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### CHALLENGES TO INTER-FAITH PEACE IN PLURALISTIC SOCIETY: AN APPRAISAL OF MODERN APPROACHES FOR SUSTAINABILITY

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#### **ABSTRACT**

Living in pluralist society and longing for sustainable Inter-Faith peace is a great desire which encourages communities to think about hurdles and methods to overcome the challenges. Motivated with this expectation, this research paper aims to explore challenges and the methods for sustainable peace. Research outcome would be conveyed in descriptive and analytical method with help of essential statistics. Findings lead to this believe that religion plays major role in solutions and stakeholders should involve 'religious moderates' to design approaches for resolving interfaith tensions. Challenges which cause difficulties the most are related to identity issue in each group. No one intends to compromise on underrating its identity. Moreover, each section lacks true representation which is supported by all its members. Most of time, their credibility is questioned. As far as the question of methodologies is concerned, idealized method or approach is suggested as solution of such conflicts. However, theological and political approaches are considered more result oriented and feasible. Apart from this, it

must be kept in mind that diverse conditions and settings require precise methods. Furthermore, the need to re-evaluate the implemented strategies is always demanded

## INTRODUCTION

While living in a pluralist society, groups and communities of different faiths desire for sustainable Inter-Faith peace. In order to achieve this goal, we must think about hurdles in this path and propose methods to overcome the challenges. Faith and religion are central point but all problems are associated to religion only. Our societies are social constructions and both socio-religious difficulties are faced in attaining inter-faith peace. This paper is going to address two important challenges and two important approaches for sustainable inter-faith peace. The challenges are issues of identity of religious groups and lack of representative religious leaders. The approaches discussed are theological and political. While adopting the general-to-specific strategy, discussion will start by covering broader perspectives and end on special consideration of inter-faith peace situation in Pakistan.

## METHODOLOGY

Primarily, research outcome would be conveyed in descriptive and analytical method with help of essential statistics. So, analytical and descriptive methods are utilized for this work. Documentary and qualitative research methodology will prevail in whole study.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Among prolific and eminent Muslims and western scholars, Mohammad Abu-Nimer has presented a lot of works reserved for conceivable approaches for sustainable interfaith peace with specific reflection on Muslim community.<sup>1</sup> As far as initiatives and innovative tools for Interfaith dialogue are concerned, the works of Reina C. Neufeldt<sup>2</sup> are of great importance.

However, it must be kept in mind that interreligious dialogue is not just a theory. Expected outcomes can be anticipated once it is practiced. However, few links are lost between initiatives and desired outcomes. So, an intense prerequisite is required to analyze the challenges and practicality of selected approaches for overcoming these hurdles for long-lasting peace and solidarity.

## DISCUSSION

### *Pluralistic society and role of religion in peace*

Several terminologies are in used for defining association among majority and minority groups of a pluralistic society. Interfaith means relationship among different religions. (Jan & Rehman, 2019, p. 77) Numerous methods are used to explain it. In general terms, it refers to a procedure in which an initiative is taken to build reciprocated relationship with multiple religious communities. The terms of interfaith dialogue or interreligious dialogue are common in use.(Dr. Qadir Bakhsh & Ahmed, 2014, p. 21)

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<sup>1</sup> See for detail (M. Abu-Nimer, 1999, 2001, 2003, 2015, 2018; M. Abu-Nimer, Khoury, & Welty, 2007; M. Abu-Nimer & Smith, 2016; M. a. N. Abu-Nimer, Renáta Katalin, 2021; Abu-Nimer, 1996)

<sup>2</sup> See for detail (Neufeldt, 2011a, 2011b, 2014, 2016, 2021)

The chief purpose of interfaith dialogue is peace and harmony amongst followers of numerous faiths. It aims to develop solidarity to accomplish undivided goals. (Dr. Qadir Bakhsh & Ahmed, 2014, p. 24)

Predominantly, religion is believed a major basis for violence, hatred or extremism. Possibly, it is considered any of the sources for such negatives. The inquiries propose the multiple players that are effective for extremism and conflicts. It is clear as provided in the study directed by Isak Svensson of Uppsala University's Department of Peace and Conflict Research. According to it, religious causes do not play major part as 22% of total conflicts occurred due to religious elements during 1989-2003. (Frändå, 2016, p. 15)

Thus, it is not appropriate to blame only religion for all conflicts among religious groups and hurdles in sustainability of inter-faith peace.

### *Challenges to attain sustainable inter-faith peace*

#### *Identity issue*

Challenges which cause difficulties the most in interreligious relations are related to identity issue in each religious group. No one intends to compromise on underrating its identity. It must be remembered that identity is not only self-attained through religion or ethnicity. It is a social construction also. Identities refer to our sense of who we are, how we see ourselves and the ways in which we think we are similar to and different from other groups. Another essential part of it is about how other people see us and judge us. In this way, our identity or image of ourselves is formed through interaction with others. So, in a pluralistic society, each religious group is conscious about identity. What is real identity and what is right or wrong perception?

One of the approaches in interfaith relations is 'us versus them' framework which reflects conflict of narratives. Perceptions are developed in opposition to the 'other'. Nathan C. Funk and Abdul Aziz Said have argued that Islam and other religious societies especially Christianity have designed their identities in contrast of others. Religious groups intend to present their images to display their splendor, worth and superiority. It produces the impression of superiority of 'self' and inferiority of 'other'. These images are established on targeted reflection for which negative aspects are considered and positivity is left. For example, Western Christian communities have built their identity in opposition to the idea of Islamic Others such as Saracen, Turks, Moorish or Muslims. East or Orient is defined to highlight their distinguishing characteristics. West is demarcated when she came across to the East. Likewise, Muslim community belonging to Middle East in particular and others in general have demarcated their identity with excessive support system of ideals, values and principles, in comparison to European Christian Others. Thus, self-vs-other discourse is presented in interreligious studies. (Funk & Said, 2004, pp. 4-5)

Muslims and European societies have considered the "other" as unassimilable. They argue to sanction dominance, virtue, and autonomy for themselves. The consequent images are expressed in form of violent extremes in relationship of

Islam and West as extensive massacre of residents of Jerusalem by the Crusader army in 1099 C.E. (Armstrong, 2001, p. 178; ul Mustafa, Abro, & Awan, 2021) Dealing with interreligious matters, Dr. Ataullah Siddiqui (1997) emphasizes on the considering the past perception built by both communities of Muslims and Christians. According to him, 'religions do not meet in a vacuum.' The followers of different religions always counter each other. Numerous events shape their perceptions and apprehensions. Thus, they try understand each other.

For example, he recalls that Muslims' understanding of Christianity is learned by their faithfulness to Jesus Christ. But they are understood with a tradition of Christianity during the last two centuries. Christians are perceived a 'legacy' of Western colonial system. With this understanding, Muslims are asked to participate in dialogue with them. It is also significant to remember that the Churches are now launching the theology of religious pluralism. They are relating their faith with others.

Same is the case with Muslims who also shape these 'images' of each other and perceptions of each other's' religion. Although, in Islam, Jesus and Mary, his mother, are given distinct status. However, Muslims still assess Christians and get opinions about them from a different aspect. So, both communities assess each other's religion with the help of their own images, and thus formulate opinions about each other on this ground.(Siddiqui, 1997, pp. 49-50)

### ***Lack of representation***

A renowned intellectual, Dr. Ataullah Siddiqui has also highlighted a crucial problem faced by Muslim world. He is of the view that issue of representation among Muslims is a major concern. Primarily, organizations of interfaith dialogue ask for representatives on behalf of Muslims. In response, certain Ulama are nominated by government agencies. But these representatives are given label of 'official Ulama'. In this regard, he also points out another linking issue that it can be observed a severe lack of coordination amongst different sects and their representatives in Muslim world.

Moreover, there is absence of a single representative organization of Muslims. For dialogue, its organizers usually consult the 'official Ulama or religious scholars' to on behalf of Muslims. When these Ulama are invited as representatives, other Muslims ask whom they are representing. These official Ulama have limited freedom to speak so they have limited representation of the Muslims outside their own home countries.(Siddiqui, 1997, p. 52)

In has been practice of the Church to nominate certain members from Muslim community. These scholars are selected to participate in dialogues. These initiatives related to dialogue are planned to enforce the policies prepared by European States and their representative churches. Even, these stakeholders set the topics and issues to be addressed in the conferences and purpose is to put pressure on Muslim governments. These organizations are more interested to talk about women empowerment, human liberty, worship rights of minorities, secular state and issues of Islamic law. Moreover, very aggressive attitude is

adopted by Christian participants. But, on the other hand, Muslims have to take defensive and apologetic position.(Habib, 2010, pp. 18-19)

Another issue of representation is that these Muslim Ulama have another issue of language. Most of the dialogue introduced by Western Christians uses English, French or other European languages, but the Ulama are well versed only in Arabic or other 'Eastern language. Therefore, dialogue becomes useless and sometimes unhealthy.(Siddiqui, 1997, p. 52)

Another problem within Islam is the lack of central authority to speak on behalf of all Muslims. In most religious teachings of different traditions, people have the right to recourse, as a last resort, to the use of force to quell injustice. The last-resort argument is found in Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In Islam, when a violent attack is launched in the name of God, responsibility becomes elusive, since no central authority can adjudicate the rightness or wrongness of the resort to the use of force. Those who belong to the extremist religious right resort to the use of force; as a result of which, modernists wrongly considered Islam as a whole as an extremist religion. However, postmodernism asserts that there are multiple discourses within Islam; and, hence, Islam, as such, cannot be condemned as an extremist or terrorist religion.(Ty & Alonto, 2007, p. 139)

Generally, the role played by majority of Muslim Ulama and intellectuals is significant in order to establish harmony and coexistence among believers of numerous faiths. However, it is unfortunate that few religious representatives have misled the people and raised walls of hatred, misconceptions, religious prejudice, extremism and sectarian conflict among the supporters of different faiths. Indeed, a major gap can be observed between the conservatives and the liberals. It does not allow them to form a platform to conduct interreligious dialogue. The deep sectarian interests are the main cause of this dispute. Consistently, doubts and apprehensions about the nature, aims, resources and formation of the inter-faith dialogue have been created and propagated. Numerous religious organizations have been blaming each other of sponsoring and financing terrorism. Misconception about Jihad is another issue for the inter-faith dialogue. Chiefly, it is Jihad which is meant to safeguard humanity. It ensures rights of the people belonging to all religions. However, sometimes, it has not been taken with its true understanding. Some Ulama have been propagating and misinterpreting this great asset for their personal interests. Sometimes, it has also been misused as a weapon to harm non-Muslims living as minorities.

Another major problem is faced in the form of religious publications and speeches based on hate and prejudice for introducing and promoting an interreligious dialogue. The hate speech and publications have developed such an atmosphere of intolerance in South Asia. A healthy dialogue can only be initiated when a ban is imposed on negative literature and it should be supported by the believers of all faiths. Such kind of atmosphere based on intolerance, enmity, violence and threat has affected badly the communal relationship of the multicultural life of a society. Keeping this situation dominant in the society, it

is unlikely to maintain practice of Interreligious Dialogue.(Mahmood, 2017, pp. 59-60)

### ***Methodologies and Approaches for sustainable interfaith peace***

There are numerous approaches which are adopted for maintaining peace amongst followers of numerous faiths. Such methodologies and approaches are significant to examine transformation in humanity. It is worth mentioning that no ultimate approach can be declared to finish the conflicts among people of different religions. Generally, these methods can be formed into different categories. Among these, theological and political approaches are more relevant and result oriented for sustainable interfaith peace. (Neufeldt, 2011b)

Now a brief overview is provided regarding such methods concentrating on their nature, aims, factors with examples. Moreover, the implication of these approaches in Pakistan is also analyzed.

### **THEOLOGICAL METHOD**

It is acknowledged as the fundamental type of interfaith dialogue which is based on discussions about theological issues. It is chiefly held by scholars who have been experts in religious sciences, theological in-depth knowledge and practice. This approach is aimed at for building a harmonious relationship and strengthening commonalities among faiths such as belief system, religious practices and values. One of the examples of this methodology is the well-known “Thinking Together” series which was organized during 2000-2009, by the World Council of Churches Office on Interreligious Relations and Dialogue. In such discussions, organizers invited certain representatives to resolve some of the difficult theological issues. Such talks included some certain worship ceremonies and personal sharing of individuals as well.(Neufeldt, 2021, p. 63) Primarily, theological approach has presented valued spiritual knowledge and sharing. Sukhsimranjit Singh is of the opinion that religious mediation motivates people to accept modesty and solidarity in conduct to others. It enhances further responsibility, care and respect in attitudes.(Singh, 2018, p. 15) With respect to example mentioned above, its members used to share personal changes, new ideas and insights. In addition to that, they have been also worried about the efficiency of initiatives. For promotion of their thoughts and desired productivity on broader level. They have also issued their dialogues and talks in several volumes.(Neufeldt, 2021, p. 64)

### ***Implications in Pakistan***

In Pakistan, prolific religious leaders are aware of the need of interreligious harmony and pluralism. They set up some important organizations which not only include religious leaders of different sects but they also invited and collaborated with other faiths also especially Christians. One of the worth mentioning examples is a Lahore-based Interfaith Council for Peace and Harmony (ICPH). This organization is mainly composed of theologians and religious leaders including Christians. In the incident of violent attack by over 7,000 people on the Joseph Colony, Lahore, on 9 March 2009, the members of this association actively played a role to disperse the people. Leaders from all

sects: Shia, Sunni, Deobandi and Ahl-e-Hadith went there and told them that Islam did not give them permission to kill a Christian person who was later found of being falsely accused of blasphemy.(Weiss, 2020, pp. 141-142)

Another very important issue that must be addressed by religious heads and institution is the training of Imams and Khatibs.<sup>3</sup> On the matter of qualification of Imams and Khatibs serving in different mosques of different sects, a survey was conducted in different parts of Lahore. Interviews were conducted with Imams of mosques to find out their qualification. Results revealed that 95 percent interviewed persons were simply undergraduate and only 5 percent of the Imams were graduates in Islamic Studies or from madrassas.(Weiss, 2020, p. 148) It means that they are not providing true message of Islam.

### *Political Method*

Political approach is mainly associated with the initiatives of organized political groups. These efforts are made in reply of any conflict created amongst different faiths or ethnic groups. Political parties and leaders also used to take help of religious stakeholders. Thus, it supports to enhance the results of peace efforts at lower level. Chiefly, this type of initiatives are supported and held by governments. In these talks or initiatives, both political and religious leaders are included. Though its nature is political, but theologians persist as the chief participant of entire peace process. The chief purpose of theologians is to aid political governments or parties through religious principles associated to harmony, coexistence, conflict management and conflict resolution.

There are several instances available on governmentally motivated peace processes and interreligious dialogue. For example, the government of ex-president of United States of America, George W. Bush conducted numerous interreligious dialogues in the USA as well as across the world during 2005-2007. This inventiveness was directed by then-Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, Karen Hughes. Chief aims of these discussions were to present counter-arguments to issues of violence. Moreover, it was aimed at to promote interfaith peace, believe in the blessedness of all humans and to present accurate depiction of American Muslims to the world. A prominent initiative based on this kind of approach was taken in 2005 at Istanbul, Turkey. It was organized by Hughes and its contributors included the Syrian metropolitan, the Chief Rabbi, the Mufti of Istanbul, a member of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and a Catholic Bishop. Main objective of this joint meeting was to encourage all to work for peace.(Neufeldt, 2021, pp. 64-65)

Primarily, this method is designed to bring political steadiness with the assistance of religious moderates. This practice aids to convince the supporters of religions for lasting peace.

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<sup>3</sup> staff allocated in mosques for leading prayers and giving sermons

### ***Role of State and Government in Pakistan in Interfaith peace***

On political forums, governments and law enforcing agencies have been taking several steps to engage religious leaders of different faiths and sects for a long time. On arrival of Muharram, especially, several meetings are held and committees are formed.

Moreover, there are also some government-oriented bodies working for religious harmony. One of these, an important example is Ittehad Bain al Muslimeen (IBM). It has been established by Punjab Provincial government to promote religious harmony. Members of IBM meet 2-3 times a year. Moreover, it has issued a Code of Conduct for promoting interfaith and intra-faith harmony and peace. It includes such points as: no one will be declared wajib-ul-qatal (worthy of death) or kafir (infidel) and no hate speech will be made against any sect etc. (Weiss, 2020, pp. 148-149)

The government led efforts along with religious stakeholders can result in fruitful outcomes. The following steps must be ensured by the Pakistani Government;

First of all, the state must ensure the ban of weapons and force by militant sectarian groups in Pakistan. In this case, the role of state agencies and actors is very crucial. Without controlling these groups, religious harmony is not possible. Such efforts were made during the regime of General Pervez Musharraf and he banned militant sectarian groups and arrested their leaders (Ahmar, 2010, pp. 74-75) but these groups used to operate with other names. Pakistani government must fulfill its responsibility.

Secondly, the political parties should pass a constitutional provision to declare interfaith and intra-faith hatred and violence a serious crime. Recently, the killing of a Sri Lankan citizen by a mob is an alarming situation for legislatures, political parties and religious leaders. All of them collectively must focus on making laws for civil society. Judiciary and law enforcing agencies must ensure implementation of these laws and award severe punishments to the offenders. Thirdly, the external intervention in sectarian conflicts by some Muslim and Non-Muslim countries must be checked effectively. Funding by Saudi Arabia and Iran to the militant sectarian groups must be stopped.

Fourthly, the state is responsible for providing platform of dialogue on very sensitive religious matters. For instance, parliament should be declared as dialogue platform on issues related to Ahmadi group as it was practiced in 1974. In this regard, religious leaders should also play responsible role.

### ***Suggestions for sustainable Inter-faith peace in Pakistan***

Along with methods and approaches discussed above, following measures can also lead to promote religious harmony with reference of Pakistan.



- The government and state agencies should be impartial in any sectarian conflict. They should not favor or blame any sectarian group publicly.
- Both print and electronic media should adopt responsible reporting on intra-religious matters.
- Aman (Peace) committees at all level should consist of people who possess these two traits; they themselves should be considered peaceful and they should have a good repute and stature among their own religious group and sect.
- Law enforcing agencies should act and implement the law without any hesitation, compromise or benefits.
- Only religiously qualified and certified persons should be encouraged to guide on religious matters. People should boycott unauthentic and uncertified religious personalities and forums.
- Politicians should not care about their political interests and affiliations in matters of religious sensitivity. (الامين, 2016, pp. 128-131)

### CONCLUSION

Demarcation of the discussion is that the sustainable interfaith peace and solidarity among different faiths cannot be achieved without involving religious leaders and representatives. Religion is not the only contributor for faith-based violence. Instead, the political and economic grievances have crucial role in conflicts related to religions. In order to attain sustainable peace, it is significant to find solutions for two most crucial challenges. Identity issue and perceptions of faiths to each other don't let religious groups to forget the past. Moreover, lack of real representatives of religions especially the absence of representative organization causes issue of credibility and acceptance of declarations.

These issues of identity and representation can be resolved with theological and political approaches. Engagement of credible religious representatives is vital in attaining optimistic outcomes of an interreligious peace process. Political will is also important for providing platforms and eliminating sources of conflict among different faiths. However, there is no doubt about this belief that any idealized methodology is not available as multiple contributors play role in conflicts related to faith groups. Thus, an apt technique should be implemented according to the nature of the conflict.

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