

Severity and Reasons Behind Religious Intolerance in Pakistan: Perceptions of Sunnis, Shias, Ahmadis, and Christians

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Abstract

The aim of the study was to investigate a perceived severity of religious intolerance, and reasons behind it, among different religious groups in Pakistan. A questionnaire measuring religious intolerance was completed by 199 university students (females $M = 23.8$ yrs, $SD 5.3$, and males $M = 24.6$ yrs, $SD 5.6$) from four religious groups: Sunni, Shia, Ahmadi, and Christian. Questions regarding the severity of intolerance were included as well as the following seven scales measuring possible causes for it: impact of the school curriculum, lack of knowledge about other groups, impact of hate literature, lack of social justice, family background and peer pressure, media impact, as well as external power influence and history. Respondents of all groups agreed upon the severe level of religious intolerance towards Ahmadis. Regarding the other religious groups, opinions differed. Sunni respondents rated the seven causes for religious intolerance as lower than the others. Sunni and Shia respondents rated the impact of the school curriculum as the significantly most important reason behind religious intolerance, whereas the Ahmadis and Christians rated hate literature as the most important reason. The results suggest that there is a need for further research into social factors that could reduce religious intolerance in Pakistan. Views of different religious groups need to be taken in consideration.

Keywords: religious intolerance, religious groups, hate literature, school curriculum, Pakistan

Introduction

Intolerance between religious groups is widespread in the world of today. It is based on the belief that one religion is supreme and that all others are false, distorted, or non-existent (Nussbaum, 2004). In 1981, the United Nations' General Assembly adopted the declaration on the elimination of all forms of intolerance and discrimination based on religion or belief (United Nations, 1981).

Pakistan is the country with the highest number of reported incidents of religious extremism and hatred against religious minorities in the world, all in the name of religion (Human Rights First, 2012). According to the secular Jinnah Institute, the situation of non-Muslims in Pakistan has never been more difficult than today (Faruqi, 2011). Their access to education, work, and health care in Pakistan has been deteriorating, and there have been numerous incidents of violent attacks against them. Also in the public view, the situation is getting worse (Khan, 2012).

Today, the population of Pakistan consists of 96.4% Muslims (Sunnis 85–90%, Shias 10–15%), and 3.6% other groups, including Christians and Hindus (Index Mundi, 2016). In 1947, when the country was created, the non-Muslim religious minorities formed a quarter of Pakistan's total population; now they account for less than 4% (Sikand, 2011).

Religious extremism is not new for this part of South Asia: it has been claimed that it can be dated back as early as to the Indus Valley Civilisation (2500 BCE) (Malik, 2002). Pakistan's history includes many such movements. In 1973, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who acted as the chief architect of the Constitution, initiated the step to declare the Ahmadis to be a non-Muslim minority in Pakistan. In 1984, Zia ul Haq enacted Ordinance XX, which led to strict persecutions of Ahmadis. The "Mullah and Madrassah-culture" was then at its peak (Khan, 2012). During this period, the real Islamisation of Pakistan began, terms like religious extremism and religious suppression have been used to describe it (Malik, 2002). The establishment of blasphemy laws under the name of religious defamation is a case in point, which is creating havoc in many countries around the world (Human Rights First, 2012).

Religious violence does not only take place between Muslims and other religious groups; violent incidents also occur between sects and sub-sects of Islam (Yusuf, 2012). Sectarian violence has in fact been considered as one of the worst faces of extremism in Pakistan. The sectarian divide, largely between the Sunnis and Shias, has brought conflicts of identity. It has become a strong political weapon, and militant groups have vested their interest in such conflicts largely due to a political agenda rather than as a religious cause (Nasr, 2000). Also, the political rulers and the upper class use their position to create discriminatory peer pressure for different self-interested motives (Toor, 2011).

Due to the severe ethnic and sectarian divide, Pakistan as a state has become vulnerable to external power influence and praetorianism (Haleem, 2003). Pakistan holds importance for external powers like NATO and Al-Qaeda, especially when it comes to issues like terrorism, militancy, religious discrimination and other extremist behaviour (Toor, 2011). The situation in Afghanistan has given Pakistan a major setback and continues to do so (Kibaroglu, 2012).

A variety of social factors have been used to explain both the causes and impact of religious intolerance. A lack of social justice is experienced by minority groups; religious minorities like the Ahmadis, Sikhs and Christians are openly discriminated against (Sikand, 2011). Following the political crisis that shook the judiciary of Pakistan under Ordinance XX of 1984, hate and discrimination against the Ahmadis in particular have been disseminated (Mahmud, 1995). In 2009, due to a rift between the Pakistani government and the Taliban, the Sikhs were forcefully displaced and now have to pay a religious tax (Jizya) in the Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA) (Gaur, 2010). Also, the Christians are terrorised from every angle, starting from false charges, mob attacks and target killings to the burning down of churches and destroying of the Bible (The Religion of Peace, 2016). A study by Mahmud (1995) reveals a general lack of social justice towards religious minorities in Pakistan.

The most dangerous aspect of religious intolerance has been said to be when a religious majority group starts to try to make people change their religious beliefs (Nussbaum, 2004). An example of prejudice towards different religious minorities in Pakistan is the distribution of hate literature in the form of pamphlets and brochures. This practice impacts the minds of people and creates a strong and lasting disturbance and inequality (Kibaroglu, 2012). The editorial policy of the newspapers in Pakistan has led to the Christians being more highlighted than other religious minority groups in the media. The Ahmadis, on the other hand, are either not discussed at all or if discussed, then in a negative manner (Ali & Jalaluddin, 2010).

The Pakistani educational system is not equal for all. There is a strong discrimination in madrassas (based on a religious curriculum) and public schools on the basis of religion (Hussain, Salim, & Naveed, 2011). In the class-bound society of Pakistan that revolves around religion, intolerance is developed in an organised manner already at a grass root level due to the different forms of educational institutions (Rahman, 2003).

The national school curriculum in Pakistan, from primary to secondary school, has deviated from its actual goal of creating progressive and enlightened young minds (Nayyar & Salim, 2005). During the Zia regime, the school curriculum in Pakistan was the prime target of Islamisation and became intertwined with national identity (Lall, 2008). In recent years, refutation of the teachings of other sects has been blamed for an increase in sectarian violence in Pakistan (Rahman, 2003).

Students can either choose, or are simply put into, one of the educational streams, i.e. either the madrassas or the secular schools, in the public or the private sector (Asadullah & Chaudhury, 2010). Approximately 2 million madrassas in Pakistan have been held responsible for spreading violence and hate around the world (Delvande & Zafar, 2015). Still, the overall enrolled student population in the madrassas comprises less than one per cent of the students in Pakistan (Cheema, Khwaja, & Qadir, 2006).

Research Questions

The aim of the study was to investigate differences in opinions held by respondents from different religious groups regarding a) the experienced severity of religious intolerance towards different groups, and b) experienced causes for religious intolerance in Pakistan.

Method

Sample

A paper-and-pencil questionnaire was completed by 199 university students; 103 women (mean age 23.8 years, SD = 5.3) and 96 men (mean age 24.6 years, SD = 5.6), the age difference was not significant. The religious affiliations of the respondents were as follows: Sunni 37.2%, Shia 18.1%, Ahmadi 21.6%, and Christian 23.1%. Women and men were equally represented in all four religious groups.

Instrument

The perceived *severity* of religious intolerance towards six religious groups was estimated by respondents who were themselves from four religious groups (Sunni, Shia, Ahmadi, and Christian), with the following six questions: "How severe, in your opinion, is the religious intolerance towards the following groups: (a) Shia, (b) Ahmadi, (c) Christian, (d) Hindu, (e) Sikh, and (f) Parsee?". The responses were given on a five-point scale (0 = no intolerance, 1 = very mild, 2 = medium, 3 = severe, and 4 = very severe).

Factors associated with religious intolerance were measured with the inventory Social Factors Associated with Intolerance towards Religious Groups (SIRG; Khan, 2013) which consists of seven scales. The responses were given on a five-point scale (-2 = strongly disagree, -1 = disagree, 0 = neutral, 1 = agree, and 2 = strongly agree). The scales are presented below:

(a) *Lack of Knowledge about Other Religious Groups* measured the opinion that a lack of knowledge on an individual level about other religions and groups causes religious intolerance towards minorities (9 items, $\alpha = .85$).

(b) *Impact of the School Curriculum* measured the opinion that religious studies at the school level should begin with teaching religious tolerance and peace between all religions, and that there is a need to revise the religious studies curriculum (3 items, $\alpha = .76$).

(c) *Hate Literature against Religious Groups* measured the opinion that hate literature is having a negative psychological impact on both the individual and society as a whole, creating a rift between different religious groups, thus leading to violence (10 items, $\alpha = .90$).

(d) *Impact of the Media on Religious Intolerance* measured the opinion that the Pakistani media are religiously biased and promote extremist ideas instead of religious tolerance. Instead, the media could be a tool for creating religious respect (9 items, $\alpha = .83$).

(e) *Impact of Family Background and Peer Pressure* measured the opinion that the impact from families with their own religious interpretations, in addition to peer pressure, is diluting the actual message of different religions, instigating religious intolerance (5 items, $\alpha = .70$).

(f) *Lack of Social Justice* measured the opinion that the respondent thought that a lack of social justice has led to sectarian intolerance and the persecution of religious minorities, which in turn has resulted in a humanitarian crisis in Pakistan (9 items, $\alpha = .79$).

(g) *External Power Influence and History* measured the opinion that Pakistan still suffers from the politicisation of religion that started under the realm of independence in 1947, which has led to a scenario of religious intolerance. Furthermore, the use of military support from other countries has been a driving force in developing religious intolerance (10 items, $\alpha = .77$). The scales in full are available from the first author.

Procedure

Questionnaires were distributed amongst university students from four universities in three Pakistani cities; Islamabad, the capital; Lahore and Karachi, the provincial capitals. Students from different religious affiliations were approached. The data were collected over a period of three months. The questionnaires were returned either through regular mail or as e-mail attachments.

Results

Severity of Victimization from Religious Intolerance: Opinions of Respondents belonging to Four Different Religious Groups

Four within-subjects analyses of variance (WSMANOVA) revealed that, according to Sunni [$F(5, 69) = 15.39, p < .001, \eta^2 = .527$], Shia [$F(5, 31) = 8.33, p < .001, \eta^2 = .573$], and Ahmadi [$F(5, 38) = 8.21, p < .001, \eta^2 = .519$] respondents, the Ahmadis were significantly more subjected to religious intolerance when compared to all other religious groups (Fig. 1). The Christian respondents rated the Ahmadis, the Shias and the Christians themselves to be equally victimised from religious intolerance [$F(5, 41) = 3.85, p = .006, \eta^2 = .319$] (Fig. 2). All analyses obtained high effect sizes.

A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA, 2×4) was performed with sex and religious affiliation of the respondents as independent variables, and severity of intolerance towards six groups as dependent variables. The multivariate test showed a significant effect for the religious affiliation of the raters, a tendency towards an effect for sex, and a significant effect for the interaction between religious affiliation and sex of the raters (see Table 1 and Fig. 1).

The univariate tests showed a significant effect for the raters' religious affiliation on estimations of severity of intolerance towards Shias, Christians, Hindus, Sikhs, and Parsees, but no significant differences were found regarding ratings of intolerance towards Ahmadis. That is, raters with different religious affiliations showed the highest degree of agreement regarding the severity of religious discrimination against the Ahmadis. Regarding the other five groups, the raters showed significant differences in opinions.

The results of Scheffé's tests showed that intolerance towards Shias was rated significantly higher by Christians and Ahmadis compared to the Sunnis and Shias themselves. Intolerance towards Hindus was estimated to be significantly higher by Christians than by Sunnis. Intolerance towards Parsees was rated significantly lower by Sunnis than by all the other three groups. Christians rated the intolerance towards themselves and against Sikhs significantly higher than did any other group.

Univariate interaction effects for the religious affiliation and sex of the raters were found for intolerance towards Shias, Christians, and Hindus, and a tendency for an interaction effect was also found for ratings regarding Parsees (see Table 1). Sunni women gave the significantly lowest ratings of victimisation from religious intolerance of Christians, Hindus and Parsees. Shia women estimated that their own religious group was the one least victimised by religious intolerance.

Table 1

Results of a Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA, 2 x 4) with Sex and Religious Affiliation of the Raters as Independent Variables, and Ratings of Severity of Religious Intolerance towards Six Groups as Dependent Variables (N = 199), cf. Fig. 1

| | F | df | p ≤ | η ² | Differences Between Raters ¹⁾ |
|---|-------|--------|------|----------------|--|
| Effect of Sex of Raters | | | | | |
| Multivariate Analysis | 1.88 | 6,186 | .086 | .570 | |
| Effect of Religious Affiliation of Raters | | | | | |
| Multivariate Analysis | 3.39 | 18,564 | .001 | .098 | |
| Univariate Analyses | | | | | |
| Intolerance towards Shias | 10.14 | 3,191 | .001 | .137 | Chr, Ahm > Sun, Shi |
| Intolerance towards Ahmadis | 2.44 | " | ns | .037 | ns |
| Intolerance towards Christians | 11.46 | " | .001 | .153 | Chr > Ahm, Shi, Sun |
| Intolerance towards Hindus | 5.21 | " | .002 | .076 | Chr > Sun |
| Intolerance towards Sikhs | 9.12 | " | .001 | .125 | Chr > Ahm, Shi, Sun |
| Intolerance towards Parsees | 5.05 | " | .002 | .074 | Chr, Shi, Ahm > Sun |
| Interaction Effect of Religious Affiliation and Sex of the Raters | | | | | |
| Multivariate Analysis | 2.42 | 18,564 | .001 | .072 | |
| Univariate Analyses | | | | | |
| Intolerance towards Shias | 4.89 | 3,191 | .003 | .071 | Shia Women |
| Intolerance towards Ahmadis | 1.27 | " | ns | .020 | ns |
| Intolerance towards Christians | 4.09 | " | .008 | .060 | Sunni Women |
| Intolerance towards Hindus | 3.25 | " | .023 | .049 | Sunni Women |
| Intolerance towards Sikhs | 1.76 | " | ns | .027 | ns |
| Intolerance towards Parsees | 2.40 | " | .069 | .036 | Sunni Women |

¹⁾Abbreviations of Rater Groups: Sun = Sunnis, Shi = Shias, Ahm = Ahmadis, Chr = Christians

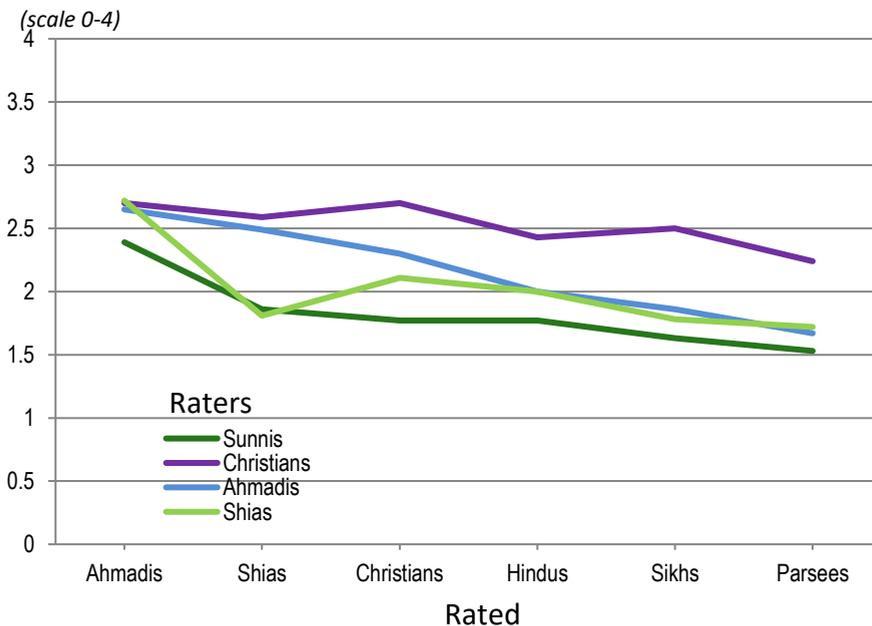


Figure 1. Opinions of members of four religious groups regarding the severity of religious intolerance in Pakistan towards six different religious groups (N = 199).

Causes for Religious Intolerance: Opinions of Respondents from Four Groups

Four within-subjects analyses of variance (WSMANOVA) revealed that Sunni [$F_{(6, 68)} = 2.99, p = .012, \eta_p^2 = .209$] and Shia [$F_{(6, 30)} = 18.51, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .787$] respondents considered the school curriculum to be the most important reason behind religious intolerance, while Christians [$F_{(6, 40)} = 5.23, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .440$] and Ahmadis [$F_{(6, 37)} = 11.87, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .658$] rated hate literature as most important (Fig. 2).

A Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA, 2×4) was performed with sex and religious affiliation of the respondents as independent variables, and the seven scales measuring factors associated with intolerance towards religious groups as dependent variables. The multivariate test showed a significant effect for religious affiliation, and no effect for sex, or for the interaction between religious affiliation and sex (Table 2 and Fig. 2).

The univariate tests showed that the Sunni respondents considered all the seven reasons for religious intolerance to be significantly less important than did the other groups. The greatest differences between raters from different groups were found for how important they considered a lack of knowledge about other groups to be; the Ahmadi and Shia respondents gave it the significantly highest importance in creating religious intolerance. Impact of the school curricula was considered to be significantly most important by the Shia and Ahmadi respondents. Impact of hate literature, the media, and family and peer pressure were considered equally important by the Shia, Christian, and Ahmadi respondents. Lack of social justice, as well as the impact of external powers and history, was considered to be significantly most important by the Ahmadi respondents. The Shia and Christian respondents also considered these two to be significantly more important than did the Sunnis.

Table 2

Results of a Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA, 2×4) with Sex and Religious Affiliation of the Raters as Independent Variables, and the Seven Scales of the Inventory Social Factors Associated with Intolerance towards Religious Groups (SIRG; Khan, 2013) as Dependent Variables (N = 199)

| | F | Df | p ≤ | η_p^2 | Differences Between Raters ¹⁾ |
|---|-------|--------|------|------------|--|
| Effect of Sex of Raters | | | | | |
| Multivariate Analysis | 1.58 | 7,185 | ns | .057 | |
| Effect of Religious Affiliation of Raters | | | | | |
| Multivariate Analysis | 10.05 | 21,561 | .001 | .273 | |
| Univariate Analyses | | | | | |
| Lack of Knowledge | 10.26 | 3,191 | .001 | .518 | Ahm, Shi > Chr > Sun |
| Impact of School Curriculum | 5.46 | " | .001 | .211 | Shi, Ahm > Chr, Sun |
| Impact of Hate Literature | 8.85 | " | .001 | .427 | Ahm, Shi, Chr > Sun |
| Media Impact | 6.08 | " | .001 | .311 | Ahm, Shi, Chr > Sun |
| Family Background and Peer Pressure | 4.52 | " | .001 | .260 | Shi, Ahm, Chr > Sun |
| Lack of Social Justice | 4.60 | " | .001 | .308 | Ahm > Chr, Shi > Sun |
| External Power Influence and History | 4.18 | " | .001 | .299 | Ahm > Shi, Chr > Sun |
| Interaction Effect of Religious Affiliation and Sex of the Raters | | | | | |
| Multivariate Analysis | 1.28 | 21,561 | ns | .046 | |

¹⁾Abbreviations of Rater Groups: Sun = Sunnis, Shi = Shias, Ahm = Ahmadis, Chr = Christians

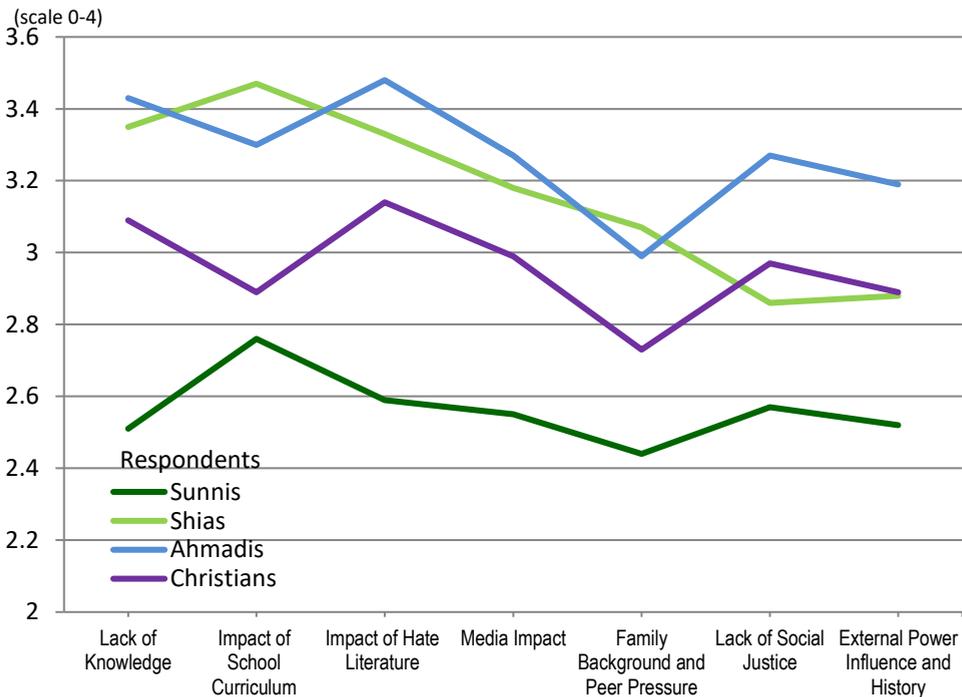


Figure 2. Opinions of respondents of four religious groups regarding reasons behind religious intolerance in Pakistan (N = 199).

Discussion

The study presents the assessments of respondents from different religious groups on the severity and reasons behind religious intolerance in Pakistan. It was found that differences in opinions were more dependent on the religious affiliation of the respondent than on gender. Males and females did not differ from each other regarding the extent to which they considered different religious groups to be victimised from religious intolerance. Neither did females and males differ regarding what they considered to be the most important reasons behind intolerance. Respondents from different religious groups, on the other hand, differed significantly from each other in their opinions on both the severity and reasons for intolerance.

Perceived Severity of Intolerance

When the assessments were made on how severe religious intolerance is towards members of six religious groups, Shia, Ahmadi, Christian, Hindu, Sikh, and Parsee, a high degree of consensus was found regarding the grave situation of the Ahmadis. The Sunni, Shia, and Ahmadi respondents agreed on the fact that the Ahmadis were the religious group suffering the most from religious intolerance in Pakistan. This result may be seen in light of the fact that the controversy over the Ahmadi sect has gone on for one hundred years, and that mainstream Muslims do not accept Ahmadis as real Muslims (Rais, 2005).

Christian respondents diverged somewhat from the general pattern and opined that not only the Ahmadis but also the Shias and they themselves were equally victimised from religious intolerance. Christians, in general, gave the highest

ratings of religious intolerance towards all groups, including themselves. Ahmadis also gave high ratings, whereas Sunnis and Shias gave lower ratings. Since Ahmadis and Christians are both minority groups this was not unexpected.

One of the few sex differences found was an interaction effect regarding Sunni women as raters. It was found that they as a group gave the lowest ratings for victimisation of Christians, Hindus, and Parsees. One reason for these assessments could be the fact that they themselves belong to the majority group and therefore are not acquainted with the amount of intolerance towards minority groups. Furthermore, as women, they stay more indoors where they interact mainly with other women, and are therefore not able to see the discrimination going on against minority groups as well as men. In a similar vein, Shia women considered intolerance towards their own group to be lower in comparison with the assessment made by other groups.

Perceived Reasons for Intolerance

The school curriculum was considered to be the most important reason behind religious intolerance according to both the Sunni and Shia respondents. The structure of the educational system is generally thought to create intolerance rather than religious tolerance. The gap between the madrassas, Urdu medium and English medium schools creates a problem since it brings inequality amongst people (Rahman, 2003). In the past decade, textbooks and the school curriculum have been revised to some extent, but the madrassas are still seen as extremist religious structures rather than regular educational institutions that teach Islamic knowledge along with regular studies. The present study shows that this is also acknowledged by the majority groups in Pakistan.

Hate literature was rated as the most important reason for intolerance by Christians and Ahmadis. Hate literature can be found in many different forms, like in newspaper sections, pamphlets, stickers, banners, and posters. It is also being distributed through electronic media under the curtain of the blasphemy laws. The highest number of hate literature publications in Pakistan are directed against the Ahmadis (Human Rights First, 2012).

The Sunni respondents considered all the seven listed reasons for religious intolerance to be of significantly less importance than any of the other groups.

The greatest differences between raters from different groups were regarding how important they considered a lack of knowledge about other groups to be; the Ahmadis and Shias gave this a significantly higher importance than did the Sunnis and Christians. Opinions regarding the impact of hate literature and the media were the second and third most important factors dividing the opinions between different groups. The Ahmadis, Shias, and Christians considered hate literature and the media to be significantly more dangerous than did the Sunnis. The minority groups of Shias, Christians, and Ahmadis are also those that suffer from the adverse effects of media and hate literature circulation. Hate literature, being one of the most crucial, and still among the lesser discussed issues, would be a good area for further research. It would not only help in obtaining an insight into the augmenting scenario of hate literature distribution in Pakistan, but it could also enable ways to curb it as much as possible. Christians are the most mentioned religious group in the media, and are especially mentioned in the newspapers. Mostly, the media projects religious minority groups positively, although the Ahmadis are least mentioned and at times, negatively highlighted (Ali & Jalaluddin, 2010).

A lack of social justice, as well as the impact of external powers and history, was given the highest ratings by the Ahmadis. The Shia and Christian respondents also considered these two to be significantly more important than did the Sunnis. The Ahmadis are the only group that have been forcefully declared as non-Muslims under the 1973 Constitution of Pakistan (Mahmud, 1996). Christians and Shias are also influenced by the political history of Pakistan and exterior forces, but they have leverage above the Ahmadis as there is nothing declared against them by the government. It appears that the Ahmadis are the most persecuted group because they are declared as a minority group under the constitution of Pakistan. They are victimised the most on the issue of khatam-i-nabuwat (the finality of prophethood) and also, on the issue of Jihad (Malik, 2002).

Final Words

In Pakistan, individuals mostly discuss religious matters with people from the same religious background rather than with people from other groups. Even if they in daily life communicate in a mixed group in which people from different religious groups are present, religious intolerance is so common that the issue of religion is never raised, or if it does, then it ends up becoming very unpleasant, since no one wants to hear the other religious group's point of view.

A limitation of the study was that the data were only collected among university students, and from three cities only. A wider sample with respondents from different parts of the country and from different levels of society would make the results more representative. Another limitation of the study is that the Sunni respondents could have been included not only as raters but also as victims of intolerance.

Future surveys of this kind might, if conducted at a national level, provide members of different religious groups with knowledge about each other's views, which subsequently might bring about a dialogue. Finding common ground, as well as acknowledging differences in opinion, is a starting point which can eventually enhance stability and ultimately peace in the society.

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