

## **Why Interfaith Harmony? How is it Possible? (Challenges and Prospects in Interfaith Dialogue in Pakistan)**

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### **Abstract**



*Almighty Allah is the absolute creator. He is the creator of good. A human being is the masterpiece of His creation. He blessed human beings with reason, aesthetics, and ethics. This is the uniqueness of a human being that among all His creations only a human being has these three core characteristics with a balance. These basic and fundamental potentials develop and nourish only in peace. Love is the gateway to peace. Every human being has the right to choose a way of life. A being may have a religion or may not. Nobody has the right to compel anybody to adopt or accept or deny any religion. Compulsion is against the dignity and integrity of a human being. Diversity is not bad but the exploitation of diversity and differences for vested interests is a curse. The aim of a religion is to provide peace and tranquility. But unfortunately, it has been made a source of restlessness, terror, and fear. These days, approximately 8 billion people on this globe are resting on the heap of nuclear weapons. Religion is the most powerful factor in influencing the masses. Spreading hate in the name of religion is the most terrible phenomenon all over the world. By having a deep and keen understanding of the background, challenges, and prospects of interfaith dialogue and harmony in Pakistan, we will be able to serve humankind. This article is an effort to search out solid grounds for interfaith dialogue and harmony.*

**Keywords:** Human Being, Religion, Interfaith Harmony, Diversity, Peace, Freedom

### **Introduction**

Every rational being lives with a set of ideas, beliefs, concepts, principles, and faith that he derives from his religion. The fundamentals of religion may be based on myths, superstitions, reason, or revelation. There are a number of religions existing in this world. Different religious leaders, thinkers, scholars, philosophers, and intellectuals of different ages with different historical, geographical, ethnic, racial, and cultural perspectives defined religion in different ways. According to Allama Muhammad Iqbal (1877-1938):

“Religion is not a departmental affair; it is neither mere thought, nor mere feeling, nor mere action; it is an expression of the whole man. (Iqbal,1982)

Prof. Whitehead describes religion as;

“A religion, on its doctrinal side, can thus be defined as a system of general truths which have the effect of transforming character when they are sincerely held and vividly apprehended”. (Whitehead, 1927)

We can describe the gist of the above two definitions as follows: religion is a set of principles, beliefs, or values which a human being accepts and applies in his whole life voluntarily considering them better than others which revolutionizes and transforms the thoughts, feelings, and actions of a person.

We can divide religions into the following main groups, i.e., Abrahamic, Indic, Sinic, and indigenous religions. (LOHR, 2015) Abrahamic religions have their claim of divinity and sacredness. They link them with the divine chain, which started from Adam A.S. and the last of that chain is the Holy Prophet of Islam (PBUH).

According to a survey of 2022, the population of this globe is around 8 billion.

<https://www.worldometers.info>

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Every human being is a unique entity according to his rational, creative, and innovative approaches and understandings. So the difference of opinion is natural. The survival and existence of an idea, concept, belief, faith, and religion depend upon its usefulness. According to Quran: ‘But what is beneficial to the people endures in the earth’. (Al-Ra’d-17)

For the founder of every religion, the main purpose of his school of thought is the organization, systemization, civilization, and facilitation of human life. But unfortunately, numberless human beings have been slaughtered in the name of religion or for the sake of religion by the exploitation of the exploiters for their vested interests. Other than a number of issues, humankind is facing severe crises of extremism. These days humankind is living on the heap of nuclear weapons. The way of survival for us is to follow and implement the principle of coexistence in thinking and practice.

### **Religious outlook of Pakistan**

As an outcome of the one hundred years of the continuous struggle of the Muslims of the Sub-Continent, Pakistan came into existence in 1947. The basis of this freedom movement was the teachings of the Quran and the exemplary character of the holy Prophet (PBUH). The ultimate goal of the emergence of Pakistan was to materialize and actualize the teachings of Islam. Islam means love, peace, tolerance, dignity, respect, welfare, well-being, and betterment. Survival of all humankind with dignity and integrity is the basic spirit of all teachings of the Holy Prophet (PBUH). (Qadri S. U., 2009) The subject matter of the Quran is the well-being of each and every human being without any discrimination of color, creed, race, tribe, nation, or country.

Other than the number of verses of the Quran which connotatively describe the plan of human betterment, there are approximately 1093 verses in which the words like insan, adam, Islam, salama, tasleem, aamana, eeman, etc. have been used and the core meanings of all narrated words are love, peace, dignity, and well-being of humankind.

Allama Muhammad Iqbal, the architect of Pakistan, a renowned Muslim philosopher, theologian, mystic, wisdom poet, and politician, declared that the springheads of his thought are the Quran and the love of the Holy Prophet (PBUH). He says that the gist of the Quran and the teachings of the Holy Prophet (PBUH) are the respect, welfare, and wellbeing of humankind. (Iqbal, 1980)

The founder of Pakistan Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah in his address on 11th August 1947 to the 1st constituent assembly, said:

“You are free; you are free to go to your temples, you are free to go to your mosques or to any other places of worship in this State of Pakistan. You may belong to any religion or caste or creed — that has nothing to do with the business of the State”. <https://na.gov.pk>

Unfortunately, a section of our society has lost this spirit of Islam and the goal of the emergence of Pakistan. Sectarian violence started in Pakistan four decades ago in the eighties and has gulped down more than seventy thousand precious lives of innocent people of all communities from all walks of life till now. This unfortunate situation has torn off the unity of the nation and destroyed the core fibers of society. But despite the conspiracies of national and international players some spirited people put a bold front and encountered these ill elements firmly.

It is impossible to find out the solution to this misfortune without knowing and analyzing the causes and challenges of the current disastrous situation.

### **Causes and Challenges**

We may describe the causes of religious and sectarian intolerance, violence, restlessness, and extremism in Pakistan under two heads:

- External
- Internal

Although above mentioned both the causes are different apparently but they are interrelated in the historical, political, economic, and geographical perspectives of Pakistan.

### **External-Causes and Challenges**

- In the 19th-century British imperialism took over the control of the subcontinent and declared it its colony. In the second half of the 19th century, after the failure of the freedom war (1857), the British, in order to subjugate the Indian people, enjoy a peaceful stay, and prolong their imperialistic rule, applied the policy of divide and rule in the Subcontinent. (Qadri S. U., 2002)The main substance of this policy was the division of the subjects of the Subcontinent

on the basis of religion, color, creed, cast, nation, tribe, politics, history, and language, etc. <https://scroll.in/India><https://www.vedantu.com>

- After the emergence of Pakistan, colonial lords did not leave the newborn state free. Due to the strategic significance of Pakistan, many other international oppressive and exploitative powers started their involvement in the affairs of Pakistan to destabilize it and became a danger to the sovereignty of Pakistan.
- The ‘new colonial’ system which is the worst variant of the colonial system has peeled off the wrap and the whoop of Pakistani society in all dimensions.
- Because Pakistan is a multi-cultural and multi-religious country. So many Muslim countries also jumped to make hay while the sun shines for their vested interests. Now Pakistan is the battlefield for the proxies. Therefore we can observe division, rift, conflict, and contradiction in all respects. The situation has become so much worse that we can observe division within the division, sects within sects, and sections within sections. From politics to economy, religion to culture, individual to society, and public sector to private bodies everything is under their plundering.

### **Internal-Causes and Challenges**

- **Illiteracy**  
Knowledge is the only way for the development of all kinds. Unfortunately, the literacy rate in Pakistan is 60% or less. In remote rural areas where poverty is at its peak, this ratio is dreadful. It is easiest to mislead an illiterate mob in the name of religion and faith.
- **Ignorance**  
No doubt illiteracy is a grave curse but ignorance of issues and problems of age is another catastrophe in our society. Both illiterate and literate sections are unaware of the core issues and are involved in irrelevant matters.
- **Debate without knowledge**  
It is also a misfortune of our society that people debate religion without having satisfactory knowledge of their religion and the religions of others and pass sweeping statements without any rationale.
- **Hate spreading literature**  
It is a misfortune that there are no effective checks and balance mechanisms in Pakistan in respect of publications. An individual or an organization may publish anything i.e. book, booklet, pamphlet, or paper without any permission or declaration. There is neither an effective publication policy in the state nor the society has a sense of publication ethics.
- **Weak political system and incompetent political elite**  
After the early demise of the founder of Pakistan, the newborn state is still in the paradoxes of politics. A number of constitutional and unconstitutional experiments have been done to run the state but unfortunately, no one has proved to be a better choice. Consequently, we are facing a weak system of state with an incompetent and low-caliber political elite, which is incapable to assure the writ of the state. This chaos opens the way for all peace-devastating activities, specifically sectarian conflicts.
- **Corruption of all kinds at the gross root level by the so-called political elite**  
A weak political system is a gateway to corruption. Leaders are known as role models for followers. It is our misfortune that mostly from top to bottom the role of the political elite is shameful. Because they are usually incapable of winning the elections by performance, they cultivate different sectarian, ethnic, and racial groups to gain power, and these ill sections blackmail politicians to protect their illegal activities. Furthermore, the unconstitutional role of non-state actors is also questionable.
- **Poor economy, heavy loans, increase in population haphazardly, and poverty**  
Poverty is the root cause of all social evils. Pakistan’s economy is weak. The haphazardly increasing population is more than 230 million. (<https://www.worldometers.info>) People are facing the unbearable burden of loans and interest. From top to bottom mostly the elite is corrupt. The export rate is very low while import is in abundance. Most of the existing economy depends upon remittances. But the opportunity for people within the country is not sufficient and the ones working abroad are not acknowledged and taken care of properly as well. In this miserable situation, this land becomes the safest haven for culprits of all kinds.

- Polarization

It is the bad luck of our society that it has been divided in a number of ways i.e. religion, sects, language, race, and color. There is a deep gulf between religious seminaries and universities' curricula and syllabi. The way of teaching, objectives, and outcomes are also different. Unluckily blind followers consider their views sacred and declare heresy to any difference.

- Delay in justice and lack of social justice

Justice is the core human and social value. The survival of an individual and society depends upon justice and social justice. The concept of welfare emanates from justice. The absence or lack of justice gives way to negativity which is the base of all inhuman thoughts and behaviors. Unfortunately, our society is deprived of this core value in all walks of life. This deprivation is generating pessimism, extremism, radicalism, and terrorism in society.

### **Discussion and Prospects**

Pakistan is a multi-religious and multi-cultural country. Despite all the above challenges and hurdles, we should be optimistic in respect of developing a culture of interfaith harmony in Pakistan. The people of Pakistan are faithful, sincere, and patriotic. They have a keen urge for love, peace, and harmony. They are contributing to and serving the nation across their religions and cultures. There are two kinds of virtues i.e., religious and rational. The wisdom of all religions (either revealed or non-revealed) is love, peace, harmony, well-being, and service to fellow beings. But the establishment of a peaceful culture in Pakistan is the major responsibility of Muslims because they are in the majority. Approximately 96% of the population of Pakistan follows Islam.

For a Muslim, it is a religious obligation also. The basic pillars of Islam are Tauhid (Oneness of Almighty Allah) and Prophecy of the Holy Prophet (SAWW). This belief invokes a deep sense of reverence, dignity, integrity, respect, freedom of choice, and equal rights for every human being. (Qadri S. U., 2014) A number of verses of the Holy Quran highlight it.

- "O mankind! Fear your lord, who (initiated) your creation from a single soul, then from it created its mate, and from these two spread (the creation of) countless men and women. AL NISSA-1

- "Indeed, We have created man in the best constitution (equipoised in the finest proportion)"AL-TIN -4

- There is no compulsion in Din (Religion).-AL-BAQARA-256

- "And rousing mischief and disruption is a severer (crime) than killing". AL-BAQARA-191, AL-MAIDA-32

- "The way of success is purity and piety". (AL-ALA)

- "Surely, the wrongdoers will not prosper" (AL-QASAS -37)

The second principle of belief for a Muslim is the faith in the Prophecy of the Holy Prophet (SAWW) and to follow His ideal life. (Qadri S.U., 2009)

- There is for you a most perfect and beautiful model (of life). (AL- AHZAB-21)

The Prophet (SAWW) is merciful for worlds, the universe, galaxies, the whole scheme of creation, for relatives, for neighbors, orphans, parentless, prisoners, children, old men, women, slaves, sick, even enemies, nature, and all objects of nature, trees, crops, water, air, etc. (AL-ANBIYA 107). So, how the follower of that merciful Prophet can be an unkind person or a terrorist? (Qadri S. U., 2015) The 1st characteristic and symbol of His followers is love, peace, and being beneficial, merciful, and respectful not only for human beings but for all creatures. The Holy Prophet (SAWW) joined their social activities. Sometimes He welcomed the religious leaders of other divine religions in Masjid e Nabvi (SAWW). So a Muslim cannot be a brutal, terrorist merciless and unkind to other fellow beings.

The Treaty of Madina with the followers of all religions (known as Misaq e Madina) is a beautiful example of interfaith harmony. According to encyclopedia Britannica;

"Constitution of Medina is, a document from early Islamic history based upon two agreements concluded between the clans of Medina and the Prophet Muhammad (SAWW) soon after the Hijrah (Latin: Hegira), or emigration, to Medina in AD 622. The agreements established the muhājirūn, i.e., the early Muslims who followed Muhammad, on a par with the eight clans of Medina (called the anṣār, or "helpers"); collectively, the nine tribes formed the first Muslim community (ummah). The agreements also regulated the relations of the Muslims with the Jews of Medina. (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Constitution-of-Medina>)

Although at that time Muslims were in power and on sound footing but the Holy Prophet (SAWW) acknowledged their all human, religious, social and cultural rights and gave them equal civilian status in 1st established Muslim state.

Similarly, the Holy Prophet (SAWW) did treaties with the Monks of Mount Sinai, the Christians of Najran, the Christians of World I, the Christians of World II, the Assyrian Christians, the Christians of Persia, the Armenian Christians, the Jews of Maqna, the Yemenite Jews, the Zoroastrians, the Coptic Christians of Egypt, the Syriac Orthodox Christians, the Samaritans, the Zoroastrians, etc. All treatises are extraordinary examples of the recognition of all human rights of a human being without any discrimination of all kinds. Following is the translation of the treaty of the Holy Prophet (SAWW) in 628 C.E. with the Monks of Mount Sinai.

“This is a message from Muhammad ibn Abdullah, as a covenant to those who adopt Christianity, near and far, we are with them.

Verily I, the servants, the helpers, and my followers defend them because Christians are my citizens; and by Allah! I hold out against anything that displeases them.

No compulsion is to be on them.

Neither are their judges to be removed from their jobs nor their monks from their monasteries.

No one is to destroy a house of their religion, damage it, or carry anything from it to the Muslims' houses.

Should anyone take any of these, he would spoil God's covenant and disobey His Prophet. Verily, they are my allies and have my secure charter against all that they hate.

No one is to force them to travel or to oblige them to fight.

The Muslims are to fight for them.

If a female Christian is married to a Muslim, it is not to take place without her approval. She is not to be prevented from visiting her church to pray.

Their churches are to be respected. They are neither to be prevented from repairing them nor the sacredness of their covenants.

No one of the nation (Muslims) is to disobey the covenant till the Last Day (end of the world).” (<http://www.cyberistan.org/islamic/charter1.html>)

The exemplary life of the Holy Prophet (SAWW) is the role model for a Muslim. So after the Holy departure of the Holy Prophet (SAWW) His true followers tried to follow his Holy life in all respects in all eras all over the world in all walks of life. For instance, Muslims ruled over the subcontinent for more than 1000 years. They provided non-Muslim subjects with complete religious freedom. They appointed them as ministers in their dynasties and granted them all equal social and cultural rights. To resolve their religious, family, and property disputes Muslim rulers appointed judges from their religions.

British imperialism took over completely in the second half of the 19th century. Muslims were badly victimized by rulers. There was bitterness between rulers and Muslims of the subcontinent but Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817-1898) tried his best to reconcile Islam and Christianity on one side and Muslims and Hindus on the other side. He wrote a commentary on the bible and the Quran to remove the misconceptions between the followers of two revealed religions. Allama Muhammad Iqbal tried his best to develop an agreement between all nationals of Sub Continent through his poetic and prose work. Quaid-i-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah was so much popular with both Hindus and Muslims that he was titled as Ambassador of peace. The first cabinet of Pakistan was created by Quaid-i-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah on 14th 1947. It consisted of 7 ministers. In which two ministers were from minorities. (<https://historypak.com/first-cabinet-1947/>) Along with many other social workers from all communities, Dr. Ruth Pfau and Moulana Abdul Sattar Edhi, etc. are the bright faces of our society.

### **Recommendations**

Approximately 8 billion population of this globe is resting on the heap of nuclear weapons. The human race has been divided into a number of sections on various bases. The religious factor is more powerful than many others. So, by having a deep and keen understanding of the background, causes, hurdles, and barriers of this issue, we should emphasize on following suggestions to achieve the goal of both interreligious and interfaith harmony.

### **Intellectual and academic movement**

Awareness is a key to success. So we should start our movement from academia. Intellectuals and academia are the brains of society. They can play an effective role in the awareness of the masses as a teacher, writer, speaker, analyst, and counselors. Academia should arrange lectures and seminars for consciousness and awakening at different levels.

### **Role of religious circles**

Usually, followers of religious leaders have blind faith and trust in their leaders. So we should approach religious circles. They can play a vital role in the development of interfaith harmony in their circles by grooming and training their followers. To remove the pseudo differences, religious leaders should participate in religious ceremonies, functions, and activities with each other with their followers.

### **Dialogue rather than debate**

We should try to establish a culture of learning rather than teaching. We should exchange our views with respect, civility, and good intention. We should be positive about others. Never impose our views on others. We should focus on dialogue rather than debate. We should avoid comparison. We should always be respectful of the religious personalities, founders, and religious books of others. We should dialogue to learn and not to convince.

### **Enhancement of social links**

We should strive to develop social and cultural links, relations, and friendships with all members of society open-mindedly and open-heartedly. It will be helpful to remove confusion and misconceptions and to develop healthy relations.

### **Responsibility of State**

The state has to play a major role in this regard. Peace is inevitable for the stability of a state. All kinds of developments (economic, political, import, export, stock exchange, controlling inflation, security) are related to peace. So it is the basic duty of the state to introduce a subject under the title "Interfaith harmony" in all public and private sector schools, colleges, and universities at the state level. At college and university levels, independent departments should be established. This degree should be acknowledged by HEC. To encourage this subject and approach seats should be created in schools, colleges, and universities. In this regard, the state should patronize and encourage all such activities.

### **Live and active participation of Media**

Media is known as the 4th pillar of a state. All sections of media (electronic and print) should play their role as a mission. They should arrange discussions and dialogues on electronic media at peak air time. They should equally invite participants from all religions. Articles should also be written by renowned columnists at the national and international levels.

### **Conclusion**

In the end, we may sum up our discussion in these words that despite all the above-mentioned challenges and hurdles, the role of all inhabitants of Pakistan is remarkable. Regardless of all internal and external problems, people are strongly linked with each other. All have their firm social bindings with each other. There is an organic unity within all fibers of society. Every individual contributes to the establishment of a peaceful society within his limits. It means the core human value is love and peace for all. It is the human and religious duty of all true, faithful, sincere, trustworthy, and dedicated units of society (religious leaders, scholars, intellectuals, teachers, researchers, writers, speakers, religious seminaries, universities, institutions, and electronic and print media) to start a mission of establishment of love, peace, and harmony in society. So we should step forward and join hands to eliminate hatred and set a foundation for a welfare state.

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