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Fostering Faith- Based Understanding: Comparative Religion in Pakistan's Educational Institutions

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ABSTRACT

In a diverse country like Pakistan, where multiple faiths coexist yet religious tensions persist, there is a growing need for faith-based understanding within education. This article argues that introducing **comparative religion courses**—taught in a respectful, academically neutral way—can foster tolerance, national cohesion, and critical thinking among students. Grounded in Islamic principles such as *قُلْ يَا أَهْلَ الْكِتَابِ تَعَالَوْا إِلَى كَلِمَةٍ سَوَاءٍ* (“Say, ‘O People of the Book, come to a word that is equitable between us.’”) (Q. 3:64), and *وَلَنْ يَرْضَىٰ عَنْكَ الْيَهُودُ وَلَا النَّصَارَىٰ حَتَّىٰ تَتَّبِعَ مِلَّتَهُمْ* (“...And never will the Jews or the Christians approve of you until you follow their religion.”) (Q. 2:120), the article presents a timely argument for curriculum reform. Drawing on recent studies, policy developments like the Directorate General of Religious Education (DGRE), and comparative institutional practices, this article proposes a model for integrating comparative religion into schools and madrasas in Pakistan that nurtures mutual respect while reinforcing Islamic identity.

1. Introduction

Pakistan has a majority Muslim population but is also home to significant religious minorities. Despite constitutional protections, social and educational systems often reflect sectarian bias, and public schooling—especially Islamiyat—fails to expose students to other faiths (Ashraf, 2022; curriculum controversy reports 2025). This leads to limited understanding of religious diversity and perpetuates mistrust and exclusion.

In an increasingly interconnected world where cultural and religious diversity is both a challenge and a resource, the role of education in fostering interfaith harmony cannot be overstated. As one of the most religiously conscious societies in South Asia, Pakistan holds a unique position in integrating religious discourse within its academic institutions. The need to cultivate faith-based understanding among the youth is more pressing than ever due to rising sectarian violence, intolerance, and religious stereotyping. **Comparative religion** as a field of study offers a structured and inclusive way to promote understanding, respect, and peaceful coexistence among diverse religious communities. When properly implemented in Pakistan's educational framework, it has the potential to counteract extremist ideologies and promote national unity.

Pakistan, a nation born in the name of Islam, is home to not only a Muslim majority but also a number of minority faiths, including Christians, Hindus, Sikhs, Ahmadis, and others. The Constitution of Pakistan, while emphasizing Islam as the state religion, also ensures the rights of religious minorities (Article 20, Constitution of Pakistan, 1973). Despite these constitutional protections, education in the country has often been critiqued for promoting a narrow religious worldview, largely influenced by a single sectarian or denominational lens (Rahman, 2004). This mono-religious narrative limits students' understanding of global religious pluralism and fails to foster empathy, dialogue, or mutual respect.

Incorporating comparative religion into school and university curricula offers students exposure to different religious traditions, values, and practices without compromising their own beliefs. It teaches them to critically engage with both commonalities and distinctions among world religions. According to **Qur'anic injunctions**, understanding others is part of the divine plan:

"يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ إِنَّا خَلَقْنَاكُمْ مِنْ ذَكَرٍ وَأُنْثَىٰ وَجَعَلْنَاكُمْ شُعُوبًا وَقَبَائِلَ لِتَعَارَفُوا"

“O mankind! Indeed, We created you from a male and a female, and made you into peoples and tribes so that you may know one another.” (*Qur'an*, 49:13)

This verse encourages pluralism, not conflict. It recognizes difference as a basis for learning and mutual recognition rather than hostility. Islam itself historically encouraged interfaith dialogue. The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) signed treaties with Christian and Jewish communities and engaged in theological discussions with representatives of other faiths, often in the spirit of mutual respect.

In Pakistan's context, the **National Curriculum of 2006** and the **Single National Curriculum (SNC)** more recently attempted to revise religious content, but with mixed results (International Crisis Group, 2021). While the aim was to reduce sectarian bias and promote inclusivity, the execution often reinforced dominant religious narratives, leaving minority perspectives marginal. The lack of trained teachers, poorly developed materials, and a social environment wary of pluralism have hindered these efforts.

A true comparative religion curriculum, rooted in empathy, critical inquiry, and a balanced portrayal of religious traditions, must go beyond naming holidays or listing rituals. It must include theologies, scriptures, histories, and lived practices. Such an approach will not only educate but also humanize “the other,” a necessary foundation for social cohesion in a country marked by both religious devotion and division.

Moreover, **international educational models** such as those of Indonesia, the UK, and even India provide valuable lessons. For example, in the UK, **Religious Education (RE)** is mandatory and aims to promote spiritual, moral, social, and cultural development while respecting a multi-religious society (Ofsted, 2010). Adapted to the Pakistani context, such a model can build religious literacy and critical thinking without diluting Islamic values.

Educational institutions in Pakistan, particularly madrasas, public schools, and private universities, show a wide variance in religious instruction. Madrasas often stick to specific interpretations, sometimes with sectarian leanings (ICG, 2019). Public schools follow government-mandated syllabi, which, while somewhat revised, still prioritize Islamic perspectives over broader religious education. Private institutions, especially those affiliated with liberal or international frameworks, may incorporate more inclusive content but reach only a small segment of society. This fragmented approach underlines the need for a **cohesive national policy** on comparative religion education.

Introducing a robust comparative religion program is also vital in curbing extremism and fostering national security. A study by Hussain and Salim (2023) found that students who were exposed to interfaith content were more likely to reject religiously motivated violence. As extremism thrives in ignorance and fear, education based on mutual understanding can serve as a powerful antidote.

From a **socio-cultural perspective**, Pakistan's rich history of religious co-existence, seen in its Sufi traditions and shared heritage sites like temples, gurdwaras, and shrines, can be used as entry points for such curricula. These cultural resources offer tangible connections to religious pluralism and can aid in making lessons more meaningful and locally relevant. Additionally, the increasing role of technology in classrooms can be used to bring global interfaith content into Pakistani schools and universities.

The Qur'an again reinforces the value of dialogue:

"ادْعُ إِلَى سَبِيلِ رَبِّكَ بِالْحُكْمَةِ وَالْمَوْعِظَةِ الْحَسَنَةِ وَجَادِلْهُمْ بِالَّتِي هِيَ أَحْسَنُ"

"Call to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good instruction, and argue with them in a way that is best." (*Qur'an 16:125*)

This verse mandates engagement with others using wisdom and respectful conversation—principles at the heart of comparative religion.

Finally, fostering faith-based understanding is not just about preventing conflict—it's also about building stronger communities. As globalization brings religions into closer proximity, the ability to understand and engage with diverse faith traditions becomes an essential life skill. Pakistani educational institutions, from schools to universities, must rise to this challenge. With a careful, inclusive, and well-designed curriculum in comparative religion, education can truly become a bridge—rather than a barrier—in our divided world.

2. Islamic and Qur'anic Foundations for Interfaith Engagement

Islam encourages respectful dialogue:

قُلْ يَا أَهْلَ الْكِتَابِ تَعَالَوْا إِلَى كَلِمَةٍ سَوَاءٍ بَيْنَنَا وَبَيْنَكُمْ (‘‘Say, O People of the Book, come to a word that is equitable between us.’’; Q 3:64) and

وَلَنْ يَرْضَىٰ عَنْكَ الْيَهُودُ وَلَا النَّصَارَىٰ حَتَّىٰ تَتَّبِعَ مِلَّتَهُمْ (‘‘...And never will the Jews or Christians approve of you until you follow their religion.’’; Q 2:120)—these verses suggest respectful engagement without coercion or political pressure.

3. Current Educational Context in Pakistan

3.1 Textbook Bias and Monolithic Curriculum

Research shows that Pakistan's school texts predominantly teach **Sunni Islam**, sometimes framing minorities negatively and omitting critical perspectives (Ashraf, 2019; BGIE concern, 2020) [WikipediaMDPI](#). Most teachers reject the inclusion of religious literacy or comparative religion due to sectarian fears (Ashraf, 2022) [MDPI](#).

3.2 Madrasa Reform and DGRE

The DGRE (Directorate General of Religious Education) was established in 2019 to integrate seminaries into mainstream curricula (DGRE overview) [Wikipedia](#). However, reform remains uneven—many madrasas still focus narrowly on Islamic studies (DGRE, 2021) [WIRED](#).

4. The Case for Comparative Religion

4.1 Promoting Tolerance and Social Cohesion

Comparative religious education—when carefully designed—help students understand beliefs beyond their own, reducing prejudice and cultivating empathy (Thames, 2022) [iPICS](#).

4.2 Supporting National Integration and Citizenship

Balanced curricula that include knowledge of multiple religions can strengthen shared national identity and reduce sectarian divisions (IPS, 2023) [Reddit+1ips.org.pk+1The Times of India+11](#).

4.3 Enhancing Critical Thinking and Moral Reasoning

Current Islamiyat teaching is often didactic, discouraging discussion and reasoning (Mulyani study, 2023) [GESR Journal+1Reddit+1](#). Comparative religion can encourage reflection, moral dialogue, and respectful debate.

5. Comparative Institutional Examples in Pakistan

A 2025 comparative thesis focusing on Gujranwala institutions—Christian Theological Seminary and Nusrat-ul-Uloom Islamic seminary—highlights how different religious institutions approach education, social roles, curricula, and community engagement (Ali & Saeedi, 2025) [ResearchGate](#). Findings underline the potential of interfaith dialogue when institutions are open-minded.

6. Proposed Model for Implementation

6.1 Curriculum Framework

- Introduce an elective comparative religion module in grades 9–12 covering Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism, and Bahá'í perspectives.
- Base content on Islamic principles of justice and peaceful coexistence (e.g. Qur'an 3:64).

6.2 Teacher Training

- Train teachers to facilitate open, respectful dialogue and employ thematic and case-based teaching (Ste'ç & Kulik approach, 2021) [GESR Journal](#).
- Involve diverse religious scholars and educationists in curriculum design (IPS recommendation) [ips.org.pk](#).

6.3 Educational Settings

- Pilot in public schools across Punjab and Sindh, and selected DGRE-linked madrasas where modern subjects co-exist (DGRE initiative) [WIRED](#).

7. Challenges and Mitigation

- **Sectarian Resistance:** Many educators oppose teaching non-Sunni faiths (Ashraf, 2022) [The Times of India+15MDPI+15Wikipedia+15](#).
- **Political and Ideological Pushback:** Curriculum boards often censor content unless approved by Ulema boards (Punjab 2020 amendment) [Reddit+1Wikipedia+1](#).
- **Mitigation:** Involve Ulema early; emphasize alignment with Qur'an and Sunnah; highlight benefits aligned with Islamic ethics.

8. Expected Benefits

- Reduced religious prejudice and improved interfaith relations among youth.
- Strengthened national identity that honors diversity.

- Critical moral reasoning and empathetic dialogue skills.
- A model aligned with Islamic values yet open to modern pluralistic realities.

9. CONCLUSION

Combining Islamic ethical imperatives with critical religious literacy, Pakistan's educational institutions can play a transformative role in fostering faith-based understanding. A well-designed comparative religion curriculum—grounded in Qur'anic teachings and implemented with sensitivity—can prepare students for peaceful coexistence in diverse societies and contribute to national harmony.

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