

Interfaith Dialogue in a Polarized World: Challenges, Practices, and Pathways to Global Religious Pluralism

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Abstract

In an era defined by geopolitical tensions, rising religious nationalism, digital amplification of hate speech, and the lingering effects of events such as the October 7, 2023 attacks and subsequent global escalations, interfaith dialogue stands as both a contested practice and an indispensable pathway toward global religious pluralism. This article employs a qualitative metasynthesis of 35 peer-reviewed studies and reports published between 2015 and 2026 to systematically examine the challenges, effective practices, and forward-looking pathways of interfaith engagement. Drawing on foundational theories from John Hick's pluralistic hypothesis and Diana Eck's pluralism-as-engagement model, alongside emerging critical religious pluralism frameworks, the analysis reveals that polarization—exacerbated by populism, misinformation, and identity-based conflicts—creates formidable theological, political, and structural barriers to authentic dialogue. Yet, evidence from global initiatives, including the Parliament of the World's Religions, the United Religions Initiative (URI) cooperation circles, and KAICIID's Dialogue Cities and Fellows programs, demonstrates that grassroots empowerment, issue-focused collaboration on climate justice and refugee support, inclusive youth leadership, and technology-mediated platforms can foster measurable outcomes in bias reduction, violence prevention, and social cohesion. The metasynthesis identifies recurring themes: the necessity of addressing power imbalances without demanding doctrinal consensus, the transformative potential of sustained relational encounters, and the integration of interfaith principles into policy and education. Pathways forward emphasize hybrid elite-grassroots models, critical reflexivity, and alignment with Sustainable Development Goals. Ultimately, this study argues that authentic interfaith dialogue, when grounded in mutual respect for difference and shared human flourishing, can convert polarization into pluralism—transforming diversity from a source of division into a resource for resilient, just global societies. Recommendations for scholars, practitioners, and policymakers underscore the urgency of scaling evidence-based practices amid accelerating global fragmentation.

Keywords: Interfaith Dialogue, Religious Pluralism, Polarization, Metasynthesis, Peacebuilding

Introduction

The contemporary world presents a paradox of unprecedented religious diversity coupled with deepening societal polarization. Globalization, mass migration, digital connectivity, and rapid demographic shifts have brought adherents of diverse faith traditions into unprecedented proximity. Yet this closeness has frequently intensified suspicion, extremism, and conflict rather than harmony. As documented in major surveys around 2015–2019, over 80% of the global population identified with a religious tradition, with Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and various folk religions forming the core, while growing numbers of unaffiliated individuals added further complexity to the landscape (Pew Research Center, 2015). In Europe and North America, processes of secularization coexisted uneasily with resurgent religious nationalism and identity politics. In regions of the Global South, faith continued to serve as a primary axis of social organization, political mobilization, and community resilience.

This dynamic tension underscores the urgent need for interfaith dialogue, understood as cooperative, constructive, and sustained interaction among individuals and communities from differing religious (and sometimes non-religious) traditions. The aim is mutual understanding, respect, and collaborative action on shared concerns. Unlike superficial tolerance or multicultural rhetoric that risks relativizing core convictions, authentic interfaith dialogue demands participants engage deeply with difference while preserving the integrity of their own traditions. It rejects both exclusivist isolation and forced syncretism, seeking instead relational bridges across divides (Swidler, 1989; Forward, 2001).

Theoretical foundations for such dialogue draw heavily from influential 20th-century scholarship. John Hick's pluralistic hypothesis, articulated in works such as *An Interpretation of Religion* (1989), posits that the world's major religious traditions represent culturally and historically conditioned human responses to the same ultimate reality, often termed the "Real." Hick argued that no single tradition possesses exclusive access to truth; rather, each offers a valid path toward transformation from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness. This Copernican revolution in theology of religions challenged traditional exclusivism and inclusivism, opening space for genuine dialogue without requiring doctrinal capitulation (Hick, 1989; Hick & Knitter, 1987).

Complementing Hick's metaphysical pluralism, Diana Eck's framework emphasizes pluralism as active engagement rather than mere diversity or relativism. In her seminal contributions through the Pluralism Project at Harvard, Eck described pluralism as a process involving encounter, relationship-building, and the navigation of difference in concrete social contexts (Eck, 1993; Eck, 2001). For Eck, pluralism requires individuals and communities to move beyond tolerance toward proactive dialogue that affirms both particularity and commonality. Her work highlighted how religious diversity in the United States, accelerated by post-1965 immigration reforms, transformed the nation from a predominantly Protestant society into a microcosm of global faiths, necessitating new models of civic engagement (Eck, 2001).

These theoretical insights built upon earlier historical milestones. The 1893 World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago is widely regarded as the birthplace of modern interfaith dialogue. Gathering representatives from ten major world traditions, the Parliament fostered unprecedented exchange and laid groundwork for subsequent initiatives (Seager, 1993). Although criticized for its Western and Christian-centric framing, it symbolized a shift from confrontation to conversation. Mid-20th-century developments further institutionalized dialogue. The Second Vatican Council's declaration *Nostra Aetate* (1965) marked a pivotal Catholic embrace of dialogue with non-Christian religions, affirming elements of truth and holiness in other traditions and rejecting anti-Semitism (Vatican II, 1965). Parallel Protestant and ecumenical efforts through the World Council of Churches promoted interfaith programs focused on peace, justice, and reconciliation (World Council of Churches, 1979).

The late 20th century witnessed proliferation of dedicated organizations. The Temple of Understanding (founded 1960), the International Council of Christians and Jews, and the Parliament of the World's Religions (revived in 1993) provided platforms for sustained encounter (Parliament of the World's Religions, 1993). In Asia and Africa, indigenous interfaith movements addressed colonial legacies and communal tensions, blending local wisdom with global aspirations (Teasdale, 1999). By the turn of the millennium, interfaith dialogue had evolved from elite theological exchange to grassroots peacebuilding, particularly in conflict zones such as Northern Ireland, the Balkans, and the Middle East (Appleby, 2000).

Post-9/11 realities intensified both challenges and imperatives. The 2001 terrorist attacks and subsequent global "war on terror" heightened suspicions toward Islam while exposing vulnerabilities in multicultural societies. Scholars noted a surge in Islamophobia alongside defensive retrenchment within Muslim communities, complicating dialogue efforts (Esposito & Mogahed, 2007). Yet the period also generated innovative responses. Initiatives like the Common Word letter (2007), signed by 138 Muslim scholars addressing Christian leaders, exemplified theological dialogue aimed at peace-building on shared Abrahamic values (A Common Word, 2007). The Alliance of Civilizations, launched under UN auspices in 2005, sought to counter polarization through intercultural and interfaith cooperation (United Nations, 2006).

Empirical studies from the 2000s–2010s demonstrated dialogue's potential while documenting limitations. Qualitative research in divided societies showed that sustained intergroup contact under conditions of equal status, common goals, and institutional support could reduce prejudice, consistent with Allport's contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Case studies from Indonesia's interfaith forums, South Africa's post-apartheid reconciliation processes, and European migrant integration programs illustrated how dialogue fostered social cohesion (Borell, 2015; Lederach, 1997). However, critics highlighted risks of co-optation by political powers, superficial "feel-good" encounters that ignored power asymmetries, and the persistence of theological incommensurability (Moyaert, 2011; Kalscheuer, 2008).

Polarization in the second decade of the 21st century assumed new forms. Rising populism in Europe and the Americas often instrumentalized Christian or national identity against perceived Islamic or immigrant “others” (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). Digital media accelerated the spread of divisive narratives, creating echo chambers that reinforced in-group bias and out-group hostility (Sunstein, 2017). Climate change, economic inequality, and forced migration compounded identity-based tensions, with religion sometimes serving as a proxy for deeper socio-economic grievances (Marshall, 2013).

Despite these pressures, pre-2020 scholarship consistently affirmed interfaith dialogue’s relevance. Works on religious peacebuilding emphasized the unique assets religious actors bring—moral authority, extensive social networks, and narratives of reconciliation rooted in sacred texts (Appleby, 2000; Philpott, 2012). Comparative studies revealed that dialogue succeeds when it combines “dialogue of life” (everyday interaction), “dialogue of action” (joint projects), “dialogue of theological exchange,” and “dialogue of religious experience” (Swidler, 1989; Cornille, 2008). Educational programs training clergy and lay leaders in dialogical skills proved particularly effective in preventing escalation during crises (Moore, 2015).

Nevertheless, significant gaps remained in the literature before 2020. Much research focused on Christian-Muslim or Christian-Jewish encounters, with less attention to Hindu, Buddhist, or indigenous traditions in plural settings. Western-centric perspectives dominated, often overlooking Southern initiatives or power dynamics between Global North facilitators and Southern participants (Kwok, 2005). Quantitative impact assessments were rare, and longitudinal studies tracking attitude change over decades were limited. Moreover, few syntheses integrated findings across disciplines to derive transferable lessons for polarized contexts.

This article seeks to address these lacunae through qualitative metasynthesis. By systematically reviewing and integrating pre-2020 foundations with more recent empirical insights, it examines challenges, documents effective practices, and charts pathways toward genuine global religious pluralism. Such pluralism entails neither homogenization nor indifference but a dynamic social reality in which diverse traditions coexist with mutual respect, contribute distinctively to the common good, and engage one another constructively amid disagreement. In an increasingly interconnected yet fragmented world, advancing this vision through rigorous scholarship and committed practice constitutes both an intellectual imperative and a moral necessity for human flourishing.

Research Questions

Building upon the historical, theoretical, and contextual foundations outlined in the introduction, this study is guided by three focused research questions. These questions direct the metasynthesis toward a systematic understanding of interfaith dialogue’s possibilities and limitations in polarized environments. They emerge from identified gaps in pre-2020 literature—particularly the need for integrated analyses of barriers, evidence-based practices, and actionable pathways—and seek to bridge theoretical insights with empirical realities. The questions are designed to support critical yet constructive inquiry,

emphasizing both diagnostic depth and forward-looking recommendations for scholars, practitioners, and policymakers committed to religious pluralism.

1. What are the primary theological, political, structural, and digital challenges impeding effective interfaith dialogue in polarized global contexts?
2. What practices and initiatives demonstrate measurable success in fostering mutual understanding, reducing conflict, and building social cohesion?
3. What theoretical and practical pathways can transform current challenges into opportunities for advancing global religious pluralism?

Research Objectives

The research questions articulated above translate into a set of clear, actionable objectives that structure the metasynthesis and ensure focused contribution to the field. These objectives are grounded in the recognition that interfaith dialogue scholarship, while rich in descriptive case studies and theological reflection prior to 2020, often lacked rigorous cross-contextual synthesis capable of informing practice amid rising polarization. By pursuing these objectives, the study aims not only to map existing knowledge but also to generate integrative insights that advance both theory and application in the pursuit of global religious pluralism. The objectives emphasize analytical depth, practical relevance, and methodological transparency. This article seeks:

1. To identify and critically analyze key barriers to interfaith dialogue through synthesis of recent qualitative scholarship.
2. To examine real-world case studies of successful interfaith practices and extract common success factors.
3. To propose evidence-based, context-sensitive pathways integrating theory, policy, education, and technology for sustainable religious pluralism.
4. To contribute methodological rigor to interfaith studies via metasynthesis and offer recommendations for scholars, practitioners, and policymakers.

Review of the Literature

The scholarly literature on interfaith dialogue and religious pluralism is both extensive and multifaceted, spanning theology, sociology of religion, peace and conflict studies, and international relations. This review synthesizes key contributions, with particular emphasis on foundational works published in or before 2020, while highlighting persistent gaps that the present metasynthesis seeks to address. It is organized thematically around historical development, major theoretical frameworks, empirical findings on practices and challenges, and identified lacunae.

Modern interfaith dialogue as an organized endeavor traces its roots to the late 19th century. The 1893 World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago stands as the seminal event, convening representatives from ten major world traditions for the first time in a formal,

public forum. Historians note that while the Parliament reflected Victorian-era optimism and certain Christian presuppositions, it nevertheless catalyzed ongoing exchange and inspired subsequent gatherings (Seager, 1993). Early 20th-century efforts remained sporadic until the mid-century, when global conflicts and decolonization prompted deeper reflection on religion's role in peace and justice. The establishment of the World Congress of Faiths in 1936 and various ecumenical initiatives laid groundwork for more structured dialogue (Braybrooke, 1992).

A decisive turning point occurred with the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965). The declaration *Nostra Aetate* (1965) fundamentally reoriented Catholic teaching toward non-Christian religions, affirming “seeds of the Word” in other traditions and explicitly rejecting anti-Semitism. This document not only opened theological avenues for dialogue but also encouraged practical engagement with Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and others (Vatican II, 1965). Protestant and ecumenical counterparts responded through the World Council of Churches, whose 1979 Guidelines on Dialogue emphasized mutual respect, hospitality, and joint action on social issues (World Council of Churches, 1979). These ecclesiastical shifts coincided with academic theological developments that sought to move beyond exclusivism.

John Hick's work represents one of the most influential theoretical contributions of the late 20th century. In *God and the Universe of Faiths* (1973) and especially *An Interpretation of Religion* (1989), Hick proposed a pluralistic hypothesis: the great world faiths constitute different, culturally shaped responses to the same ultimate reality (the “Real an sich”). Religious language is metaphorical and myth-based; salvation/liberation occurs across traditions through transformation from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness. Hick's Copernican revolution decentered Christianity without denying its validity, arguing that no single tradition possesses a monopoly on truth (Hick, 1989; Hick & Knitter, 1987). Critics, including evangelical and traditionalist voices, charged pluralism with undermining core doctrines and reducing religions to interchangeable vehicles, yet Hick's framework profoundly shaped subsequent interfaith theology (D'Costa, 1986; Netland, 1991).

Diana L. Eck offered a complementary, more praxis-oriented perspective. Through the Harvard Pluralism Project (founded 1991), Eck documented America's shifting religious landscape following the 1965 Immigration Act. In *Encountering God* (1993) and *A New Religious America* (2001), she distinguished pluralism from diversity (mere fact of variety) and from relativism. Pluralism, for Eck, requires active engagement, relationship-building, and the capacity to hold commitments while remaining open to others. Her four-fold model—dialogue, encounter, relationship, and civic participation—became foundational for community-based interfaith work (Eck, 1993; Eck, 2001). Eck's approach grounded abstract theology in concrete American pluralism, influencing educational and civic programs worldwide.

Parallel developments in peacebuilding literature highlighted religion's ambivalent role. R. Scott Appleby's *The Ambivalence of the Sacred* (2000) demonstrated that religious actors could function as both violence instigators and peacemakers. Drawing on case studies from

multiple continents, Appleby argued for “militants for peace” who leverage sacred texts, moral authority, and grassroots networks for reconciliation. John Paul Lederach’s work on conflict transformation (1997, 2005) similarly emphasized religious communities’ potential in building relational trust across divides, advocating elicitive rather than prescriptive approaches. These insights informed Track II diplomacy and community-level interfaith initiatives in conflict zones such as Northern Ireland, Bosnia, and Israel-Palestine (Gopin, 2000; Lederach, 1997).

Empirical studies from the 1990s–2010s evaluated dialogue’s outcomes. Controlled contact experiments and longitudinal community programs supported Allport’s contact hypothesis: equal-status interaction, common goals, institutional support, and cooperation reduce prejudice (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Qualitative research in Indonesia, Nigeria, and Western Europe showed that sustained interfaith forums improved intergroup attitudes and prevented escalation during crises (Borell, 2015; Smock, 2002). Issue-based dialogue—joint projects on poverty, environment, or health—proved especially effective in building trust where theological exchange alone stalled (Khamas, 2013).

Typologies of dialogue further enriched the literature. Leonard Swidler (1989) proposed four dimensions: dialogue of life (everyday coexistence), dialogue of action (collaborative service), dialogue of theological exchange, and dialogue of religious experience. Catherine Cornille (2008) added conditions for fruitful dialogue: humility, commitment, empathy, and hospitality. These frameworks helped practitioners design programs suited to specific contexts, from elite theological seminars to grassroots youth camps.

Challenges received sustained scholarly attention. Theological incommensurability—irreconcilable truth claims—posed persistent difficulties. Exclusivist traditions sometimes viewed dialogue as betrayal or proselytism in disguise (Moyaert, 2011). Power asymmetries between majority and minority faiths, or between Global North organizers and Global South participants, risked reinforcing rather than dismantling hierarchies (Kwok, 2005; Kalscheuer, 2008). Political instrumentalization emerged as another concern: governments or movements co-opted interfaith rhetoric for legitimacy while pursuing exclusionary policies (Fox, 2008). Post-9/11 securitization of religion further complicated Muslim engagement in Western contexts, with dialogue sometimes perceived as a tool of surveillance or assimilation (Esposito & Mogahed, 2007).

Digital and media dimensions, though less studied pre-2020, began receiving attention. Early analyses warned that mass media often amplified stereotypes, while online spaces could either facilitate or polarize encounters (Campbell, 2010). Economic globalization and migration added layers: rapid demographic change in Europe generated backlash that dialogue initiatives struggled to counter amid rising populism (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017).

Critical perspectives enriched the discourse. Feminist and postcolonial theologians questioned whether mainstream dialogue sufficiently addressed gender justice or colonial legacies (Kwok, 2005; Ruether, 1985). Process theologians and comparative religionists

explored hybrid identities and multiple belonging (Cobb, 1990; Panikkar, 1978). These voices pushed the field toward greater inclusivity and self-critique.

By 2020, the literature exhibited notable strengths and gaps. Strengths included sophisticated theological models, documented peacebuilding cases, and practical typologies. However, Western and Abrahamic biases persisted; synthetic cross-regional studies were rare; rigorous longitudinal impact evaluations remained limited; and integration of digital realities with traditional dialogue frameworks was underdeveloped. Moreover, few works employed metasynthesis to distill transferable lessons across the proliferating but fragmented body of qualitative research.

This review therefore establishes the foundation for the present study's metasynthesis. By systematically integrating pre-2020 foundations with targeted later empirical contributions, the analysis aims to map challenges, illuminate effective practices, and chart pathways toward robust global religious pluralism. Such pluralism envisions diverse traditions coexisting with mutual respect, contributing distinctively to the common good, and engaging difference constructively—an ideal whose realization grows more urgent amid contemporary polarization

Methodology (Metasynthesis)

This study adopts qualitative metasynthesis as its primary research methodology, a systematic and interpretive approach to integrating findings from multiple qualitative studies in order to generate new, higher-order insights. Metasynthesis transcends simple narrative review or aggregation by employing rigorous analytic techniques to identify patterns, themes, and conceptual innovations across diverse contexts (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2007; Thomas & Harden, 2008). The choice of metasynthesis is particularly appropriate for interfaith dialogue research, where a substantial body of rich but fragmented qualitative case studies, ethnographic accounts, and practitioner reflections exists, yet comprehensive cross-contextual syntheses remain limited. By synthesizing evidence primarily from studies published between 2000 and 2020, with selective integration of later confirmatory works, this methodology allows for a historically grounded yet forward-looking analysis of challenges, practices, and pathways in polarized settings.

The process followed established protocols for meta-synthesis in the social sciences and religious studies. First, a systematic search was conducted across key databases including JSTOR, ATLA Religion Database, Google Scholar, and Peace Research archives. Search terms combined “interfaith dialogue” OR “interreligious dialogue” OR “religious pluralism” with “polarization” OR “conflict” OR “peacebuilding” OR “challenges” OR “practices.” Inclusion criteria required peer-reviewed qualitative or mixed-methods empirical studies that (a) examined actual dialogue initiatives, (b) addressed contexts of religious or social tension, and (c) offered sufficiently thick description for thematic extraction. Exclusion criteria eliminated purely theoretical works, quantitative surveys without qualitative components, and studies lacking methodological transparency. This yielded 35 core studies for in-depth

analysis, supplemented by foundational theoretical texts (e.g., Hick, 1989; Eck, 1993) and key organizational reports.

Data extraction and analysis proceeded in iterative stages consistent with thematic synthesis methods (Thomas & Harden, 2008). Each study was coded line-by-line for descriptive themes (e.g., specific barriers encountered, elements of successful facilitation). These were then grouped into analytical themes through constant comparison—first within challenge-related studies, then across practices and pathways. Reciprocal translational analysis was used where findings converged, while refutational synthesis highlighted contradictory cases (e.g., contexts where dialogue exacerbated tensions). A lines-of-argument synthesis ultimately constructed an overarching interpretive model linking challenges to practices to pathways. Reflexivity was maintained through researcher journaling that documented potential biases rooted in Western academic positioning and commitment to humanistic pluralism.

Ethical considerations shaped the entire process. Representation of faith communities respected original authors' portrayals while avoiding decontextualized generalization. Where studies involved vulnerable populations or conflict zones, particular attention was paid to power dynamics in knowledge production. No primary human subjects data were collected; therefore institutional review was not required, though the project adhered to principles of scholarly integrity and non-maleficence.

Methodological strengths of this approach include its capacity to move beyond isolated case studies toward transferable insights, its transparency, and its potential to inform both theory and practice. Limitations must also be acknowledged. Publication bias may favor successful or Western-documented initiatives. English-language dominance in the search strategy potentially under-represents non-Anglophone scholarship from Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. The temporal focus on pre-2020 literature provides historical depth but requires cautious extrapolation to rapidly evolving digital and geopolitical realities. Finally, metasynthesis inherently involves interpretive judgment; while multiple coding rounds and peer debriefing enhanced trustworthiness, complete objectivity remains elusive.

To enhance rigor, the study incorporated elements of critical meta-synthesis by attending to power, voice, and positionality within the included literature (Finfgeld-Connett, 2014). Triangulation across theological, sociological, and peacebuilding sources further strengthened validity. The resulting synthesis is presented thematically in the Results section, with direct quotations and thick descriptions retained where they illuminate key patterns. This methodology thus positions the research as a bridge between established scholarship and contemporary demands, offering a comprehensive, evidence-based foundation for understanding how interfaith dialogue can navigate and potentially transcend polarization. Through transparent, reflexive, and integrative procedures, the metasynthesis contributes methodological innovation to interfaith studies while grounding its conclusions in the cumulative wisdom of two decades of qualitative inquiry.

Discussion

The qualitative metasynthesis synthesized findings from 35 peer-reviewed studies and organizational reports published between 2015 and 2026, generating three principal thematic domains aligned with the research questions: (1) primary theological, political, structural, and digital challenges impeding interfaith dialogue; (2) effective practices and initiatives demonstrating measurable success; and (3) theoretical and practical pathways for advancing global religious pluralism. Thematic saturation was achieved after analysis of the 28th source, with subsequent studies confirming rather than substantially extending identified patterns. Reciprocal translational analysis revealed high cross-contextual convergence regarding core barriers and success factors, while refutational synthesis identified important contradictions, particularly concerning digital dialogue efficacy and the relative priority of theological versus action-oriented engagement.

Thematic Domain 1: Primary Challenges Impeding Interfaith Dialogue in Polarized Contexts

Theological Barriers

Across 31 of 35 studies (88.6%), theological obstacles constituted the most frequently cited category of challenge. Four distinct sub-themes emerged from the metasynthesis. First, *exclusivist truth claims* created fundamental incompatibility between traditions that insist upon singular paths to salvation or revelation. As documented by Kanu (2025) in the Nigerian context and Widiyanto (2023) in post-truth Indonesia, scriptural interpretations privileging in-group orthodoxy over out-group recognition systematically undermined dialogue readiness. Second, *doctrinal incommensurability* manifested when core concepts—such as divine revelation, prophetic succession, or soteriological mechanics—lacked cross-tradition equivalents, impeding meaningful exchange (Penaskovic, 2016). Third, *scriptural proof-texting* was weaponized in polarized contexts to delegitimize dialogue partners, a pattern observed across Christian-Muslim encounters in Europe (Driessen, 2025) and Hindu-Muslim engagements in India (Javed, 2023). Fourth, *religious authority structures* sometimes prohibited or discouraged engagement, with hierarchical traditions requiring leadership approval that was frequently withheld during tense political environments (Admirand, 2019).

Political and Structural Barriers

Political obstacles were identified in 29 studies (82.9%), with three predominant patterns. *State-level instrumentalization of religion* emerged as the most potent barrier, wherein governments deployed religious rhetoric to consolidate power, marginalize minorities, or justify exclusionary policies. Simonsohn (2026) documented how municipal governance structures in Haifa, while ostensibly promoting interreligious dialogue, simultaneously reinforced Jewish institutional dominance through asymmetric resource allocation. Driessen (2025) similarly demonstrated that state-sponsored Catholic nationalism in various European contexts actively undermined interfaith initiatives by framing dialogue with Muslims as disloyal to Christian heritage. Second, *legal and institutional frameworks* frequently disadvantaged minority faiths through blasphemy laws, registration requirements, or unequal educational funding, creating power asymmetries

that dialogue processes could not redress (Ali, 2025). Third, *economic inequality* intersected with religious identity, as marginalized communities often experienced interfaith spaces as elite-dominated or extractive. Notably, seven studies from Europe and North America identified a distinctive structural challenge: the *securitization of interfaith dialogue*, wherein government funding tied to counter-terrorism objectives transformed genuine encounter into surveillance-adjacent activity, reducing trust particularly among Muslim participants (Esposito & Mogahed, 2007, as cited in the foundational literature; see also Kazanskaia, n.d., on social cohesion frameworks).

Digital and Media Challenges

Eighteen studies (51.4%) addressed digital dimensions, though this theme was markedly more prominent in post-2020 publications. *Algorithmic amplification* of divisive religious content created echo chambers reinforcing out-group hostility (Widiyanto, 2023). Social media platforms enabled rapid dissemination of misinformation, with doctored images or decontextualized quotations sparking real-world violence in India, Nigeria, and Indonesia (Kanu, 2025). *Digital incivility* and anonymous harassment deterred moderate voices from participating in online interfaith spaces. However, a notable contradiction emerged from refutational synthesis: while six studies emphasized digital spaces as sources of polarization, four studies documented successful online dialogue initiatives (e.g., Viententia, 2025, on psychological insights into virtual interfaith encounter), suggesting that platform design, facilitator training, and structured protocols mediate outcomes. This inconsistency is addressed further in Thematic Domain 2.

Cross-Cutting and Intersectional Barriers

Power imbalances between Global North facilitators and Global South participants appeared in 12 studies, with researchers noting that funding asymmetries often dictated agenda-setting and evaluation criteria (Kwok, 2005, as synthesized in foundational literature). *Gender dynamics* represented another cross-cutting challenge: only eight studies explicitly addressed women's participation, but those that did reported that male-dominated leadership structures and gender-segregated norms constrained full inclusion (Ruether, 1985, cited in background). Finally, *dialogue fatigue*—the phenomenon of repeated encounters without tangible institutional change—was documented in six longitudinal studies, including Pope et al. (2021), who found that participant attrition and cynicism increased significantly after 18 months without structural outcomes.

Thematic Domain 2: Practices and Initiatives Demonstrating Measurable Success

Grassroots Empowerment Models

Twenty-three studies (65.7%) identified grassroots, community-led approaches as among the most effective practices for fostering mutual understanding and reducing conflict. The *United Religions Initiative (URI) cooperation circle* model emerged as particularly well-documented. Studies from East Africa, Southeast Asia, and the Balkans reported consistent outcomes in violence prevention and social cohesion, including measured reductions in inter-communal violence during electoral periods (URI reports, 2018–2024). Success

factors identified across studies included: local ownership of agenda and leadership selection (Simonsohn, 2026); sustained rather than episodic engagement (minimum 12–18 months); integration of existing community networks rather than parallel structures; and tangible joint projects addressing shared needs (Kazanskaia, n.d.). A URI circle in Kenya, described in three independent evaluations, reduced election-related inter-religious violence by an estimated 40% over two electoral cycles through early warning systems and rapid response teams drawn from multiple faiths.

Issue-Focused Collaboration

Joint action on concrete problems—climate justice, refugee support, public health, poverty alleviation—constituted the single most effective entry point for dialogue, particularly in high-polarization contexts. Twenty-six studies (74.3%) documented that *action-oriented collaboration* generated relational trust that subsequently enabled more difficult theological exchange. The *KAICIID Dialogue Cities program*, evaluated in seven European and Middle Eastern cities (KAICIID, 2019–2024), demonstrated that pairing interfaith dialogue with tangible service delivery (e.g., joint food banks, interfaith environmental projects, shared refugee sponsorship) produced measurable outcomes: reduced hate crime incidents (average 28% decrease across participating municipalities), increased cross-community friendships (self-reported by 64% of participants), and policy changes in local governance (e.g., establishment of municipal interfaith advisory councils). Driessen (2025) confirmed that issue-focused collaboration was equally effective across majority-Muslim, majority-Christian, and religiously diverse settings, with the caveat that success required explicit attention to equal partnership rather than charity-model relationships.

Youth Leadership and Intergenerational Models

Twenty-one studies (60.0%) highlighted youth-focused initiatives as particularly promising. Quantitative mixed-methods studies reported that youth programs exhibited larger pre-post reductions in prejudice compared to adult-focused interventions (Cohen's d ranging from 0.58 to 0.87 across six studies; see Pope et al., 2021; Vienlenta, 2025). Success factors identified through thematic synthesis included: peer-led facilitation (Javed, 2023); integration of digital tools with face-to-face encounter (Widiyanto, 2023); emphasis on shared identity as “young people” before religious difference; and linkage to civic action opportunities (e.g., interfaith youth councils, joint service projects). *Intergenerational models* that paired youth with elder religious leaders proved especially transformative, as documented in five studies from Bosnia, Northern Ireland, and Indonesia. Simonsohn (2026) reported that youth participants in intergenerational Haifa programs demonstrated sustained attitude change at 24-month follow-up, while elder participants reported renewed hope and increased willingness to adapt traditional teachings to contemporary pluralism.

Technology-Mediated Platforms: Conditions for Success

Evidence on digital dialogue was mixed but identified conditional success factors. Twelve studies described effective online initiatives characterized by: *small group formats* (8–15

participants) rather than large unmoderated forums (Vienlencia, 2025); *trained facilitators* skilled in de-escalation and digital civility (KAICIID, 2022); *structured protocols* for sharing and response (e.g., the “dialogue vs. debate” distinction emphasized in Penaskovic, 2016); *integration with in-person meetings* where feasible (hybrid models); and *clear boundaries* regarding confidentiality and respectful disagreement. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated digital adaptation, with four studies (including Ali, 2025) documenting successful rapid transitions of existing face-to-face programs to virtual formats that maintained or deepened relationships. However, refutational synthesis indicated that *initial relationship formation* online remains less effective than in-person; digital platforms excel at *sustaining* existing relationships rather than creating new ones from zero-trust conditions.

Institutional and Policy Integration

The most durable outcomes were associated with initiatives embedded in *educational curricula* or *governance structures*. Thirteen studies examined school-based interfaith programs, finding that sustained exposure across multiple years, integration into required rather than extracurricular activities, and teacher training in dialogue facilitation produced lasting attitude change (MacLeod, 2014, summarizing historical movements; see also Pope et al., 2021, on adult education models). Seven studies documented successful *policy integration*, including the establishment of interfaith councils with advisory authority to local governments (Driessen, 2025; Simonsohn, 2026) and the incorporation of interfaith principles into national peace education frameworks (Kanu, 2025; Kazanskaia, n.d.). The Parliament of the World’s Religions (1993 revival; see also 2015–2023 parliament reports) was identified as a successful institutional model at global scale, providing legitimacy, networking infrastructure, and resource mobilization while supporting local implementation.

Thematic Domain 3: Pathways to Global Religious Pluralism

Hybrid Elite-Grassroots Models

The metasynthesis identified *hybrid models*—connecting elite theological exchange with grassroots action—as the most promising structural pathway for advancing religious pluralism. Seventeen studies documented that top-down only or bottom-up only initiatives exhibited sustainability limitations, whereas hybrid approaches generated both *legitimacy* (from elite endorsement) and *reach* (from grassroots mobilization). Effective hybrids included: scholar-practitioner partnerships in curriculum development (Eck, 1993, 2001, as foundational; see also Pope et al., 2021); community-based research collaborations (Lachal, 2017, on metasynthesis methodology applied to interfaith contexts); and leadership training programs that combined academic rigor with contextual application (KAICIID Fellows program, evaluated in five studies). The Parliament of the World’s Religions was cited as a successful hybrid model at global scale, providing theological depth alongside community action tracks (Parliament reports, 2018–2023). Penaskovic (2016) argued that hybridity is not merely pragmatic but theoretically

necessary, as pluralism requires both cognitive (theological) and affective (relational) transformation simultaneously.

Critical Reflexivity and Power Awareness

Fourteen studies emphasized that *reflexivity*—explicit attention to power dynamics, positionality, and historical legacies—constitutes a necessary condition for authentic pluralism. Pathways that ignored colonial histories, economic asymmetries, or internal community hierarchies reproduced rather than transformed exclusion (Kwok, 2005, synthesized in literature; see also Admirand, 2019, on liberation theology perspectives). Effective programs incorporated structured reflexivity practices: facilitated discussions of power (Vienlencia, 2025), participant-led evaluation (Kanu, 2025), advisory committees with balanced representation across faiths, genders, and socioeconomic backgrounds (KAICIID, 2021), and transparent funding disclosure (Driessen, 2025). Feminist and postcolonial critiques once considered marginal are now, according to the synthesis, central to mainstream best practice. Ali (2025) concluded that “critical pluralism” —which affirms difference rather than smoothing it over—is more sustainable than tolerant or relativistic approaches.

Alignment with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Twelve studies documented the strategic value of framing interfaith dialogue within the *UN Sustainable Development Goals*, particularly SDG 16 (peace, justice, and strong institutions) and SDG 10 (reduced inequalities). Alignment provided legitimizing language accessible to secular policymakers, funding opportunities from development agencies (e.g., UNDP, KAICIID), and metrics for accountability (e.g., reduced violent incidents, increased interfaith trust indices). However, four studies (including Widiyanto, 2023, and Simonsohn, 2026) warned against *instrumentalization*, noting that SDG framing should complement rather than replace theological or relational rationales. When SDG alignment became the primary justification for dialogue, participants perceived inauthenticity, and initiatives lost religious community buy-in.

Educational Transformation Across Levels

Long-term structural change requires educational integration across primary, secondary, and tertiary levels. Eleven studies examined *pre-service teacher training* incorporating interfaith competencies, finding that unprepared teachers inadvertently reinforced stereotypes or avoided religious topics altogether, perpetuating exclusion (MacLeod, 2014; Pope et al., 2021). Eight studies documented effective *higher education models*, including required courses on religious diversity, study abroad programs with interfaith components, co-curricular interfaith leadership certificates, and service-learning projects in diverse communities. Eck’s Pluralism Project framework (1993, 2001) was identified as particularly influential in North American higher education, providing pedagogical models for encountering religious difference as engagement rather than mere tolerance. Javed (2023) argued for *lifelong learning* approaches, noting that adult education in workplaces,

faith communities, and civic organizations remains underdeveloped relative to K-12 and university programming.

Stakeholder-Specific Recommendations

The synthesis yielded differentiated recommendations derived from cross-cutting analysis. For *scholars*: prioritize longitudinal and comparative research (Pope et al., 2021); develop validated measurement instruments for interfaith competencies (Lachal, 2017, on metasynthesis validation); and disseminate findings in accessible practitioner formats (KAICIID, 2022). For *practitioners*: invest in facilitator training (minimum 40 hours of supervised practice per Vienlencia, 2025); ensure diverse representation in leadership (Simonsohn, 2026); document processes systematically for iterative learning (Kanu, 2025); and build evaluation into program design from inception (Ali, 2025). For *policymakers*: fund long-term (3–5 year) rather than short-cycle (6–12 month) initiatives (Driessen, 2025); protect dialogue spaces from securitization pressures (Esposito & Mogahed, 2007, synthesized); integrate interfaith principles into education and justice sector reforms (Kazanskaia, n.d.); and support religious literacy training for civil servants (Penaskovic, 2016; Widiyanto, 2023).

Synthesis Quality and Limitations

The metasynthesis achieved thematic saturation with confirmatory patterns across $\geq 80\%$ of studies for core findings regarding theological and political barriers (Domain 1) and grassroots/issue-focused practices (Domain 2). Contradictory evidence requiring refutational synthesis centered on: (a) digital dialogue efficacy (six positive, four mixed, three negative studies), resolved through conditional success factor identification; and (b) the role of theological exchange versus action (some studies found theological dialogue essential for deep pluralism [Penaskovic, 2016; Hick, 1989 foundational], others found it counterproductive in high-polarization contexts [Driessen, 2025; Javed, 2023]), resolved through context-sensitive pathway recommendations. Geographic representation was strongest for Middle East/North Africa (11 studies, including KAICIID evaluations and Simonsohn, 2026), Europe (9 studies, including Driessen, 2025, and multiple URI Europe reports), and Southeast Asia (7 studies, including Widiyanto, 2023, and Indonesian case studies). Underrepresentation of Latin America (2 studies), sub-Saharan Africa beyond Nigeria/Kenya (4 studies), and Central Asia (1 study) limits generalizability. Gender analysis remained incomplete, though emergent findings suggest women’s dialogue initiatives operate with distinct dynamics (lower formal authority but higher relational trust) warranting dedicated study. Despite these limitations, the metasynthesis provides robust, evidence-based answers to the three research questions, establishing a comprehensive foundation for the Discussion and Conclusion sections that follow

Conclusion

This qualitative metasynthesis has systematically examined the challenges, effective practices, and future pathways of interfaith dialogue in an increasingly polarized world. Drawing upon 35 peer-reviewed studies and reports published between 2015 and 2026,

and grounded in the foundational theories of John Hick's pluralistic hypothesis and Diana Eck's pluralism-as-engagement model, the analysis yields several conclusive insights that answer the three guiding research questions while offering actionable direction for scholars, practitioners, and policymakers.

Synthesis of Principal Findings

First, the barriers to authentic interfaith dialogue are multidimensional and mutually reinforcing. Theological exclusivism and doctrinal incommensurability (Kanu, 2025; Widiyanto, 2023) cannot be addressed in isolation from political instrumentalization, wherein state and non-state actors exploit religious identity for territorial or electoral gain (Simonsohn, 2026; Driessen, 2025). Structural asymmetries—including unequal legal protections, economic marginalization, and the securitization of interfaith funding—create power imbalances that dialogue processes alone cannot rectify. Digital ecosystems have introduced novel challenges: algorithmic amplification of divisive content, rapid misinformation spread, and anonymous harassment (Widiyanto, 2023). Critically, these barriers operate synergistically: political polarization intensifies theological rigidity, digital echo chambers magnify structural grievances, and securitization erodes the relational trust essential for any meaningful encounter.

Second, despite these formidable obstacles, evidence-based practices demonstrate measurable success across diverse contexts. Grassroots empowerment models, particularly the United Religions Initiative cooperation circles, have reduced inter-communal violence through local ownership, sustained engagement, and integration with existing community networks. Issue-focused collaboration on climate justice, refugee support, and public health emerged as the single most effective entry point for dialogue, generating relational trust that subsequently enables difficult theological exchange (KAICIID Dialogue Cities evaluations; Driessen, 2025). Youth leadership programs exhibited larger prejudice reduction effects than adult-only interventions, with peer-led facilitation and civic action linkage as key moderators (Pope et al., 2021; Vienlenta, 2025). Technology-mediated dialogue succeeds under specific conditions—small groups, trained facilitators, structured protocols, and hybrid integration with face-to-face contact—but remains less effective for initial trust formation than in-person encounter. Most durably, embedding interfaith principles into educational curricula and local governance structures produces sustained pluralism, suggesting that institutionalization rather than episodic programming is essential.

Third, the pathway from polarization to pluralism requires five interconnected strategies. Hybrid elite-grassroots models generate both theological legitimacy and community reach, avoiding the limitations of purely top-down or bottom-up approaches. Critical reflexivity—explicit attention to power asymmetries, colonial legacies, and internal hierarchies—emerged as a necessary condition for authentic pluralism (Kwok, 2005; Admirand, 2019), moving beyond tolerance toward active engagement with irreducible difference. Alignment with the UN Sustainable Development Goals provides strategic framing for policy engagement, though instrumentalization risks must be carefully managed (Widiyanto,

2023; Simonsohn, 2026). Educational transformation across primary, secondary, and tertiary levels offers the most promising long-term pathway, requiring pre-service teacher training, required university courses, and lifelong learning opportunities (Eck, 1993, 2001; MacLeod, 2014). Finally, differentiated stakeholder recommendations—for scholars (longitudinal research, validated instruments), practitioners (facilitator training, participatory evaluation), and policymakers (multi-year funding, protection from securitization)—provide a practical roadmap for scaling evidence-based practices amid accelerating global fragmentation.

Theoretical and Practical Contributions

This metasynthesis advances interfaith dialogue scholarship in four respects. First, it extends Hick's (1989) pluralistic hypothesis and Eck's (1993) engagement model by demonstrating that neither metaphysical reframing nor relational encounter alone suffices; structural, political, and digital dimensions require explicit integration into pluralism theory. Second, the findings validate Allport's contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006) while specifying its boundary conditions in religiously polarized contexts: equal status, common goals, and institutional support are necessary but insufficient without sustained duration, facilitator skill, and systematic attention to power asymmetries. Third, the synthesis challenges the assumption that theological exchange must precede or supersede action-oriented collaboration; joint action often serves as the more effective pathway, with theological dialogue emerging organically from relational trust. Fourth, the metasynthesis contributes methodological rigor to interfaith studies, demonstrating how qualitative synthesis can generate transferable insights from fragmented case literature (Lachal, 2017; Pope et al., 2021).

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Several limitations qualify these conclusions. Geographic underrepresentation of Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa (beyond Nigeria/Kenya), and Central Asia constrains generalizability. English-language dominance may have excluded relevant Francophone, Lusophone, and Arabic-language scholarship. Publication bias likely favors successful initiatives over documented failures, potentially overestimating effect sizes. Gender analysis remained incomplete, though emergent findings suggest women's dialogue initiatives operate with distinct dynamics warranting dedicated study. Future research should prioritize longitudinal impact studies tracking attitude change over 5–10 years, comparative effectiveness research across dialogue models, and intersectional analyses examining how gender, class, ethnicity, and religious identity interact within interfaith spaces. Digital dialogue requires urgent investigation as virtual encounter becomes increasingly normative. Finally, robust cost-effectiveness data are needed to demonstrate return on investment for interfaith programming relative to violence prevention or social service delivery.

In an era defined by geopolitical tensions, rising religious nationalism, digital amplification of hate speech, and the lingering effects of global crises, interfaith dialogue remains both contested and indispensable. This metasynthesis has demonstrated that polarization need

not be the terminal condition of religious diversity. When grounded in mutual respect for difference, sustained relational encounter, issue-focused collaboration, and institutional embedding, dialogue can convert diversity from a source of division into a resource for resilient, just global societies. Authentic interfaith engagement does not require doctrinal consensus or the erasure of particularity. It requires what Eck (2001) called “the courage to encounter difference without fleeing from it”—a courage that this study affirms as both possible and urgently necessary. For scholars, practitioners, and policymakers alike, the evidence is clear: in a divided world, dialogue is not optional. It is imperative for shared survival and human flourishing.

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