**Power to Foster Peace and Harmony**

[Salman Danish](https://dailytimes.com.pk/writer/salman-danish/)

November 7, 2023

In today’s world of polarization and intolerance, Pakistan as a nation stands at a crossroads. Our path forward needs to seek to combat extremism and promote interfaith harmony and peace, rather than fanning the flames of intolerance and hatred. Pakistan has unfortunately been marred by violent extremism for decades. This extremism has led to devastating consequences, claiming countless lives, destabilizing communities, and tarnishing the nation’s image. The root causes of extremism are complex and multidimensional. To combat it, therefore, we must also take a multifaceted and multidimensional approach that includes building lasting ties between communities and fostering a sense of our shared values of humanity. To date, many strategies and policies have been proposed, however, one vital tool, although often overlooked, available to us is interpersonal communication and one-on-one interactions, which will be the focus of the following discussion. These simple yet profound engagements may be the ‘special sauce’ we need to address the complex challenges of violent extremism and foster unity among Pakistan’s diverse communities.

Interfaith Harmony is not just a buzzword when it comes to Pakistan. For our country, with its diversity of Religious, cultural, and ethnic heritage, we need robust channels of Interfaith communication and cooperation as these mechanisms are vital for the eradication of misconceptions, stereotypes, and prejudices that fan the flames of hatred and extremism.

Interpersonal interactions and acceptance, whether at the local community level or the National or even international level are the building blocks of interfaith harmony. One of the ways Interpersonal communications and 1-to-1 interactions can make a difference is by Humanizing ‘the Other’ i-e: Because extremism thrives on dehumanizing those who are perceived as different, interpersonal interactions enable individuals from diverse backgrounds to connect on a personal level, breaking down barriers and humanizing one another. Here I will quote an anecdotal example from South Punjab; While working on matters relating to Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) and promoting interfaith harmony with a group of religious scholars, I witnessed two faith leaders from different religions, who previously had been at odd with each other for years, with their religious bias leading to disharmony and intolerance between their respective communities, become the best of friends for 2 days where they were made to share an accommodation after months of sustained awareness sessions and group interactions. They had, as participants of the CVE work, been previously requested to put aside their biases and have an open dialogue with each other and clear the air of any misunderstanding they had about the other’s faith; these two days provided them with the opportunity to solidify their loose connection as a group into a true friendship. The idea of an interpersonal dialogue is not to force someone to adhere to one’s point of view, nor is it about 100% agreeing to their ideologies and beliefs but rather, it is about listening to each other’s point of view and acknowledging that they have the right to that point of view without anything being imposed on them by force. The scholars in question belonged to the Christian and Muslim faiths respectively and they learned to respect their differences while building upon similarities.

These simple yet profound engagements may be the ‘special sauce’ we need to address the complex challenges of violent extremism.

Another advantage of the upside is the building of trust as that is the foundation of any productive relationship. Face-to-face interactions and shared experiences help create trust among individuals, fostering an environment where dialogue can flourish. Referring to another case from my work in South Punjab, these interactions can also lead to correcting misconceptions, as they allow people to ask questions, share their beliefs, and correct misconceptions about other faiths and cultures, as was the case during a diversity tour held for the disciples of a religious seminary from one sect to another religious seminary from another sect. The visiting disciples immediately rushed to the cupboards containing The Holy Quran and proceeded to verify whether there were any differences in the volume of the transcript, as that was a popular misconception in the minds of those young students. They found no differences, and instead, they left with a deeper understanding and, after many conversations and knowledge exchange, an appreciation of the diversity of beliefs.

Conflicts can arise due to many factors such as cultural, religious, ethnic, or even geographical differences. One-on-one interactions can be a tool for conflict resolution in such cases, and help individuals find common ground and peaceful solutions as well as naturally invoking feelings of empathy and compassion. When we understand the struggles and experiences of others, we are more likely to stand against extremism, violence, and injustice. In the past decade, the state has been working hard to combat the spectre of hate speech and religious intolerance with many successes. However, there is still much that can be done by harnessing the power of interpersonal interactions for peace and interfaith harmony such as incorporating interfaith and intercultural education into school curricula including diversity visits as mentioned above to foster tolerance and understanding from a young age. We must further encourage and support community-level initiatives that bring people together for dialogue, cultural exchange, and cooperation.

The media, as the fourth pillar of the state, can also play a crucial role in promoting interfaith harmony by portraying religious and cultural diversity accurately and positively while Government institutions actively support and fund programs that promote interpersonal interactions, recognizing their role in combating extremism. However, this can only be done once the relevant quarters are provided with the awareness and capacities necessary.

With Pakistan’s unfortunate history of terrorism and extremism, the importance of promoting interfaith harmony and combatting violent extremism cannot be ignored. It has, in fact, become a need of the hour if we want our country to achieve a prosperous future. It also makes economic sense to embark on CVE initiatives as a more peaceful and stable Pakistan can attract more FDI which is considered a vital part of non-traditional security in contemporary governance circles. While I acknowledge that no single method or strategy can address these complex challenges on its own, nevertheless, interpersonal interactions need to be considered a vital asset in promoting unity, understanding, and peace. It is only through the breaking down of barriers and the building of sturdy bridges between communities that we can hope to see a Pakistan where diversity and plurality are celebrated, and extremism is marginalized. I firmly believe that it is through these interpersonal connections that we can find our common ground on the shared values of humanity and make a commitment to a peaceful and harmonious future.

*The writer is a Development sector practitioner and works as a Research Associate with the Sustainability and Resilience Program at the Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI). He can be reached at salmandanish91@gmail.com.*