



Extended Abstract of PhD Dissertation

The Role of Culture as a Variable in Christian–Muslim Dialogue

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Abstract

This article examines culture as a central analytical category in Christian–Muslim dialogue, addressing a significant gap in interfaith studies where theological commonalities often overshadow the formative role of cultural and ethnic differences. Recognizing the deep interrelation of religion and culture, the study argues that cultural configurations shape how beliefs are expressed, rituals performed, and sacred texts interpreted, thereby influencing both the possibilities and constraints of interreligious engagement. Using examples from diverse Christian and Muslim settings, the analysis demonstrates that variations in communicative style and interpretive expectation are frequently rooted in cultural divergences. The conceptual framework integrates Qur’anic perspectives with insights from Shi’i thinkers ‘Allāmah Hasanzādah Āmulī and ‘Allāmah Sha’rānī, who view religion as a comprehensive and identity-forming system. Edward Tylor’s classical definition of culture and Victor Kozlov’s model of ethnicity further clarify how cultural and ethnic identities intersect with religious belonging. Jürgen Habermas’s theory of communicative action provides an additional lens for evaluating the conditions necessary for constructive intercultural dialogue. Institutional analyses of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, the World Council of Churches, and Iran’s Center for Interreligious Dialogue, along with case studies from Myanmar and Nigeria, reveal the decisive impact of cultural variables on dialogical outcomes. The study concludes that interfaith dialogue gains depth and effectiveness when cultural and ethnic contexts are explicitly acknowledged and incorporated into its design.

Keywords: Christian–Muslim Dialogue; Culture and Religion; Ethnicity; Intercultural Communication; Interreligious Studies.

Research Overview and Problem Statement

This study examines the role of culture as an independent analytical variable in Christian–Muslim dialogue, highlighting cultural dynamics as a crucial yet often neglected dimension in the analysis of interreligious encounters. Existing scholarship in interfaith studies frequently privileges doctrinal or theological commonalities, while giving far less attention to the ways in which cultural and ethnic distinctions structure communication, shape interpretive frameworks, and influence the outcomes of dialogue. The present research identifies this imbalance as a substantive gap, noting that insufficient engagement with cultural variables can limit conceptual clarity, reinforce misunderstandings, and diminish the transformative potential of dialogical initiatives.

The inquiry is premised on the observation that religion and culture are profoundly interrelated within all human societies. A nuanced appreciation of this interrelation reveals that cultural configurations substantially inform the articulation of beliefs, the performance of rituals, and the interpretation of sacred texts. By drawing on illustrative examples from diverse Christian and Muslim contexts, the study demonstrates that cultural divergences play a determinative role in shaping the contours of interreligious interaction.

Key Concepts and Theoretical Foundations

The conceptualization of religion in this study draws upon Qur’anic perspectives alongside the reflections of two influential twentieth-century Iranian Shi’i theologians, ‘Allāmah Hasanzādah Āmulī (1928–2021) and ‘Allāmah Sha’rānī (1902–1973). Within this framework, religion is understood not simply as a collection of doctrinal propositions, but as a comprehensive and identity-shaping system that organizes human life, grounds ethical orientations, and provides a hermeneutical structure through which social reality is interpreted and inhabited.

The discussion of culture is grounded in Edward Tylor’s classical formulation, which conceptualizes culture as a complex totality encompassing knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and the full range of capacities acquired by individuals as members of society. Emphasis is placed on the acquired and socially transmitted character of culture, which enables a more precise account of how cultural patterns shape religious understanding and guide interpretive processes.

The concept of ethnicity is examined in light of contemporary sociological literature, with particular reference to Victor Kozlov’s analytical model. Ethnicity is defined as a historically constituted social formation rooted in shared language, cultural practices,

values, kinship ties, and territorial continuity. Such a definition allows for a more rigorous assessment of how ethnic identity interacts with religious belonging in interfaith settings.

The principal research question explores how cultural and ethnic differences influence both the theoretical dimensions and practical outcomes of dialogue between Christians and Muslims. This central question is further articulated through four subsidiary inquiries that investigate:

- Variations in modes of reasoning across cultural contexts;
- The significance of recognizing culturally embedded belief structures;
- The contribution of divergent cognitive styles to misunderstandings in dialogue;
- The degree to which formal interfaith encounters acknowledge and integrate participants' cultural backgrounds.

Theoretical Literature

This section outlines the theoretical foundations of the research. In examining cultural theories, attention is given to both classical and contemporary perspectives, with particular emphasis on Edward Tylor's formulation. Tylor, who treats culture and civilization as synonymous, conceptualizes culture as the totality of human social life. Although culture is acquired, it is also understood to possess deep roots in the human unconscious. This conceptualization provides an effective analytical lens for interpreting the dynamics of interreligious dialogue.

The discussion of ethnicity engages major sociological theories, drawing specifically on Abramson's six defining features of ethnic groups. These features include a shared historical experience, cultural and social distinctiveness, embeddedness within broader social systems, formation at scales larger than local communities, variable meanings across social contexts, and the possession of recognizable names and labels. Through analyzing these characteristics, the study delineates a framework for understanding ethnicity as it intersects with religious identity.

An important part of this section examines the dialectical relationship between religion and ethnicity. Building on Andrew Greeley's typology, two primary trajectories are identified: the interpretation of religion through ethnic belonging, and the preservation of ethnic identity through religious structures. Illustrative examples from different historical and geographical settings demonstrate how these two dimensions have been intertwined, often shaping communal worldviews, ritual practices, and patterns of social cohesion.

In the area of intercultural communication, Jürgen Habermas's theory of communicative action is adopted as the principal conceptual framework. The analysis highlights three central dimensions of this theory: the pursuit of peace and nonviolence, the cultivation of knowledge and respect for the religious other, and the fostering of culturally informed dialogue. These elements offer a coherent approach for analyzing the communicative dynamics present in interfaith interactions.

The section concludes with an examination of key models of interreligious engagement, organized into four main categories: the dialogue of life, action-oriented dialogue, theological dialogue, and the dialogue of spiritual experience. Each form is presented with illustrative examples and conceptual clarification, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the varied modalities through which Christian–Muslim dialogue may be conducted.

Analysis of Cultural and Ethnic Variables in Interreligious Dialogue

This section presents a field-based analysis of interreligious dialogue initiatives within three major international institutions. The first part examines the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue at the Vatican, tracing its historical formation and subsequent developments. A close reading of the Council's documents and official statements indicates a gradual movement within the Vatican from positions characterized by exclusivist tendencies toward more inclusive orientations. Although the Council has made significant contributions to promoting dialogue, it has not yet fully integrated cultural considerations as a central component of its dialogical framework.

The activities of the World Council of Churches in the domain of interfaith engagement are analyzed with particular reference to their emphasis on social issues. An examination of the Council's records shows that a focus on shared social concerns has created conducive conditions for interreligious communication. Compared to the Vatican, this institution has placed stronger emphasis on cultural dimensions and has frequently prioritized culturally and socially embedded themes in shaping its dialogue agenda.

The section then considers the Center for Interreligious Dialogue in Iran, focusing on its collaborations with various Christian institutions. An analysis of the Center's programs and statements highlights the importance accorded to cultural and civilizational factors within the Iranian approach to interreligious engagement. In selecting topics and structuring its dialogical practices, the Center has consistently taken into account the cultural and historical backgrounds of the participating communities.

Across the three institutions, four recurring thematic orientations in dialogue are identified: an emphasis on shared social issues, selective engagement with theological questions, collective responses to secularization, and forms of convergence shaped by encounters with the West. The analysis shows that attention to cultural variables significantly influences both the selection of topics and the outcomes of dialogue. For instance, in conversations with Eastern Orthodox churches, recognition of civilizational and cultural affinities has contributed to the creation of a more productive and receptive dialogical environment.

The Significance of Culture and Ethnicity in Interreligious Dialogue

This section presents the final synthesis of the study. By examining two prominent cases of religious and ethnic conflict in Myanmar and Nigeria, the analysis demonstrates that many contemporary interreligious challenges are deeply rooted in cultural differences. In the context of Myanmar, tensions between Buddhists and the Rohingya Muslim community reflect not only a religious divide but also a cultural and ethnic confrontation linked to the legacies of colonial border formation and historical patterns of exclusion. In Nigeria, conflicts between Christian and Muslim communities similarly contain strong cultural and ethnic dimensions and are intertwined with economic and political grievances.

An examination of interviews conducted with scholars active in the field of interfaith dialogue indicates that insufficient attention to cultural factors remains one of the most significant obstacles to effective engagement. Many interviewees stressed that formal dialogues often prioritize theological commonalities while neglecting the cultural divergences that shape participants' identities, interpretive frameworks, and communicative expectations.

The study's concluding assessment affirms that interreligious dialogue is most effective when the cultural and ethnic backgrounds of the participants are taken into account, when conversations extend beyond theological overlap, and when cultural differences are approached as potential resources rather than impediments. Future dialogues are encouraged to focus on three principal dimensions: greater sensitivity to cultural contexts, attention to shared social concerns, and the cultivation of civilizational commonalities.

Final Reflections and Research Contributions

This research, adopting an interdisciplinary perspective and integrating both qualitative and comparative approaches, contributes to the contextualization of interreligious

dialogue studies by foregrounding cultural and civilizational dimensions. Among its principal contributions are the formulation of a theoretical framework for analyzing the cultural foundations of interreligious communication and the articulation of a dialectical understanding of the relationship between religion and culture.

Through the combination of textual, field-based, and institutional analysis, the study offers a comprehensive assessment of how cultural variables influence dialogical processes. The comparative examination of three major international institutions and the identification of core thematic orientations in their activities further underscore the significance of cultural analysis for the future of interfaith engagement.

Dissertation Information

This doctoral dissertation was successfully defended and refereed in July 2021 at the Department of Abrahamic Religions, University of Religions and Denominations, Qom, Iran.

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