Interfaith Dialogue and the Pursuit of Peace: Negotiating Power, Consensus, and Polarization in Contemporary Religious Discourse

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ABSTRACT
Interfaith dialogue (IFD) is often framed both as a moral imperative and as an effective strategy to reduce religious polarization, conflict, and social disintegration. However, despite these ethical objectives, contemporary interfaith peace discourses frequently overlook structural inequalities, historical injustices, and imbalances of power between religious communities. This paper critically examines how peace is discursively constructed in modern interfaith dialogue using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Drawing on Fairclough's three-dimensional framework and Van Dijk's socio-cognitive theory, the study analyzes a purposively selected corpus of elite interfaith statements, dialogue texts, and peace declarations delivered between 2010 and 2024. The findings reveal that dominant interfaith discourses ideologically normalize a depoliticized, consensus-driven notion of peace, characterized by abstract moral universalism, the erosion of agency, and the exclusion of dissent. While these narratives claim inclusivity and harmony, they often obscure underlying power struggles and shift ethical responsibility for peace onto historically marginalized communities. To address these limitations, the article proposes an Islamic justice-based ethical framework grounded in Qur'anic principles, Prophetic traditions, and classical scholarship, emphasizing justice (عدل), moral witnessing (شهادة), and responsible coexistence. By synthesizing discourse analytic insights with Islamic moral epistemology, the study argues that interfaith dialogue can achieve meaningful transformation only when it moves beyond symbolic harmony toward critically reflexive, justice-oriented engagement.

Keywords: Interfaith Dialogue; Peace Discourse; Critical Discourse Analysis; Power and Ideology; Religious Polarization; Islamic Ethics; Justice

Introduction
The early twenty-first century has seen unprecedented scales of religious, political and cultural polarities at both local and international levels. The framing of religious identities through security discourses, armed conflicts with religious connotations, emergence of populist nationalism and the way the med-ia presents religious differences and differences have led to religion being turned into a disputed signifier in the public space, but not a moral asset that can unite people.[i] In this respect, interfaith dialogue (IFD) is marketed by religious institutions, international organisations and civil society as a generic instrument of attaining peacebuilding, social cohesion and conflict resolution on the grounds of religio-cultural conditions. The use of pronouncements, dialogue forums and symbolical meetings between religious leaders is usually rejoiced as confirmation that religion has the power to make a positive impact on the social life.[ii] Nevertheless, despite the institutional growth, the interfaith dialogue is still ambivalent in

terms of its results, casting the critical questions of the discursive assumptions as well as the practical effectiveness.

Critical commentaries are also proposing varying views that the fall of interfaith dialogue has been more of how the idea of peace has been framed than a fact of bad will. Peace in IFD texts is defined as harmony, tolerance or mutual respect, without any references to historical domination, political violence and structural injustice. This kind of formulation makes peace a moral ideal and not a socio political reality. Universalising discourses that claim to apply ethical concepts are likely conceal the power relations by giving priority to certain voices and silencing the others This abstraction is ironic, and in polarised environments will tend to support the antagonisms that IFD is intended to alleviate. [iii]

Islamic epistemological point of view does not allow one to talk of peace (سلام) without relating it to justice (عدل) and moral responsibility. The Qur'an specifically relates reconciliation with moral uprightness as can be seen in the verse:

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا كُونُوا قَوَّامِينَ بِالْقِسْطِ شُهَدَاءَ لِلَّهِ وَلَوْ عَلَىٰ أَنْفُسِكُمْ أَوِ الْوَالِدَيْنِ وَالْأَقْرَبِينَ ۚ إِنْ يَكُنْ غَنِيًّا أَوْ فَقِيرًا فَاللَّهُ أَوْلَىٰ بِهِمَا ۖ فَلَا تَتَّبِعُوا الْهَوَىٰ أَنْ تَعْدِلُوا ۚ وَإِنْ تَلْوُوا أَوْ تُعْرِضُوا فَإِنَّ اللَّهَ كَانَ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ خَبِيرًا

"O you who have believed, be persistently standing firm in justice, witnesses for Allah, even if it be against yourselves or parents and relatives. Whether one is rich or poor, Allah is more worthy of both. So follow not [personal] inclination, lest you not be just. And if you distort [your testimony] or refuse [to give it], then indeed Allah is ever, of what you do, Aware."[iv]

This verse breaks completely consensual concept of peace in the favor of justice in place of social comfort. The Quran also warns that the evils cannot be swept under the carpet because the reconciliation is superficial: ٤٠ وَمَن لَّمْ يَجْعَلِ اللَّهُ لَهُ نُورًا فَمَا لَهُ مِن نُّورٍ "And whoever thinks not Allah after a right way has gone far...] (Qur'an 5:8). Such textual backgrounds suggest that any discourse of peace which does not correspond with power accountability and historical context is ethically invalid. This discussion argues that dominant interfaith peace discourses are depoliticisation discourses which govern difference instead of rebuilding conflict. Through their preferential treatment of harmony, consensus, and justice, these kinds of narratives can reproduce asymmetric power dynamics across religious groups, often making one group a hegemonic group in relation to another. Instead of being the neutral arenas of interfaith comprehension, interfaith writings become arenas of ideological bargaining, at which the religious identities, moral authority, and political legitimacy are made.[v]

Methodology

As a methodological and theoretical framework, the current research will utilize Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). This theory is suitable since CDA views language as a social practice that is informed by power and ideology (Fairclough, 1989)[vi]. It helps scholars to examine what interfaith actors say about peace, how they say it on what assumptions, and with what social implications. The socio-cognitive theory of van Dijk (1998) offers instruments to understand the impact of elite religious discourse on collective image of the Self and Other under polarised conditions, as well as, as Fairclough suggests, the socio-cognitive approach.[vii]

Research Questions

According to this theoretical foundation, the study will be conducted using the following research questions:

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What does the majoritarian peace discourses in the interreligious dialogue texts accord specific religious identities?

What are the ideological assumptions behind the organisation of the notion of peace in polarising situations?

In what ways do these stories recreative or disruptive ways of power?

By providing answers to these queries, the article is trying to go beyond normative advocacy of interfaith dialogue to a critical evaluation of the discursive formulation thereof.

The main argument developed in this direction presupposes that interfaith dialogue is a potentially transformative praxis that may take place in polarized societies (under the conditions of the revival of the discourses of peace through the justice-based, critically reflexive outlook). Through the utilization of primary Islamic literature and its incorporation with the modern scholarship in the area of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the article attempts to contribute to the growing body of interdisciplinary literature that attempts to reconfigure religion as an agent that requires moral conscience, thus tackling the problems of inequality, exclusion, and ideological subjection.

Literature Review

The scholarly literature on interreligious dialogue (IFD) is based on a variety of fields such as religious studies, peace and conflict studies, sociology, and political theory. Experts often praise IFD as an effective approach to the resolution of religious conflict based on the moral aspect. However, an increasing body of literature has been critically questioning its conceptual underpinnings, political disengagement, and even the authority of the discourse itself. The present review identifies three research streams interrelated to each other, namely (1) normative and theological approaches to interfaith dialogue; (2) the application of interfaith dialogue as a tool of peacebuilding and conflict resolution; and (3) the application of Critical Discourse Analysis to religious and peace-related texts. The review identifies a significant gap in the literature that has not been filled by the current research.

Interfaith Dialogue: The Approaches of Normativity and Theology

Initial academic discourse on the subject of IFD was dominated by ethical and theological views. During the middle of the twentieth century, Christian ecumenical forces had a very powerful effect. Leonard Swidler had theorized dialogue as a moral duty and a precondition to survival[viii], and Paul Knitter described IFD as a pluralistic theology practice that acknowledges the salvific worth of every religion.[ix] These interpretations also highlight sincerity, openness, and the common values as the basis of peaceful co-existence.

Islamic scholarship conceptualizes interfaith interaction as a way of recognition and coexistence as per the Quranic principles. The verse

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلنَّاسُ إِنَّا خَلَقْنَٰكُم مِّن ذَكَرٍ وَأُنثَىٰ وَجَعَلْنَٰكُمْ شُعُوبًا وَقَبَآئِلَ لِتَعَارَفُوٓا۟ ۚ إِنَّ أَكْرَمَكُمْ عِندَ ٱللَّهِ أَتْقَىٰكُمْ ۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ عَلِيمٌ خَبِيرٌ

O humanity! Indeed, We created you from a male and a female, and made you into peoples and tribes so that you may ˹get to˺ know one another.

Surely the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous among you. Allah is truly All-Knowing, All-Aware.[x] is oftentimes mentioned as a foundation of the dialogue. Classical exegetes like al-Tabari contend that li-taarafu does not mean relativism, rather it is an ethical command to socialise in a manner that is morally responsible. Modern commentators and philosophers, such as Tariq Ramadan, believe that the role of Islam in IFD does not need to be lost in the fog of moral ambiguity or

injustice, but must still be grounded in theological essentialism (In the Footsteps of the Prophet). These theological systems are also criticized as having a moral rhetoric that is too prone to ignore the power relations and socio-political processes. They assume an egalitarian standing of religious actors by focusing on harmony and mutual recognition thus ignoring historical differences, colonialities, and political dominances that define interreligious relations. Discourse can therefore be prescriptively idealistic and not in touch with actual lives.

Interreligious Dialogue, Peacebuilding and Conflict Resolution

The other intellectual school of thought places IFD in the scope of the existing literature on the conflict management and peace studies. John Paul Lederach views religious actors as powerful moral imaginations that can go beyond the violence with the help of relationship-building (The Moral Imagination).[xi] Based on this, IFD can be used as a means of promoting trust, alleviating prejudice, and developing social capital in communities. Empirical studies in situations like Northern Ireland, Bosnia and in parts of South Asia have indicated that interfaith interventions may humanise the religious Other in sectarian societies (Appleby, "The Ambivalence of the Sacred). However, these steps are not always successful, especially when they are adopted at an elite or symbolic level and do not tend to deal with systemic injustices, political marginalisation, or economic inequalities that give rise to conflict. Gopin warns that the concept of building peace can help to legitimize dangerous political systems without realizing it by encouraging reconciliation without any meaningful redress.[xii]

The most critical commentators in the field of peace studies believe that the current liberal paradigm, within which most IFD projects are practiced, privileges stability, over justice. Richmond argues that peacebuilding discourses have the propensity of normalising conflicts through management of differences to the extent of overhauling the conditions underlying violence (A Post-Liberal Peace). This criticism highlights the possibilities of depoliticization of the discourses of tolerance and coexistence.

The Islamic tradition of ethics is in sharp contrast. The Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) would not accept a reconciliation which would silently promote injustice. The hadith of an authentic narrator confirmed by rigorous methodology, demonstrates the resistance the Prophet advocated against the oppression and encouraged the stand instead of passive coexistence (Sahih al-Bukhari, Kitab al-Mazalim). Quranic vision of peace thus involves intervention in the wrong and not just assimilation.

Narratives of Religious Peace, Critical Discourse Analysis

The third research strand that is the most relevant to the current research is the use of CDA towards religious and peace-oriented texts. Fairclough assumes that discourse is a three-dimensional phenomenon, which includes text, discursive practice and social practice (Discourse and Social Change).[xiii] The model allows the scholars to question how language reproduces and creates power relationships. The socio-cognitive approach of Van Dijk is concerned with how elite discourse has been used to form collective knowledge, beliefs and ideologies (Ideology).[xiv] Through the CDA, political speeches, media representations of Islam and securitisation discourses related to religion have been analysed (Wodak, "The Politics of Fear).[xv] Nevertheless, the literature that specifically deals with IFD as a discursive genre is limited. The current analyses point to the use of inclusive pronouns, moral universalism, and intertextual references to sacred texts as the means of creating. They however rarely ask who exactly is expressing peace and with which sacrifice. Additionally, most of the CDA papers are western liberal in perspective and tend to be marginalising of non-western epistemological schools of thought. The Islamic discursive traditions, which are mainly the concepts of عدل (justice), امانة (trust),

and شهادة (witnessing) are underrepresented in the CDA analyses of peace discourses. Abu Zayd warns about ignoring local hermeneutics as it is one of the dangers of repeating epistemic superiority (Rethinking the Qur'an).[xvi]

Research Gap
This review finds a gap between interfaith dialogue (IFD), peace studies, and discourse analysis. The normative and peace-building scholarship is mostly future-looking the promise of IFD in a moral way, but it fails to acknowledge the discursive multi-layered constructions it represents. On the other hand, critical discourse analysis (CDA) helps to shed light on power relations in the process of religious discourse but does not systematically address IFD or Islamic moral standards. The current paper attempts to address this gap by critically analysing interfaith peace talk using CDA with the supplement of Islamic primary sources as a counter-discursive approach. To this effect, it provides a subtle understanding of how interfaith dialogue can either alleviate or advance polarization among the modern societies.

Methodology
The paper uses CDA to question the discourse of peace in the modern texts of IFD. CDA takes language as a social practice that is entrenched in power, ideology and history (Fairclough, Language and Power)[xvii]. The analysis will be organized based on the three dimensional model of Fairclough (textual, discursive, social) and will incorporate the socio-cognitive perspective of van Dijck on ideology and representation of groups to groups (Ideology and Discourse).[xviii] On the textual level, the analysis examines lexical selection, modality, transitivity, presupposition and evaluative language. One is to understand the manifestation of such terms as peace, harmony, religious coexistence and specifically the use of inclusive pronoun (e.g. we, our) and moral terms like human dignity and universal peace and a passive form that makes the agents unclear.

At the discursive level, the work researches the text production, distribution as well as reception processes and talks about intertextual references to the religious texts, the discourses relating to global human rights and global peace structures. The social aspect of the analysis contextualises the results in the context of the reinforcement of the religious authority, political power and polarization of the society. It contains a carefully selected sample of high-profile IFD texts, 2010-2024, such as bureaucratic interfaith utterances by major religions, tapes of open IFD events with top executives, and IFD peace efforts covered by the press. The texts were selected because of their normative impact and wide scope. The Islamic primary sources (Quran, authentic traditions of Prophet like Sahih al-Bukhari and Sahih Muslim) and classical scholarly work are used as an ethical and discursive opposing factor to supplement CDA. This triangulation aids in critically assessing the consistency of the prevailing discourse on IFD peace with justice-religious ethics, which improves the level of analysis and reflexivity.

Data Selection, Segmentation, and Curation
The current paper relies on a qualitative corpus that was purposely collected and includes high-profile IFD texts, which are the works created between 2010 and 2024. The criteria of selectivity focus on elite, institutional, and norm-setting interfaith texts since they represent symbolic authority and normative control over the common views of religion, peace, and coexistence. The corpus comprises:
Formal interreligious statements and peace proclamations of international religious councils and interreligious forums;

Publication and transcripts of official interfaith conferences and dialogue forums of senior religious figures;

Public speeches and combined utterances by the representatives of the religions in the conflict, polarization, or post-conflict reconciliation.

The reason behind the selection of these texts was the widespread circulation, institutional support and rhetorical impact they have, thus creating the dominant narratives of religious peace beyond the local or grassroots levels. The analysis does not assume that such writings are the only types of interfaith interaction; instead, it actively examines the discourse of the elite, in which the power relations are the most evidently normalized with the help of language. The last corpus is made up of about 2530 textual items, the length of these texts ranging between short statements and lengthy dialogue transcriptions. All the texts were published in the English language or officially translated in the English language and were served by publicly available institutional facilities. In order to go beyond representational exhaustiveness to the depth of analysis, the study is concentrated on discursive patterns, recurring themes, and linguistic strategies instead of the frequency of statistical analysis.[xix]

Analytical Procedure

The analysis is carried out in terms of a multiphase Critical Discourse Analytic process that incorporates the three-dimensional critical discourse analysis framework by Fairclough with the socio-cognitive one by van Dijk. This was aimed at providing an analytical rigor, reflexivity, and theoretical consistency.

Textual Level- It encompassed close reading to define recurrent lexical patterns, modality, transitivity, evaluative terms, and use of pronouns in each document. Special focus was put on the use of abstract moral nouns (e.g., peace, harmony, dignity), passive forms of the verbs which obscure agency and modal verbs (must, should, need to) which serve as normative imperatives.

Level of Discursive Practice The analysis involved taking a look at the production, dissemination and legitimisation of texts. This was done by recognising intertextual sources of sacred scriptures, international language of human rights and global peace systems, and also pointing out the institutional command of speakers and hosting agencies. These factors were examined to examine the extent to which consensus oriented meanings were stabilised and dissenting readings marginalised.

Social Practice Level- The discursive findings were put into context in larger frames of religious authority, political power, historical inequality and polarization. In this case, the discussion examined the role of interfaith peace discourses in the normalisation of asymmetrical power dynamics by making the conflict process depoliticised and conceptualising injustice as a misconception. The socio-cognitive model of van Dijk was used throughout each of the stages to explain the role of elite religious discourse in creating shared mental models, thus defining the attitudes of audiences towards responsibility, victimhood, and moral responsibility. The analytical categories were inductively constructed through repeated readings and through constant comparison of texts and revised to capture the coherence between empirical evidence and theoretical assertions.

Findings and Discussion

This part outlines the results of CDA on the modern IFD peace discourse and implications on polarization, power relations, and religious morality. The argument is arranged in three themes connected with each other: (1) the religious Other in

representation; (2) the creation of consensus and enmity; (3) the opposition or defiance to power imbalance in the discourse of peace.

The Religious Other Representation

One of the salient trends of the analysed texts is the decline of religious identities. The Other is often put in a generalized moral context, as allies in peace, as religious groups, as common guardians of humankind, not as a particular historical context. This indicates what Fairclough described as the universalisation of specific interests whereby actual realities are changed to neutral moral claims. Lexically, there is the dominance of positive nouns that include coexistence, solidarity and mutual respect in IFD declarations. These terms do not eliminate conflict, however, they mask the substantive inequalities, especially when one side has been marginalised or even where one part has been the subject of violence. The Other is made not dangerous but also agentless; communal meetings like we did it wrong or societies were victims put the blame on an indefinite we, and no particular agent.

As faith leaders, we are all committed to peace, harmony and dignity of the entire humankind, we denounce any kind of hatred and division.[xx] These constructions - often repeated in interfaith statements - rely on universal pronouns (we), abstract moral nouns (humanity, dignity) which forms of universalisation of religious participants and obliterates asymmetries among them. In Faircloughian terms, this linguistic strategy is synthetic personalisation that makes the appearance of equality of moral positions even in the face of historically unequal power relationships. The agency is also diffused in all ways, so that there is no way to know who makes injustice, exclusion, and violence. The social cognitive analysis developed by Van Dijk can be used to explain how these discourses produce collective mental models where conflict is seen as a moral misconception and not as a political fact. The Other is not portrayed as one who is oppressed or marginalised but as an equal shareholder in an abstract ethical effort. This substantiates the fact that interfaith peace language usually neutralises difference instead of addressing it, which goes against the Quranic stress on moral accountability and responsibility that is differentiated. The Qur'an says:

وَأَنزَلْنَآ إِلَيْكَ ٱلْكِتَٰبَ بِٱلْحَقِّ مُصَدِّقًا لِّمَا بَيْنَ يَدَيْهِ مِنَ ٱلْكِتَٰبِ وَمُهَيْمِنًا عَلَيْهِ ۖ فَٱحْكُم بَيْنَهُم بِمَآ أَنزَلَ ٱللَّهُ ۖ وَلَا تَتَّبِعْ أَهْوَآءَهُمْ عَمَّا جَآءَكَ مِنَ ٱلْحَقِّ ۚ لِكُلٍّ جَعَلْنَا مِنكُمْ شِرْعَةً وَمِنْهَاجًا ۚ وَلَوْ شَآءَ ٱللَّهُ لَجَعَلَكُمْ أُمَّةً وَٰحِدَةً وَلَٰكِن لِّيَبْلُوَكُمْ فِى مَآ ءَاتَىٰكُمْ ۖ فَٱسْتَبِقُوا۟ ٱلْخَيْرَٰتِ ۚ إِلَى ٱللَّهِ مَرْجِعُكُمْ جَمِيعًا فَيُنَبِّئُكُم بِمَا كُنتُمْ فِيهِ تَخْتَلِفُونَ

We have revealed to you ˹O Prophet˺ this Book with the truth, as a confirmation of previous Scriptures and a supreme authority on them. So judge between them by what Allah has revealed, and do not follow their desires over the truth that has come to you. To each of you We have ordained a code of law and a way of life. If Allah had willed, He would have made you one community, but His Will is to test you with what He has given ˹each of˺ you. So compete with one another in doing good. To Allah you will all return, then He will inform you ˹of the truth˺ regarding your differences.[xxi]

This verse underscores the Qur'ān's role as a guiding authority, emphasizing justice, pluralism, and moral responsibility, while acknowledging diversity in religious laws and the importance of ethical competition in righteousness. The framework by Van Dijk explains how the common mental models are formed through such representations. The discourse of elite IFD prevents the audience from perceiving conflict as a political fact, but as a moral misunderstanding because it avoids direct references to historical wrongs or the presence of power imbalances. This fits the ideas of van Dijk of positive self-

presentation and negative other-presentation, except that negativity is not expressed but displaced. This idea is opposite of the Quranic imperative of clarity and responsibility. Quran does not abolish differences in the quest to achieve peace; on the contrary, it recognizes them as social realities and divine trials (Qur'an 5:48). Interpretations of this verse by scholars like al-Qurtubi accept pluralism and denounce moral relativism, which means that it is preferable to be responsible than homogenised. The discussion shows that IFD peace discourses have a disposition to lay emphasis on the symbolic solidarity at the cost of ethically significant interaction with dissimilarity.

The other important discovery is the representation of consensus as indubitable goodwill. The agreement, harmony, and common values are committed to in the texts on numerous occasions, and dissent is shown as a possible danger to peace. Consensus oriented language modal verbs e.g. must, should or need to, implicitly delegitimise other perspectives. This reiterates the argument by Fairclough that modality is a crucial point where power is exercised by means of language (Language and Power). The agreement is further strengthened in terms of intertextuality especially by calling on the concept of the universal human values and international peace structures. Although these powers confer some moral authorisation, they instil discourse into a liberal order, which values stability more than confrontation. As a result, it is possible to present the conflict as an exception to a rule of peaceful coexistence, but not a sign of injustice.

"Peace requires that all communities commit to dialogue, restraint, and mutual understanding, setting aside divisive narratives for the greater good.[xxii]"

This statement exemplifies modalized consensus language, where verbs such as requires, must, and commit function as normative imperatives. According to Fairclough, modality is a site where power is exercised implicitly, framing certain positions as morally obligatory while delegitimizing dissent. Disagreement is not framed as a legitimate ethical stance but as a threat to peace itself.

Intertextually, such expressions frequently invoke global peace norms and liberal humanist ideals, positioning stability as the highest moral value. This discursive move aligns with what post-liberal peace theorists identify as conflict aversion, where peace is equated with the absence of visible disagreement. From an Islamic ethical standpoint, this framing is problematic, as principled disagreement (اختلاف) is not inherently destabilizing but can be a form of moral responsibility when injustice persists. The holy Qur'an guides us in this regard saying:

وَإِن طَآئِفَتَانِ مِنَ ٱلْمُؤْمِنِينَ ٱقْتَتَلُوا۟ فَأَصْلِحُوا۟ بَيْنَهُمَا ۖ فَإِنۢ بَغَتْ إِحْدَىٰهُمَا عَلَى ٱلْأُخْرَىٰ فَقَٰتِلُوا۟ ٱلَّتِى تَبْغِى حَتَّىٰ تَفِىٓءَ إِلَىٰٓ أَمْرِ ٱللَّهِ ۚ فَإِن فَآءَتْ فَأَصْلِحُوا۟ بَيْنَهُمَا بِٱلْعَدْلِ وَأَقْسِطُوٓا۟ ۖ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ يُحِبُّ ٱلْمُقْسِطِينَ

And if two groups of believers fight each other, then make peace between them. But if one of them transgresses against the other, then fight against the transgressing group until they ˹are willing to˺ submit to the rule of Allah. If they do so, then make peace between both ˹groups˺ in all fairness and act justly. Surely Allah loves those who uphold justice.[xxiii]

This verse highlights the Qur'ānic emphasis on conflict resolution, the pursuit of justice, and the balance between enjoining peace and confronting wrongdoing, reflecting the moral framework believers are called to uphold. This discursive act repeats the criticisms in peace studies which cite the liberal peace narratives as conflict-aversion. In its attempt to conflate peace and the lack of discord, IFD discourse runs the danger of making dialogue be what Mouffe defines as a post-political space where real antagonism is stifled instead of being pursued (On the Political)[xxiv]. The results of the CDA show that,

in most cases, IFD texts serve the purpose of consensus management rather than the purpose of critical engagement.

The Islamic scholars and texts have an alternate perspective of disagreement, named as ikhtilaf. It is said that disagreement is not necessarily destabilizing. Prophet Muhammad who passed away ﷺ was aware of different opinions that people may have without crossing the moral boundaries. Principled disagreement was also regarded by old jurists as an intellectual life. Notably, justice is more about reconciliation than merely a reconciliation as the Qur'an informs us: should there be two factions of believers fighting each other, unite them. However, in case a group of people torment another group of people, you have to confront the bully until it submits to Allah (Qur'an 49:9). The meaning of this verse is that peace will only come when oppression is eliminated; it is not just practical to restore harmony. It is a condition lacking in many interfaith stories, and an evident difference in their ethical approach.

Discourses of Peace and Power Inequality

The main result of this investigation is that the peace discourses that have been proclaimed in the various religious traditions seem to reflect an accommodating ethos; however, in reality, they represent recitations of power inequalities. Fairclough imagines this effect as ideological naturalisation where major interpretations are made natural. The tolerant appeals that are distilled out on the sample texts are viewed to be injunctions of universal tolerance despite the fact that certain actors have disproportionate power in the process of defining social configurations. In many cases, minority groups are called to be the models of tolerance, strength, and negotiation, and the gain that the majority groups can get is right before their eyes. These kinds of rhetoric are a symmetrical front, which later clouds deeply rooted inequalities. It puts the burden of peace on subordinates. van Dijk claims that the dominant groups do not exercise power by coercion, but by morally pleasant discourses that seem to be benevolent and fair. Minority communities are encouraged to demonstrate patience, resilience, and tolerance as pathways to reconciliation and social harmony.[xxv] This type of formulation illustrates how peace discourse subtly redistributes moral labor. While framed as ethical encouragement, such language places a disproportionate burden of peace on marginalized groups, implicitly absolving dominant actors from addressing structural injustice. Van Dijk describes this as elite ideological management, where power operates through benevolent-sounding moral appeals rather than overt coercion. From a critical Islamic ethical perspective, this asymmetry contradicts the Qur'ānic injunction (كُونُواْ قَوَّٰمِينَ بِٱلْقِسْطِ) that justice is a prerequisite for reconciliation, not its consequence (Qur'ān 4:135). By moralizing endurance without confronting oppression, interfaith peace narratives risk transforming ethical virtues into tools of political pacification.

There is an added complexity of religious language. They use scriptural materials to support the idea of coexistence but in most cases, scholars take these materials out of contextual isolation thus making them ineffective. In contrast, the Islamic discourse associates peace and equity with a rebellion against oppression. According to the Quran, (وَكَذَٰلِكَ جَعَلْنَٰكُمْ أُمَّةً وَسَطًا لِّتَكُونُواْ شُهَدَآءَ عَلَى ٱلنَّاسِ) believers are witnesses of humanity, and this is the reason why they are a righteous community.[xxvi] This witnessing obligation is considered by some of the scholars such as Ibn Taymiyyah as an incumbent obligation to condemn injustice regardless of the person who instigated it. One of the hadiths that are canonical states that uttering truth in the presence of a tyrannical despot is the best jihad (سنن أبي داود، كتاب الملاحم).This tradition highlights that there is a moral responsibility to speak the truth and argues that interfaith discourses which celebrate politeness to the

telling of truth are opaque in nature. Most peace texts have little or no reference to the virtue of moral fortitude which would relate to the current power structures.

Facing Polarization or Dealing with It?

A key question that arises due to the cumulative impact of these strategies is; do interfaith peace narratives actually reduce polarization, or are they simply coping with it? CDA shows that, despite the fact that dialogue can partially reduce the symbolic hostility and make individuals more civil, it is often unable to challenge the structural and ideological factors that precondition polarization. These stories are dangerous to whitewash the unfair facts in the name of concord because the peace is the agreement, the misunderstanding is the difference, and the justice is the periphery.[xxvii] However, some points are found in the corpus when the storyline breaks down. Other writings recognize the historical wrongs, mention power disparities and demand accountability and reconciliation. These examples demonstrate that the dialogue does not necessarily depoliticise, but is a transformative process that depends on the ethical agency of the leaders of the dialogue.

The Islamic ethics underline that justice (عدل) and moral responsibility are the two main pillars of true peace (صلح). Al-Shatibi argued that the primary goals of the Islamic law maqasid al-sharia are those that promote dignity and justice and not social conformity. An introduction of these values into interfaith considerations would redirect the focus towards uniting symbolically to a process of real change. Overall, the paper shows that the surviving interfaith narratives occupy an insidious discursive space that is purported inclusiveness mixed with ideological fences. They partly mediate explicit polarization up to the fact that they neutralize conflict and hide power relations. A better way to go in pursuit of real peace in polarized societies is a critical and justice focused re-articulation that authorises dissent on ethical grounds and appeals to inequality.[xxviii]

Scope and Limitations of the Study

While this study offers a critical examination of interfaith peace discourse through the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the analysis focuses primarily on elite, institutionally produced interfaith texts, such as official declarations, formal dialogue transcripts, and public statements by recognized religious authorities. As a result, the findings do not necessarily reflect grassroots, informal, or community-based interfaith initiatives, where power relations and ethical engagement may operate differently. Second, the study prioritizes discursive patterns and ideological tendencies over quantitative representation. The aim is not to measure the frequency of specific linguistic features, but to interrogate how dominant meanings are constructed and normalized. Consequently, the conclusions should be understood as interpretive rather than generalizable in a statistical sense. Third, although Islamic ethical and scriptural sources are employed as a critical normative framework, the study does not claim to present a comprehensive comparative theology of peace across religious traditions. The use of Islamic sources serves as a counter-discursive ethical lens, not as an evaluative judgment on other faith traditions. Future research could expand this approach by incorporating justice-centered ethical frameworks from other religious and philosophical traditions. Finally, the analysis is limited to texts produced in the contemporary global context (2010–2024). Discursive formations of interfaith dialogue may evolve in response to changing political and social conditions, necessitating longitudinal and context-specific studies to assess transformation over time.

Conclusion

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The article attempts to criticize interfaith dialogue (IFD) against polarizing tendencies with increasing polarization through Critical Discourse Analysis. Using the frameworks of Fairclough and van Dijk, the paper has shown how the texts of interfaith in contemporary times though engaging strategies of peace, turn to depoliticised, consensus-based rhetoric that hides the inequalities of power and historical injustices. Instead of creating objective moral curing, these stories are ideological locations of convergence of religious identity, moral responsibility and political power. The research has three main contributions to the scholarship. It, first, applies CDA to the little-studied area of interfaith communication, demonstrating the ways in which language forms harmony and prevents it from being critically examined. Second, it destabilizes the traditional peace paradigm based on stability and not justice by blending the passages in the Quran, the genuine Prophetic traditions as well as the classical scholarship. To give an example, Quranic encouragement to observe justice (Qur'an 4:135) and the prophetic command to avoid injustice (صحيح البخاري) offer an excellent vision of peace that opposes shallow tolerance discourses.

These results have relevant implications to interreligious practitioners. Any effort which obscures injustice and silences constructive controversy, or apportions moral responsibility inequitably, will tend to deepen, not ease divisions. To be able to reach a truly transformative dialogue, reflexivity, awareness of the imbalance of power, ethical opposition validation, and basing of the peace narratives on the foundations of justice-based moral traditions is required. So, interfaith dialogue can no longer be limited to dealing with diversity; it must attempt to break the exclusion and domination.

Other shortcomings of the study are that it concerns high-profile, elite texts under interfaith conditions, which is unlikely to represent grassroots dialogue or local peace-building initiatives. Besides, although Islamic ethical conversation was preemptively marginalised as a critical counterpart, prospective studies might substantively interrogate other religious traditions on their respective normative grounds, and thus enliven the comparative study. Future scholarship must also explore the ways justice-based religious discourses can be put to work in the framework of interfaiths without becoming relativistic or falling into an ideological clash. Longitudinal research on the material results of the critically informed interfaith efforts would also enhance the comprehension of capacities of dialogue to transform. Finally, this paper hypothesizes that interfaith dialogue can have any significant role to play in peaceful societies that are polarized only when it goes beyond symbolic harmony and adopts ethically rooted, critically engaged and justice-oriented dialogue.

Acknowledgment

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