

## The Role of Interreligious Education in Promoting Social Cohesion and Peace

Rahima Akhter\*

**Abstract:** *Interreligious education is considered crucial for multicultural people to live in harmony and social coherence. This article examines how interreligious education can play a vital role in fostering tolerance across religious communities, lessening prejudice, and promoting mutual understanding among different faith groups (Muslim, Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, and others). It also shows how policymakers can create a prejudice-free environment in a country that works for harmony and social cohesion among all. Qualitative methodology is adopted to interpret secondary data on interreligious education in diverse societies to make awareness among various communities. The community study shows that interreligious education can play an important role in promoting religious empathy and mutual trust among people of different religions by reducing prejudice, religious intolerance, and religious conflicts. This article discusses some findings that are the root cause of religious conflict, instability in society, and gives some suggestions for betterment. To promote a stable and harmonious society, this study offers suggestions for policymakers, students, and religious leaders on how to effectively implement interreligious education programs, thereby establishing a peaceful and harmonious society in today's world.*

**Keywords:** *Interreligious Education, Peace, Social Cohesion, Empathy, Prejudice, Policymakers, Students, World.*

### Introduction

Religious diversity or multi-religious experience is one of the fundamental characteristics of modern society. As a part of societal coexistence from local communities to a global scale, there is frequent contact between individuals and groups of different faiths. These diverse religious scenarios can help to improve the social and cultural life of people by reducing religious misunderstandings and conflicts among them. The main purpose behind religious diversity is to develop mutual understanding and respect rather than division and conflict (Putnam & Campbell, 2010). This article mainly focuses on the role of interreligious education in building social cohesion and peace in society. Interreligious education enlightens the inner mind of a student. According to Jackson (2008), interreligious education eradicates religious prejudice and promotes mutual respect. Besides, Gill (2022) shows that interreligious education emphasizes the values and cooperation of all faiths to build a peaceful society. Without interreligious study, sometimes religious study can be dangerous by creating division among one another, but interreligious

---

\* Lecturer, Department of World Religions and Culture, University of Dhaka

education teaches mutual trust and understanding (Kobrich and Hoffmann, 2023). Sri Lanka is a great example where interreligious dialogue helped to reduce tensions between communities (Arkam & Shehu, n.d.). Furthermore, “Interreligious education is a part of intercultural education and, like intercultural education, aims to build understanding, tolerance, and social cohesion to ‘actively shape the relations of people of different religions’ (UNESCO 2006, p.14). Interreligious education contains teachings about different religious traditions, practices, cultures, and rituals, and promotes dialogue among people of multicultural and multi-religious backgrounds. Though traditional religious education is centered on doctrines and beliefs, interreligious education emphasizes mutual respect and shared values of different traditions. This system encourages students to understand others’ religious beliefs and cultures and creates an environment of mutual respect. Interreligious education also indicates intercultural education. It can play a vital role in promoting cultural and religious diversity. Intercultural education, as defined by Milton Bennett, is the process of “acquiring increased awareness of subjective cultural context sensitivity and competence across cultural contexts as both an immediate and long-term effect of exchange” (Bennet 2009). This article highlights that interreligious education is crucial for establishing peace and mutual understanding in diverse societies. However, to guide this research, answers to some research questions are sought, such as: How can education mold interreligious understanding? How does interreligious education accelerate social cohesion? Can teachings about different religions enhance peace?

This article consists of four parts. Different core concepts related to this subject area are discussed first. After that, in the ‘Methodology’ section, the method and techniques used in this study are discussed. The next section provides a detailed outcome of the research. An analytical discussion is also presented in this section. Lastly, this study concludes by mentioning some challenges of implementing interreligious education, and solutions to these problems are recommended.

## **Conceptual Framework**

Interreligious education focuses on understanding different religious traditions. It is designed to promote mutual respect among people of different religions. It helps students develop empathy and critical thinking. According to Jackson (2008), interreligious education teaches about the beliefs and practices of various religions. Jackson also asserts that it promotes respect and tolerance. Besides, it helps to take religious diversity as part of social life. A study by Aneas et al. (2024) found that students who knew different religions were better prepared to live in diverse societies.

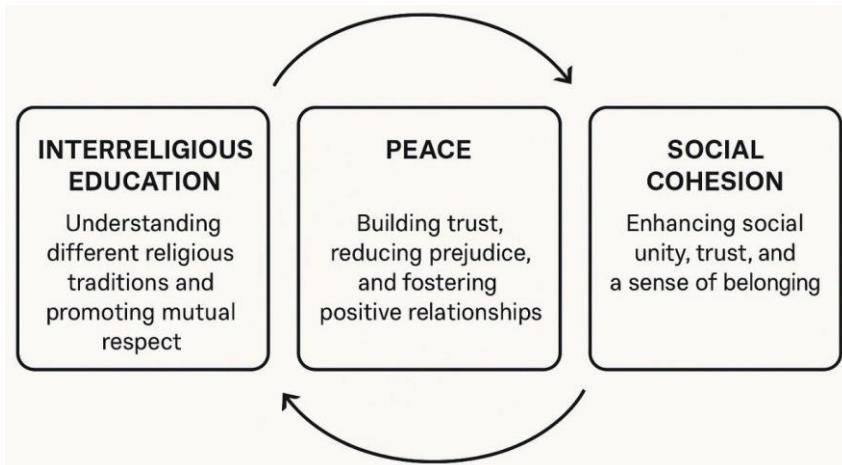
Interreligious education is used in different ways in practical contexts. Islamic Religious Education (IRE) supports religious belief and social identity in Finland and Ireland at the same time. Teachers help students explore their religion and values such as respect, equality, and citizenship (Rissanen & Sai, 2017). Through this, students learn to respect their own identity and other people in society.

On the other hand, peace is not only the absence of violence. It also signifies the presence of trust and a harmonious relationship with others. Education can build peace by reducing misunderstandings and conflict. Listening to others and working together are among the core teachings of interreligious education. Interreligious dialogue is a valuable tool for peacebuilding. It enables different communities to engage in open dialogue and resolve problems. Dialogues assist in preventing future violence. They can be part of formal education or organized by community groups, religious institutions, or NGOs.

Schools and educators can support peace by including religious topics in a fair and balanced way. Students learn to question stereotypes and avoid discrimination. In many parts of the world, governments and civil society organizations use interfaith learning as a peacebuilding strategy.

Social cohesion means that people in a society feel connected and united, even if they come from different backgrounds. It includes trust between individuals and trust in institutions like schools, courts, or governments. A cohesive society is one where people cooperate, feel safe, and are treated equally. Education plays an important role in building cohesion. Peterson (2012) explains that interreligious education enhances social cohesion by teaching others' worldviews. Social cohesion also depends on the inclusion of all people in the society, regardless of religious beliefs. If any group thinks they are annihilated, the society will become weaker. Education helps prevent this by including all with respect.

Raharjo et al. (2025) found that Islamic schools teaching pluralism helped in decreasing community tensions. They also encouraged cooperation with followers of different religions. These findings suggest that religious education can build social cohesion. In diversified societies, interreligious education can bring people together. Liu and Chudjuarjeen (2025) also support this idea in lessening division.



**Figure 1:** Connection of Interreligious Education, Peace, and Social Cohesion

Interreligious education, peace, and social cohesion are connected concepts. If interreligious education can be circulated, peace and cohesion are possible. Interreligious education teaches to live peacefully with others. It promotes dialogue and justice. These things are essential for peace. Peace makes it possible for people to trust each other. With the growth of peace and trust, social cohesion strengthens. Each concept cyclically supports the others. Education leads to peace. After that, peace supports cohesion. Finally, cohesion allows education to continue safely and inclusively. Arkam and Shehu (n. d.) describe how religious education programs contributed to shaping community trust after violence. Liu and Chudjuarjeen (2025) explain that civic resilience comes from understanding and respecting others.

## **Methodology**

This study used the document analysis method. This method is often used in social and educational research. It helps to study written texts like books, reports, and internet articles. It is useful for understanding ideas, values, and opinions in documents. The topic of this research is interreligious education and peace. This topic is about ideas, not numbers or experiments. So, document analysis was the best method. It allows the researcher to study different kinds of written sources.

The data were taken from secondary sources. These include books, journal articles, policy documents, and online sources. All documents were chosen based on how useful and trustworthy they were. Only documents from good academic or official sources were used.

Document analysis is easy to use and low-cost. It does not need interviews or surveys. It also avoids risks because no people are directly involved. Bowen (2009) says that this method is good for finding meaning in written texts. It also helps to understand themes and patterns in the data. Many researchers have used this method before. Glaser and Strauss (1967) showed that documents can help to build theories. They explained that useful information can come from written texts. This shows that document analysis is a strong method in social research. In this study, the steps were simple. First, documents were collected. Then, they were read carefully. Important ideas were marked and grouped by topic. These topics helped to answer the research questions. Document analysis is often used to study education and policies.

## **Findings and Discussion**

### **The Role of Education in Shaping Interreligious Understanding**

The findings of this article indicate that interreligious education helps in developing peaceful individuals' attitudes to religious diversity, which develops social cohesion (Abu-Nimer & Smith, 2016). By creating religious empathy, reducing religious prejudice, and encouraging dialogue, interreligious education helps to build a peaceful and cohesive society (Aneas, 2023). Interreligious

education teaches students about understanding, co-existence, and social cohesion (McLoughlin, 2011). These are the main components of interreligious understanding. Interreligious education helps students to enrich their knowledge about different religions and develop a positive mentality toward others' beliefs and practices. It is very important to eliminate religious prejudice and taboos that fueled the conflict. Researcher McLoughlin said that the students of interreligious education have a great understanding of different religious beliefs and practices. Emotional engagement is mandatory for students of interreligious education, which teaches religious empathy and understanding (Kimanen, 2022). Interfaith dialogue and community service help the student to develop connections with individuals of different faiths. This engagement plays a significant role in eliminating prejudice and developing positive beliefs toward diversity (Visser, 2023).

### **Promoting Social Cohesion and Inclusive Communities**

The trustworthiness among diverse religious groups is very important for social cohesion. Interreligious education creates a space for open dialogue among different religions with mutual respect that helps to build trust between different religions (Bowen, 2016). Interreligious education encourages the students to perform social work, which is mandatory for social cohesion (UNESCO, 2006). Case studies from Canada, Indonesia, Rwanda, and Bosnia show that interreligious education can reconcile the divided people and rebuild the fractured social trust (Lapis, 2025). Interreligious education establishes a shared sense of community by educating individuals with different religious knowledge (Bowen, 2016). It gives importance that various faiths can maintain coexistence, and various faiths enrich social bonding (Abu-Nimer & Smith, 2016). Interreligious education is mandatory for building inclusive societies where all people live respectfully. Interreligious education motivates people to prevent religious conflict (Aneas, 2023). For example, case studies from Canada and Indonesia demonstrate how structured interreligious curricula can help reduce polarization and strengthen inclusive social norms (Government of Canada, 2017; Yusuf, 2018). Interreligious education has a great effect in post-genocide Rwanda and post-conflict Bosnia. The main point of interreligious education is a collective vision of peace that is mandatory for social cohesion among different faiths.

### **Interreligious Education: A Pathway to Peace**

Interreligious education includes the beliefs and practices of different religions, which are mostly common for peace and social cohesion. By teaching the inner meaning of all religions, it eradicates religious prejudice from the minds of students of interreligious education. From this point of view, interreligious education teaches mutual respect for all others, which heals past wounds and prevents future tension. The findings of this study indicate that interreligious education works as a vital pathway to peace in the contemporary world. Peace is not merely the absence of conflict (negative peace) but the presence of justice, equality, and

mutual respect (positive peace) (Galtung, 1996). Interreligious education can bring peace for a long time or permanently. This study also shows that sustainable peace requires a transformation of social attitudes, relationships, and values. From this point of view, interreligious education can be the central concept to establish peace. It always teaches students about compassion, forgiveness, and respect for human dignity. It is very important to know the root cause of violence, particularly prejudice and exclusion. Religious intolerance often provides fertile ground for extremist ideologies. For that reason, UNESCO's (2006) emphasis is on education as a means of countering intolerance and promoting intercultural, multi-religious dialogue. Interreligious learning cultivates intercultural competence and solidarity, enabling students to contribute positively to pluralistic societies. It is very crucial because peace is not only about preventing conflict but also about ensuring that individuals feel connected to the broader social fabric. On the other hand, this study reveals some challenges, such as obstacles from conservative religious groups, a lack of trained teachers, and difficult government policy (Hirsch, 2016). Without solving these challenges, interreligious education cannot be effective.

### **Promoting Dialogue and Conflict Resolution Skills**

Interreligious education emphasizes religious dialogue. Interreligious dialogue teaches individuals about how to build a relationship with others of different faiths. Sometimes it includes conflict resolution skills, and teaching to think about differences in a peaceful manner rather than in conflicting ways. By promoting these skills, interreligious education not only reduces religious conflict but also shows a constructive way of changing social settings. Interreligious education has a pivotal role in promoting empathy and reducing prejudice among educators. Interreligious education teaches the students about religious empathy, which helps to reduce religious prejudice. There is an example that whoever knows one religion knows nothing. Knowledge of different religions makes a man enlightened. Religious knowledge about different religions develops religious empathy. Religious prejudice causes conflict. The students of interreligious education can engage with diverse religious people, which helps to develop a deeper understanding of the beliefs and practices of others. This process of engagement makes a bridge between different communities for a peaceful coexistence in society. Interreligious dialogue plays a role in making interreligious understanding. Igrave (2003) shows that classroom discussions make students competent to accept others' thoughts when they express their own identity. From this mechanism, students learn empathy, respect, and recognition of different thoughts, which are the prime elements of conflict resolution. They know every person's mentality, and when they deal with others, they follow similar conversations, similar arguments like opponents through interfaith interaction. This view of students creates a situation that helps to resolve the conflicts between religions and different cultures in a pluralistic society. On the other hand, the competence of resolving conflicts is very important. According to Lederach (2005), the learning of resolving conflicts is very constructive for lasting peace. Interreligious religious education teaches these

abilities, such as meditation, negotiation, and dialogue, to resolve conflicts. For example, students can arrange debates, meetings between different religions to know the common matter that helps much to resolve the disputes. Interreligious education mainly prevents religious prejudice and religious extremism. According to Hirsch (2016), the teacher of interreligious education teaches harmony to their students. The students of interreligious education become mentally bright through knowing mutual respect among all faiths. Not only can it stop present conflicts among different religious groups, but it also works like medicine to prevent future conflict. Students of interreligious education are taught from the institution, then apply it in their family territory society, and all over the country. From this point of view, they play the role of peach makers from the front. It has a huge impact on building social cohesion and a peaceful society.

## Conclusion

This research primarily focused on establishing peace and social cohesion through interreligious education in a religiously pluralistic country. Interreligious education is the only way to create a platform of interreligious dialogue that helps to reduce religious conflict, eradicate religious prejudice, and foster mutual relationships among people of different religious faiths. The platform of interreligious dialogue is used as a social, cultural, and spiritual difference solution table for all living contemporary religions. The success of interreligious education depends on liberal students, a dynamic curriculum, adequate resources, and trained teachers. From the existing example, it is shown that policymakers implement interreligious education in the education system for establishing shared humanity and mutual respect between different faiths. It can be the turning point in deciding on a peaceful society. It always follows the middle path when teaching the religions. It works with common values shared by all faiths at its center. Religious tolerance, mutual respect, and shared humanity are the primary focus points for building social cohesion and a peaceful society. Religious plurality is the beauty of the contemporary world. It can be a quiet world if we include interreligious education in education policy. It can make a nation a united nation. Religious prejudice, religious extremism, and religious conflict are the most talked-about words in the contemporary world. Interreligious education students can be the light bearers against these crucial problems through their wise decisions and commitment. The internal institutions of a country related to education policy must work together to establish an interreligious education that will make an enlightened nation. Interreligious education teaches the students about peace rather than disputes, which is attainable through interreligious dialogue. Interreligious dialogue teaches the inner positive teachings of every religion. They are the same, which helps to reduce conflict and build a peaceful world. Interreligious education nursing a culture of peace, empathy, and inclusion among people. In the contemporary world, religious and cultural conflict is a primary problem for peace. Interreligious education creates a foundation as a tool for problem-solving for the present

and future. There are some challenges in interreligious education in the education sector of a country. Religious prejudice is the primary obstacle behind it. Religious prejudice makes it difficult to promote an environment where open dialogue and open discussion among different faiths can happen. Cultural sensitivity and religious taboos are also considered serious challenges to interreligious education. From this point of view, discussing a religious doctrine in a classroom where different religions are considered taboo. Sometimes society faces resistance to religious and cultural mixture from fear of cultural impurity. These things make a limitation to interreligious dialogue (Hirsch, 2016). The lack of trained teachers is also a crucial crisis for the success of interreligious education. According to Fisher, professional development programs for educators are essential to becoming successful in interreligious education (Fisher, 2018). Teacher training programs can be very effective in becoming successful in interreligious education. These decisions help to develop skills that enable teachers to discuss different religious beliefs and practices perfectly. The curriculum has to include world religions as a mandatory subject for establishing peace and social cohesion in a country. Besides, interreligious education should be mandatory to promote peace and a stable society. The output of interreligious education becomes more successful when most people believe in religious diversity and religious coexistence. Interreligious dialogue can play a great role in a successful interreligious education program. The awareness of educators, religious leaders, and policymakers is mandatory to ensure the success of interreligious education. The education policy of the government of a country can make a space for interreligious education. For making a peaceful society, the practice of interreligious education is a must.

## Acknowledgement

This article is partially funded by the Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue (CIID), University of Dhaka.

## References

Abu-Nimer, M., et al. (2007). Interreligious dialogue, conflict resolution and peacebuilding: A review. *Religions*, 16(2), 150.

Aneas, A., Carmona, C., Shuali Trachtenberg, T., & Montané, A. (2024). Interreligious competence (IRC) in students of education: An exploratory study. *Religions*, 15(1), 21. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15010021>

Arkam, M., & Shehu, F. (n.d.). Evaluating existing literature on interreligious dialogue and peacebuilding in Sri Lanka: Buddhist-Muslim relationships. *IIUM Journal of Religion and Civilisational Studies*. <https://journals.iium.edu.my/irkh/index.php/ijrcs/article/view/366>

Bowen, G. A. (2009). Document analysis as a qualitative research method. *Qualitative Research Journal*, 9(2), 27–40. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/240807798\\_Document\\_Analysis\\_as\\_a\\_Qualitative\\_Research\\_Method](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/240807798_Document_Analysis_as_a_Qualitative_Research_Method)

Bowen, G. A. (2016). Document analysis as a qualitative research method. *Qualitative Research Journal*, 9(2), 27–40. <https://doi.org/10.3316/QRJ0902027>



Galtung, J. (1996). *Peace by peaceful means: Peace and conflict, development and civilization*. Sage Publications.

Gill, S. (2022). Interreligious education and peace. In M. Hermansen, E. Aslan, & E. Erşan Akkılıç (Eds.), *Peace education and religion: Perspectives, pedagogy, policies* (pp. 105–123). Springer VS. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-36984-2\\_6](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-36984-2_6)

Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Aldine.

Government of Canada. (2017). *Teaching respect for religious diversity: A resource for educators*. Government of Canada. Retrieved from <https://www.canada.ca/en/canadian-heritage/services/teaching-respect-religious-diversity.html>

Hirsch, K. (2016). *Interreligious education: Theory and practice in the global context*. Peter Lang.

Ipgrave, M. (2003). *Dialogue, citizenship, and religious education*. Institute of Education, University of London. Retrieved from <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9780203218792-10/dialogue-citizenship-religious-education-julia-ipgrave?context=ubx&refId=94e0b506-f0fd-4677-bebb-aa0c1c5b0c8d>

Jackson, R. (2008). The theme of social cohesion in religious education policies and practices: An analysis of England, Japan, and Italy. *Religions*, 16(4), 503. <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/16/4/503>

Kobrich, J., & Hoffmann, L. (2023). What do we know about religion and interreligious peace? A review of the quantitative literature. *Politics and Religion*, 16(4), 708–732. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755048323000238>

Lapis, K. (2025). Interreligious education and post-conflict reconciliation: Comparative case studies. *Global Journal of Peace Studies*, 10(1), 77–92.

Lederach, J. P. (2005). *The moral imagination: The art and soul of building peace*. Oxford University Press.

Liu, Y., & Chudjuarjeen, S. (2025). Interreligious understanding, social harmony, and civic resilience in a polarized world. *Journal of Social Innovation and Knowledge*, 2(1), 1–3. <https://doi.org/10.1163/29502683-20250101>

McLoughlin, S. (2011). Interreligious learning and plural societies. *Journal of Peace and Education*, 8(3), 267–284.

Peterson, A. (2012). Religious education and social and community cohesion. *Journal of Social Science Education*, 11(3). <https://doi.org/10.4119/jsse-610>

Raharjo, S., Latuconsina, A., & Syahbudin, A. (2025). Islamic education and social cohesion. *International Journal for Science Review*, 2(6), 50. <https://doi.org/10.71364/ijfsr.v2i6.50>

Rissanen, I., & Sai, Y. (2017). A comparative study of how social cohesion is taught in Islamic religious education in Finland and Ireland. *British Journal of Religious Education*, 40(3), 337–347. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01416200.2017.1352487>

Rissanen, I., & Sai, Y. (2018). A comparative study of how social cohesion is taught in Islamic religious education in Finland and Ireland. *British Journal of Religious Education*, 40(3), 337–347. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01416200.2017.1352487>

UNESCO. (2006). *Guidelines on intercultural education*. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

Visser, M. (2023). Empathy and pluralism: The impact of interreligious education on youth. *Religious Studies Review*, 49(2), 187–204.