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COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM THROUGH AUTHENTIC RELIGIOUS EDUCATION: A COMPARATIVE THEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF HINDUISM, CHRISTIANITY, AND ISLAM

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how authentic religious education in Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam can serve as an effective antidote to violent extremism. The primary objective was to retrieve and reinterpret scriptural and doctrinal resources that explicitly affirm non-violence, universal human dignity, freedom of belief, and peaceful coexistence, while exposing the hermeneutical distortions used by extremist groups. Employing a qualitative hermeneutical-comparative methodology, the research analysed primary sacred texts (the Vedas, Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita, the New Testament, the Qur'an, and authoritative Ḥadīth), classical commentaries, and modern moderate scholarship across the three traditions, supplemented by expert consultations. Findings reveal striking convergence: ahiṃsā and the Sermon on the Mount, the imago Dei, and the sanctity of the children of Adam, "no compulsion in religion" and the parable of the wheat and weeds collectively delegitimise supremacism and sanctified violence. When systematically taught through contextually grounded pedagogy, these resources render extremist narratives theologically incoherent. The study concludes that tradition-specific and potentially collaborative religious-education curricula offer a sustainable, endogenous strategy for preventing radicalisation.

Keywords: Religious Education, Extremism, Peace, Islam, Christianity, Hinduism

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The persistent appeal of religiously framed violent extremism—from Hindutva-inspired mob violence in India, Christian identity militias in the West, to global jihadist networks claiming Islamic legitimacy—reveals a profound crisis of religious interpretation in the contemporary world (Juergensmeyer, 2017; Jones, 2017). Extremist ideologies thrive by offering selective, decontextualized readings of sacred texts that sanctify hatred of the "other" and justify violence as a divine mandate. Paradoxically, the very traditions extremists weaponize also contain rich, authoritative resources for non-violence, human dignity, and pluralistic coexistence (Appleby, 2000; Rambachan, 2015). This study argues that well-designed, theologically authentic religious education—rather than purely secular or coercive counter-extremism measures—represents one of the most effective and sustainable means of preventing radicalization from within faith communities themselves.

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While extensive literature exists on the causes and prevention of violent extremism from political science, psychology, and security studies perspectives (Hafez & Mullins, 2015; Kruglanski et al., 2019), theological engagement remains surprisingly marginal. Single-tradition studies have illuminated peace-oriented hermeneutics in Islam (Abu-Nimer & Said, 2021), Christianity (Stassen et al., 2018), and Hinduism (Sharma, 2013), yet comparative theological analyses across these three major traditions that systematically address extremist misinterpretations and translate findings into educational practice are rare. Notable exceptions include interfaith peacebuilding frameworks (Patel, 2016) and comparative theology projects (Clooney, 2010), but these rarely focus explicitly on countering extremism through formal religious pedagogy.

This research, therefore, seeks to fill this gap by undertaking a comparative theological investigation of Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam to retrieve and reinterpret scriptural and doctrinal resources that unequivocally reject supremacism, coercive proselytism, and sanctified violence.

2.0 METHODOLOGY

This qualitative comparative theological study explores how authentic religious education in Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam can counter violent extremism through their own doctrinal resources. A hermeneutical-comparative design is employed, combining close textual analysis of primary scriptures with expert consultation. Primary sources include the Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gītā, the New Testament, the Qurʾān, the major Hadith collections, and authoritative classical commentaries. Secondary literature comprises peer-reviewed works in comparative theology, religious education, and counter-extremism studies.

Analysis proceeds in four stages: (1) identifying scriptural texts misused by extremists and recovering mainstream interpretations; (2) extracting core doctrines on human dignity, non-violence, and pluralism; (3) evaluating effective pedagogical models; and (4) distilling convergent themes across traditions suitable for joint curricula. Ethical priorities include accurate representation of each tradition, acknowledgment of internal diversity, and sensitivity to affected communities. Limitations are the primarily text-based approach and reliance on scholarly translations. The study yields a theologically robust, cross-traditional framework for religious education curricula designed to immunize learners against extremist ideologies while deepening authentic commitment to their respective faiths.

3.0 DISCUSSION

3.1 Religious Education

In the context of this study, religious education is understood as the systematic, intentional transmission of a religious tradition's sacred texts, doctrines, ethical teachings, spiritual practices, and interpretive methods to successive generations, with the dual aim of fostering authentic faith commitment and equipping adherents to live responsibly in pluralistic societies (Grimmitt, 2000; Hull, 2005).

Unlike confessional catechesis, which primarily seeks conversion or doctrinal conformity, or the phenomenological study of religions as an external academic discipline, the religious

education envisaged here is tradition-specific yet critically reflective. It combines faithful transmission of normative sources with hermeneutical tools that enable learners to distinguish authentic teachings from distorted, ideological misreadings—particularly those exploited by extremist movements (Jackson, 2014; Stern, 2018).

Such education occurs formally in schools, madrasas, seminaries, and faith-based institutions, as well as non-formally through community programmes, and is increasingly recognised as a strategic site for peacebuilding and the prevention of violent extremism (Abu-Nimer & Smith, 2016).

3.2 Extremism

In the context of this theological study, extremism refers to the deliberate advocacy of ideological positions that absolutize selected religious doctrines or texts while rejecting the legitimacy of pluralism, dialogue, or coexistence with those holding differing beliefs. It is characterized by the construction of rigid in-group/out-group boundaries, the dehumanization or demonization of perceived adversaries, and the theological legitimization of coercive or violent means—whether physical, psychological, or structural—to establish or defend an exclusivist socio-religious order (Schmid, 2013; Kruglanski et al., 2019). Religious extremism specifically instrumentalizes sacred scriptures, symbols, and traditions through decontextualized, literalist, or supersessionist interpretations that override established ethical and jurisprudential restraints on harm, portraying violence or domination as a sacred obligation (Appleby, 2019; Juergensmeyer, 2021). This definition encompasses both violent extremism (direct participation in or support for terrorist acts) and non-violent ideological extremism that creates cognitive openings and moral justification for violence, distinguishing it from orthodox conservatism or fundamentalist revivalism that remains within non-violent ethical boundaries (Borum, 2011; Pratt & Woodlock, 2016).

3.3 The Role of Religious Education in Countering Extremism

Religious education serves as a powerful bulwark against extremism by drawing deeply from the living heart of each tradition. For instance, Hinduism counters supremacist violence through the radiant principles of ahiṃsā, the vision of one global family (vasudhaiva kuṭumbakam), and the eternal declaration that Truth is One though the wise call it by many names. Christianity dismantles hatred with Jesus' revolutionary command to love enemies, the inviolable dignity of every person as imago Dei, and the peacemaking spirit of the Beatitudes. Islam decisively refutes coercion and terror through the Qurʾānic insistence on freedom of belief, the equation of one innocent life with all humanity, and the Prophet's universal mercy. The fundamental religious teachings of Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam, aimed at countering extremism, are discussed below.

3.3.1 Hinduism

3.3.1.1 Teaching of Peace and Harmony

Hindu religious education counters exclusivist and violent extremism by systematically foregrounding the tradition's core commitment to universal peace (śānti), non-violence (ahiṃsā), and the recognition of divine presence in all beings. The foundational principle of

ahiṃsā is declared in the Mahābhārata: "Ahimsā is the highest dharma; ahimsā is the highest self-control; ahimsā is the highest gift; ahimsā is the highest austerity; ahimsā is the highest sacrifice; ahimsā is the highest power; ahimsā is the highest friend; ahimsā is the highest truth; ahimsā is the highest teaching" (Mahābhārata, Anuśāsana Parva 115.44-47; Buitenen, 1978).

The Upaniṣads repeatedly invoke peace as the ultimate reality and benediction: "Oṃ śāntiḥ śāntiḥ śāntiḥ" (peace threefold—peace in the cosmos, society, and the individual) concludes the Īśa, Kena, Kaṭha, and other Upaniṣads (Radhakrishnan, 1953). The Chāndogya Upaniṣad teaches the unity of all life in the famous maxim "Tat tvam asi" ("That thou art"; ChU 6.8.7), establishing that harming another is ultimately harming the same Self (Ātman) that resides in all.

The Bhagavad Gītā, while discussing the duty of a warrior, places the highest spiritual ideal in equanimity and non-hatred even toward enemies: "He who hates no creature, who is friendly and compassionate to all … is dear to Me" (Bhagavad Gītā 12.13–15; Easwaran, 2007). Lord Kṛṣṇa further teaches that true peace arises from seeing all beings with equal vision (sama-darśanaḥ; BG 5.18–19).

Classical and modern interpreters from Śaṅkara to Gandhi have consistently presented these texts as mandating non-violence and mutual respect across caste, creed, and community (Rambachan, 2015). When Hindu religious education—whether in pathaśālās, schools, or family transmission—centres these authoritative śāstric teachings, it delegitimises ethno-religious supremacism and violence, instead cultivating a worldview in which peace and harmony are both spiritual practice and social imperative.

3.3.1.2 Freedom of Religion

Hindu religious education counters coercive conversion and religious supremacism by grounding formation in the tradition's ancient and explicit affirmation of spiritual freedom and the validity of multiple paths to truth. The Ṛgveda declares unequivocally: "Truth is one, the wise call it by many names" (ekaṁ sad viprā bahudhā vadanti; Ṛgveda 1.164.46), a principle reiterated throughout the tradition as the theological basis for accepting diverse forms of worship and philosophical approaches (Radhakrishnan, 1927; Klostermaier, 2007).

The Bhagavad Gītā reinforces this pluralism when Kṛṣṇa states: "In whatever way people surrender unto Me, I reciprocate with them accordingly. Everyone follows My path, knowingly or unknowingly, O son of Pṛthā" (Bhagavad Gītā 4.11; Prabhupada, 1986). He further declares that even those who worship other deities with faith ultimately reach Him (BG 9.23–25). He concludes the teaching with the inclusive invitation: "However men approach Me, even so do I reward them" (BG 4.11). These verses are universally interpreted by classical commentators (Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja, Madhva) and modern scholars as sanctioning freedom of belief and practice (Rambachan, 2015).

The Upaniṣads and later dharmaśāstras consistently uphold individual spiritual autonomy: "Let a man prefer to his own creed the creeds of others with reverence" (Mahābhārata, Śānti Parva 262.26), and the Manusmṛti warns against intolerance toward other traditions. Historical royal edicts (e.g., Aśoka's Rock Edict XII) and the lived practice of Hindu kingdoms further demonstrate institutional protection of religious diversity.

When Hindu religious education systematically teaches these foundational texts—especially Ṛgveda 1.164.46 and Bhagavad Gītā 4.11—alongside the commentarial tradition, it dismantles exclusivist claims that only one path or community possesses salvific truth, thereby delegitimising coercive conversion, forced uniformity, or violence in the name of religious purity (Sharma, 2003).

3.3.1.3 Teaching of Humanity

Hindu religious education counters extremist dehumanisation and caste- or religion-based supremacism by anchoring human dignity in the universal presence of the divine Self (Ātman) within every being. The Upaniṣads proclaim the ontological unity of all life through the mahāvākya "Tat tvam asi" ("Thou art That"; Chāndogya Upaniṣad 6.8.7), teaching that the same Brahman-Ātman resides in every individual irrespective of birth, creed, or status (Radhakrishnan, 1953; Olivelle, 1998). The Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad reinforces this: "Whoever sees all beings in the Self and the Self in all beings feels no hatred" (Īśā Upaniṣad 6; BU 4.4.5).

The Bhagavad Gītā repeatedly calls for equal vision (sama-darśana): "The wise see the same in a brāhmaṇa endowed with learning and humility, a cow, an elephant, a dog, and even an outcaste" (Bhagavad Gītā 5.18; see also 6.29–32). Kṛṣṇa declares that one who is undisturbed by others and causes no disturbance is dear to Him (BG 12.15) and describes the highest devotee as one who "never hates any being" (BG 12.13).

The Mahābhārata states: "The entire world of beings is one family" (vasudhaiva kuṭumbakam; Maha Upaniṣad 6.71–73; also quoted in Hitopadeśa). This principle, together with the doctrine of ahiṃsā paramo dharmaḥ ("non-violence is the highest duty"), renders any ideology that dehumanises or harms others based on religion, caste, or ethnicity fundamentally anti-Hindu (Rambachan, 2015; Chapple, 1993).

When Hindu religious education—whether in gurukulas, schools, or community settings—centres these authoritative texts and their classical commentaries, it dismantles supremacist narratives and cultivates a worldview in which universal human dignity and mutual respect are non-negotiable spiritual imperatives.

3.3.1.4 Ten Restraints and Observances (Yama and Niyama)

Hindu religious education counters extremism by systematically teaching the ten ethical foundations of spiritual life—five restraints (yama) and five observances (niyama)—outlined in Patañjali's Yoga Sūtra (II.30–32) and echoed across dharmaśāstras. These universally applicable principles directly dismantle the ideological and behavioural roots of supremacist violence (Feuerstein, 2003; Chapple, 2018).

The five yamas are: Ahiṃsā (non-violence in thought, word, and deed) – the highest dharma (Yoga Sūtra 2.35; Mahābhārata 13.117.38); Satya (truthfulness) – to be followed only when it does not conflict with ahiṃsā (YS 2.36); Asteya (non-stealing); Brahmacarya (continence and responsible use of vital energy); and Aparigraha (non-possessiveness and non-covetousness). The five niyamas are: śauca (purity), santoṣa (contentment), tapas (austerity), svādhyāya (self-study of scriptures), and īśvara-praṇidhāna (surrender to the Divine). These ten principles are

declared "mahāvrata" (great universal vows) that apply "without exception of time, place, purpose, or caste" (Yoga Sūtra 2.31). Classical commentators (Vyāsa, Vācaspati Miśra, Vijñānabhikṣu) and modern interpreters (Vivekananda, Rambachan) consistently teach that any ideology that promotes hatred, deception, theft of dignity, sexual coercion, or greed for territory in the name of religion violates the very foundation of sanātana dharma (Rambachan, 2015; Vivekananda, 1896/1972).

When Hindu religious curricula—whether in traditional pathaśālās or modern schools—place the yama-niyama at the core of moral and spiritual formation, they render extremist justifications (whether based on selective readings of purāṇas or modern political ideology) ethically and scripturally incoherent, fostering instead disciplined, compassionate, and inclusive citizens committed to universal welfare (loka-saṅgraha).

3.3.1.5 Consequences of an Extremist

Hindu religious education counters extremist ideologies by clearly articulating the severe karmic, social, and spiritual consequences of hatred, violence, and supremacist actions performed in the name of dharma. The Bhagavad Gītā warns that actions rooted in krodha (anger), lobha (greed), and moha (delusion) bind the soul to lower births and prolonged suffering: "From anger comes delusion; from delusion, loss of memory; from loss of memory, destruction of discrimination; from destruction of discrimination, he perishes" (Bhagavad Gītā 2.63; Easwaran, 2007). Kṛṣṇa further declares that those who abandon dharma for adharma fall into demoniac (āsura) natures characterised by hypocrisy, arrogance, and violence, ultimately leading to repeated birth in degraded wombs (BG 16.4–20).

The Manusmṛti and other dharmaśāstras prescribe expiatory rites (prāyaścitta) and social ostracism for those who commit hiṃsā against innocents, while emphasising that no amount of ritual can purify violence motivated by hatred (Manusmṛti 11.55–72; Doniger, 1991). The Mahābhārata repeatedly illustrates that even warriors who violate dharma in the name of victory (e.g., Aśvatthāma's night massacre) suffer catastrophic karmic retribution and eternal infamy (Mahābhārata, Sauptika Parva 10; Buitenen, 1978).

Classical commentators (Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja) and modern reformers (Gandhi, Vivekananda) unanimously teach that violence justified by selective or distorted readings of scripture creates pāpa of the gravest order, binding the perpetrator to naraka and prolonged saṁsāric bondage (Rambachan, 2015). When Hindu religious education—whether in gurukulas, temples, or schools—faithfully transmits these texts and their authoritative interpretations, it dismantles the extremist illusion that violence against "others" earns divine favour, instead exposing such acts as self-destructive betrayal of sanātana dharma.

3.3.2 Christianity

3.3.2.1 Teaching of Peace and Harmony

Christian religious education counters extremism by placing the non-violent ethic of Jesus Christ at the centre of formation. The Sermon on the Mount constitutes the foundational charter of this ethic: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God" (Matthew 5:9, NRSV) and "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.'

But I say to you: Do not resist an evildoer. If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also" (Matthew 5:38–39). Jesus' command to love enemies— "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:44)—directly delegitimises the demonisation and retaliatory violence characteristic of extremist ideologies (Stassen & Gushee, 2016; Hays, 1996).

The apostolic writings reinforce this teaching. Paul instructs believers: "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them … If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all" (Romans 12:14, 18), and explicitly forbids vengeance: "Never repay evil for evil … 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay,' says the Lord" (Romans 12:17–19, citing Deuteronomy 32:35). The Epistle to the Ephesians calls Christians to "live a life worthy of the calling … bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:1–3).

Early Church practice reflected this commitment. The second-century Apologists (Justin Martyr, Athenagoras) and pre-Constantinian fathers consistently rejected participation in violence, while the post-Constantinian just-war tradition (Augustine, Aquinas) still maintained strict limits that contemporary extremist violence violates (Augustine, 426/2018; Cahill, 1994).

When Christian catechetical curricula systematically teach the Sermon on the Mount, the cruciform pattern of enemy-love, and the eschatological vision of a peaceable kingdom (Isaiah 11:6–9; Revelation 21:4), they immunise believers against supremacist theologies of holy war or redemptive violence, grounding identity instead in the self-sacrificial peace of Christ (Yoder, 1972/1994).

3.3.2.2 Freedom of Religion

Christian religious education counters coercive and supremacist forms of extremism by rooting its formation in the New Testament's clear affirmation of freedom of conscience and rejection of religious compulsion. Jesus himself established the principle of voluntary faith when he taught: "If anyone wants to become my follower, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Mark 8:34, NRSV) and "No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me" (John 6:44), indicating that authentic discipleship cannot be imposed but arises from inner conviction enabled by divine grace (Hays, 1996; Swartley, 2006).

The parable of the wheat and the weeds explicitly forbid premature violent judgement over religious difference: the servants ask whether they should uproot the weeds, but the master replies, "No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest" (Matthew 13:24–30, 36–43). Early Church interpreters (Origen, Chrysostom) and modern exegetes understand this as a direct rejection of theocratic coercion and a mandate for patient coexistence (Yoder, 1994).

Paul reinforces non-coercion in matters of faith: "For why my liberty should be subject to the judgment of someone else's conscience?" (1 Corinthians 10:29) and "Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind" (Romans 14:5). The apocalyptic vision of Revelation portrays final salvation as the voluntary gathering of "a great multitude … from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages" (Revelation 7:9), not the outcome of forced uniformity.

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By teaching these texts alongside the historical witness of the pre-Constantinian church's refusal to wield the sword for conversion, and the Second Vatican Council's declaration that "the human person has a right to religious freedom … based on the very dignity of the human person" (Vatican II, 1965), Christian catechesis delegitimises crusading mentalities and dominionist theologies, anchoring Christian identity instead in persuasion, witness, and respect for the inviolable conscience of the other (Cahill, 2013).

3.3.2.3 Teaching of Humanity

Christian religious education counters extremist dehumanisation by anchoring anthropology in the imago Dei and the universal scope of Christ's redemptive love. The foundational affirmation that every human being is created "in the image and likeness of God" (Genesis 1:26–27, NRSV) establishes an inviolable dignity that transcends race, religion, nationality, or ideology (Cahill, 2013; Grenz, 2001). This doctrine, repeatedly affirmed in both Testaments, renders any ideology that demonises or instrumentalises the "other" theologically incoherent.

Jesus radicalised this principle by extending neighbour-love beyond tribal boundaries. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, he deliberately chose a despised religious and ethnic outsider as the model of true neighbourliness, answering the question "Who is my neighbour?" with the command: "Go and do likewise" (Luke 10:25–37). He summarised the entire Law in the double commandment: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart … and your neighbour as yourself" (Matthew 22:37-40), immediately followed by the Golden Rule: "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you" (Matthew 7:12).

The apostolic writings universalise this ethic: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28), and "The Lord is patient … not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). John declares that hatred of a brother or sister—any human being—is incompatible with knowing God (1 John 4:20-21).

When catechetical curricula systematically teach the imago Dei, the parable of the Good Samaritan, and the universal lordship and love of Christ, they dismantle supremacist and exclusionary theologies. Students learn that to violate the humanity of another is to violate the image of God and the very heart of the Gospel, thereby inoculating them against ideologies that justify violence through dehumanisation (Stassen & Gushee, 2016; Volf, 1996).

3.3.2.4 Consequences of an Extremist

Christian religious education confronts extremist ideologies by clearly presenting the biblical warnings of eternal and temporal consequences for those who adopt hatred, violence, or coercive domination in the name of faith. Jesus himself pronounced severe judgement on those who harm others while claiming religious legitimacy: "It would be better for that one to have a millstone hung around the neck and to be thrown into the sea than to cause one of these little ones to stumble" (Luke 17:2, NRSV), and "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father … Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name …?' Then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers'" (Matthew 7:21-23).

The Sermon on the Mount equates murderous hatred with liability to divine judgement: "Whoever says, 'You fool,' shall be liable to the hell of fire" (Matthew 5:22), while the parable of the sheep and the goats makes final salvation contingent upon concrete acts of mercy toward the vulnerable, regardless of their identity (Matthew 25:31–46). Paul warns that "those who do such things (hatred, strife, dissensions, envy) will not inherit the kingdom of God" (Galatians 5:19-21), and Revelation excludes from the holy city "everyone who loves and practises falsehood" and those whose names are not in the book of life (Revelation 21:27; 22:15).

Early Church Fathers (Tertullian, Origen, Lactantius) and later magisterial teaching consistently interpreted these texts as condemning religious violence and persecution (Cahill, 1994; Yoder, 1994). When catechesis faithfully teaches these passages alongside the cruciform pattern of Jesus—who forgave his executioners rather than calling down vengeance (Luke 23:34)—it dismantles the extremist illusion of divine reward for violence, exposing the eschatological peril of weaponising faith in this way.

3.3.3 Islam

3.3.3.1 Teaching of Peace and Harmony

Islamic religious education plays a pivotal role in countering extremism by systematically foregrounding the Qur'ān's and Prophet Muhammad's unequivocal emphasis on peace (salām/silm), mercy (raḥma), justice (ʿadl), and peaceful coexistence with non-Muslims. Central to this curriculum is the principle that peace is both a divine attribute and a religious obligation. The Qur'ān declares: "O you who have believed, enter into peace wholly [silman kāffatan] and do not follow the footsteps of Satan" (Qur'ān 2:208), interpreted by classical and contemporary exegetes as a comprehensive command to embrace peace in creed, behaviour, and social relations (Al-Ṭabarī, 2000; Quraishi, 2019).

The prophetic tradition reinforces this imperative. The Prophet ﷺ stated: "A Muslim is the one from whose tongue and hand the people are safe" (Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, Book 2, Ḥadīth 4; Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, Book 1, Ḥadīth 64), establishing non-harm as a definitional trait of authentic faith. Another widely transmitted ḥadīth declares: "Shall I not inform you of something better than fasting, prayer, and charity?" The Companions replied, "Yes." He said, "Reconciling between people, for discord between people shaves off faith" (Sunan Abī Dāwūd, Book 42, Ḥadīth 4919; graded ṣaḥīḥ).

The Qur'ān explicitly rejects religious coercion: "There is no compulsion in religion" (Qur'ān 2:256) and praises diversity as a divine sign: "And among His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth and the diversity of your languages and colours. Indeed, in that are signs for those of knowledge" (Qur'ān 30:22). The Prophet's own treaties with Jewish and Christian communities in Madīnah (the Constitution of Madīnah) and his letters to neighbouring rulers exemplify practical pluralism and peaceful diplomacy (Hamidullah, 1987).

By embedding these texts and their classical interpretations (e.g., Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī, al-Qurṭubī, and modern works by Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī and Tariq Ramadan) into madrasa and school curricula, Islamic religious education directly delegitimises extremist narratives that sanction violence against non-Muslims or dissenting Muslims. When students internalise mercy as one of God's primary names (Qur'ān1:1, repeated in the Basmala) and learn that spreading

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corruption on earth is among the gravest sins (Qur'ān 5:32–33), they develop theological immunity against ideologies that glorify terror as worship.

3.3.3.2 Freedom of Religion

A cornerstone of Islamic religious education that directly counters extremist coercion and takfīrī ideologies is the unambiguous affirmation of freedom of religion (hurriyyat al-iʿtiqād). The Qur'ān explicitly prohibits compulsion in matters of faith: "There shall be no compulsion in religion. Truth stands out clear from error" (Qur'ān 2:256). Classical and modern exegetes (al-Ṭabarī, al-Rāzī, Abduh, and Saeed) unanimously interpret this verse as a permanent legal and ethical principle that invalidates forced conversion and protects the conscience of non-Muslims living under Muslim governance (Saeed, 2017; al-Ṭabarī, 2000).

The Qur'ān further reinforces volitional faith in multiple verses: "And say: The truth is from your Lord. Then whosoever wills, let him believe, and whosoever wills, let him disbelieve" (Qur'ān 18:29); "Had your Lord willed, everyone on earth would have believed. Will you then compel people until they become believers?" (Qur'ān 10:99). These verses are taught in traditional curricula to demonstrate that genuine faith cannot be imposed, and that religious diversity is part of the divine plan: "To each of you We have appointed a law and a way. If Allah had willed, He would have made you one community, but [He intended] to test you in what He has given you. So, compete in good deeds" (Qur'ān 5:48).

Prophetic practice consistently upheld this principle. The Prophet ﷺ stated: "Whoever kills a person with whom we have a covenant (muʿāhid, i.e., a non-Muslim protected citizen) will not smell the fragrance of Paradise" (Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, Book 83, Ḥadīth 2995; Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, Book 25, Ḥadīth 1370). His treaties with the Christians of Najrān and the Jews of Khaybar guaranteed full religious freedom, including the right to practise their faith and maintain their places of worship (Hamidullah, 1987).

By embedding these texts and their authoritative interpretations into madrasa and Islamic-school curricula, religious education delegitimises extremist claims that apostates or non-Muslims must be coerced or eliminated. Students learn that violating freedom of religion constitutes rebellion against clear divine commands, thereby building theological resilience against ideologies that weaponise takfīr and religious persecution.

3.3.3.3 Teaching of Humanity (al-insāniyyah)

Islamic religious education counters extremist dehumanisation of the "other" by foregrounding a universal theology of humanity that affirms the inherent dignity (karāmah) and sanctity of every human life regardless of faith, ethnicity, or status. The Qur'ān establishes this principle unequivocally: "We have honoured the children of Adam and carried them on the land and sea and provided for them of the good things and preferred them over much of what We have created, with [definite] preference" (Qur'ān 17:70). Classical and contemporary scholars interpret this verse as an unconditional bestowal of honour upon all humanity simply by virtue of being human (al-Qurṭubī, 2006; Kamali, 2017).

The most frequently cited proof-text against extremist violence is: "Whoever kills a soul unless for a soul or for corruption [done] in the land—it is as if he had slain mankind entirely; and

whoever saves one—it is as if he had saved mankind entirely" (Qur'ān 5:32). Originally addressed to the Children of Israel and then universalised, this verse is taught in Islamic curricula as a categorical prohibition of murder and a positive command to protect life (al-Ṭabarī, 2000).

Prophetic practice and sayings reinforce this universal ethic. The Prophet ﷺ declared: "All creatures are Allah's dependents (ʻiyāl Allāh), and the most beloved of people to Allah is the one who is best to His dependents" (Sunan Abī Dāwūd, Book 9, Ḥadīth 1648; graded ṣaḥīḥ by al-Albānī). In another narration: "People are two types: the righteous who benefit others and the wicked who harm others—be among those who benefit" (Sunan al-Tirmidhī, Book 38, Ḥadīth 2688; graded ḥasan ṣaḥīḥ).

These texts, when systematically integrated into religious education, dismantle extremist narratives that selectively dehumanise non-Muslims, apostates, or minorities. By internalising the prophetic directive "Do not transgress—Allah does not love transgressors" (Qur'ān 2:190) alongside the universal sanctity of life, students develop a theological framework that renders ideologies of hatred and supremacism religiously incoherent and morally indefensible.

3.3.3.4 Consequences of an Extremist

Islamic religious education systematically presents the severe spiritual, moral, and eschatological consequences reserved for those who adopt extremist ideologies and engage in unjust violence, thereby creating a powerful theological deterrent against radicalisation. The Qur'ān repeatedly warns that transgressive violence and spreading corruption on earth (fasād fī al-arḍ) rank among the gravest sins, punishable both in this world and the Hereafter: "The recompense of those who wage war against Allah and His Messenger and strive to spread corruption in the land is that they be killed or crucified or have their hands and feet cut off from opposite sides or be exiled from the land … and for them in the Hereafter is a humiliating punishment" (Qur'ān 5:33–34; al-Ṭabarī, 2000).

Extremist acts of terror are explicitly categorised as ḥirābah (brigandage/waging war against society), rendering perpetrators outside divine mercy unless they repent before capture (Qur'ān 5:34). The Prophet ﷺ warned: "Whoever carries arms against us is not one of us, and whoever cheats us is not one of us" (Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, Book 1, Ḥadīth 182), and in a more severe narration: "Whoever rebels against my ummah, striking the righteous and the wicked alike and does not spare the believers and does not fulfil his covenant—he has nothing to do with me and I have nothing to do with him" (Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, Book 20, Ḥadīth 4545).

On the Day of Judgement, the extremist who killed innocents will face the victims' right of retribution: "If anyone kills a believer deliberately, his recompense is Hell, abiding therein forever; Allah's wrath is upon him, He has cursed him and prepared for him a tremendous punishment" (Qur'ān 4:93). The Prophet ﷺ foretold that the first matters judged between people will be those of bloodshed (Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, Book 81, Ḥadīth 6533).

By teaching these texts alongside classical commentaries (e.g., Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr, al-Qurṭubī) and contemporary fatāwā from mainstream scholarly councils that unequivocally classify modern terrorist acts as ḥirābah (al-Qaraḍāwī, 2009; Bin Bayyah, 2017), Islamic education demonstrates that extremism does not elevate one to martyrdom but expels one from the fold

of divine mercy and prophetic community, thus dismantling the extremist promise of eternal reward.

4.0 CONCLUSION

This comparative theological study has demonstrated that Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam—far from being sources of extremism—possess abundant, authoritative, and internally consistent resources for peace, universal human dignity, freedom of belief, and the rejection of religiously legitimated violence. When sacred texts are taught contextually and holistically within their respective classical commentarial traditions, extremist interpretations that rely on decontextualised proof-texts, literalism, or supersessionist hermeneutics are rendered scripturally incoherent and theologically illegitimate. Authentic religious education in all three traditions, therefore, functions not merely as a preventive measure but as a proactive immunisation against radicalisation, equipping believers with the interpretive tools and ethical formation needed to resist ideologies of hatred while deepening genuine faith commitment.

The convergence of core principles—ahiṃsā and enemy-love; ekam sat viprā bahudhā vadanti and the imago Dei extended to all humanity; lā ikrāha fī al-dīn and the parable of the wheat and the weeds—reveals a shared theological grammar that can undergird both tradition-specific and collaborative interreligious curricula. Such education, when delivered by trained, moderate educators in schools, madrasas, seminaries, and community settings, offers one of the most sustainable and culturally resonant strategies for countering violent extremism.

Future research should move from theological retrieval to empirical verification: longitudinal studies assessing the impact of reformed religious-education curricula on attitudes toward pluralism and violence; comparative evaluation of existing successful models (e.g., Indonesian pesantren programmes, Indian Sarva Dharma education initiatives, and European Christian peace-church catechesis); and the development and testing of joint Hindu–Christian–Muslim modules for use in pluralistic societies. Only through such rigorous, interdisciplinary follow-up can the promise identified in this study—religious education as an endogenous antidote to religious extremism—be fully realised and scaled.

In an era when extremist minorities continue to hijack religious discourse, the reclamation of authentic theological education by the moderate majority represents not only a scholarly imperative but a moral and civilisational necessity.

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