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ASIA/PAKISTAN - Islamic fundamentalism: the root of the problem is youth education

Lahore (Agenzia Fides) – At the root of increasing intolerance and the spread of Islamic fundamentalism in Pakistan is the vexing problem of the education system and of the teaching given to children and youth, upholds Peter Jacob, a Catholic lay man, Executive Secretary of the "Justice and Peace" Commission within the Episcopal Conference of Pakistan. In an analysis sent to Fides, Jacob – an eminent figure in the campaign for the abolition of the blasphemy law and for the defence of justice, religious freedom and human rights in the Country – explains the roots of the phenomenon of "young fundamentalists", who now worry observers and who emerge in the news nationally and internationally.

Following the case of Asia Bibi, in fact, the "Tehrik Tahaffuz Namoos-i-Risalat" network (TTNR, "Alliance to defend the honour of the Prophet"), has risen to the fore, a network of parties and Islamic movements which has made a conglomerate of all the fundamentalist groups (even of diverse schools of thought) present in Pakistan. The TTNR publicly promotes an agenda of national Islamisation, of taking up the sword in defending the law on blasphemy and threatening with death those who would repeal it. What is striking in this picture is the presence of youth movements, such as that of Pakistani lawyers led by Rao Abdur Raheem: the thirties are defined as "generation Zia" because they were born and raised within the education system defined by the dictator Zia-ul Haq, who allied himself with the conservative Islamic groups and initiated extensive policies of the Islamisation of society, one of which is the blasphemy law.
In order to effectively combat fundamentalism, Peter Jacob tells Fides, requires intervention in the national education system: "The new National Education Plan ("National Education Policy") of 2009 has not changed in any way the policies implemented in the past, which have fuelled fundamentalism. Islamic studies became mandatory in public schools in 1976. And, after the State coup of General Zia, the education curriculum has been crammed, at every level, of that much religious material that public schools now seem to compete with the madrassas (Koranic schools)."
For the non-Muslim citizens – explains the Secretary – it was found expedient to introduce the teaching of the subject of "ethics", "but the problems are still there: today about 1,000,000 non-Muslim students are required to take Islamic studies in order to obtain a valid qualification. And then even the teaching of ethics reflects Islamic ethics," notes Jacob.
As a nation, there should be "a supplement to reflect the impact that these education policies have had on society. The indicators of international standards on education raise serious questions for us. If we want our young people prepared to live as responsible citizens, law-abiding, and not growing up as bigoted and biased, Pakistan must radically change the substance of public education: from a focus on Islamic religion and a balance of civic values, pointing to a quality education. This type of education would not allow intolerance to flourish, which becomes rather difficult to control if nothing is done about the decision on the curriculum of schools and universities." (PA)
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