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## Role of Interreligious Dialogue in Promoting Peace and Harmony

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### ABSTRACT

This paper aims to comprehend the role of Interreligious Dialogue (IRD) in promoting peace and harmony, specifically in Pakistan and generally in the world. It also aims to analyze whether Pakistan is an extremist state and unsafe land for non-muslims, as internationally portrayed. Related to this, challenges that restrict IRD and solutions to overcome those challenges have also been discussed. This study reveals that despite multiple challenges, IRD has been playing its role in making Pakistan a peaceful and coherent state. The Constitution of Pakistan assures religious freedom to its minorities. The state religion of Pakistan is Islam, which, as a worldwide religion, imparts love, forbearance, and compassion for humankind. Extremism associated with Islam is only due to its insufficient knowledge. History reveals that muslims have always played a vital part in stimulating interreligious relations through the provision of justice, equal rights, and liberty of belief and practice to any religion, society, and culture. Islam,

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through IRD, can work as an ideal for reducing interreligious clashes and sustaining harmonious and peaceful concurrence among different religions to contribute persuasively to the betterment of humanity.

**Keywords:** Interreligious Dialogue, Constitution of Pakistan, Religious Diversity, Extremism, Peace and Harmony

## Introduction

In this world where people from various ethnic, religious, and cultural settings exist, we frequently intermingle with individuals of diverse religions in the form of friends, neighbors, fellow students, and colleagues. Hence, we go through an interreligious experience in our everyday life. Interreligious dialogue (IRD) is, therefore, certainly essential for sustaining a peaceful co-existence and harmonious relationship amongst dissimilar religious groups. In the contemporary age, while the world has converted into a global village, it is more important for communities, nations, and faiths to have better relationships, tolerance, and peace than ever before in human history. IRD has turned into an increasingly noticeable subject in the global religious world. Its popularity is attributed, partly, in reaction to globalization which offers increased exposure to human beings to various religions. Consequently, IRD is regarded as a “holy religious exercise and has become a much-discussed topic to deal with the clashes resulting from disclosure to religious multiplicity.”<sup>1</sup> Theologians, scholars, and academics,

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<sup>1</sup> C Cornille, ed., *Conditions for inter-religious dialogue* (Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2013), 34; E Patel, *Out of Many Faiths: Religious Diversity and the American Promise*, vol. 4 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

thus, regard IRD as a serious effort to construct worldwide amity and encounter intricate and complex social scuffles ascribed to religion.

The polarity of religion often leads to both peace and violence.<sup>1</sup> History offers plentiful proofs of religious beliefs or associations causing strains and ferocity more frequently than the known peaceful harmony. Like, “the conflicts in the Middle East, clashes amongst Israel and Palestine, Muslims and Buddhists in Thailand and Myanmar, and Hindus and Muslims in India and Bangladesh are afflicting the world.”<sup>2</sup>

Similar to many other countries of the world, Pakistani society also comprises an enormous diversity of religions, beliefs, cultures, and ethnicity. In any diverse society, there are prospects of misunderstandings and conflicts among unlike groups, and Pakistan is no exception. Therefore, there has always been a dire need for serious efforts to promote social harmony amongst these groups, particularly from the Muslim - Christian perspective. Muslims have a long and persistent history in this arena. However, Christians are recognized as the founders of the modern movement of IRD. The mainstream Pakistanis are adherents to the religion of Islam. In the Qur’anic words (Al-Imran 3:104), IRD is a significant means of inviting people towards uprightness and desisting them from evilness. Therefore, IRD aims to nurture virtuousness, comprising understanding, courtesy, cooperation, and unanimity among the followers of, unlike religions and cultures. IRD carries great significance in Pakistan to overcome interreligious strains, tensions, misunderstandings, and

<sup>1</sup> U Beck, *A God of one's own: religion's capacity for peace and potential for violence* (Cambridge: Polity, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> M. Elius, I. Khan and R. M. Nor, “Interreligious dialogue: An Islamic approach.” *Katha* 15 (2019): 15.

divisions, and to abolish ferocity, abhorrence, and discrimination of caste, doctrine, and religion via effective communication skills.

Dialogue is not a novel idea. It is as ancient as the history of humans.<sup>1</sup> History has documented several initiatives of IRD. The recent concept of IRD reflects the first Parliament of World's Religions in Chicago in 1893,<sup>2</sup> from where the interreligious movement is assumed to be started.<sup>3</sup> Various interreligious organizations, like the International Association for Religious Freedom (IARF), World Council of Churches (WCC), United Religions Initiative (URI), Interfaith Centre for Sustainable Development, and King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue (KAAICIID), are working on IRD.<sup>4</sup> The notion of IRD has also been incorporated into official policy documents of the United Nations Organization (UNO) and the European Union (EU), as well as other global organizations.<sup>5</sup>

The European Union White Paper on intercultural dialogue describes dialogue as a process of mutual understanding that involves the reverent and open discussion of views among people and groups of diverse cultural, religious, and linguistic traditions. The principles of this dialogue include

<sup>1</sup> See H Wani, R Abdullah and L. W. Chang, "An Islamic perspective in managing religious diversity." *Religions* 6, no. 2 (2015): 642–656, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel6020642>

<sup>2</sup> A Al-Masud and M Elius, "The Qur'anic view of interreligious dialogue and harmony." *International Journal of Recent Research in Social Sciences and Humanities* 3, no.1 (2016): 18–21.

<sup>3</sup> M Swamy, "Religion, religious conflicts and interreligious dialogue in India: An interrogation." (Doctoral dissertation, The University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, Scotland, 2012). Retrieved from <http://hdl.handle.net/1842/8145>

<sup>4</sup> I Khan, M Elius, M R M Nor, M Y Yusoff, K Noordin and F Mansor, "A Critical Appraisal of Interreligious Dialogue in Islam." *SAGE Open* (2020): 1, DOI: 10.1177/2158244020970560

<sup>5</sup> K Lehmann, ed., *Interreligious Dialogue in Context: Towards a Systematic Comparison of IRD-Activities in Europe*. [\*Interdisciplinary Journal for Religion and Transformation in Contemporary Society\* 6, no. 2 \(2020\): 238.](#)

creating the skill to listen, honor the multiplicity of beliefs, and find shared religious understandings. Ethics and human rights are prioritized over dogmatism, and issues are tried to be resolved through an analytical and cooperative group. IRD presumes the readiness to reconsider one's concepts about others' beliefs, hence encouraging mutual upgrading and transformation. One of the pedagogical ways of eliminating discrimination, according to Dietz, entails addressing the collective issue of the perception of otherness.<sup>1</sup> It enhances the ability to recognize the existence of the "other" or other perspectives. A positive attitude toward others, who are affiliated with different religions, helps to an "increased comprehension of religious tolerance."<sup>2</sup> Marianne Moyaert argued that "Dialogue is deeply connected with the quest for truth and an endeavor for wisdom, and omits fanaticism. A fanatic person convinces himself that he is right, so rejects any critical testing or challenge."<sup>3</sup>

The practice of IRD can also be entitled interfaith dialogue.<sup>4</sup> Religion includes a group while faith appears to signify different beliefs possessed by supporters of the group.<sup>5</sup> Interreligious cooperative groups, alliances, and activities aim to curtail violence and deal with the

<sup>1</sup> R Vila, M Freixa, Montse and A Aneas, "Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue in Education." *Interdisciplinary Journal for Religion and Transformation in Contemporary Society* 6 (2020): 256-257.

<sup>2</sup> Van Tongeren, S Hakim, JN Hook, KA Johnson, JD Green, TL Hulsey and DE Davis, "Toward an understanding of religious tolerance: Quest religiousness and positive attitudes toward religiously dissimilar others." *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 26, no. 3 (2016): 212-24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10508619.2015.1039417>

<sup>3</sup> M Moyaert, "Interreligious Dialogue," in *Understanding interreligious Relations*, eds. David Cheetham, Douglas Pratt and David Thomas (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 206.

<sup>4</sup> D. L. Eck, *A new religious America* (New York: Harper Collins World, 2002).

<sup>5</sup> S B Swanson, "Interreligious Dialogue in the Religious Styles Perspective." (Master's thesis, The University of Tennessee, Chattanooga, Tennessee, 2019). Retrieved from file:///F:/Call%20for%20Paper/INTERRELIGIOUS%20DIALOGUE%20IN%20THE%20RELIGIOUS%20STYLES%20PERSPECTIVE.pdf.

humanitarian crisis.<sup>1</sup> Many crucial enterprises related to interreligious engagements have sprung from organizations of human rights, for instance, the Plan of Action for Religious Leaders and Actors to avert provocation to violence, which could arouse atrocity crimes.<sup>2</sup> The purpose of these dialogues and collaborations is to unite diverse faith communities to develop policies, advocacies, and laws that the faiths settle on. Most interfaith organizations struggle to protect religious freedom and pluralism,<sup>3</sup> focus on the issues related to economic, racial, and social justice, combat intolerance, and discrimination, and promote the objectives of peace, viable development, and endorsing human rights.

In the Pakistani scenario, the majority of its population is in favor of serving and fortifying interreligious harmony. Several Pakistani people and organizations are working in a much-planned manner in promoting interreligious coherence among the people in Pakistan. Some of these include;

- **The Christian Study Center (CSC), Rawalpindi.** It has been playing a historical role in stimulating Dialogue between Muslims and Christians through conducting interreligious dialogical meetings, conferences, seminars, and workshops on national and international levels for the past 50 years.

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<sup>1</sup> S Berry and F Petito, *Interreligious Engagement and Sustainable Peace. The Role of Interreligious Dialogue and Collaboration in Combatting Intolerance and Discriminations: Mapping International Initiatives and Best Practices: Workshop Report*. Retrieved from The Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and ISPI (Italy: Bologna, 2018), 3. [https://www.ispionline.it/sites/default/files/pubblicazioni/interreligious\\_engagement\\_report-finallogo\\_def.pdf](https://www.ispionline.it/sites/default/files/pubblicazioni/interreligious_engagement_report-finallogo_def.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Berry and Petito, *Interreligious Engagement and Sustainable Peace*, 6.

<sup>3</sup> Pluralism manifests the co-existence of different religions and heterogeneity of culture and society (F Huda "Role of Interfaith Dialogue in Checking Religious Extremism." *Philosophy and Progress* 61, no. 1-2 (2019): 96. doi.org/10.3329/pp.v61i1-2.44204)

- **The Pakistan Interfaith League (PIL).** It is working for interreligious harmony and national integration.
- **Cavish Development Foundation (CDF).** According to the Chairperson of its Board of Directors, Naeem Iqbal, “CDF aims and efforts sincerely to make Pakistan a safer and peaceful place for everyone, and will leave no stone unturned to carry on its struggles for the promotion of interreligious harmony and peace.”<sup>1</sup>
- **Tearfund Germany.** It is a part of the global Tearfund family and working against poverty and injustice in more than 50 countries, especially in the Muslim world. In Pakistan, it has been working for many years.
- **National Council for Interfaith Peace and Harmony Pakistan (NCIPHP).** It also organizes many programs to promote coherence. For example, it recently launched the “Living Together Movement” in the “Interfaith Harmony Week” at the Lahore press club on 1<sup>st</sup> February 2021.
- **International Peace Committee for Interfaith Harmony (IPCIH)**  
It was established in 2010. It has been working for the development of ignored & marginalized communities in Sindh especially and overall in Pakistan. It also works for peace, health education, pure drinking water, and the environment.
- **Global Peace Pioneers (GPP)**  
To establish a prosperous society, strengthened, and free from all forms of prejudice, inequality, and injustice, it aspires to foster

<sup>1</sup> Zahid Shahab Ahmed, “An Interfaith Harmony Project in Pakistan.” *Peace Direct*, 2010, accessed July 25, 2022. Retrieved from <https://www.peaceinsight.org/en/articles/an-interfaith-harmony-project-in-pakistan/?location=pakistan&theme=>

unity, solidarity, and understanding among multi-religious communities in Pakistan and the rest of the world.

- **United Religions Initiative (URI)**

It was established in Pakistan's Lahore in 1988. The URI is an international program that seeks to advance religious harmony worldwide; in Pakistan, it attempts to accomplish the same goal at the national level.

- **Interfaith Harmony Initiatives: Hive Pakistan**

Hive Pakistan has been involved in numerous interfaith harmony and religious tolerance programs that are meant to offer both entertainment value and experience learning.

- **Peace Hope Pakistan**

Since 4<sup>th</sup> April 2017, this organization has worked to advance peace, religious harmony, and the realization of human rights in Pakistan.

- **Interfaith Harmony Wing**

Interfaith Harmony Wing, the Ministry of Religious Affairs & Interfaith Harmony has been tasked with the critical duty of Policy and Legislation about Interfaith Harmony following the Post devolution situation.

## **Literature Review**

### **Security Threats and the Need for Unity and Solidarity in Pakistan**

Hamid remarked that after the 9/11 issue, the security conditions have changed in Pakistan. Now Pakistan is combating various kinds of intimidations; such as terrorism, radicalism, sectarian ferocity, political and economic insecurity, and feudalism are a few interior threats interconnected



with some exterior threats.<sup>1</sup> While Mr. Ijaz Alam Augustine, Provincial Minister for Human Rights, said in a one-day “Intrafaith and Interfaith roundtable conference,” (organized in Lahore in cooperation with the “Interfaith Council for Peace and Harmony Pakistan” and “the European Union Delegation to Pakistan”) that “currently, the country is in dire need of unity and solidarity, because violence, intolerance, and religious extremism are among the main challenges being faced by Pakistan today.

### **Diversity of Religions in Pakistan**

Pakistan is a racially and religiously mixed state, the populace of which is about 210 million (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2018). Islam is the state religion of Pakistan, and almost 96.47 % of its population is Muslim. Whereas 3.53 % of its population comprises minorities, including Christians at around 1.27%, Hindus at 2.14%, Ahmadis at 0.09%, Sikhs at 0.01%, and other major minority religions at 0.01% (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2017).

- **Propaganda against Pakistan**

There is propaganda that tries to defame Pakistan by portraying its incorrect image and behavior toward minorities. Pakistan is supposedly considered a risky place for non-Muslims, as some previous outbursts on sacred places of non-Muslims have been presented on worldwide media that Pakistan is not a secure site for them. Nonetheless, when one observes thoroughly, such terrorist assaults damaged not only their sacred places but also the sanctified places of Muslims, in which many Muslims had been murdered.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See M Akbar and H Yaseen, “Interfaith Harmony in Pakistan: An Analysis.” *Global Political Review* 5, no. I (Winter 2020): 9 – 18. DOI:10.31703/gpr.2020(V-I).02,

<sup>2</sup> Akbar and Yaseen, “Interfaith Harmony in Pakistan.” 11-12.

**The Constitution of Pakistan affirms the Rights of Non-Muslims**

Although Pakistan was established on the Islamic ideology, its constitution protects the fundamental rights of non-Muslims or minorities and provides freedom of religion to every individual (Part II; Chapter 1: Fundamental Rights (Article 20, Constitution 1973)).<sup>1</sup> It also targets to ensure inter-religious co-existence in Pakistan.<sup>2</sup> On one occasion Quaid-e-Azam, the founder of Pakistan, declared that “Equal rights for minorities and females, democracy, and tolerance should be the key drives of the new state; and that sectarianism and extremism will not be tolerated in Pakistan.”<sup>3</sup> While, at another time, Quaid-e-Azam emphatically stated the privileges of minorities in Pakistan:

“Minorities will be safeguarded, to whichever faith they may belong. Their religion, faith, or belief will be secured. They will enjoy freedom in their ways of worship. They will have their rights and privileges without any doubt about their citizenship.”<sup>4</sup>

In the Constitution of 1973 of Pakistan, it was declared that all existing laws will be executed as per the doctrines of Islam. But, Section 1(4) of the Enforcement of *Shari‘ah* Act affirms that “Nothing contained in this Act shall affect the personal laws, religious freedom, traditions, customs and way of life of the non-Muslims.”<sup>5</sup>

Qais Aslam, an economist, and professor, evoked that “the Constitution of Pakistan recognizes the equal rights and opportunities for all. Hence it is essential to respect the diversity of cultures, ethnicities,

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid.

<sup>2</sup> R Shaukat, *Interfaith Harmony in Pakistan* (Lahore: Pakistan Observer, 2017).

<sup>3</sup> See J. Wolpert, “Prudence and Parsimony: A Regional Perspective.” *SAGE journals* 18, no. 3 (1989): 223-36.

<sup>4</sup> M Ali Jinnah, *Speeches as Governor General of Pakistan 1947-1948* (Karachi: Pakistan Publication, 1947).

<sup>5</sup> M A Chaudhary, “Religious practices at Sufi Shrines.” *Pakistan Journal of History and culture* 31, no. 1 (2006): 2-10.

genders, and religious beliefs, to reinforce interreligious harmony for peaceful coexistence of people of all faiths in Pakistan.<sup>1</sup> So, Pakistan is developing as a more peaceful abode for non-Muslims, because it provides them their lawful rights. Their membership in the governmental process is also proof of that assertion by the state.<sup>2</sup>

### **Religion and Extremism**

Every religion teaches universal love and preaches compassion for other humans. However, numerous atrocious crimes,<sup>3</sup> extremism, and terrorism are being perpetrated in the name of religion. Though there is no solid explanation of extremism it is mostly defined with unpleasant meaning. Despite a socio-religious consideration it is usually contended that extremism does not approve of liberty of choice and expression. It negates all types of liberal views, and social and civil rights.<sup>4</sup> People nurturing the idea of extremism are branded as extremists. The extremists regard their viewpoint as categorically accurate and thus aspire to impose their ideas on others either indisputably or violently. They consider extremism as the only way to achieve a better future. It is mostly claimed that religious extremism encompasses hostile attitudes towards other religions and purposefully harms their adherents.

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<sup>1</sup> Agenzia fides. "Asia/Pakistan - Improving interreligious relations: the commitment of Christian organizations." 2021. Accessed August 15, 2022. Retrieved from [http://www.fides.org/en/news/71315-ASIA\\_PAKISTAN\\_Improving\\_interreligious\\_relations\\_the\\_commitment\\_of\\_Christian\\_or\\_ganizations](http://www.fides.org/en/news/71315-ASIA_PAKISTAN_Improving_interreligious_relations_the_commitment_of_Christian_or_ganizations)

<sup>2</sup> A Aqeel. "Problems with the Electoral Representation of non- Muslims." 2018. Accessed September 7, 2022. Retrieved from <https://herald.dawn.com/1154039>

<sup>3</sup> D Mogahed and A Mahmood. "American Muslim Poll 2019: Predicting and Preventing Islamophobia." 2019. Accessed July 29, 2022. Retrieved from <https://www.ispu.org/american-muslim-poll-2019-predicting-and-preventing-islamophobia/>

<sup>4</sup> K A Cronin, "Behind the Curve: Globalization and International Terrorism," in *Global Terrorism*, eds., B J Lutz and J M Lutz (London: Sage Publications, 2008), 1: 57-76.

Extremism, thus, is measured as an ideology, policy, and method, designed to accomplish pre-determined religious, political, and cultural goals and motives through force, violence, threat, or fear. The extremists even use some narratives, economic support, and strategies to tempt the youths, minorities, underprivileged, and illiterates to make them believe that they are deprived and must revolt to have their due rights. Religious extremism through the violation of the fundamental instructions of religions generates anxiety and stressful circumstances and causes inter and intra-religious conflicts. Extremism is, indeed, “a social, religious, and psychological phenomenon. Wrong interpretations of religions, worldwide politics, emerging *Jihadi* movements, political uncertainty, and the vulnerable situation of democracy are the main influential factors behind the development of religious extremism and conflicting circumstances.”<sup>1</sup> It is, therefore, not justified to associate any religion with extremism and terrorism.

### **Role of Interreligious Dialogue in Mitigating Interreligious Conflicts**

European Commission put forward the measure of interreligious and intercultural dialogue as one of the educational approaches to avert religious intolerance and radicalization. At this time of rising global stresses, frequent disasters, threats, and reservations, IRD is a vital strategy to fight social and political clashes ascribed to religion and to build peaceful relations. It can reveal the supremacy of religious traditions and offer the stimulation, direction, and justification required to adopt non-violent ways to resolve violent conflicts both nationally and globally.

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<sup>1</sup> Huda, “Role of Interfaith Dialogue in Checking Religious Extremism.” 104.

IRD is not a debate, as a debate is based on winning over the other whereas dialogue aims to comprehend the other.<sup>1</sup> IRD involves moving beyond our concerns and focusing on the bigger humanity representing the varying faiths. It strengthens the individual through acquaintance with dissimilarities that construct the empathy and sympathy compulsory to fight for social justice. In this way, it helps dismantle the system of oppression and fight for the marginalized. It also makes us realize that we are more identical than different and enables us to grow and learn from one another and stand in solidarity with each other.<sup>2</sup>

IRD is a substantial struggle to promote peace, collaboration, and the safety of religious freedom.<sup>3</sup> In this quest for peace, IRD has emerged across the globe with the aim of not only promoting tolerance but also developing interreligious understanding, which supports varied believers to unite and serve the world and their collective pro-social objectives in a better way.<sup>4</sup> It provides opportunities, which are indispensable for peaceful co-existence.<sup>5</sup> Due to its importance, Dialogue on both a local and a global basis has become a necessity. Currently, humankind is encountering a significant dichotomous choice: "Dialogue or Death!"<sup>6</sup> Dialogue is,

<sup>1</sup> M Zia-ul-Haq, "Muslims' participation in interfaith dialogue: Challenges and opportunity." *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 49, no. 4 (2014): 613-46.

<sup>2</sup> D J Austin, "Interreligious Dialogue, Peace, and Reconciliation." *Hoya Paxa*. 2017. Retrieved from <https://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/responses/interreligious-dialogue-peace-and-reconciliation>; E Patel, & P Brodeur, eds., *Building the interfaith youth movement: Beyond dialogue to action*. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> D Cheetham, D Pratt and D Thomas, eds., *Understanding interreligious relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> I Merdjanova, "Overhauling Interreligious Dialogue for Peace building." *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* 36, no. 1 (2016): 26-33.

<sup>5</sup> See Cornille. *Conditions for inter-religious dialogue*.

<sup>6</sup> L Swidler, *The age of global dialogue* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2016).

therefore, the only option for current societies to coexist in a peaceful world.

### **Contemporary Challenges to Interreligious Dialogue**

The success of the IRD faces multiple challenges, particularly in Pakistan and generally from the global perspective. Such as:

- Many religious, sectarian, and ethnic groups are still perplexed about the nature, procedure, and purposes of IRD. “The mainstream of its contributors is academically ignorant of other beliefs and lack understanding of the need of the present-day world, rather some of them are destroying the dialogue and spreading confusion,”<sup>1</sup> as every individual and group joins this dialogue for its concern and objective.
- Muslims and Christians both accept the importance of Dialogue. Its future, according to them, however, is not very bright in Pakistan. The present Dialogue does not achieve its objectives, according to some Muslim and non-Muslim Pakistani religious scholars, because instead of IRD, it is a social and political dialogue,<sup>2</sup> and it does not include any theological discussion, rather it is a liberal dialogue.
- The majority of Muslim and Christian scholars and the public avoid taking part in such dialogues due to their reservations and doubts about the present IRD.<sup>3</sup> As Muslim scholars have some concerns about IRD for its missionary activities. According to them, some

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<sup>1</sup> A Saeed, N Akhter, M R Mahmood, S Rafiq, M I Ahmad, A Munir and M Iqbal, “Future Hopes of Interfaith Dialogue in Pakistani Context (Analysis of Dialogue in the Light of Muslim-Christian Scholarly Views).” *Transylvanian Review* 25, no. 22 (2017): 5970.

<sup>2</sup> Mufti Muhammad Taqi Usmani, Interview (Karachi: Jamia Darul Ulum, 13-7-2009), cited in Saeed et al., “Future Hopes of Interfaith Dialogue in Pakistani Context.” 5969.

<sup>3</sup> H Shahid, *Interreligious Dialogue between Muslim and Christians* (Islamabad: International Islamic University, 2007), 140.

Pakistani churches and Christians are working for this cause and receiving funds from foreign nations.<sup>1</sup> But at the same time, it is noticed that Muslims mostly join this dialogical activity with the objective of Islamic *Da'wah*.

- Abuse and usage of religion for political goals are also the leading hurdles in the way of IRD. Most people are rigid in their stereotypical religious beliefs and are not ready to change themselves. So, it is quite challenging to transform their perceptions through IRD. The mainstream people, therefore, do not participate in it with an open mind.
- The prejudiced and partial religious literature about other religions creates misconceptions and apprehensions and is another great impediment to initiating and promoting IRD.
- Dissimilar religious groups and organizations accuse each other of stimulating and supporting radicalism. So, security fears may inhibit some religious scholars and groups from joining meetings in certain locations.
- The religious, regional, tribal, and linguistic distinctiveness of the Pakistanis have destructively influenced the logic of national pride, so the sense of being an integrated nation is almost absent here.
- Another major challenge of IRD is that only a limited group, chiefly religious or academic scholars, has access to it. IRD is an academic term and only some people know of it. Since mass people and many

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., 139.

high-ranked officers are unaware of its importance, its effectiveness goes in vain.<sup>1</sup>

- Religious doctrinal variances are predominantly liable for disseminating horror and hatred among the people of Pakistan.
- The partial descriptions of religions have impoverished their philanthropic aspect far behind.
- Terrorism has constrained interreligious harmony in Pakistan.
- Media has a strong role in encouraging religious intolerance in Pakistan.
- Poor governance contributes to spreading religious intolerance in Pakistan.

### **1.1. Solutions**

- To overcome the negative sentiments for other religions and their followers through IRD, the specialists of all religions must take an active part in introducing a joint academic syllabus created on the collective knowledge of various religions,<sup>2</sup> taking into account ancient history, philosophy, cultural traditions, art, literature, etc. Moreover, prejudiced religious themes from course books and other literature should also be removed and banned.
- Academic curriculum ought to be reviewed to impart religious forbearance and peace among all religions. Education policy should be made to create recognition of other religions. Enhancing students' knowledge of religious issues leads to broader acceptance and peaceful harmony. It requires accurate knowledge of the

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<sup>1</sup> Huda, "Role of Interfaith Dialogue in Checking Religious Extremism." 102.

<sup>2</sup> M R Mahmood and I R Ghauri, "Inter-Faith Dialogue in Pakistan: An Analysis of Historical Tradition and Contemporary Challenges." *Al-Adwa* 47, no. 32 (2017): 58-59.



profound reality of the religious phenomenon,<sup>1</sup> and traditions. Visits to places of worship should also be arranged to diminish the sense of rejection or fear toward others. These steps expand the perceptions of students and support them to enquire about their personal biases and stereotypes. As according to Hans Kung, “No peace among the nations without peace among the religions. No peace among religions without dialogue among religions. No dialogue between the religions without investigation of the foundations of the religions.”<sup>2</sup>

- For IRD to be operational, partakers must be permitted to make doctrinal assertions, moderately criticize the doctrinal assertions of others, and defend their own when disapproved. But such criticism and defense must be done politely and respectfully.<sup>3</sup>
- To make interreligious meetings successful, it is crucial to identify common ground between various religions. It can include spirituality or even non-religious interests. For this, firstly the participants must view each other as human beings.<sup>4</sup> Then they should discuss the common values (religious, social, political, etc.), the religions share, such as faith in one God, respect for others, human dignity, aspiration of knowledge, justice and fairness, obligation, kindness, coherence, optimism, veracity, affection, etc.
- To ensure participation, IRD should not strive for imposing particular values on members and “must encourage free discussion. While it is imperative to certify that the participant’s needs are

<sup>1</sup> Vila, Freixa and Aneas, “Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue in Education.” 260.

<sup>2</sup> H Kung, *Global Responsibility* (USA: Stock Publishers. 2004), 56.

<sup>3</sup> Saeed et al, “Future Hopes of Interfaith Dialogue in Pakistani Context.” 5972.

<sup>4</sup> Berry and Petito, *Interreligious Engagement and Sustainable Peace*, 7.

fulfilled, the aims of interreligious collaboration must be evident so that the participants do not exploit the process for their purposes.”<sup>1</sup>

- There is a need to develop basic guidelines, comprising: listening, esteem, and no provocation or individual assaults. It is essential to accept others and their viewpoints, instead of compelling them to comply with pre-established standards. Particularly, the identification of those narratives, that are useful to encourage collaboration and also those that are expected to isolate and weaken participation, is necessary. A continual negotiation is needed to facilitate persistent participation to make interreligious collaboration effective over time since change takes time.<sup>2</sup>
- There is no universal solution to interreligious alliance, as endeavors are based on context. Accordingly, the collaboration between religions can be formal (between religious leaders) or informal (at the indigenous level, in neighbourhoods and schools, etc.).
- All citizens, particularly parents, teachers, and religious and political leaders, are responsible for playing their vibrant role in promoting interreligious harmony in the state.<sup>3</sup>
- Good governance and progress in law and order can establish internal stability in Pakistan.
- Peace-building organizations, like local and international NGOs, should assist relevant governmental bodies, particularly the Interior Ministry, to affirm that the National Action Plan (NAP) addresses the underlying reasons and signs of terrorism and violent extremism.

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>2</sup> Berry and Petito, *Interreligious Engagement and Sustainable Peace*, 7.

<sup>3</sup> S Masih, *Challenges of interfaith harmony* (Karachi: Pakistan Observer, 2017).

These interactions between the government and civil society would create a forum that would be highly valuable in ensuring timely reporting of hate crimes throughout the country.<sup>1</sup>

- Members of NCIPHP, in the “Interfaith Harmony Week” celebrated in Pakistan in 2021, emphasized that every religion and sect should collaborate to establish peace and coexistence at the societal level. Religion should be used to eliminate variances among the masses.

### Methodology

This paper has adopted the qualitative research method. It mainly involves reviewing the multitude of articles, books, and the notions of current intellectuals to comprehend the present situation of interfaith harmony in Pakistan, challenges as well as solutions to create peaceful relations among people belonging to diverse creeds, beliefs, and religions. Moreover, to understand the Islamic approach towards IRD, data has been gathered from the fundamental sources of Islam, i.e., the Qur’an and the Prophetic traditions.

### Results and Discussion

Extremism associated with religions is due to lack of understanding. The unclear concepts stimulate mutual disputes, hatred, violence, and extremism among the adherents of different religions. Pakistan was established in the name of Islam but it provides freedom to its every individual and protects the rights of its minorities to reside in the state freely. The Qur’anic verse (Al-Kahf 18:29) stating “truth comes from your God and those who want to believe, let them believe and those who do not, let them do so,” provides a true example of the Islamic concept of freedom

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<sup>1</sup> Ahmed. “Counter-extremism in Pakistan: success or falling short?”

in religion. The Qur'an, and *Hadith* collections, frequently command Muslims to be kindhearted and sympathetic to all creatures of God. Islam does not discriminate against groups. Islamic law deals with all humanity based on equality and provides them equal rights of citizenship in Muslim states. It instructs its adherents to treat every citizen according to the values of social justice.<sup>1</sup> The Qur'an (An-Nahl 16:125) guides Muslims to treat non-Muslims politely and talk to them with wisdom. The Qur'an (Al-An'am 6:108; Al-Hujuraat 49:11) also deters to mock other religions, their deities, and their cohorts. The Prophet ﷺ stated: "All creatures of God are the members of the family of God, and he is the best-loved of God who loves best His creatures."<sup>2</sup> So, according to Islamic teachings, all are equal. Discussion should be conducted based on mutual understanding and not on mistrust or abhorrence to establish an environment of harmony.

Nowadays, no religion can live in exclusion from other religions. So, all religions should open their doors to all others, permitting them to be studied and observed critically, and appreciated or rejected. In the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, the majority of inhabitants are Muslim. Muslims follow Islam, which plays a distinct role in encouraging IRD by offering justice, equal rights, and liberty in religious views, and practice of any religion, beliefs, and civilization. Islam, like every other religion, claims for alleviating conflicts and upholding harmony and peaceful co-existence among varied religions, faiths, and traditions. The Qur'an fully guides and reinforces Muslims' engagement with followers of other faiths, chiefly

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<sup>1</sup> A Kurucan and M K Erol, *Dialogue in Islam: Qur'an- Sunnah- history* (London: Dialogue Society, 2012), 88.

<sup>2</sup> M Elius, I Khan, R M Nor, M Y Z M Yuoff and K Noordin, "Islam as a religion of tolerance and dialogue: A critical appraisal." *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies* 18, no. 52 (2019): 96–109.

Christianity and Judaism. Hence, though a comparatively modern terminology, IRD has, indeed, had a long and continuous history for Muslims.<sup>1</sup> Since its beginning, Muslims have interacted with non-Muslims. The Prophet ﷺ made many treaties with non-Muslims. In all accords, he ﷺ assured the protection of their lives, properties, and faith. When the delegation of the Christians of Najran came to Madina in the year 10H, the Prophet ﷺ treated them with great courtesy. He even permitted them to pray in his *Masjid* with their religious rituals. It indicates that “mutual respect is more important than tolerance.”<sup>2</sup> Despite the differences between Islam and other religions and cultures, Islam never had problems adjusting to them. For instance, when the delegation from Najran came to the Prophet ﷺ and was involved in a doctrinal discussion about the nature of Christ, they “did not agree on the theological issues but approved a peace agreement between them. So, it is not obligatory to argue the theological subjects of varied religions in an IRD. It simply entails acceptance and respect of differences to preserve the scheme of God and follow the morals of the Prophet ﷺ and involve positively with others for developing peace, harmony, and co-existence.”<sup>3</sup>

Islamic teachings do not inspire Muslims to mistreat non-Muslims but encourage helping and protecting them from any harm, and facilitating them with their due rights and dignity. Islam commands to respect the views of other religions (Al-Imran 3:64) and prohibits misbehaving, insulting, or abusing others for possessing a specific faith, belief, and religion, and

<sup>1</sup> M Shafiq and M Abu-Nimer, Foreword in *Interfaith Dialogue: A Guide for Muslims*, 2nd ed. (Herndon, VA: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2011), ix-x.

<sup>2</sup> A A Andrabi, “Interfaith dialogue: its need, importance and merits in the contemporary world.” *International Journal of Advanced Academic Studies* 2, no. 3 (2020): 264-71.

<sup>3</sup> M H Kamali, “Diversity and pluralism: A Qur’anic perspective: Islam and civilizational renewal.” *International Institute of Advanced Islamic Studies* 1, no. 1 (2009): 27–54.

blaming them without any evidence (Al-Baqarah 2:256, Al-An'am 6:108, Al-Kafirun 109:1-6). Islam directs us to settle contentious and disputed issues through the best possible methods and skills grounded on mutual judgment and well-being (An-Nahl 16:125).

The Prophet ﷺ himself established, promoted, and consolidated exemplary relations with the non-Muslims in the political, social, and economic fields. The Madina Pact, the *Hudaibiah* Contract, and the conquest of Makkah are superb representations of the presence and value of these relations. The Prophet ﷺ even availed the services of non-Muslim professionals and never had any religious prejudice.<sup>1</sup> The Muslim *Ummah* sustained this majestic tradition of humanitarianism even after his demise.<sup>2</sup> Islam, being a universal religion, preaches love, forbearance, and understanding for humanity, so it would be “mistaken to categorize “violent radicalization” exclusively with Islam.

### **Overcoming Religious Phobia**

There are several means to address the issue of overcoming religious phobia.

- Bashy<sup>3</sup> regarding IRD advised us to speak discretely and listen more, appreciate mutually, and be mindful of our prejudices, the followers of different religions must discard historical ignorance, and should realize that one person is not a cultural representative of

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<sup>1</sup> M A M Ibn e Hashaam, *Al-Seerat un Nabwiya* (Arabic), vol. 1 (Beirut: Darul Fikr, 1402 AH), 167; M Ibn e Saad, *Al-Tabqaat ul Kubra* (Arabic), vol. 3 (Beirut: Darul Ahya ut Turaasul-Arabi, 1985), 182.

<sup>2</sup> For more detail see M Hamidullah, *Introduction to Islam* (Lahore: Idara-e-Islamiat, 2004), 193-207.

<sup>3</sup> Bashy Quraishy is the President of European Network Against Racism – Brussels, a large European network against racism

the whole particular religion, meaning they are not a homogenous group of individuals who think, act, and desire alike.<sup>1</sup>

- In IRD meetings emphasis should be laid on the urgency for participants of all faiths to discuss and denounce all types of phobias against any religion. IRD involves getting our point heard. Interreligious collaboration may support a certain interpretation or kind of religion. So, IRD can be a source to give lectures in seminars, conferences, and workshops to remove misconceptions about religions. Workshops can provide an open forum for students and grownups to ask questions freely about some of the common myths and misunderstandings surrounding religions and their adherents. Open discussion among followers of diverse religions would correct numerous common misperceptions about religions and their followers.
- Discuss in IRD that no religion permits insulting and hurting other religions, especially the desecration of the Holy Prophets. Blasphemous acts are a conspiracy to destabilize world peace. “Blasphemy Laws” should be formulated to ban communicating deviant elucidations of religions. Whosoever deliberately and openly articulates hostile, abusive or disgracing sentiments about any religion should be subjected to a jail sentence or other punishment according to his crime.”<sup>2</sup> Blasphemy Law arguably must be based on the principle that the right of religious freedom should be

<sup>1</sup> See “Overcoming Islamophobia—promoting inter-religious dialogue and co-operation,” Report of the study session held by Ecumenical Youth Council in Europe (EYCE) and Forum for European Muslim Youth and Student Organisations (FEMYSO) in co-operation with the European Youth Centre Strasbourg of the Council of Europe on 19<sup>th</sup> – 26<sup>th</sup> March 2006, Strasbourg, (DJS/S (2006)2), 19.

<sup>2</sup> S Fenwick, *Blasphemy, Islam and the state* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), 15.

assured, but should not be assumed as limitless, letting to the possibility of government action if religious freedom leads to conflict and threaten the unity and coherence of the nation.<sup>1</sup>

### **Rules of Interreligious Understanding**

Krister Stendahl<sup>2</sup> established three rules of interreligious understanding, especially for Christian–Muslim relations.<sup>3</sup>

**Rule 1.** The first rule is to learn from the experts of a religion not from its adversaries, and let them describe how they understand their religion, instead of reinforcing stereotypes or their own biases against other religions.

**Rule 2.** The second rule is to compare like to like or apple to apple of other religions and relate them to the best instances in our own. In all religions, there are scoundrels and villains, injustices and atrocities as well as role models and heroic figures, including peace-makers. People must pay heed to the positive side of other religions if they want to construct relationships of mutual respect.

**Rule 3.** The final rule is to develop “holy envy” toward all that is beautiful and inspiring in other religions.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I Ropi, *Religion and regulation in Indonesia* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 134.

<sup>2</sup> A Lutheran bishop in the Church of Sweden and a former dean of Harvard Divinity School.

<sup>3</sup> Y Landau, “An interview with Krister Stendahl.” *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*. 2007. Retrieved from <https://bulletin.hds.harvard.edu/an-interview-with-krister-stendahl/>

<sup>4</sup> For a powerful Christian exploration of “holy envy” toward other religions, see B B Taylor, *Holy envy: Finding God in the faith of others* (New York: Harper One, 2019).



These rules encourage greater cooperation, a cooperation that cannot succeed unless they consider others not as enemies or opponents but as companions in appreciating “the justice, peace, and great life that God plans for us all.”<sup>1</sup>

### **Peace-building efforts through IRD in Pakistan**

- Declaration issued on December 9, 2020, in Intrafaith and Interfaith roundtable conference about harmony in the country is the voice of Pakistan that has helped in enhancing harmony in the country.

- Father James Channan OP, Dominican priest and director of the “Peace Center,” recently declared at a national conference on “the future of interreligious relations in Pakistan,” organized by the “Center for Social Justice,” in Lahore that our current government has already made headway in the direction of IRD and must do much more to make our country peaceful and harmonious.

- Secretary General of NCIPHP, Mr. Javaid William, said in the “World Interfaith Harmony Week” and “Living Together Movement,” that the people of Pakistan have connected with the World Interfaith Harmony Week, declared by the UN General Assembly in 2010, to promote harmony and IRD to create significant aspects of a culture of peace and a path to create mutual understanding among all people irrespective of their faith.

### **Conclusion**

IRD might not produce absolute agreement, it is, however, an honest and sincere exchange of opinions to understand each other’s religion regardless

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<sup>1</sup> Landau. An interview with Krister Stendahl.

of their dissimilarities in beliefs and practices. In dialogue, everyone remains true to his faith and expresses respect for others' rights. He earnestly endeavors to correct many of his preconceived thoughts and tries to identify the shared areas of all religions for bridging the gaps between them. The common purpose of IRD is to unite the believers of varied religions and contribute to interreligious peace, harmony, and co-existence, by accepting that despite being different, they are all equal. To make successful strategies and policies, there must be conceptual clarity about IRD. As only dialogue is not enough to yield the expected results, so focus must be on interreligious collaboration and the accomplishment of goals.

Religion itself rarely leads or motivates violent activities. Misconceptions and misinterpretations of religious values and teachings contribute a lot to misguiding people. So, bigoted and radicalized religious interpretations are manipulated as a prime source for promoting terrorist and extremist groups, either openly or covertly, and are used as a justification to convert grievances into violence. The religious leaders, pedagogues, and mass media could regulate the erroneous narratives of religion and disseminate correct teachings of the Holy Scriptures to curb ferocity, discrimination, and culture of abhorrence to attain the effective results of IRD in mitigating religious extremism. To defeat religious extremism and build bridges among different cultures and religions, IRD should be globally launched as an organized movement. IRD can help know others and understand their religious point of view and remove extremist ideas.

Pakistan is a multi-religion country, which is generally a tolerant state towards other religions, and where folks of diverse faiths are typically spending their lives with tranquility. There could be discord in opinion with others' religious creeds but not with the individuals. Both the constitution

and state religion of Pakistan encourages the treatment of its religious minorities with justice. Islam, indeed, aims to make this world a peaceful abode for Muslims as well as for people of all other faiths and cultures, expecting to promote harmony and interreligious co-existence for the greater benefit of humanity. Respect and tolerance of other religions are the universal messages of Islam. So, it can play a unique and effective role through IRD to eliminate any mistrust, conflict, and violence among different religious groups in Pakistan and the global world.