

Impediments to Interfaith Dialogue as A Peacebuilding Strategy: Perspective from Religious Leaders in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

This study is characterized with the objective to discover perspective of religious leaders regarding hurdles in peace building through interfaith dialogue in Pakistan. For this purpose, qualitative research method was employed. Twenty-five religious leaders, belonging to Muslim, Christian, Hindu and Sikh communities were interviewed. Sample was drawn through purposive sampling method at first stage and convenient sampling technique at second stage. Data was gathered through in-depth interviews after seeking consent. Interviews were recorded on audio device with the permission of participants. Later on all interviews were transcribed and thematic analysis was carried out. It was found from the results that fear of conversion and loss of religious identity stand as a major hurdle in the way to successful dialogue on grassroots level. Lack of knowledge about one's own religion is also one of the impediments to successful dialogue. It was further found that misconceptions and incorrect information about other religions is also a hurdle in the smooth occurrence of interreligious dialogue. Maltreatment and ethnic cleansing of Muslims in different parts of the world (Kashmir, Palestine, Burma) and frequent incidents of shameful acts like burning the copies of Holy Quran and making cartoons of Holy Prophet leave no possibility for dialogue activity at local level. The findings of the study suggest that widespread consciousness regarding concept and implications of interfaith dialogue is required among masses. Government of Pakistan should do robust lobbying on international level to restrain harassment of Muslims as well as harmful trends of scandalous acts of burning copies of holy Quran and heretical remarks on the holy Prophet (PBUH). Drama serials, movies and cartoons for the children based on interfaith stories with the purpose to sensitize the masses should be produced and promoted by mainstream electronic media.

Keywords: *Interfaith Dialogue, Religious Leaders, Peace Building, Impediments*

INTRODUCTION

Interreligious interaction and constant communication bring people of diverse faiths together to develop culture of mutual respect, understanding and acceptance for each other and lead towards an environment of tolerance and peaceful living (Andrabi, 2020). Dialogue among religions connotes to a purposeful and healthy interaction of the people who are adherents of dissimilar religious traditions with varying dogmatic patterns, with the objective to arrive at commonalities in faith and value system to find the possibilities for peaceful co-existence (Sanaullah, 2014). Religious dialogue refers to junction of souls, hearts and minds between the devotees of differing religions. It's a constructive exchange of words between believers at religious level. It's a collective march towards truth and partnership in projects of common interests for welfare of all (Arinze, 1997). Interfaith dialogue is pertaining to folk of divergent belief systems coming to an agreed upon understanding that makes them to dwell in peace with display of

cooperation and collaboration in spite of their differences. The term also speaks of healthy working relationship among people of varying backgrounds both at micro and macro levels. It is always a complicated phenomenon through which people of a range of religions come into relations and smash away the shells of division to set up peace among them. Interfaith dialogue is not only about lip service but it is also about interaction and making social relations necessary for collective development. It can come about between individuals, groups, families and communities. It may be carried out at vicinity, in educational institutions and also at the place of work, both in formal and informal environment (Fults, 2016). Interfaith dialogue connects people on respecting and accepting terms to others belief and faith and urges to avoid hatred and criticism. It also aims at accepting others with their respective beliefs, rituals and value system. Furthermore, it makes people to work together for common welfare (Zafar, 2012). Discussion and conversation on the fundamental belief system of various religions do not fall in the scope of interfaith dialogue rather it focuses on morality, social norms, help to needy and destitute, end of intolerance and establishment of peace (Zafar, 2012). The term interfaith dialogue that has several connotations first came into use in western countries almost three decades before and later it made its way towards other parts of world (Nadvi, 2012). To revive the relations with the world interfaith dialogue is imperative for Islam. Holy Quran also calls for dialogue on common terms with the people of Book. Interfaith dialogue is a right step towards durable and long lasting stability and peace. When peace among the adherents of different religions is achieved social and economic development takes an inclining trend (Adam & Tayviah, 2023).

Pakistan houses diversity where numerous religions, cultures and ethnicities coexist and almost identical religio-cultural features are found in the bordering countries as well. In such socio-cultural, religious and territorial context interfaith synchronization becomes a dire need to set up peace in the region. Dialogue among the believers of all faith groups seems only way forward for building peace and cohesion. Putting the differences aside, we need to spotlight on commonalities to bring all faith identities nearer for improved relations and accommodative milieu. Dialogue among religions in Pakistan will not only bring betterment in interreligious relations but also will result into collective economic development. In this connection, job of religious leadership from all religions becomes more important for taking dialogue into right direction (Shah & Ranjha, 2019). Paigham e Pakistan is a right step at right time that helped bringing all actors of dialogue at one table. This narrative has been developed with collective deliberations in the light of Islamic teachings and constitution of Pakistan. Paigham-e-Pakistan will surely facilitate the process of interfaith dialogue leading towards peace and social cohesion (Naveed et al., 2021). The Paigham-e-Pakistan is a combined national narrative that was developed with the robust support of people of Pakistan, state institutions and faith leaders from all traditions. This document is based on the injunctions and guideline of the holy Quran and Sunnah. This unanimous document is meant to restore peace, pluralism and religious tolerance in Pakistan. It is also meant to fight extremism, radicalism, terrorism and religious hatred (Zia-ul-Haq, 2018). Islam is major religion of Pakistan which teaches peace, brotherhood and tolerance. Process of dialogue in one or other form has always been there among Muslims and followers of other religions in Pakistan which helps people improve interfaith relations and ensure provision of equal rights and social justice (Asiya & Bano, 2024). In Pakistan interfaith dialogue is getting popularity and interfaith scholars are now attempting to raise more awareness among masses. But there is lot more to be done in this regard as interfaith dialogue is comparatively new phenomenon in Pakistani society. Patronage of state may possibly be useful for conducting dialogue on all levels (Shah & Ranjha, 2019). Most of the religious leaders in Pakistan are well aware of the need and significance of interfaith cohesion and peace. So much so a number of organizations have been formed by them where they offer leaders of all religions to come closer and correspond in an open and cordial environment. In case of any interfaith violence they become proactive and intervene to settle the matters (Habib et al., 2022). The Pakistan Interfaith League (PIL), National Council for Interfaith Peace and Harmony (NCIPHP), Cavish Development Foundation (CDF), Interfaith

Harmony Initiative: Hive Pakistan, United Religious Initiative (URI), Peace and Education Foundation (PEF), Pakistan, Peace Hope Pakistan, Interfaith Harmony Wing (Ministry of Religious Affairs and Interfaith Harmony), International Peace Committee for Interfaith Harmony (IPCIH), Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS), Center for Peace and Development Initiative (CPDI) are some of the major organizations in Pakistan engaged in peace building activities through interfaith dialogue and harmony (Asiya & Bano, 2024).

Background and Purpose of the Study

In South Asia extremism in the name of religion is a long standing phenomenon. Pakistan has also been a favorite and fertile land for thriving religious extremism. In different political eras waves of religious fanaticism evolved and hit religious minorities. At the time of partition of Subcontinent, non-Muslims constituted almost 20% of the entire population of Pakistan but now their population has condensed to less than 4%. This demographic shift is mainly influenced by religious extremism and mounting violence on minorities (Khan, et al., 2023). Religious violence not only exists between Muslims and non-Muslims but it also exists between different factions, sects and sub sects of Muslims. Sectarian violence essentially breeds violent trends towards non-Muslims in Pakistan. When different sectarian groups get political patronage by different political groups for getting political mileage, then these groups become more effective and harmful (Huda, 2017). Number of social factors is held responsible for religious bigotry and violence in Pakistan such as injustice, poor religious knowledge, misinterpretation of religious text. In Pakistan minorities also undergo insecurity, social discrimination and injustice. Incidents of violence like forced conversion, mob attacks, mob killings, sabotage, false charges of blasphemy, burning down of churches or temples are often reported. In other incidents entire communities of Christians were burnt down by angry mob such as Jaranwala incident, Sargodha incident, Sialkot incident etc. Different churches in different parts of Pakistan were bombed. In 2009 Sikh community of FATA was terrorized and forced to get displaced by TTP (Khan, et al., 2023). There are religious groups who run false propaganda about minorities. In doing so, hateful literature is produced and distributed that threatens healthy interfaith understanding and relations. Most of the acts of religion based violence are carried out under the pretext of alleged blasphemy. Blasphemy laws are also misused to settle personal accounts. Religious extremists, without any confirmation or reporting to law enforcement agencies, take law into their hands and try to execute mob justice that result into loss of life and property (Hunter, 2023). The increasing trend of bigotry and violence towards minorities is really perturbing. This distressing trend is fueled by manipulation of laws and biased attitudes towards non Muslims. If this trend goes unchecked the consequences could be devastating. In order to cool down growing tension, interfaith engagement is much needed (Nafees, 2024). Interfaith dialogue could be a useful tool to address the menace of extremism in the name of religion. At the same time media can play a positive role in exterminating extremist narratives and promoting opportunities for peaceful coexistence (Huda, 2017). This study was carried out to learn about the hurdles and impediments to interfaith dialogue as strategy to build peace and cohesion in Pakistani society. The study also attempted to seek solutions and way forward for successful dialogue in Pakistan.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Discourse of hatred and violence that are habitually fueled and funneled by extremist groups hiding in all religions, results into distorted perceptions, prejudice and disregard. In wake of it dialogue turns into a controversial activity that is further manipulated for seeking political advantage (Hyongesa, 2019). Most of the religious leaders are perplexed about the purpose and utility of interfaith dialogue. They rottenly suppose that through religious dialogue they would advocate for their religions as truer one. Moreover, the politics within religious leadership makes dialogue contentious and later on dialogue is manipulated for attaining political advantage. In the same manner inflexible and orthodox behaviors pose impediments

for swift and peaceful dialogue process (Asiya & Bano, 2024). Overwhelming majority of the people identify interfaith dialogue as something which undermines their religious values and faith. Under the shadow of these misperceptions people adopt behaving in reactive and unfriendly way which deescalates the pace of purposeful dialogue (Akhter et al., 2023). Almost all heavenly religions have missionary approach this is why they assume interfaith dialogue as an obstacle in way to missionary work. Every religion asserts to teach and preach ultimate truth which turns its followers hesitant to seek any other truth or meanings of life from any other religious tradition (Sanaullah, 2014). A disagreement surfaces when all religions are demanded to be appreciated and treated equally truthful. Ordinary dialoguers think that all religions are not evenly virtuous or truthful. Ethnocentric mindset of believers demotes healthy participation in dialogue activities (Sanaullah, 2014). Carrying dialogue process forward is possible but with lot of trouble and obstacles. Usually problems like dearth of valid knowledge about one's own religion, poor confidence, baseless fear, lack of ability, misapprehensions about other faiths, uncertainty about legality of dialogue, superiority or inferiority complex, poorly trained dialoguers, capacity related issues to deal with intricate and metaphysical aspects of truth etc (Fassf, 2016). Accepting each other's faith through relative approach is hardly found among dialoguers. Muslims usually have propensity to Islamize Christianity and Christian incline to Christianize Muslims. Struggle to convert than to converse appear more likely in interfaith dialogue process. This tendency discourages and demotes dialogue to catch desired outcome (Ayoub, 2004).

Khan (2015) believes that worldwide political unfairness that is turning into despotism and subjugation in several parts of world predominantly in Muslims world stands atop as a impediment to a inventive and forward looking interfaith dialogue. Instead of getting people engaged in dialogue process for shaping a synchronized planet to live on, things are degenerating. Crack within religions gives rise to the issue of inclusivity and representativeness. Religious leaders are labeled with brands of sects and schools of thought. Finding religious scholars who are esteemed and trusted by all factions within a religion is also near to impossible (Habib et al., 2022). It's very untoward that people associated with different faith groups are unwilling to comprehend each other. They consider each other as believer of deception and sadistic in temperament. Likewise, Islamophobia (fear of Islam) pushes adherents of other religions away from Muslim preventing dialogue and related stuff. Associating terrorism and violence with Islam poses hazard to successful and sustainable dialogue process. Political agenda of global and regional leaders also wish to keep dialogue, as a way forward towards peace, into doldrums (Sarki et al., 2023). Historical happenings of violence and conflict among Muslims and Christians such as crusades, eviction of Muslims from Spain and Muslim-Jews conflict in Palestine, Arab-Israel six-day war, give very bitter feel and place dialogue into back burners. In the same way, Russia-Afghan war, America Afghan war, Conflict of Muslims and Hindus in Kashmir, incident of 9/11, Islamophobia and Israel-Gaza conflict shrink the scope of productive dialogue (Shakeel, 2024). Paucity of knowledge about rituals, language and culture of other people often hamper dialogue. Stereotypes and ethnocentric prejudice against other religions thwart dialogue to be thriving and instead of mounting healthier relations interfaith tension and conflict are escalated (Rosidah et al., 2024). Almost all the religions assert to stand by ultimate truth believe other religions as devoid of truth or less truthful. This widespread propensity stands as a bulwark in the way to successful dialogue (Chaudhari, 2016). Another challenge to the discourse of interfaith dialogue is that it is limited to small circles of scholars and researchers. Ordinary people are ignorant of this phrase even. For example a shopkeeper or a driver or a factory worker has no idea about this highly academic term. This is why all labors in this connection finish in futile. In the same way, education system is failing in giving students awareness about numerous religions. One learns only about one's own religion and consequently interfaith understanding remains an un-achieved goal (Huda, 2017). Rapid advancement in technology and better exposure to digital media have created opportunities as well as challenges to interreligious engagement. Where people grab opportunities to work together and explore each other, there spread of disinformation, hate content, false propaganda against religion of others have dejected

people to participate in interfaith interaction. Excess of forged stories and deprecating comments about religions and righteous personalities of multiple religions flicker conflicts and clashes among religions (Kanu & Nosike, 2025). Ignorance also stands as a serious obstruction in the way to interfaith communication. It exists on three levels i.e. innocent ignorance, blind ignorance and culpable ignorance. Innocent ignorance refers to a situation where knowledge and right information are missing but there is a possibility of correction when accurate information reaches. Blind ignorance implies to intellectual inability that prevents from education or knowing other than what has been learnt earlier and culpable ignorance refers to deliberate rejection and refutation to discover something novel or diverse regarding religious doctrine (Pratt, 2005). In the same way another key hurdle is the fear of syncretism, the amalgamation of religious beliefs, which is supposed by majority of the people as menace to their religious doctrine. Religious leadership also fears that interreligious interaction and cooperation will have an effect on their core beliefs that will result into loss of religious integrity and individuality. This is why faith leaders generally deject their cohorts and direct to move away from interfaith engagement (Kanu & Nosike, 2025). In accordance with Hussain (2014), one of the challenges to interfaith dialogue is scarceness of focus by interfaith participants and practitioners; the researcher holds view that most interfaith actions are undertaken without covertly defined and predetermined goals. The concentration of greater part of the practitioners is to lessen tension at a time or try to play down certain issues that spark conflict for both faiths. According to Babagario (2019), religion-born extremism also stands as a challenge for successful dialogue. Many adherents are utterly against for getting engaged in interreligious dialogue. Such people merely believe that their religion is the lone absolute and true way of life hence engagement in dialogue with the believers of other faiths is pointless and parallel to treachery to their own conviction. The author also remarks that those who get involved in interfaith dialogue activities and related stuff are typically left unaccompanied without social hold up from fellow members of their belief which eventually discourages them to go on with interfaith dialogue discourse.

METHODOLOGY

This research work is qualitative with phenomenological approach. In order to collect data, in-depth interviews were carried-out. For this purpose, an interview guide (unstructured interview) was devised that carried themes and sub themes according to the study objective. Faith leaders (only males) from all major religions (Islam, Christianity, Hinduism and Sikhism) in Pakistan were the study population. Data was gathered from big cities (Islamabad, Karachi, Lahore, Peshawar, Multan, Quetta, Bahawalpur and Faisalabad). Sample was taken through Purposive sampling method at first stage and convenient sampling technique at second stage. Data was gathered with the informed consent of respondents and prior appointment for interview. Interviews were taken both through face-to-face interaction and telephonic mode as per convenience of the respondents. Data collection process continued for almost three months to complete. All interviews were conducted in Urdu language as common and understandable mean of communication. Interviews were also taped, with the permission of respondents, for transcribing purpose. After data collection process completed, all interviews were transcribed into English language and reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) method was applied for data analysis to arrive at insightful findings. For carrying out reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) NVivo was used as appropriate software.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results of the study show that dearth of correct information and misconceptions about each other faith are the major hurdles in the way to smooth occurrence of interreligious dialogue. In general people have very diminutive knowledge about their particular religion. In the same way knowledge about other religions is also very limited that takes to misconceptions. Muslims know little about Islam, Christians know little about Christianity and Hindus know much little about their religion as endorsed by Huda (2017) in her

study. Religious literacy must be promoted and essential knowledge about one's religion must be ensured by educational institutions. Lack of understanding concerning need and importance of interfaith dialogue also poses a hindrance in the way to smooth and unhindered dialogue. Countrywide awareness should be spread through all types of media to defeat this challenge.

Additionally, findings illuminate that people in our society shun talking and discussing about religious affairs for sensitivity of the subject matter. People from minority group also avoid it too much in public and private both, fearing blasphemy law if someone fallaciously accuses them. They are also afraid of attempt of conversion on them under pretext of dialogue which is supported by Ayoub (2004). Conversation about religions or interfaith dialogue is also prevented for that matter. People also deem dialogue as a menace to their primary religious beliefs and religious individuality. All this keep people away from dialogue. We must educate people that dialogue is not about preaching or change of religion but it's about discussing general social problems and their solutions for better living in society. In this connection faith leaders can play an efficient and constructive role.

Likewise, killing on Muslims in different parts of world like Kashmir, Palestine, Burma etc also shove people in Pakistan away from dialogue. When ordinary Muslims get to know about atrocities on fellow Muslims by the people of other faiths, they take interfaith dialogue as worthless and pointless thing that is also established by the study of Shakeel (2024). They think that on one side Muslims are being unlawfully slaughtered and on other side Muslims are called upon to live peacefully that seems impossible at all. International powers should give up double standards then call for mutual respect and peace for all would be heard and valued. Absence or lack of capable people for carrying out dialogue on right track also appeared as a challenge. Most of the educational institutes and seminaries are not producing experts of this field. In wake of this non experts are pushed into dialogue associated matters where they fail to perform well and dialogue process gets derailed. In order to take dialogue in right direction, properly qualified and trained experts of interfaith dialogue must be produced through educational institutions. Study by Kanu & Nosike (2025) also confirms the finding that continuous spread of false information; posting hateful content and false propaganda against religion of others also discourage people to come forward for interfaith interaction. Ample of baseless stories and deprecating remarks, cartoons and caricatures of holy personalities and burning copies of Holy Quran flicker serious conflicts and tensions among religions. This state of affairs in no way allows meaningful and genuine dialogue. In order to make dialogue possible and tolerable for all, change in behaviors of international community is desirable since global behaviors affect local behaviors. Gillani & Waheed (2025) also approve that long standing sectarian segregate among Muslims also poses a serious challenge to interreligious dialogue. Sunni-Shia crack and antagonism have sternly offended our society in terms of religious harmony. Internal bickering among diverse sects of Muslims has cultivated an environment of fear in the minds of non-Muslims that badly affects the opening of successful interreligious dialogue. Wickedness of sectarianism is funneled by plentiful actors for obtaining political mileage. Rigid, hardcore and self-serving interpretations of religion have stained the central values of serenity and harmony for coexistence.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

By summing up the discussion it could be concluded that fear of conversion and loss of religious identity stand as a major hurdles in the way to successful dialogue on grassroots level that need to be broken by massive awareness and mobilization campaigns on national level. Maltreatment of Muslims in different parts of the world and incidents of shameful acts like burning the copies of Holy Quran and making cartoons of Holy Prophet leave no possibility for dialogue activity at local level.

1. Widespread consciousness on the concept and implications of interfaith dialogue is required among masses. For this purpose, conventional as well as social media could be more efficient. Awareness campaigns must be led by interfaith councils constituted by government at central as well as provincial level. Such awareness will not only educate people about the subject matter but misconceptions about interfaith dialogue would also be eliminated.
2. Government of Pakistan should do robust lobbying on international level to restrain harassment of Muslims as well as harmful trends of scandalous acts of burning copies of holy Quran and heretical remarks on the holy Prophet (PBUH). If these disparaging trends persist on global level, interfaith dialogue and harmony would have no recognition in our society and it would yield no positive results.
3. People of minority groups in Pakistan are afraid of majority. They feel insecure and vulnerable to be accused of any blasphemy law and resultantly they stay away from interfaith engagement. Therefore, laws protecting minorities should be sternly enforced to make them feel safer for participating in interfaith activity with confidence
4. In this age, media is the most powerful tool of perception management and awareness raising. There is a need to produce drama serials and movies based on interfaith stories with the purpose to sensitize the masses. In addition to it, cartoons presenting interfaith friendships should be promoted that would help children learn interfaith tolerance and acceptance.

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