THE INTERPLAY OF RELIGION AND CONFLICT: PATHWAYS TO SUSTAINABLE PEACE BUILDING IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT
Religion serves a dual function in societies, sometimes acting as a source of conflict, while also being a powerful means for fostering peace. In Nigeria, where religious diversity is significant, tensions between major faith groups, especially Christianity and Islam, have often led to violent conflicts. These tensions are frequently compounded by political, ethnic, and economic factors. Despite this, religion has also played a crucial role in peace-building efforts through interfaith dialogue and reconciliation initiatives. This study i) investigates the intricate relationship between religion and conflict in Nigeria, ii) It also evaluates the contributions of religious leaders, faith-based organizations, and interfaith dialogues in promoting reconciliation, social cohesion, and peace-building efforts, iii) identifies key factors that shape the interplay between religious identities and conflict dynamics. The research is qualitative, employing thematic analysis of data and the perspectives of respondents selected through purposive sampling. The study therefore recommends that inclusive, faith-sensitive approaches are essential for effective peace-building in pluralistic societies. It offers pathways for using faith as a tool for peace, emphasizing the importance of inclusive, community-driven strategies in achieving long-term stability in Nigeria. The study offers practical insights for policymakers, religious leaders, and peace practitioners seeking to harness the positive potential of religion in resolving conflicts and building lasting peace.

1.0 Introduction

Throughout history, religion has been a force of both inspiration and division. It shapes cultures, values, and communities, offering people a sense of identity and purpose. However, religion can also become intertwined with conflict, especially when political, economic, and social tensions are present. In many parts of the world, religious differences have fueled misunderstandings, rivalries, and even violence. Understanding the complex interplay between religion and conflict is essential to grasping how these tensions arise and how they might be resolved. Richardson (1960) found that, overall; a shared religion did not reduce the incidence of war. While there appeared to be a link between religious differences and conflict, particularly between Christianity and Islam (p. 245), Christians were also highly likely to engage in conflicts with one another (pp. 235–39).

Religion is now, more than ever, revealing its politically ambivalent nature. The war in Ukraine, the rise of aggressive nationalist ideologies in Asia and the West, and sectarian conflicts in Africa and the Middle East often manifest as religiously motivated clashes. Religion has taken on an unusual prominence in global affairs. The horrific events of 9/11, the turmoil in Iraq, and the assertive stance of quasi-theocratic Iran reinforce the popular belief that religion underpins much of today's international conflict. Huntington affirmed that religion was an important factor in world politics.

In December 1992, 24 wars with religious backgrounds were recorded, with most occurring in Northern Africa, the Middle East, the former USSR, and Asia. Only two were in Europe: the conflicts in Yugoslavia and Northern Ireland. Some notable conflicts include Myanmar/Burma (1948) between Buddhists and Christians; Israel/Palestine (1968) between Jews and Arabs (Muslims and Christians); Northern Ireland (1969) between Catholics and Protestants; the Philippines (Mindanao, 1970) between Muslims and Christians (Catholics); Bangladesh (1973) between Buddhists and Christians; Lebanon (1975) between Shiites supported by Syria (Amal) and those supported by Iran (Hezbollah); and Ethiopia (Oromo, 1976) between Muslims and the central government. Religious conviction has historically been, and continues to be, a source of conflict within and between communities.

Since the North-South conflicts in Sudan have been framed in religious terms, they have taken on the appearance of profound value conflicts that seem resolvable only through force or separation (Assefa, 1990). Maoz (2006) found that religious polarization significantly influenced systemic conflict, though its effects varied over time and across different measures of conflict.

The politicization of religious identity and infrastructure in Central African civil conflicts poses a serious threat to religious freedom in the region. In the Central African Republic, ethnoreligious tensions have led to human rights abuses based on religious and ethnic identity. In Cameroon's secessionist conflict, both government forces and rebel groups have used violence and intimidation against places of worship and religious leaders. Similarly, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, religious and non-religious armed groups in the eastern regions have attacked houses of worship, while the government has failed to protect vulnerable religious communities from violence.

Since the return of democracy in 1999, secular governments have generally led Nigeria at the federal level, while Muslim-majority states in Northern Nigeria have implemented strict Sharia law. Religious conflicts between Muslims and Christians have erupted multiple times since 2000, often resulting in riots and thousands of casualties on both sides (Harnischfeger, 2008). Since 2009, the Islamist group Boko Haram has waged an armed insurgency against the Nigerian military, attacking villages and towns and killing thousands in assaults and massacres targeting Christians, students, and others deemed opponents of Islam.

In Nigeria, religion significantly influences social identity, politics, and community life, yet it has also been a source of conflict, often intensifying divisions and violence. The country's diverse religious landscape, primarily divided between Islam and Christianity, has been marked by frequent clashes fueled by differences in beliefs, competition for resources, and political manipulation of religious identities. These conflicts undermine social stability, deepen distrust among communities, and obstruct national development. Despite numerous peace efforts, sustainable peace remains elusive. This study seeks to explore the complex interplay between religion and conflict in Nigeria, identifying pathways and strategies for effective, long-lasting peace-building.

This study is important because it addresses the pressing need for sustainable peace in Nigeria, a country where religious conflicts have repeatedly disrupted social cohesion and hindered national progress. By exploring the interplay between religion and conflict, the study aims to provide a deeper understanding of the underlying factors that fuel religious tensions. The insights gained can inform the development of targeted peace-building strategies that respect religious diversity, promote dialogue, and encourage mutual understanding. Ultimately, this research offers a foundation for creating policies and initiatives that foster lasting peace, enhancing stability, security, and development in Nigeria's multi-religious society.

The objectives of this study is to investigate the intricate relationship between religion and conflict in Nigeria, It also evaluates the contributions of religious leaders, faith-based organizations, and interfaith dialogues in promoting reconciliation, social cohesion, and peace-building efforts, and identifies key factors that shape the interplay between religious identities and conflict dynamics.

2.1 Statement of the Problem

Nigeria's religious diversity, while a source of cultural richness, has increasingly become a fault line for violent conflict. Recurrent clashes between religious groups, such as those in Kaduna, Plateau, and Borno States, highlight how religious identities are often mobilized to express deeper socio-economic and political grievances (Ukiwo, 2003). Despite numerous peacebuilding initiatives, the persistence of religiously framed violence suggests that existing strategies insufficiently address the structural and ideological drivers of conflict. There is a critical gap in understanding how historical legacies, political manipulation, socio-economic disparities, and doctrinal interpretations interact to transform religious identity into a catalyst for violence. This problem is compounded by weak governance, youth disillusionment, and the influence of transnational religious ideologies. Consequently, there is a pressing need for a comprehensive, interdisciplinary analysis that uncovers these underlying dynamics and identifies sustainable peacebuilding strategies tailored to Nigeria’s religious and socio-political realities.

3.1 Conceptual and Empirical Literature Review

Scholars have yet to agree on a single, universally accepted definition of religion, largely due to the concept's inherent ambiguity. Numerous definitions have been proposed, each often reflecting the personal experiences or perceptions of the individual proposing it. Best (2011) defines religion as a comprehensive system encompassing beliefs, practices, and institutions that guide individuals in fulfilling perceived divine mandates and connecting with the supernatural.

In essence, religion provides a framework for individuals to understand their place in the universe and their relationship with the divine. It offers a set of beliefs and practices that help individuals make sense of the world around them and find meaning and purpose in their lives.

Ojo and Akolo (2021) define religion as an established framework of specific theological doctrines and rituals habitually practiced by a community of shared beliefs. Simply put, religion is a structured system of beliefs and practices shared by a group of people. Adeniyi (1993) defines religion as the awareness of one's dependence on a transcendent being and the inclination to worship that being. It comprises a body of truths, laws, and rites through which humans relate to this transcendent entity. In short, religion, as described by Adeniyi, is recognizing our reliance on a higher power and the practices we use to honor it.

Conflict typically arises from disagreements, controversies, or quarrels between individuals or groups. Unresolved or mismanaged, these situations can escalate into violence. Alegbeleye (2014) defines conflict as "a situation or condition of disharmony in an interactional process." Simply stated, conflict is a state of disharmony or opposition that, if unresolved, can lead to violence.

Scholars have identified conflict, with its multifaceted consequences, as a major impediment to progress, economic growth, political stability, and overall socioeconomic development (Edewor, Aluko & Folarin, 2014; Polachek & Sevastianova, 2012; Ray & Esteban, 2017). Conflict obstructs development in multiple ways, hindering economic

advancement, political stability, and overall societal progress.

Religious conflict is a struggle over values and claims to scarce resources, status, and power, where the aim is to neutralize or eliminate rivals (Abubakar, 2019). Religious conflict arises from competition for resources, status, or power, fueled by differing values, and aims to defeat the opposition.

Nigeria's two main religions, Islam and Christianity, have a long history of competition, contributing to intolerance and socio-political crises within the country and beyond. Ngene (2019) notes that:

> *While religion ideally unites people, it is often misused as a tool for conflict, becoming a powerful weapon in the hands of some leaders. Religious crises, therefore, represent disagreements between religious groups who struggle to coexist peacefully.*

The ongoing conflict between Christianity and Islam in Nigeria is not simply a matter of limited shared territory. In essence, religious conflict in Nigeria is not about land, but about competing ideologies and the struggle for power and influence, often exacerbated by leaders who exploit religious differences.

The instrumentalization of religion for political gain is a recurring argument. Many scholars contend that political elites manipulate religious sentiments and identities to mobilize support, divide opposition, and consolidate power (Last, 2007; Walker, 2012). This often involves the propagation of exclusionary narratives that demonize religious "others," fostering a sense of grievance and competition over resources and influence. The contentious debates surrounding the application of Sharia law in some northern states, for instance, are often viewed as having significant political undercurrents rather than being purely religiously motivated (Kukah, 1993; Soares, 2014).

The theological interpretations, particularly within certain strands of Islam and Christianity, are sometimes implicated in promoting intolerance and violence. Studies on extremist groups like Boko Haram demonstrate how distorted religious doctrines are used to justify brutal acts against perceived infidels or apostates (Harnisch, 2015; Zenn, 2014). Similarly, within some Christian circles, the rise of proselytizing and assertive evangelical movements has been linked to increased tensions with Muslim communities (Hagher, 2007). These interpretations, when coupled with a lack of interfaith dialogue and mutual understanding, can lead to rigid identity boundaries and an inability to accommodate religious diversity.

The socio-economic grievances often intersect with religious identities, exacerbating conflict. High rates of poverty, unemployment, and inequality can be framed through a religious lens, leading to feelings of marginalization and resentment (Forest, 2012). For example, the grievances of disaffected youth, who often lack opportunities, can be easily exploited by religious extremists who offer a sense of belonging, purpose, and even financial incentives. This confluence of economic desperation and religious ideology creates fertile ground for radicalization and violent mobilization.

Religious leaders often command considerable moral authority and influence within their communities, making them vital agents for peace. Imams, pastors, and traditional religious figures can leverage their positions to preach messages of tolerance, forgiveness, and non-violence (Idownu, 2010). Their sermons and interventions can effectively counter extremist narratives and encourage dialogue between conflicting parties. Interfaith dialogue initiatives, bringing together leaders and adherents from different religious traditions, have shown promise in building bridges of understanding and cooperation (Gwamna & Nkom, 2013). These dialogues can address misconceptions, promote shared values, and identify common ground for collective action towards peace.

Religious institutions often possess extensive social networks and infrastructure that can be utilized for peacebuilding efforts. Mosques, churches, and faith-based organizations are deeply embedded in communities and can serve as platforms for mediation, conflict resolution, and humanitarian aid (Omotosho, 2006). They can organize peace rallies, workshops, and educational programs that promote peaceful coexistence and civic responsibility.

Furthermore, these institutions are often involved in social welfare programs, addressing some of the underlying socio-economic grievances that contribute to conflict, thereby promoting long-term stability.

4.1 Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research methodology to explore the complex interplay between religion and conflict in Nigeria, with particular attention to how religious leaders, faith-based organizations, and interfaith dialogues contribute to peacebuilding, reconciliation, and social cohesion. The qualitative approach was chosen because it allows for in-depth understanding of perceptions, experiences, and contextual factors that quantitative methods may overlook. Given the socio-cultural and religious sensitivities surrounding the topic, qualitative methods are most appropriate for capturing nuanced insights into the dynamics of religious conflict and peace processes.

4.1.2 Population and Sampling Technique

The population of the study consisted of religious leaders (Christian and Muslim clerics), members of faith-based organizations, peacebuilding practitioners, community leaders, civil society actors, and individuals affected by religious conflicts. Purposive sampling was used to select participants who possess relevant knowledge and experience on the subject matter. A total of 30 respondents were selected, ensuring a balance between Christian and Muslim representatives, as well as gender diversity.

4.1. 3 Data Collection Methods

Data were collected through the following methods:

- **In-depth Interviews**: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with key informants, including religious leaders, representatives of faith-based and interfaith organizations, and peacebuilding experts. These interviews sought to explore their perspectives on the causes of religious conflict, the effectiveness of peacebuilding efforts, and the challenges they face in their work.
- **Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)**: FGDs were organized in communities that had experienced religious conflict. These discussions enabled the researcher to gather collective views and lived experiences from community members, especially youth and women, on the impact of religious conflict and peacebuilding efforts.
- **Documentary Analysis**: The study also reviewed existing literature, official reports, media publications, and organizational records related to religious conflicts and peacebuilding in Nigeria. This secondary data helped to contextualize the primary data and supported the triangulation of findings.

4.1.4 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the appropriate institutional review board prior to data collection. Informed consent was obtained from all participants after clearly explaining the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw at any time. Anonymity and confidentiality were ensured by using pseudonyms and securing all data in password-protected files.

5.1 The Intricate Relationship between Religion and Conflict in Nigeria: A Multifaceted Analysis

Nigeria, a nation boasting a rich tapestry of ethnic and religious diversity, has unfortunately become a prominent case study in the intricate and often violent interplay between religious affiliations and conflict. This relationship manifests across various scales, from localized disputes over religious practices and resources to large-scale sectarian violence with profound socio-political ramifications. Understanding the dynamics of this complex nexus necessitates a nuanced examination that transcends simplistic attributions of religious dogma as the sole catalyst. The relationship between religion and conflict in Nigeria is shaped by a confluence of historical legacies, socio-economic disparities, political manipulation, the nature of religious identities themselves, and the weaknesses of state governance. Employing an interdisciplinary lens, this analysis will delve into these

interconnected factors to illuminate the multifaceted ways in which religious identities become entangled with conflict dynamics in the Nigerian context.

One of the foundational pillars upon which the current interplay rests is the historical context, particularly the legacy of British colonialism. The arbitrary demarcation of territories during the colonial era often amalgamated disparate ethnic and religious groups within artificial boundaries, sowing the seeds for future intergroup tensions (Akinyele, 2001). Colonial policies that favored certain religious groups and regions over others created enduring imbalances in access to education, economic opportunities, and political power, fostering resentment and a sense of marginalization among those disadvantaged (Osaghae, 1995). This historical structuring of inequality along religious lines continues to shape contemporary intergroup relations and provides a fertile ground for the politicization of religious identity. Furthermore, historical narratives of religious conflict and dominance, often selectively remembered and transmitted across generations, contribute to a climate of suspicion and mistrust between religious communities, making them more susceptible to mobilization along sectarian lines.

Socio-economic disparities represent another critical layer in understanding the relationship between religion and conflict in Nigeria. The stark inequalities in wealth distribution, access to essential services, and opportunities for advancement often correlate with religious and regional identities (Albert, 2005). When individuals or communities perceive themselves as economically deprived or politically marginalized due to their religious affiliation, religion can become a powerful lens through which grievances are articulated and mobilized. Competition for scarce resources, such as land, employment, and political patronage, can be framed and experienced as a zero-sum game between religious groups, particularly in a context of weak governance and limited state capacity to equitably distribute resources. The perception of systemic injustice along religious lines can fuel resentment and provide a potent motivation for participation in conflict.

The politicization of religious identity by political elites and other influential actors is a significant catalyst in transforming religious differences into drivers of conflict. In a multi-ethnic and multi-religious nation like Nigeria, religion can be a potent tool for mobilizing support, consolidating power bases, and delegitimizing political opponents (Suberu, 2001). Politicians often exploit religious sentiments and manipulate religious symbols and narratives to cultivate a sense of collective identity and foster an "us versus them" mentality. This can involve the deliberate construction of exclusionary religious identities, the propagation of sectarian ideologies that demonize out-groups, and the exploitation of religious grievances, real or perceived, for political gain. The absence of robust and inclusive governance structures, coupled with high levels of corruption, creates an environment where the manipulation of religious sentiments for political ends can thrive, often at the expense of national unity and social cohesion.

The nature of religious doctrines and interpretations within Christianity and Islam in Nigeria also plays a role in shaping the dynamics of conflict. While both faiths, in their core tenets, advocate for peace and compassion, diverse interpretations and the rise of extremist ideologies can contribute to interreligious tensions (Hassan, 2008). Literal and exclusivist interpretations of religious texts can foster intolerance and a belief in the superiority of one's own faith, leading to the dehumanization of those belonging to other religious traditions. The emergence of charismatic religious leaders espousing radical views and the proliferation of sectarian rhetoric through various channels, including religious institutions and social media, can incite hatred and violence. Furthermore, proselytization efforts, if not conducted with sensitivity and respect for other faiths, can be perceived as aggressive and threatening, leading to interreligious friction.

Weak state capacity and governance failures create a permissive environment for religiously inflected conflicts to emerge and escalate. When the state is unable to provide effective security, enforce the rule of law impartially, and address grievances through legitimate channels, individuals and communities may turn to religious identities for protection, social order, and the articulation of their demands (Ibrahim, 2003). In such contexts, religious institutions can become alternative centers of authority, and religious leaders may assume quasi-political roles, sometimes exacerbating existing tensions. The failure of the state to ensure equitable access to justice and to hold perpetrators of violence accountable can also foster a climate of

impunity, further fueling cycles of religious conflict.

Finally, demographic shifts and patterns of religious segregation can influence the interplay between religious identities and conflict dynamics. Rapid urbanization and migration patterns can lead to increased interaction and competition between different religious communities in previously homogenous areas. In contexts where residential or social segregation along religious lines is prevalent, opportunities for meaningful intergroup contact and understanding may be limited, fostering suspicion and prejudice. Competition for resources and political influence in newly mixed areas, particularly in the absence of effective mechanisms for managing diversity, can trigger conflict along religious fault lines.

5.2 The Prophetic Voice and the Pious Hand: Contributions of Religious Actors to Reconciliation, Social Cohesion, and Peace-building Efforts

In societies scarred by conflict and fractured by division, the arduous journey towards reconciliation, social cohesion, and sustainable peace necessitates the active engagement of a diverse array of actors. Among these, religious leaders, faith-based organizations (FBOs), and interfaith dialogues stand as uniquely positioned contributors, often wielding significant moral authority, possessing deep-rooted community networks, and operating with a long-term commitment to healing and transformation. Their contributions, while contextually nuanced and varied in approach, frequently leverage ethical frameworks, spiritual resources, and a capacity to inspire trust and mobilize action in ways that secular entities may find challenging to replicate. This paper argues that religious leaders, FBOs, and interfaith dialogues play indispensable and multifaceted roles in fostering reconciliation, strengthening social cohesion, and building lasting peace by providing moral guidance, delivering essential services, cultivating intergroup understanding, and advocating for justice and healing.

Religious leaders, by virtue of their spiritual authority and moral standing within their respective communities, often serve as pivotal figures in promoting reconciliation. Their pronouncements, sermons, and teachings carry significant weight, shaping narratives and influencing attitudes towards past grievances and future coexistence (Appleby, 2000). In post-conflict settings, religious leaders from different traditions can jointly condemn violence, offer solace and pastoral care to victims and perpetrators alike, and facilitate dialogue across lines of division. Their ability to frame reconciliation as a moral and spiritual imperative, rooted in shared values of compassion, forgiveness, and justice inherent in many faith traditions, can lend profound legitimacy and traction to peace-building initiatives. Furthermore, their consistent presence within communities allows them to address the deep-seated emotional and spiritual wounds inflicted by conflict, fostering healing at a personal and collective level. By advocating for empathy and the transcendence of past animosities, religious leaders can inspire a shift towards mutual respect and the rebuilding of trust.

Faith-based organizations, driven by religious principles and often possessing extensive grassroots networks, constitute another crucial pillar in peace-building efforts. These organizations frequently engage in a wide spectrum of activities that directly contribute to reconciliation and social cohesion. They are often at the forefront of providing humanitarian aid, including food, shelter, medical assistance, and psychosocial support, to vulnerable populations affected by conflict, often transcending religious, ethnic, and political divides in their service delivery (Smock, 2006). This impartial approach can build bridges of trust and foster a sense of shared humanity among diverse groups. Moreover, FBOs are frequently involved in long-term development initiatives that address the root causes of conflict, such as poverty, inequality, lack of access to education, and healthcare. By working collaboratively across religious lines on these projects, they can foster social interaction, break down stereotypes, and cultivate sustained cooperation at the community level. Their commitment to social justice, human dignity, and the common good, deeply embedded in their faith traditions, provides a strong ethical framework for advocating for peace and reconciliation and holding stakeholders accountable.

Interfaith dialogues, as structured and unstructured platforms for engagement between individuals and communities of different religious beliefs, offer a vital space for fostering mutual understanding, reducing prejudice, and building trust. These dialogues can take various forms, ranging from formal high-level meetings between religious leaders to

informal grassroots initiatives involving community members, youth groups, and women's organizations (Johnston, 2011). By providing opportunities for participants to learn about each other's faiths, share personal experiences, and discuss common values and concerns, interfaith dialogues can dismantle misconceptions and challenge negative stereotypes that often fuel conflict. They can also serve as a crucial mechanism for identifying shared theological and ethical resources that can be mobilized in support of peace-building efforts. Furthermore, interfaith platforms can facilitate joint initiatives and collaborative projects aimed at addressing shared challenges, such as poverty, injustice, environmental degradation, and promoting human rights, thereby strengthening social cohesion across religious boundaries. The very process of dialogue cultivates essential communication skills, promotes empathy, and builds interpersonal relationships that can serve as crucial channels for conflict resolution and mediation during times of heightened tension.

The contributions of religious leaders, FBOs, and interfaith dialogues are particularly salient in contexts where religious identity is a significant factor in conflict. In such settings, religious actors possess a unique ability to engage with the underlying religious dimensions of the conflict, address theological justifications for violence, and promote interpretations of faith that emphasize peace, compassion, and coexistence (Gopin, 2002). They can challenge extremist narratives from within their own traditions, offering alternative theological frameworks that promote reconciliation and understanding. Moreover, their moral authority can be instrumental in mobilizing religious communities to actively participate in peace-building processes, lending legitimacy and broad-based support to these efforts. In societies where religious institutions command significant social capital, their engagement can be crucial for fostering a sense of collective ownership in the peace process.

However, it is crucial to acknowledge that the role of religious actors in peace-building is not without its complexities and potential challenges. Religious institutions can sometimes be implicated in conflict, and religious leaders may, on occasion, exacerbate tensions through exclusionary rhetoric or partisan allegiances (Haynes, 1998). Therefore, it is essential to foster inclusive and accountable religious engagement in peace-building, ensuring that diverse voices within religious communities are heard and that efforts are aligned with universal principles of human rights, gender equality, and inclusivity. Furthermore, effective collaboration between religious and secular actors is vital to ensure a comprehensive and sustainable approach to peace-building. Secular organizations can provide expertise in areas such as political negotiation, security sector reform, and transitional justice, while religious actors contribute their unique moral authority, community networks, and capacity for grassroots mobilization and long-term engagement.

5.3 The Crucible of Faith: An Examination of Factors Shaping the Interplay Between Religious Identities and Conflict Dynamics

The relationship between religious identities and the emergence and perpetuation of conflict is a complex and often volatile nexus. While it is misleading to portray religion as a singular or inevitable cause of conflict, religious identities frequently intersect with conflict dynamics in intricate ways. Understanding this interplay requires examining various mediating factors that influence how religion interacts with social tensions. This paper contends that the nexus between religion and conflict is shaped by historical legacies, socio-economic disparities, political manipulation, religious interpretations, state governance, demographic shifts, and the influence of external actors. Through an interdisciplinary lens, this analysis explores how these factors converge to render religion both a source of cohesion and a catalyst for violence.

Historical legacies remain central to the religious conflict discourse. Colonial rule, especially in Africa and Asia, imposed arbitrary borders that forced disparate religious groups into single political entities (Anderson, 1991). These colonial impositions often disrupted preexisting social orders and laid the foundation for enduring religious tensions. Historical patterns of persecution, dominance, or marginalization have embedded collective memories that continue to shape intergroup relations. Narratives of past injustices, transmitted across generations, can foster lasting grievances and mistrust, escalating tensions during periods of crisis (Halbwachs, 1992).

Socio-economic disparities further intensify religious fault lines. In many societies, economic and political disadvantages align with religious

identities, reinforcing perceptions of systemic exclusion (Gurr, 1993). When access to resources such as education, land, or employment is distributed along religious lines, identity-based grievances escalate. In such contexts, religion becomes a banner under which marginalized groups mobilize, particularly when competition for resources is high and economic opportunities are limited. Addressing these structural inequities is critical for mitigating religiously framed conflicts.

Political manipulation of religion by elites constitutes another significant dimension. Politicians often exploit religious symbols and rhetoric to consolidate power, legitimize authority, or undermine opponents (Brass, 2003). In fragile or exclusionary political systems, religious affiliations become tools for political mobilization, promoting exclusivist ideologies and deepening sectarian divisions. This strategic use of religion transforms faith from a spiritual expression into a political weapon, inflaming tensions and legitimizing discrimination and violence.

Religious doctrines and their interpretations also play a pivotal role. While most religious traditions advocate peace and justice, scriptural interpretations vary. Extremist or literalist readings may justify violence, exclude minorities, and incite hostility (Juergensmeyer, 2003). Religious leaders are instrumental in shaping these interpretations those promoting inclusive theologies and interfaith cooperation may de-escalate tensions, while radical preachers may provoke conflict. The growing reach of digital media further amplifies these voices, often spreading divisive ideologies across borders.

Weak state capacity compounds these issues. In contexts where governments fail to ensure security, administer justice impartially, or address grievances, religious institutions often fill the void (Tilly, 1985). These institutions may offer social services, mediate disputes, or assume quasi-governmental authority. While this can foster community resilience, it may also create parallel structures that undermine national cohesion and increase inter-religious competition. Fragile states lacking effective conflict resolution mechanisms often become fertile ground for religiously motivated violence.

Demographic changes and social organization patterns contribute further. Rapid urbanization, migration, and population growth frequently bring religious groups into closer contact, leading to competition over housing, services, and political representation. In segregated settings with limited intergroup interaction, suspicion and stereotyping flourish (Putnam, 2007). Poor urban planning and weak governance can turn these frictions into full-blown religious confrontations.

Finally, external actors and transnational religious networks can exacerbate domestic religious tensions. Financial and ideological support from foreign religious organizations or diaspora communities can embolden local actors and intensify sectarian agendas (Hoffman, 2006). Globalized religious narratives often disseminated through digital media, further shape local identities and conflicts. The involvement of external governments or movements with vested interests often complicates peace-building efforts and entrenches divisions.

The link between religion and conflict is not inherent but shaped by broader historical, political, and socio-economic forces. Recognizing these dynamics is essential for addressing the root causes of religiously framed conflicts and promoting sustainable peace.

6.1 Recommendations

i. Enhance Contextual and Multidisciplinary Research on Religion and Conflict. Researchers should utilize both qualitative and quantitative methodologies, including ethnographic fieldwork, content analysis, and statistical modeling, to better capture the complexities and localized expressions of religious tensions. Regional case studies should be emphasized to account for variations in religious conflict across Nigeria's geopolitical zones, thereby avoiding overgeneralizations.

2. Institutional support should be provided for capacity-building programs aimed at training religious leaders in conflict resolution, interfaith dialogue, and community mediation. Similarly, Faith-based organizations should be integrated into national and local peace building strategies through partnerships with governmental and non-governmental bodies. While interfaith initiatives should move beyond elite engagement to include grassroots

participation, especially among youth and women, in order to foster sustainable dialogue and reconciliation. In addition, Funding and logistical support from both international donors and the Nigerian government should be increased to ensure the continuity and scalability of interfaith peace efforts

ii. Policymakers should recognize and address the socio-economic grievances such as poverty, unemployment, and political exclusion that are often framed in religious terms and exploited by conflict entrepreneurs. More so, National and state governments should implement inclusive policies that promote interreligious cooperation, equitable resource distribution, and protection of minority rights.

7.1 Conclusion

The intricate interplay between religion and conflict in Nigeria underscores the dual capacity of religion to either foster division or promote peace. This study has explored how religious identities, historical grievances, socio-political dynamics, and economic disparities contribute to the persistence of religiously tinged conflicts across the country. It has also examined the commendable roles played by religious leaders, faith-based organizations, and interfaith initiatives in mitigating violence and nurturing a culture of reconciliation and tolerance. These actors, through their moral authority, grassroots engagement, and dialogue-based interventions, have become critical agents of peacebuilding, particularly in regions prone to ethno-religious tensions.

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