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Islamic Principles for Promoting Religious Harmony in Pakistan A Study of Inter-Sectarian Relations

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Abstract

Religious diversity is an important feature of Muslim societies, and differences of interpretation have existed throughout Islamic intellectual history. The challenge is not the existence of scholarly differences but the manner in which those differences are expressed and managed. Islam provides clear principles for maintaining unity, protecting dignity, exercising justice, avoiding abusive language and resolving disagreements through knowledge and wisdom. In Pakistan, where Muslims belonging to different schools of thought live together, these principles have particular importance. This article examines the Qur'anic and Prophetic foundations of inter-sectarian harmony and relates them to contemporary social, educational and religious life in Pakistan. The study emphasizes unity upon shared Islamic foundations, respect for legitimate differences, avoidance of insulting language, verification of religious claims, consultation with qualified scholars, responsible preaching, educational reform and constructive dialogue. It also considers the role of mosques, madrasas, universities, religious scholars, media and state institutions in strengthening a culture of mutual respect. Contemporary initiatives such as Paigham-e-Pakistan and Pakistan's Policy on Interfaith Harmony demonstrate the value of consensus-based approaches that emphasize peace, social

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cohesion and responsible citizenship. The article argues that religious harmony does not require abandoning established schools of thought or suppressing legitimate scholarly disagreement. Rather, it requires distinguishing between principled disagreements and conduct that damages Muslim brotherhood. A balanced approach based on Qur'an and Sunnah can enable Muslims to preserve their religious commitments while maintaining mutual respect, cooperation and social unity.

Keywords: Religious Harmony, Inter-Sectarian Relations, Islamic Teachings, Muslim Unity, Pakistan, Dialogue, Tolerance, Qur'an, Sunnah, Paigham-E-Pakistan

Introduction

Islam gives great importance to unity among Muslims. The Qur'an describes believers as brothers and directs them toward collective adherence to the divine guidance. At the same time, the Muslim intellectual tradition contains differences in jurisprudential interpretation, methods of legal reasoning and scholarly opinion. These differences have existed within the broader framework of Islam and have contributed to the development of Islamic scholarship.

The existence of different schools of thought, therefore, should not by itself be regarded as incompatible with Muslim unity. The more important question is how differences are handled. When disagreement remains within the limits of knowledge, manners and mutual respect, it can be managed without damaging social relationships. When disagreement becomes associated with personal hostility, insulting language, unjust accusations or rejection of the basic rights of others, it can weaken the bonds that Islam seeks to preserve.

The Qur'an provides a fundamental principle:

إِنَّمَا الْمُؤْمِنُونَ إِخْوَةٌ فَأَصْلِحُوا بَيْنَ أَخَوَيْكُمْ

“The believers are but one brotherhood, so make peace between your brothers.”¹

This verse places brotherhood and reconciliation at the centre of Muslim social life. It does not require Muslims to hold identical views on every secondary question. Rather, it

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establishes a relationship of brotherhood within which differences are to be handled responsibly.

For Pakistan, this principle has particular significance because religious scholarship, mosques, madrasas, universities and communities represent diverse scholarly traditions. The Ministry of Religious Affairs and Interfaith Harmony currently identifies the promotion of inter- and intra-faith harmony and tolerance as part of its institutional mission.²

The government's 2025 Policy on Interfaith Harmony also emphasizes dialogue, social integration, religious freedom and mechanisms for addressing issues through appropriate institutional channels.³

The objective, therefore, should be constructive: to strengthen those Islamic principles that allow Muslims to preserve their scholarly identities while maintaining mutual respect and cooperation.

Unity as a Qur'anic Principle

The Qur'an states:

وَاعْتَصِمُوا بِحَبْلِ اللَّهِ جَمِيعًا وَلَا تَفَرَّقُوا

“And hold firmly to the rope of Allah all together and do not be divided.”⁴

This verse provides a central foundation for Muslim unity. Unity is connected with adherence to divine guidance rather than with uniformity in every matter.

The verse also suggests that Muslims should identify the principles they share before concentrating on matters in which they differ. Faith in Allah, belief in the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, the Qur'an, the basic obligations of Islam and the fundamental moral teachings of the religion provide a substantial common foundation.

Inter-sectarian harmony can therefore be strengthened when Muslims give appropriate attention to common beliefs and obligations. Differences should be discussed where scholarly clarification is needed, but they should not become the basis for constant social separation.

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Unity does not mean that a scholar must abandon the jurisprudential position he considers correct. It means that disagreement should not automatically destroy the relationship of Muslim brotherhood.

Respect for Legitimate Scholarly Differences

Islamic scholarship developed through serious engagement with evidence. Jurists sometimes reached different conclusions because they evaluated textual evidence, linguistic meanings, principles of interpretation and legal circumstances differently.

This history provides an important lesson for contemporary Muslim society. A difference of opinion does not necessarily mean that one side has abandoned Islam or that mutual respect is impossible.

The appropriate distinction is between difference in scholarly interpretation and disagreement that produces personal hostility. The first can be discussed through knowledge; the second requires ethical restraint.

Muslims should therefore learn to say, “This is the position I follow because I consider its evidence stronger,” rather than turning every disagreement into an attack upon the other person's integrity.

Such an approach also protects the dignity of religious scholarship. When disagreements are presented through evidence and respectful language, ordinary Muslims learn that Islamic learning involves serious reasoning rather than personal confrontation.

Brotherhood and Mutual Respect

The Qur'an warns believers against ridicule and offensive speech:

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا لَا يَسْخَرْ قَوْمٌ مِّنْ قَوْمٍ عَسَىٰ أَن يَكُونُوا خَيْرًا مِّنْهُمْ

“O believers! Let no group of people ridicule another group; perhaps they may be better than them.”⁵

The principle is broad and directly relevant to religious interaction. Mockery damages relationships because it changes a scholarly disagreement into a matter of personal dignity.

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The Qur'an further commands believers not to insult others in a manner that produces further insult.⁶

This principle should guide religious speeches, educational discussions, publications and digital communication.

A religious teacher can explain why he considers a particular position incorrect without using language that humiliates those who follow another recognized interpretation. This distinction between refutation of an opinion and disrespect toward persons is essential for maintaining harmony.

Justice Even in Disagreement

The Qur'an provides another important principle:

وَلَا يَجْرِمَنَّكُمْ شَنَاٰنُ قَوْمٍ عَلَىٰٓ اَلَّا تَعْدِلُوْا ۚ اَعْدِلُوْا هُوَ اَقْرَبُ لِلتَّقْوٰی

“Do not let the hatred of a people lead you away from justice. Be just; that is closer to righteousness.”⁷

Justice is particularly important in religious disagreement. A person should not attribute to another group what its recognized scholars do not actually teach. Nor should an isolated statement be presented as representative of an entire school of thought.

Fair representation is therefore part of religious ethics. Before criticizing another position, the speaker should understand it accurately, consult reliable sources and present it according to its actual formulation.

This principle can significantly improve inter-sectarian discourse. Many disagreements become more intense when one side responds not to the actual position of another group but to an inaccurate description of it.

The Prophetic Principle of Muslim Brotherhood

The Prophet ﷺ emphasized the dignity of Muslims and their mutual responsibility. In a well-known Hadith, he described the believer in relation to another believer as a building whose parts strengthen one another.⁸

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The image is important because a building consists of different parts that perform different functions while contributing to one structure. Muslim society can similarly contain differences of scholarship and practice while retaining a shared religious and social foundation.

The Prophet ﷺ also warned Muslims against turning their disagreements into physical confrontation and hostility.⁹

These teachings demonstrate that preserving Muslim brotherhood is not a secondary social preference; it is part of the Prophetic ethic.

Consequently, religious scholarship should strengthen faith, knowledge and moral character rather than produce permanent hostility among Muslims.

Dialogue Through Wisdom

The Qur'an commands:

ادْعُ إِلَى سَبِيلِ رَبِّكَ بِالْحُكْمَةِ وَالْمَوْعِظَةِ الْحَسَنَةِ وَجَادِلْهُمْ بِالَّتِي هِيَ أَحْسَنُ

“Invite to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good instruction, and argue with them in the best manner.”¹⁰

The principles of wisdom and good expression should be applied not only to dialogue with people of other faiths but also to disagreement among Muslims.

A scholarly discussion should therefore aim at clarification rather than humiliation. A teacher may correct an error, but the method of correction should preserve dignity. A scholar may defend a particular position, but the defense should be based on evidence rather than anger.

Constructive dialogue does not require agreement on every issue. Its purpose is to develop the ability to disagree without destroying relationships.

The Importance of Responsible Religious Language

Language plays a major role in shaping religious relationships. A sentence spoken from a pulpit can influence an entire community. A short social-media statement can reach thousands of people beyond its original context.

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Religious speakers therefore carry a special responsibility. They should avoid language that unnecessarily provokes hostility, especially when discussing issues of jurisprudential or sectarian difference.

This does not mean avoiding all correction or scholarly criticism. Islamic scholarship requires the clarification of truth. However, correction should be proportionate, evidence-based and directed toward the issue rather than toward humiliation of individuals or communities.

The same principle should guide religious publications, television programmes, lectures and online videos.

Verification Before Attribution

Another important principle of harmony is the verification of information. False quotations, inaccurate claims and statements attributed to scholars can create unnecessary disagreements.

The Qur'an commands believers:

إِنْ جَاءَكُمْ فَاسِقٌ بِنَبَأٍ فَتَبَيَّنُوا

“If an evildoer brings you news, verify it.”¹¹

Although the verse addresses the verification of news generally, its principle is highly relevant to religious communication.

Before forwarding a statement about another school of thought, a scholar or a religious group, Muslims should verify its source. An inaccurate quotation may produce anger against an entire community even though the statement was never made by its recognized scholars.

Responsible verification can therefore prevent disputes before they begin.

Avoiding Generalizations

One of the practical principles for inter-sectarian harmony is avoiding unnecessary generalization. Every scholarly tradition contains qualified scholars, students, institutions and ordinary followers with different levels of knowledge.

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A statement made by one person should not automatically be attributed to everyone associated with a particular school of thought.

Similarly, disagreement with one legal or theological interpretation does not justify negative assumptions about the character of all those who follow that tradition.

Accurate representation encourages serious scholarship. Generalization, by contrast, creates distance and prevents meaningful dialogue.

Shared Religious and Social Responsibilities

Muslims belonging to different schools of thought share many responsibilities. They worship Allah, believe in the Qur'an and the Prophethood of Muhammad ﷺ, perform prayer and fasting, and share concern for the moral and social well-being of their communities.

These common responsibilities provide opportunities for cooperation.

Mosques, universities, welfare organizations and educational institutions can arrange programmes around shared themes such as Qur'anic education, character development, service to society, family ethics, education, youth development and community welfare.

Such cooperation does not require theological uniformity. It simply demonstrates that Muslims can work together where their purposes are shared.

Education as a Foundation of Harmony

Education is one of the most effective means of developing responsible attitudes toward religious differences. UNESCO has emphasized the role of education in developing mutual respect, dialogue, social cohesion and the capacity to live constructively within diverse societies.¹²

Islamic education can contribute significantly to this objective. Students should be taught not only what their own school of thought teaches but also how Islamic scholarship developed, why scholars sometimes differed and how disagreement can be handled with academic manners.

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This approach can reduce unnecessary suspicion. When students understand that differences can arise from methods of interpretation and evidence, they are less likely to treat every disagreement as evidence of hostility.

Universities and madrasas can also organize academic seminars in which scholars present different positions respectfully. Such programmes can teach students how to listen, question and respond without turning scholarship into confrontation.

Role of Mosques and Religious Scholars

The mosque remains an important center of religious learning and community life. Imams and scholars therefore have a significant role in promoting harmony.

The Friday sermon, religious lessons and community programmers can emphasize Muslim brotherhood, justice, good manners and respect for legitimate differences. When differences need to be discussed, they should be explained academically and with appropriate language.

Scholars can also help communities distinguish between matters that require adherence to a particular jurisprudential position and matters in which Muslims can reasonably follow different recognized opinions.

This distinction reduces unnecessary conflict in everyday life. It enables people to worship according to their scholarly tradition while maintaining social relationships with other Muslims.

Role of Universities and Islamic Studies Departments

Universities have an important role in producing a balanced religious discourse. Islamic Studies departments can contribute through research, seminars, academic publications and teacher training.

Research on inter-sectarian relations should move beyond simply describing differences. Greater attention should be given to constructive questions: How can scholars communicate disagreement respectfully? How can students learn comparative Islamic

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scholarship without hostility? How can digital religious content be verified? How can mosques and educational institutions cooperate?

The Islamic Research Institute of the International Islamic University Islamabad has, for example, organized discussions emphasizing interfaith harmony, peaceful coexistence and the educational importance of these subjects.¹³

Such academic initiatives can contribute to a wider culture of dialogue.

Role of Religious Institutions

Madrasas and religious institutions possess considerable influence in shaping religious attitudes. Their contribution to harmony can be strengthened by incorporating communication skills, comparative scholarship, ethics of disagreement and responsible digital communication into appropriate educational programmers.

Students who receive strong religious training should also learn how to communicate their knowledge responsibly. Correct knowledge expressed through inappropriate language may fail to achieve its intended purpose.

The objective should therefore be to produce scholars who are firm in their religious commitments and equally strong in scholarship, manners and social responsibility.

Role of Media and Social Media

Modern communication platforms have created new possibilities for religious dialogue. A scholar can now address an audience across the country without leaving his institution. This opportunity should be used constructively. Religious institutions and scholars can produce programmers that explain areas of agreement, clarify genuine scholarly differences and discourage abusive language.

Social-media users should also be encouraged to verify statements before forwarding them. A false quotation or edited video can create misunderstanding between communities within a very short time.

The principle of tabayyun is therefore particularly relevant to digital religious communication. Verification should precede reaction.

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Paigham-e-Pakistan and Consensus-Based Reform

A significant contemporary example of consensus-based religious engagement in Pakistan is Paigham-e-Pakistan. NACTA describes it as a consensus decree issued in 2018 and signed by more than 1,800 religious scholars representing different Muslim schools of thought. It reflects the teachings of Qur'an and Sunnah alongside constitutional principles and a shared national understanding.¹⁴

The importance of such an initiative lies not only in its individual provisions but also in the principle of collective scholarly responsibility. Religious scholars from different traditions can identify areas of shared concern and provide guidance that strengthens social peace and responsible citizenship.

This approach demonstrates that religious scholarship can contribute positively to national cohesion without requiring the abandonment of established schools of thought.

Contemporary Institutional Support for Harmony

Pakistan's Ministry of Religious Affairs and Interfaith Harmony has formally included both intra-faith and interfaith harmony within its institutional responsibilities. Its current policy framework includes dialogue, public awareness, cooperation with communities and mechanisms for addressing issues related to religious harmony.¹⁵

The 2025 Policy on Interfaith Harmony also emphasizes structured dialogue involving religious leaders and local communities and calls for appropriate mechanisms to address material that can disturb social harmony.¹⁶

These policy directions provide a useful institutional framework. Their effectiveness can be strengthened through cooperation among scholars, educational institutions, civil society and local religious leadership.

The central principle should remain constructive engagement: differences should be addressed through knowledge, consultation and lawful institutional processes rather than through social hostility.

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Respect for Religious Identity and Social Cooperation

Harmony does not require people to abandon their religious or jurisprudential identity. A person may remain committed to a particular school of thought while maintaining respectful relationships with Muslims who follow another recognized interpretation.

This distinction is important. Attempts to create harmony by ignoring genuine differences may not be sustainable. A more realistic approach is to acknowledge differences while establishing ethical boundaries for disagreement.

These boundaries include respect for persons, accurate representation of opposing views, avoidance of abusive language, protection of mosques and religious institutions, responsible use of media and commitment to lawful dispute resolution.

Within such boundaries, scholarly discussion can continue without damaging social relationships.

A Practical Framework for Inter-Sectarian Harmony

The principles discussed above can be translated into a practical framework:

Principle	Practical Application
Qur'anic brotherhood	Give priority to shared Islamic identity
Justice	Represent other positions accurately
Wisdom	Discuss differences through knowledge and appropriate language
Verification	Confirm quotations and claims before circulation
Respect	Avoid ridicule, insult and unnecessary provocation
Dialogue	Create opportunities for scholarly discussion
Education	Teach students the ethics of disagreement
Cooperation	Work together on shared religious and social objectives
Responsible media use	Avoid forwarding inflammatory or unverified material

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Institutional consultation

Address serious disputes through recognized authorities

This framework does not attempt to eliminate legitimate scholarly differences. Its purpose is to establish a disciplined method for living with those differences while protecting Muslim brotherhood.

Youth and the Future of Religious Harmony

Young people will play a decisive role in shaping future religious communication. Their religious understanding is increasingly influenced by digital platforms, short videos and online personalities.

For this reason, religious harmony should be included within youth education. Young Muslims should be taught how to distinguish between scholarly disagreement and personal hostility, between evidence and assertion, and between responsible criticism and disrespect.

Universities, madrasas and youth organizations can provide opportunities for students from different educational backgrounds to participate in academic discussions, community service and educational activities.

Such interaction can reduce unnecessary distance. When young people meet others personally and work toward shared objectives, they are more likely to understand that scholarly differences do not prevent cooperation.

Constructive Reform through Scholarship

The long-term improvement of inter-sectarian relations depends upon strengthening the quality of religious scholarship. Scholars should continue researching differences, but research should also address the ethics of disagreement and the practical requirements of peaceful coexistence.

Academic journals can contribute by publishing balanced studies that explain differences accurately and identify areas of agreement. Conferences can bring scholars together for

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discussion rather than confrontation. Religious institutions can cooperate on issues of shared social importance.

The objective is not to create a single interpretation of every Islamic question. The objective is to create an intellectual environment in which disagreement remains within the boundaries of knowledge, justice and good conduct.

Conclusion

Islam provides a comprehensive foundation for religious harmony. The Qur'an commands Muslims to hold firmly to divine guidance, describes believers as brothers, requires justice, prohibits ridicule and offensive speech, and directs people toward wisdom and responsible communication. The Sunnah reinforces these principles by emphasizing mutual support, brotherhood and the protection of Muslim dignity.

Inter-sectarian harmony does not require the elimination of legitimate scholarly differences. Islamic intellectual history demonstrates that differences in interpretation can exist within a broader framework of shared faith and social responsibility. The essential requirement is to manage disagreement through knowledge, justice, respect and appropriate language.

For Pakistan, this approach provides a constructive path toward stronger social cohesion. Religious scholars can guide communities toward responsible disagreement; mosques can emphasize brotherhood; madrasas and universities can teach the ethics of dialogue; media can promote accurate religious communication; and young people can be trained to verify information before sharing it.

Contemporary initiatives such as Paigham-e-Pakistan and the government's Policy on Interfaith Harmony demonstrate the value of collective efforts based on dialogue, mutual respect and shared responsibility. These initiatives can be strengthened through sustained academic and religious engagement. Pakistan's Ministry of Religious Affairs itself places intra- and inter-faith harmony within its institutional mission, while the 2025 policy framework emphasizes structured dialogue and social cohesion.¹⁷

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The most important principle is therefore simple: Muslims may differ in scholarly understanding, but disagreement should not remove brotherhood, justice and mutual respect.

A healthy religious society is not one in which every person expresses exactly the same opinion. It is one in which people can hold their convictions firmly while treating others with justice, dignity and good manners. When this balance is achieved, religious scholarship becomes a means of guidance and reform, and differences can be managed without weakening the bonds that unite society.

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