



## FROM POLARIZATION TO COEXISTENCE: THE ROLE OF DIALOGUE OF CIVILIZATIONS IN MANAGING RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY

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**Abstract:** The persistent, often violent, splintering of societies along religious and cultural lines poses a profound challenge to global stability, rendering genuine coexistence an elusive ideal. Despite decades of scholarly discourse and diplomatic initiatives advocating for intergroup understanding, the chasm separating diverse communities appears to deepen, not narrow. This paper contends that the superficial application of inter-civilizational dialogue has frequently failed to address the deep-seated fears and power imbalances fueling polarization, leaving it a well-intentioned but often impotent tool. We explore how dialogue, when stripped of its transformative potential and reduced to mere polite conversation, becomes utterly insufficient for navigating the intricate web of religious and cultural differences. A critical examination reveals that true progress demands a radical re-imagining of dialogue, moving beyond performative gestures to cultivate robust, empathetic engagement that confronts rather than sidesteps fundamental disagreements. Without such a paradigm shift, the dream of genuine coexistence remains a dangerous fantasy, perpetually vulnerable to the next spark of division.

**Keywords:** Civilizational Dialogue, Religious Pluralism, Cultural Coexistence, Polarization Management, Interfaith Engagement



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## INTRODUCTION

The world struggles with a stark, unsettling reality: communities, once intertwined, now fracture along lines of faith and heritage, their differences weaponized into instruments of division. Consider the recurring episodes of ethno-religious tension in nations celebrated for their diversity, or the digital echo chambers that amplify suspicion, cementing rigid identities. This isn't merely a localized problem; it is a global pattern, manifesting as political instability, social unrest, and a profound erosion of collective trust. Despite fervent calls for harmony and numerous initiatives aimed at fostering understanding, the chasm between disparate groups often appears to widen, leaving observers to ponder the efficacy of current approaches. The very notion of a shared future seems to dim under the shadow of escalating cultural and religious polarization.

Academics and policymakers have long championed "dialogue" as the panacea for such societal ills. Yet, the persistent recurrence of conflict suggests this remedy, as currently applied, falls short. There is a glaring, uncomfortable gap between the theoretical promise of inter-civilizational engagement and its often-disappointing real-world impact. We hear endless pronouncements about the "importance" of dialogue, but rarely a critical dissection of why it so frequently fails to deliver lasting change. Why do well-funded programs often yield only fleeting moments of civility rather than fundamental shifts towards genuine coexistence? This paper argues that the conventional framing of civilizational dialogue has been too timid, too superficial, and too unwilling to confront the raw, uncomfortable truths of power, identity, and historical grievance that lie beneath the surface of religious and cultural differences. We need to move beyond the comforting rhetoric and demand a more robust, even confrontational, model of engagement if we are truly serious about transforming polarization into enduring coexistence. This study, therefore, scrutinises the mechanisms and limitations of civilizational dialogue, pushing past platitudes to identify concrete pathways for managing religious and cultural diversity in an increasingly fractured world.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The academic landscape concerning inter-civilizational dialogue is broad, yet often saturated with an optimism that belies the persistent realities of global polarization. Early theoretical frameworks, particularly those emerging in response to Samuel P. Huntington's provocative "Clash of Civilizations" thesis, largely positioned dialogue as a counter-narrative, a necessary antidote to inevitable conflict (Huntington, 1993). Huntington himself argued that future conflicts would primarily erupt along civilizational fault lines, driven by fundamental cultural and religious differences (Huntington, 1993). This grim prognosis spurred a concerted effort to promote understanding, often framed within the United Nations' declaration of 2001 as the "Year of Dialogue Among Civilizations" (United Nations General Assembly, 1998). This initiative, while symbolic, marked a global recognition that fostering communication between diverse cultures was essential.

However, the efficacy and actual mechanics of this "dialogue" have remained points of contention. Some scholars, like Ankerl (2000), posited that global communication, even without a universal civilization, could facilitate a form of coexistence. Others, however, questioned the depth of such engagements. Smock (2002) and Knitter (1996) defined interfaith dialogue not merely as talking, but as a sympathetic interaction aimed at mutual understanding. Yet, the question remains:

does this empathy translate into tangible societal shifts, or does it merely create pockets of understanding among a select few?

The challenges to effective dialogue are well-documented, often categorized into theological, cultural, and structural barriers. Beyers (2023) highlights doctrinal disparities as a significant impediment, noting that fundamental differences in beliefs can hinder meaningful exchange, especially when coupled with intolerance. This is compounded by cultural and historical baggage, where lingering prejudices and past conflicts continue to shape contemporary perceptions (Beyers, 2023). Khairulnizam Mat Karim and Suzy Aziziyana Saili (2009) specifically detailed these challenges within the Malaysian context, observing that limited interaction between various ethnic groups, often segregated by residential areas and educational systems, prevents robust dialogue. Such limitations mean that dialogue, if it occurs, often remains superficial, failing to penetrate the core issues of identity and belonging (Mat Karim & Saili, 2009).

Moreover, the very definition and purpose of dialogue are not universally agreed upon. Some see it as a means to identify commonalities and universal ethics, aiming for a "global ethic of mutual respect, compassion, and peace" (Axworthy, n.d.). This perspective, articulated by figures like Hans Küng, suggests that core ethical principles shared across faiths can form a foundation for bridging divides (Axworthy, n.d.). Conversely, others caution against a naive search for sameness, emphasizing that dialogue should acknowledge and respect differences without seeking to homogenize beliefs. Hashim Musa (2005) argued that dialogue must agree upon differences, avoiding relativism and syncretism, and instead promoting a pluralistic attitude. Muzaffar (2003) and Nasr (2004) further stressed that dialogue should foster understanding of each other's cultures without prejudice, focusing on intercommunication and mutual respect.

The practical application of dialogue in conflict resolution settings also receives mixed reviews. Lederach (1997) emphasized the importance of building peace through sustainable reconciliation, implying that dialogue is a component of a larger, more complex peacebuilding process. Barnas (2022) studied interfaith youth programs, finding that participation fostered confidence and positive attitudes towards other faiths, leading to concrete actions against religious intolerance. This suggests that dialogue can indeed change individual attitudes, but scaling these changes to broader societal transformation remains a hurdle. Cahyono (2018) highlighted the role of interfaith dialogue in building social harmony in Indonesia, while Ruslan and Irham (2022) underscored the significance of religious education in maintaining harmony. However, these successes often depend on specific local contexts and the active involvement of religious and community leaders (Mujiburrahman, 2006; Barton, 2014; Ichwan et al., 2020).

Despite these positive examples, critical perspectives persist. Some question whether interfaith dialogue is merely an idealistic endeavor with intangible results (Zannini, 2017). There is a concern that such dialogues might be too focused on theological commonalities, neglecting the deeper socio-political and economic factors that fuel conflict (Köse, 2009). Religious conflicts, it is argued, rarely stem from theological differences alone; they often reflect struggles over identity, power, history, and resources (Driessen, 2023; Yankelovich, 1999). Indeed, some critiques suggest that dialogue can even be perceived as a threat, potentially eroding one's own identity or culture (Khairulnizam Mat Karim, 2005; Mat Karim & Saili, 2009). This fear of dilution or conversion can lead to resistance and a lack of genuine participation, rendering dialogue ineffective (Mat Karim & Saili, 2009; Barnas, 2022).

Moreover, the digital age introduces new complexities. Hirschl et al. (2012) and other scholars observe an increase in socio-political polarization linked to religiosity, with social media acting as a potent amplifier for the construction of rigid religious identities (Hirschl et al., 2012). This environment can exacerbate intolerance and create echo chambers that actively resist genuine intergroup communication. The challenge, therefore, is not just to initiate dialogue, but to navigate a media landscape that often thrives on division and simplification (Héliot & Sarr, 2020; Atmaja et al., 2023).

Ultimately, while the literature broadly agrees on the necessity of inter-civilizational and interfaith dialogue, a more critical lens reveals its inherent limitations and the significant challenges it faces. The transition from theoretical advocacy to practical, impactful coexistence remains a complex, often fraught, journey. Simply "talking" is not enough; the quality, intent, and structural support for dialogue determine its potential for true transformation. The field needs to move beyond celebrating the existence of dialogue to rigorously evaluating its depth, its inclusivity, and its capacity to address the root causes of polarization, rather than merely papering over cracks.

## METHODOLOGY

This study employs a conceptual and document analysis methodology, a deliberate choice rooted in the conviction that understanding complex social phenomena like inter-civilizational dialogue demands a deep, qualitative engagement with existing intellectual frameworks and empirical observations. We deliberately prioritized this approach over empirical fieldwork or quantitative analysis, not out of convenience, but because the very nature of "dialogue" and "coexistence" is deeply embedded in discourse, theory, and articulated experiences. To rush into surveys or statistical models would risk flattening the rich, often contradictory, narratives that define this field. This method allowed us to scrutinize how concepts are constructed, debated, and applied across various academic and policy contexts.

The selection of documents was not an arbitrary accumulation of texts, but a thoughtful, iterative process. We began with broad searches using keywords such as "civilizational dialogue," "interfaith dialogue," "religious polarization," "cultural coexistence," and "conflict management" in both Malay and English. This initial sweep was designed to capture a wide spectrum of scholarly journals, doctoral and master's theses, and official reports from reputable institutions. We deliberately filtered out ephemeral sources like news articles, popular blogs, or unreviewed conference presentations, focusing instead on peer-reviewed academic publications and rigorously vetted institutional reports. This was a conscious effort to ground our analysis in established scholarship, avoiding the noise and potential biases of less formal commentary.

Our intellectual defense of this method rests on its capacity to uncover the evolution of ideas. By analyzing texts spanning several decades, we could trace how the understanding of dialogue shifted from a reactive response to Huntington's "Clash of Civilizations" to a more proactive, albeit still challenged, approach to diversity management. We meticulously examined how key terms are defined, how arguments are constructed, and what underlying assumptions inform different perspectives. For instance, comparing the optimistic framing of dialogue in early UN initiatives with later critiques that highlight its structural limitations allowed for a more nuanced understanding of its practical applications.

The process of document analysis involved several stages. First, we conducted an initial reading to identify core themes, recurring arguments, and prominent authors. This allowed us to map the intellectual terrain. Second, we engaged in a critical, iterative reading, where we actively sought out points of tension, disagreement, and methodological gaps within the literature. We didn't simply summarize what each author said; we interrogated their claims, asking: What evidence supports this? What alternative perspectives are ignored? What are the practical implications of this theoretical stance? This critical posture was essential to move beyond a mere descriptive review to a genuine synthesis of insights.

Furthermore, we deliberately prioritized sources that offered empirical observations or case studies, even within a conceptual analysis. While not conducting primary data collection, we leveraged the rich data presented in existing studies—such as analyses of interfaith initiatives in Malaysia (Khairulnizam Mat Karim, 2005; Mat Karim & Saili, 2009) or Indonesia (Cahyono, 2018)—to inform our conceptual arguments. This fusion of theoretical critique with grounded observations provided a robust foundation for our claims about the practical challenges and potential pathways for dialogue.

To avoid the bias of a singular disciplinary lens, we included works from various fields, including political science, sociology of religion, peace studies, and cultural studies. This interdisciplinary approach ensured that the multifaceted nature of religious and cultural diversity was adequately captured. We acknowledged that "dialogue" is not a monolithic concept but a dynamic, context-dependent process, and our method was designed to reveal this complexity. The deliberate choices made in selecting, reading, and interpreting these documents aimed to construct a compelling, intellectually honest argument about civilizational dialogue's role in navigating polarization towards coexistence, rather than merely presenting a sanitized overview of existing ideas.

## RESULTS

The analysis of the literature reveals several compelling, often contradictory, themes regarding the role of civilizational dialogue in managing religious and cultural diversity, moving from an initial, almost naive optimism to a more grounded, albeit still hopeful, realism.

Firstly, the very framing of dialogue has undergone a significant, if understated, evolution. Initially conceived as a direct counter to the "Clash of Civilizations" thesis (Huntington, 1993), dialogue was often presented as a grand, almost ceremonial encounter between major global traditions. This early vision, while noble, often overlooked the granular realities of intergroup relations. The United Nations' "Year of Dialogue Among Civilizations" (United Nations General Assembly, 1998) exemplified this macro-level approach, aiming for a global declaration of understanding. However, subsequent critiques, both implicit and explicit, suggest that such broad-stroke initiatives, while important for setting a global tone, often failed to translate into tangible, local-level transformations (Köse, 2009). A pervasive sense emerges that dialogue, when treated as a high-level diplomatic exercise, becomes performative, detached from the lived experiences of communities struggling with daily friction.

Secondly, a striking tension exists between the aspirational goals of dialogue and its practical limitations. Scholars like Smock (2002) and Knitter (1996) articulate dialogue as an inherently empathetic process, fostering mutual understanding. Indeed, studies on interfaith youth programs demonstrate that structured engagement can cultivate appreciation and tolerance, empowering

individuals to actively counter intolerance (Barnas, 2022). This suggests that dialogue, at its best, reshapes individual attitudes. However, the literature also points to formidable barriers: deep-seated theological differences, historical grievances, and pervasive cultural biases (Beyers, 2023). These aren't minor obstacles; they are the bedrock of communal identity, often fiercely defended. The fear of syncretism or the erosion of distinct religious identity, as highlighted by Hashim Musa (2005) and Khairulnizam Mat Karim (2005), remains a potent deterrent to genuine, open engagement for many. Dialogue, in this light, can be perceived not as a bridge, but as a threat.

Thirdly, the role of power dynamics within dialogue is frequently understated, yet profoundly impactful. While formal dialogue often aims for parity, the inherent socio-political and economic inequalities between groups frequently skew the playing field. Religious conflicts are rarely purely theological; they are often intertwined with struggles over resources, political influence, and historical narratives (Driessen, 2023; Yankelovich, 1999). If dialogue fails to acknowledge and address these underlying power imbalances, it risks becoming a mechanism that inadvertently reinforces existing hierarchies or masks deeper injustices. This is a critical observation, suggesting that dialogue cannot exist in a political vacuum; it must be embedded within broader frameworks of justice and equity.

Fourthly, the local and contextual nature of successful dialogue stands in stark contrast to universalist aspirations. While grand theories of civilizational rapprochement abound, the most compelling evidence for positive change emerges from specific, community-led initiatives. In Indonesia, interfaith dialogue, supported by religious and community leaders, has demonstrably fostered social harmony (Cahyono, 2018; Mujiburrahman, 2006). Similarly, the integration of religious education within broader efforts to maintain harmony in diverse societies proves effective (Ruslan & Irham, 2022; Ichwan et al., 2020; Héliot & Sarr, 2020; Atmaja et al., 2023). These examples underscore that effective dialogue is often bespoke, tailored to specific historical contexts and community needs, rather than a one-size-fits-all solution. Its success hinges on sustained, grassroots engagement, not merely episodic high-level meetings.

Finally, the digital realm presents a new, complex battleground for dialogue. While offering unprecedented avenues for communication, digital platforms also exacerbate polarization, facilitating the rapid dissemination of misinformation and the formation of insular online communities (Hirschl et al., 2012). Religious identities, amplified and sometimes distorted by social media, can become more rigid, making the prospect of genuine cross-cultural engagement even more daunting. This means that future approaches to civilizational dialogue cannot ignore the digital dimension; they must actively seek strategies to foster constructive online engagement and counter the polarizing forces of digital echo chambers. The very environment in which much of contemporary human interaction occurs is both a tool and a formidable challenge for fostering coexistence.

## DISCUSSION

The persistent specter of religious and cultural polarization, far from receding, seems to loom larger in our interconnected world, which suggests that our approaches to fostering coexistence demand a radical re-evaluation. The prevailing reliance on inter-civilizational dialogue, while conceptually sound, has frequently stumbled in practice, failing to bridge the yawning divides it was intended to heal. What does this really mean for societies grappling with internal fragmentation and external tensions? It implies that the well-meaning rhetoric surrounding dialogue has often obscured a failure to confront the uncomfortable realities of human nature and power.

One striking implication of our findings is the chasm between macro-level diplomatic pronouncements and micro-level societal impact. The grand gestures, such as the UN's "Year of Dialogue Among Civilizations" (United Nations General Assembly, 1998), undeniably raise awareness. Yet, these initiatives, as Köse (2009) implicitly notes, often remain detached from the daily struggles of communities. It is entirely possible that the symbolic weight of such events inadvertently creates a false sense of progress, allowing policymakers to feel they have addressed the issue without instigating deep, systemic change. This hints at a deeper issue: a reluctance to move beyond ceremonial exchanges to genuine, messy, and often difficult engagement at the grassroots. Superficial dialogue, therefore, becomes a form of political theater, not a tool for transformation.

Furthermore, the inherent challenges articulated by Beyers (2023) – doctrinal differences, historical baggage, and cultural biases – are not mere footnotes; they are the very fabric of identity. To expect these to dissolve through polite conversation is, frankly, naive. Hashim Musa (2005) and Khairulnizam Mat Karim (2005) correctly pointed out the fear of identity erosion and syncretism as potent barriers. This suggests that effective dialogue must begin not with a search for sameness, but with a profound, almost audacious, acceptance of difference. It must create spaces where distinct identities can be articulated, even celebrated, without resorting to claims of superiority or exclusivity. The work of Barnas (2022) with interfaith youth programs, which fosters confidence and positive attitudes, might indicate that building trust requires a generation-long commitment, not quick fixes. We should be asking: are our dialogue initiatives truly designed for this kind of long-term, identity-affirming engagement, or are they still subtly pushing for a diluted, lowest-common-denominator understanding?

The intersection of dialogue with power dynamics is another critical, often neglected, area. Driessen (2023) and Yankelovich (1999) reminded us that religious conflicts rarely exist in a vacuum, but are deeply entwined with power struggles and resource competition. If dialogue initiatives fail to address these underlying political and economic grievances, they risk becoming irrelevant, or worse, tools for maintaining existing power imbalances. It is entirely possible that a dialogue that ignores the cries for justice or the historical marginalization of certain groups will be perceived as a patronizing exercise, further entrenching polarization rather than alleviating it. This implies that civilizational dialogue cannot be divorced from broader efforts towards social justice and equitable resource distribution. It is not enough to talk; one must also act to dismantle structures of inequality that fuel division.

Moreover, the localized successes in places like Indonesia, as highlighted by Cahyono (2018) and Mujiburrahman (2006), demonstrate that effective dialogue is often bespoke, deeply embedded in specific community contexts, and driven by committed local leaders. This contrasts sharply with a universalist approach that attempts to apply a single model across diverse cultural landscapes. Perhaps the failure to scale dialogue successfully stems from this very universalist ambition. It suggests that external interventions, no matter how well-intentioned, might be less effective than empowering local actors to craft their own pathways to coexistence, rooted in their unique historical narratives and social structures (Ruslan & Irham, 2022; Ichwan et al., 2020; Héliot & Sarr, 2020; Atmaja et al., 2023).

Finally, the digital realm presents an unprecedented challenge and opportunity. Hirschl et al. (2012) illustrated how digital platforms can exacerbate polarization. This implies that future dialogue strategies must actively engage with online spaces, developing digital literacy programs that promote critical thinking, empathy, and constructive online interaction. Ignoring the digital landscape would

be akin to ignoring a major battleground where identities are forged, opinions are solidified, and prejudices are amplified. It is entirely possible that the next frontier for civilizational dialogue lies not in grand conference halls, but in the nuanced, often volatile, world of social media, where the very tools of connection can become instruments of division. The journey from polarization to coexistence, therefore, demands not just more dialogue, but smarter, more courageous, and more contextually sensitive engagement, both online and offline.

## CONCLUSION

The journey from the perilous precipice of religious and cultural polarization to the fertile ground of genuine coexistence is not a straightforward path, nor is it one amenable to simplistic solutions. This extensive analysis firmly establishes that while civilizational dialogue holds undeniable promise, its current manifestations frequently fall short, often because they skirt the profound complexities of identity, power, and historical grievance. We have seen that merely convening individuals from diverse backgrounds to "talk" is insufficient; such encounters risk becoming performative, devoid of the transformative friction necessary for authentic change. The initial optimism surrounding dialogue, born as a hopeful rejoinder to Huntington's (1993) stark predictions, has matured into a more cautious realism, acknowledging the formidable barriers of doctrinal differences and cultural biases (Beyers, 2023; Hashim Musa, 2005).

True coexistence, therefore, demands a fundamental recalibration of our approach to dialogue. It requires moving beyond the comfortable confines of polite conversation to embrace what might be termed "courageous dialogue"—an engagement willing to confront uncomfortable truths, acknowledge power imbalances, and respect the irreducible distinctiveness of each identity without demanding its dilution. The successes, however localized, in nations like Indonesia and Malaysia (Cahyono, 2018; Mujiburrahman, 2006; Khairulnizam Mat Karim, 2005) offer a potent reminder that effective dialogue is often bespoke, grassroots-driven, and deeply embedded in specific community contexts, rather than a universal template imposed from above. These examples underscore the necessity of sustained, empathetic engagement that builds trust over time, recognizing that transformation is a marathon, not a sprint.

Future research must move beyond mere advocacy for dialogue and delve into rigorous, longitudinal studies that assess its actual impact on reducing polarization and fostering behavioral shifts at a societal level. Specifically, a future study should investigate the efficacy of integrating critical digital literacy and intergroup empathy training within formal educational curricula, from primary school through university, designed explicitly to counter online polarization and foster offline inter-civilizational understanding. This research could quantitatively measure changes in attitudes, reductions in stereotyping, and increases in cross-cultural collaboration among participants, comparing cohorts exposed to such integrated programs against control groups. The digital realm, as highlighted by Hirschl et al. (2012), is now an unavoidable arena for identity formation and conflict, making interventions in this space critically important.

If societies continue to treat civilizational dialogue as a peripheral activity, a mere diplomatic nicety, rather than a core strategic imperative for social cohesion, then the trajectory towards deeper fragmentation seems tragically inevitable. The cost of ignoring this imperative is not merely abstract; it manifests in real-world violence, fractured communities, and the erosion of the social fabric,

threatening the very possibility of a shared, peaceful future. The path to coexistence is arduous, but it is the only path forward.

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