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RELIGIOUS LEADERSHIP AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION: RE-EXAMINING THE ROLE OF FAITH-BASED ORGANISATIONS IN PEACEBUILDING IN NIGERIA

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Abstract
Nigeria occupies a paradoxical place in the study of religion and conflict. It is one of the most religiously observant societies in the world, and it is also a society in which religious identity has repeatedly been mobilised in riots, insurgency, communal clashes and electoral violence. This article re-examines the role of religious leaders and faith-based organisations (FBOs) in conflict resolution and peacebuilding in Nigeria. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of the "ambivalence of the sacred," structural and cultural violence, and Lederach's model of middle-range leadership, it analyses the historical trajectory of religiously framed conflict in Nigeria, from the Kano Maitatsine riots of 1980 to the Kaduna Sharia crisis of 2000, the recurrent Jos crises, the Boko Haram insurgency and the farmer-herder conflicts of the Middle Belt. The article then evaluates the peacebuilding work of key actors, including the Interfaith Mediation Centre in Kaduna, the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC), the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), the Jama'atu Nasril Islam (JNI), the Catholic Justice, Development and Peace Commissions, and Pentecostal and Anglican networks. It argues that FBOs possess distinctive moral authority, grassroots reach and symbolic resources that make them indispensable to peacebuilding, but that their effectiveness is constrained by politicisation, elite capture, denominational competition, theological exclusivism and weak institutional capacity. The article concludes that a re-examined model of faith-based peacebuilding in Nigeria must move from episodic, elite-level dialogue towards a sustained, justice-oriented, community-anchored and state-complementary practice.

Keywords: Religious leadership; faith-based organisations; peacebuilding; conflict resolution; interfaith dialogue.

Introduction

Religion is not peripheral to public life in Nigeria; it is constitutive of it. Christianity and Islam, together with indigenous religious traditions, shape personal identity, political loyalty, moral reasoning and patterns of association across the federation. This centrality explains why religion has so often been implicated in Nigerian conflict, and why it is also so frequently invoked as a resource for peace. Falola's classic study captures the gravity of the problem when he describes “religious violence in Nigeria as a phenomenon that has threatened the very foundations of the Nigerian state" (Falola, 1998, p. 1).

Yet the same pulpits and minbars that have at times amplified suspicion have also produced some of the most remarkable experiments in reconciliation on the African continent. “The partnership between Pastor James Movel Wuye and Imam Muhammad Nurayn Ashafa in Kaduna, former militia leaders who became co-founders of the Interfaith Mediation Centre, has become a globally recognised example of religious peacemaking” (Little, 2007; Wuye *et al.,* 1999). The question that animates this article, therefore, is not whether religion matters to conflict and peace in Nigeria, but how, under what conditions and with what limits religious leadership and faith-based organisations contribute to durable peace.

The scholarly literature has moved through several phases. An earlier secular paradigm in international relations treated religion as a residual or irrational variable that would fade with modernisation. Johnston and Sampson's influential volume challenged this assumption by describing religion as "the missing dimension of statecraft" (Johnston *et al.*, 1994, p. 3).
Subsequent scholarship, especially after the end of the Cold War, recognised that religious actors could be both drivers of violence and agents of reconciliation. “Appleby's notion of the "ambivalence of the sacred" crystallised this insight and has become the dominant interpretive lens” (Appleby, 2000). “In Nigeria, a substantial body of work has examined the political sociology of religion” (Ibrahim, 1991; Kukah, 1993; Falola, 1998), “the dynamics of specific crises” (Higazi, 2011; Human Rights Watch, 2013; International Crisis Group, 2010), and the emergence of interreligious initiatives” (Haynes, 2009; Mustapha *et al.,* 2018).

What remains insufficiently addressed is a critical re-examination of the peacebuilding record of faith-based organisations themselves. Much writing on the subject is either celebratory, highlighting exemplary interfaith

encounters, or dismissive, treating religious bodies as mere extensions of ethnic and political blocs. This article attempts a more balanced assessment. It asks four questions. First, what theoretical resources best explain the dual potential of religion in Nigerian conflict? Second, how has the historical pattern of religiously framed conflict shaped the roles that religious leaders are expected to play? Third, what have Nigerian FBOs actually contributed to conflict prevention, mediation, reconciliation and post-conflict recovery? Fourth, what structural and theological constraints limit their effectiveness, and how might these be addressed?

Methodologically, the article is a qualitative, interpretive study based on critical analysis of secondary literature, published reports of human rights and policy organisations, and documented case studies of faith-based interventions. It adopts a historical-analytical approach that situates contemporary peacebuilding within the longer trajectory of religion and politics in Nigeria. The argument proceeds in six parts: conceptual clarification; theoretical framework; the historical context of religious conflict; an assessment of faith-based peacebuilding practices; a critical analysis of constraints; and a set of recommendations towards a re-examined model.

Conceptual Clarification

Religious Leadership

Religious leadership refers to the exercise of authority, influence and moral guidance by persons whose legitimacy derives, at least in part, from a religious tradition. In Nigeria such leaders include bishops, pastors, general overseers, imams, emirs in their religious capacity, Sufi shaykhs, ulama, traditional priests and the lay officials of religious associations. Their authority is multi-sourced: it rests on sacred texts and doctrine, on charisma, on institutional office and on the social services that religious institutions provide. Marshall's study of Nigerian Pentecostalism shows how “religious authority increasingly shapes not only private piety but the government of self and others" (Marshall, 2009, p. 2).

This authority is significant for peacebuilding because religious leaders frequently enjoy higher levels of public trust than politicians, security agencies or civil servants. They also command dense networks of congregations, schools, hospitals, women's and youth associations and media platforms through which messages can be transmitted rapidly.

Conflict Resolution and Peacebuilding

Conflict resolution denotes processes aimed at addressing the underlying causes of a conflict so that the parties' relationships are transformed and violence is no longer necessary. Peacebuilding is a broader concept. Following Lederach, it is understood here as "a comprehensive concept that encompasses, generates, and sustains the full array of processes, approaches, and stages needed to transform conflict toward more sustainable, peaceful relationships" (Lederach, 1997, p. 20).

“This definition is important because it moves attention beyond ceasefires and signed agreements to the long-term work of rebuilding trust, institutions and relationships. Galtung's distinction between negative peace, the absence of direct violence, and positive peace, the presence of social justice, deepens the point” (Galtung, 1969, 1996). For Nigeria, where episodes of violence have often been followed by fragile calm rather than genuine reconciliation, the distinction is particularly instructive.

Faith-Based Organisations

Faith-based organisations are formally or informally constituted bodies whose identity, mission or motivation is drawn from religious belief. Bouta, Kadayifci-Orellana and Abu-Nimer define faith-based peacebuilding actors as organisations that are "inspired by religious and spiritual values" and engaged in "peacebuilding activities" (Bouta *et al.,* 2005, p. 6).

In Nigeria, the category includes umbrella bodies such as the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA) and Jama'atu Nasril Islam (JNI); interreligious structures such as the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC); denominational agencies such as Catholic Justice, Development and Peace Commissions and Anglican diocesan relief and development boards; and specialised interfaith NGOs such as the Interfaith Mediation Centre.

Theoretical Framework

The Ambivalence of the Sacred

The primary theoretical lens of this article is Appleby's thesis of the ambivalence of the sacred. Appleby argues that religion's capacity to inspire violence and its capacity to inspire peace spring from the same source: the intense

experience of the holy and the deep commitments it generates. In his words, "religion's ambivalence is a product of the believer's encounter with the sacred" (Appleby, 2000, p. 28).

The implication is that the decisive variable is not religion as such but the interpretation and leadership exercised within religious communities. Militants and peacemakers alike are, in Appleby's analysis, religious "extremists" in the sense of radical commitment; what differs is the direction in which that commitment is channelled. Appleby concludes that “religious leaders who wish to promote peace must draw on the internal resources of their own traditions" (Appleby, 2000, p. 16).

This framework is particularly useful for Nigeria, because it allows the analyst to avoid two errors: the essentialist error of treating Islam or Christianity as inherently violent, and the reductionist error of treating religion as nothing but a mask for economic or ethnic interests. Gopin similarly insists that religious traditions contain both exclusivist and pro-social elements and that peacebuilding requires the deliberate retrieval of the latter (Gopin, 2000).

Structural and Cultural Violence

The second lens is Galtung's typology of violence. Galtung defines violence expansively as present “when human beings are being influenced so that their actual somatic and mental realizations are below their potential realizations" (Galtung, 1969, p. 168).

This broadened definition draws attention to structural violence, embedded in unjust social arrangements such as unequal access to land, employment, citizenship rights and political office. In a later article Galtung introduced the concept of cultural violence, defined as "those aspects of culture, the symbolic sphere of our existence ... that can be used to justify or legitimize direct or structural violence" (Galtung, 1990, p. 291).

Religion is explicitly listed among the domains in which cultural violence may operate. This is analytically crucial for Nigeria. Much religiously framed conflict in the country is rooted in structural grievances, notably the indigene-settler dichotomy, competition over farmland and grazing routes, unemployment, and the distribution of state patronage. “Religious discourse can, however, supply the cultural legitimation that transforms a dispute over land or chieftaincy into a perceived cosmic struggle. Juergensmeyer's account of "cosmic war" illuminates how such framing raises the stakes of conflict and makes compromise appear as betrayal” (Juergensmeyer, 2003).

Lederach's Pyramid of Leadership

The third lens is Lederach's pyramid of actors in peacebuilding. Lederach distinguishes between top-level leadership (military, political and religious leaders with high visibility), middle-range leadership (respected sectoral leaders, ethnic and religious leaders, academics, NGO leaders) and grassroots leadership (local leaders, community developers, local health officials). He argues that the middle range holds a strategic position because such actors "are positioned so that they are likely to know and be known by the top-level leadership, yet they have significant connections to the broad context and the constituency that the top leaders claim to represent" (Lederach, 1997, p. 41).

Religious leaders in Nigeria occupy all three levels, but their distinctive peacebuilding potential lies in the middle range, where they can connect the presidency, state governors and traditional rulers with congregations, youth groups and local communities. Lederach's later work on the "moral imagination" adds that “peacebuilding requires the capacity to imagine oneself in a web of relationships that includes one's enemies” (Lederach, 2005). This is a resource that religious traditions, with their teachings on neighbourliness, hospitality and forgiveness, are well placed to cultivate.

Integrating the Frameworks

Taken together, these frameworks suggest a working hypothesis: faith-based organisations contribute most effectively to peace when they (a) deliberately interpret their traditions in pro-social directions, (b) address structural as well as direct violence, and (c) leverage their middle-range position to link elite and grassroots processes. Conversely, they contribute to conflict or remain ineffective when their discourse supplies cultural legitimation for exclusion, when they ignore structural injustice, or when they are captured by top-level political interests.

Historical Context of Religion and Conflict in Nigeria

Colonial and Post-Independence Foundations

The roots of religiously framed conflict in Nigeria lie partly in the colonial construction of the state. British indirect rule in the North preserved and strengthened the Islamic emirate system while restricting Christian missionary activity, whereas the South experienced rapid missionary expansion and Western education. This produced asymmetries in education, employment and political orientation that became salient after independence. Kukah's study of Northern Nigeria demonstrates how religion and power became intertwined in the politics of the region, observing that “religion became "a major factor in the struggle for power" (Kukah, 1993, p. ix).

Kastfelt's study of Middle Belt Christianity similarly shows that “Christian identity in the region developed partly as a political idiom of resistance to perceived Hausa-Fulani Muslim domination” (Kastfelt, 1994).

The Politicisation of Religion from the 1970s

From the late 1970s onward, religion became increasingly politicised. The Sharia debate in the Constituent Assembly of 1977–1978, the controversy surrounding Nigeria's membership of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference in 1986, and the expansion of both Islamic revivalist and Pentecostal movements intensified religious competition. Ibrahim argued that this period witnessed the emergence of religion as a central idiom of political mobilisation, warning that "religion has become a major factor in Nigerian political turbulence" (Ibrahim, 1991, p. 115).

“The Maitatsine uprisings in Kano (1980) and subsequent cities, the Kafanchan-Kaduna riots of 1987, the Zangon-Kataf crisis of 1992 and the Kano riots of 1991 established a pattern in which localised disputes rapidly assumed religious meaning” (Falola, 1998). “Ojo's study of charismatic movements shows how the Pentecostal surge of this period reshaped Christian self-understanding, increasing confidence and assertiveness in the public sphere” (Ojo, 2006). “Kalu notes that African Pentecostalism became a powerful force in public life and in the reconfiguration of religious identity across the continent” (Kalu, 2008).

The Sharia Crisis and the Fourth Republic

The return to civilian rule in 1999 opened political space but also intensified religious contestation. The adoption of expanded Sharia criminal codes in twelve northern states from 1999 onward produced deep anxiety among Christian minorities. The Kaduna riots of February and May 2000 killed hundreds and possibly thousands of people. Paden's analysis of Muslim civic cultures argues that the Sharia question tested the capacity of Nigerian federalism to manage religious pluralism and observes that “Nigeria's future depends on the capacity for conflict resolution within its federal system” (Paden, 2005, p. 1).

Onapajo shows that “democratic competition in the Fourth Republic encouraged politicians to deploy religious identity as an electoral resource, thereby deepening polarization” (Onapajo, 2012).

The Jos Crises

Plateau State, once promoted as the "Home of Peace and Tourism", experienced major episodes of violence in 2001, 2004, 2008 and 2010. Higazi demonstrates that the Jos crisis was rooted in contests over indigeneity, land and political representation between groups classified as indigenes, predominantly Christian, and those classified as settlers, predominantly Hausa-Fulani Muslims. He emphasises that "the conflict is not fundamentally about religion, although religion became a powerful marker of identity” (Higazi, 2011, p. 3).
Human Rights Watch documented the pervasive failure to prosecute perpetrators, noting that “the culture of impunity left victims to leave everything to God" (Human Rights Watch, 2013, p. 1).

The Jos experience demonstrates the limits of religious dialogue in the absence of justice and accountability, a theme to which this article returns.

Boko Haram and Violent Extremism

The Boko Haram insurgency, which escalated after 2009, introduced a qualitatively different form of violence: a jihadist movement that attacked churches, mosques, schools, markets, security forces and traditional and religious leaders who opposed it. Thurston's history of the movement shows that “Boko Haram emerged from intra-Muslim debates and that its earliest and most numerous victims included Muslims” (Thurston, 2018). “Mustapha's edited volume on Muslim identities underscores the internal diversity of Northern Nigerian Islam and the danger of treating sectarian movements as representative of the Muslim community as a whole” (Mustapha, 2014). This

internal diversity matters for peacebuilding, because Muslim religious leaders have been among the most important voices against extremist interpretation, and some have paid with their lives.

Farmer-Herder Conflicts

Since the mid-2010s, conflicts between predominantly Muslim Fulani pastoralists and predominantly Christian farming communities in the Middle Belt have become among the deadliest in the country. The International Crisis Group reported that "these clashes had become Nigeria's gravest security challenge, killing more people than the Boko Haram insurgency in some periods" (International Crisis Group, 2018, p. i).

"Although driven by climate pressure, population growth, land-use change and the collapse of traditional grazing arrangements, the conflict has increasingly been interpreted through religious frames, with narratives of "Islamisation" and "Christian land grabbing" circulating in sermons and social media" (International Crisis Group, 2017). This religionisation of an essentially resource-based conflict presents both a challenge and an opportunity for religious leaders.

Synthesis

The historical pattern reveals three recurrent features. First, religion rarely functions as the sole cause of conflict; it interacts with ethnicity, indigeneity, resource competition and elite political manipulation. Agbiboa's analysis of "ethno-religious conflict highlights the persistent crisis of national identity underlying these interactions" (Agbiboa, 2013). Second, religious identity serves as a powerful amplifier, converting local disputes into national and even transnational narratives. Third, the state's weak record of justice and accountability has repeatedly undermined post-conflict reconciliation. Sampson's causal diagnosis of "religious violence in Nigeria highlights precisely this mix of doctrinal, political and governance factors" (Sampson, 2012). These features define the terrain on which faith-based organisations operate.

Faith-Based Organisations and Peacebuilding Practice in Nigeria

The Interfaith Mediation Centre, Kaduna

The most celebrated Nigerian example of faith-based peacebuilding is the Interfaith Mediation Centre (IMC), founded in Kaduna in the mid-1990s by Pastor James Wuye and Imam Muhammad Ashafa. "Both men had led rival religious militias during the Kaduna violence of the early 1990s; Wuye lost his hand, and Ashafa lost close relatives. Their transformation, narrated in their joint book and in the documentary film The Imam and the Pastor, rested on the retrieval of scriptural teachings on forgiveness and love of neighbor" (Channer, 2006; Wuye *et al.,* 1999). Little's profile describes their work as an instance in which "religious militants" became "religious peacemakers" (Little, 2007, p. 247).

The IMC's methods include joint Christian-Muslim mediation teams, early warning and early response networks, training of youth and women, the development of peace declarations and the use of scriptural reasoning to undercut extremist narratives. "The Centre facilitated the Kaduna Peace Declaration of Religious Leaders in 2002 and has intervened in Plateau, Kaduna and other states. Smock's collection of case studies on religious contributions to peacemaking includes the Kaduna experience as evidence that religious actors can reach audiences beyond the access of secular diplomats" (Smock, 2006).

The significance of the IMC, viewed through Appleby's framework, lies in its demonstration that the same radical commitment that sustained militancy can be redirected towards peace. Viewed through Lederach's framework, the IMC is a classic middle-range actor, with connections to governors and traditional rulers on one side and to youth and community networks on the other.

The Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC)

NIREC was established in 1999 under the co-chairmanship of the Sultan of Sokoto, as President-General of the NSCIA, and the President of CAN. Its membership comprises equal numbers of Christian and Muslim leaders.

> NIREC's role has been chiefly at the top level of Lederach's pyramid: issuing joint statements during crises, advising government and convening national dialogue. Its value lies in the symbolic power of the country's foremost Christian and Muslim leaders appearing together. Its limitations, however, are equally evident. Critics note that NIREC has often been reactive rather than preventive, irregular in its meetings, dependent on government funding and weak in its links to the grassroots (Mustapha et al., 2018).

The case confirms Lederach's warning that top-level processes alone are insufficient for sustainable peace.

Umbrella Religious Bodies: CAN, JNI and NSCIA

CAN, founded in 1976, and the JNI and NSCIA on the Muslim side, are the principal representative bodies of Nigeria's two major faiths. They have played ambivalent roles. On the one hand, they have condemned violence, organised relief for displaced persons and participated in peace committees. “On the other hand, they have at times functioned as advocacy blocs whose communiqués reinforce mutual suspicion, particularly during disputes over Sharia, census figures, appointments and electoral tickets. Kukah has long argued that the politicisation of religious associations has weakened their prophetic independence” (Kukah, 1993). Haynes's comparative study of Mozambique, Nigeria and Cambodia observes that in Nigeria religious bodies have been less successful than their Mozambican counterparts in acting as neutral intermediaries because they are perceived as partisan representatives of their communities (Haynes, 2009). In his assessment, "religious actors in Nigeria have been part of the problem as well as part of the solution" (Haynes, 2009, p. 64).

Catholic Justice, Development and Peace Commissions

The Catholic Church in Nigeria operates Justice, Development and Peace Commissions (JDPC) at diocesan and national levels. These commissions combine peace education, election monitoring, legal aid, human rights documentation and humanitarian assistance. Their strength lies in an integrated approach that links peacebuilding to justice and development, consistent with Galtung's emphasis on positive peace. Catholic social teaching provides a coherent theological basis for this approach. Philpott's account of political reconciliation, which draws in part on religious traditions, argues that “genuine reconciliation must address the wounds that political injustices inflict" (Philpott, 2012, p. 4).

The JDPC model therefore illustrates how a faith-based organisation can address structural violence rather than only its symptoms.

Anglican and Protestant Networks

The Church of Nigeria (Anglican Communion), with its extensive diocesan structure across both northern and southern Nigeria, is positioned to contribute significantly to peacebuilding. Anglican dioceses in Kaduna, Jos, Kano and other northern locations have provided shelter for displaced persons, participated in state peace committees and run schools and hospitals that serve mixed populations. At the same time, the Anglican Church's public posture has sometimes emphasised the defence of Christian rights in ways that, while understandable in contexts of persecution, can be read by Muslim interlocutors as confrontational. Mainline Protestant churches, including Methodist, Baptist and the Church of Christ in Nations (COCIN), have similarly combined relief, advocacy and dialogue. The Middle Belt churches in particular have been central to the care of victims of the farmer-herder conflict.

Pentecostal and Charismatic Churches

“Pentecostal and charismatic churches have become the fastest-growing segment of Nigerian Christianity. Marshall describes Pentecostalism as a "revolution" that seeks to remake both self and society” (Marshall, 2009). Its peacebuilding implications are complex. “Pentecostal emphasis on spiritual warfare and the demonisation of rival spiritual forces can harden boundaries with Islam and with indigenous religion. Ojo and Kalu both note the confrontational rhetoric that sometimes accompanied Pentecostal expansion in the North” (Kalu, 2008; Ojo, 2006). Yet Pentecostal churches also possess enormous capacities for social mobilisation, media outreach and youth engagement. Where Pentecostal leaders have embraced reconciliation ministries, trauma counselling and community development, they have reached constituencies that mainline churches and secular NGOs struggle to engage. The challenge is theological as well as practical: whether spiritual warfare theology can be reinterpreted so that the "enemy" is understood as violence, injustice and hatred rather than as religious others.

Muslim Organisations and Islamic Peace Resources

Muslim organisations, including the JNI, NSCIA, Sufi orders, the Izala movement and the Federation of Muslim Women's Associations in Nigeria (FOMWAN), have contributed to peacebuilding through sermons against extremism, support for victims, and participation in interfaith councils. Islamic traditions provide rich resources for conflict resolution, including the concepts of sulh (reconciliation), islah (reform and restoration of relationships) and the protection of non-Muslim communities. “Abu-Nimer's work on Islamic peacebuilding has shown that such concepts can provide culturally resonant frameworks for training and dialogue” (Abu-Nimer, 2001). Mustapha and Ehrhardt's study of Muslim-Christian relations in Northern Nigeria emphasises that "everyday practices of coexistence" have been as important as formal dialogue (Mustapha *et al.,* 2018, p. 3).

This insight relocates peacebuilding from conference halls to markets, neighbourhoods, schools and families, where Muslim and Christian Nigerians negotiate daily coexistence.

Women and Youth in Faith-Based Peacebuilding

Faith-based peacebuilding in Nigeria is often described through the actions of senior male clerics, but women's and youth organisations within religious communities are frequently the most active peace agents at the grassroots. Christian women's fellowships and Muslim women's associations have organised joint prayer meetings, trauma support and economic empowerment schemes. “Youth wings of churches and mosques have been both recruitment pools for violence and targets of peace education. Bouta and colleagues emphasise that faith-based actors' advantages include their "long-term presence" in communities” (Bouta *et al.,* 2005, p. ix).

This long-term presence is most visible in the local work of women and youth, and a re-examined model of peacebuilding must place them at its centre rather than its margins.

Distinctive Contributions of FBOs

From these cases, five distinctive contributions of faith-based organisations can be identified. First, moral authority and legitimacy: religious leaders can speak to the conscience of their followers in ways that secular actors cannot. Second, grassroots reach: churches and mosques are present in virtually every community, including areas the state barely reaches. Third, symbolic and ritual resources: shared prayers, joint visits to places of worship and public acts of repentance can communicate reconciliation powerfully. Fourth, humanitarian capacity: FBOs operate shelters, hospitals and schools that sustain victims and displaced persons. Fifth, normative resources: scriptures and traditions supply vocabularies of forgiveness, justice, hospitality and the dignity of the human person. Toft, Philpott and Shah argue that religious actors that enjoy independence from the state and possess a political theology favouring pluralism are most likely to contribute to democracy and peace (Toft *et al.,* 2011). This proposition offers a valuable criterion for evaluating Nigerian FBOs.

Critical Re-examination: Constraints and Contradictions

Politicisation and Elite Capture

The most serious constraint on faith-based peacebuilding in Nigeria is politicisation. Religious leaders are courted by politicians, receive patronage, and are sometimes perceived as partisans. “When religious bodies endorse candidates or act as advocates for communal interests in the distribution of political offices, their capacity to act as impartial mediators is compromised. Onapajo describes this as a situation in which politics is conducted "for God", with religious identity providing an instrument of electoral mobilization” (Onapajo, 2012). “Toft and colleagues' emphasis on the independence of religious actors from the state is directly relevant: where independence is weak, prophetic critique and impartial mediation suffer” (Toft *et al.,* 2011).

Reactive and Episodic Interventions

A second constraint is that many interventions are reactive. “Peace meetings, joint press conferences and solidarity visits typically follow violent incidents rather than preventing them. Lederach's emphasis on peacebuilding as a long-term process requiring sustained infrastructure is relevant here” (Lederach, 1997). Without permanent structures for early warning, dialogue and joint action, FBOs are reduced to firefighting.

The Justice Deficit

A third constraint concerns justice. Faith-based peacebuilding often privileges forgiveness and reconciliation, but victims of violence in Nigeria frequently experience such calls as premature when perpetrators remain unpunished. “Human Rights Watch's documentation of impunity in Plateau and Kaduna reveals that thousands of killings resulted in few convictions” (Human Rights Watch, 2013). In such contexts, appeals to forgiveness can be heard as demands that victims surrender legitimate claims. Philpott's ethic of political reconciliation insists that “reconciliation includes acknowledgement, reparation, punishment in appropriate forms and forgiveness, rather than forgiveness alone” (Philpott, 2012). Galtung's notion of positive peace likewise implies that “peace without justice is unstable” (Galtung, 1969).

Theological Exclusivism and Competitive Proselytism

“A fourth constraint is theological. Both Christianity and Islam in Nigeria contain strands that emphasise exclusive truth claims, conversion and competition for public space. Such strands are not inherently violent, but in contexts of insecurity they can provide what Galtung calls cultural violence, the symbolic legitimation of hostility” (Galtung, 1990). Hate speech in sermons, cassette and digital media, and social networks has repeatedly preceded or accompanied violence. Gopin argues that “peacebuilding requires engagement with, not avoidance of, the

hermeneutical debates within traditions" (Gopin, 2000). Ter Haar and Busuttil's collection on religion as "bridge or barrier" reinforces that "the same tradition can be read in either direction depending on leadership and interpretation" (Ter Haar *et al.,* 2005).

Denominational Fragmentation

A fifth constraint is fragmentation. Nigerian Christianity is divided among Catholic, Anglican, mainline Protestant, African Independent, Evangelical and Pentecostal blocs, while Nigerian Islam includes Sufi orders, Izala reformists, Shi'a groups and others. Representative bodies cannot always speak for or discipline their constituencies. The Islamic Movement in Nigeria, for instance, operates outside mainstream Muslim structures, and many independent Pentecostal churches are only loosely connected to CAN. Mustapha's work demonstrates that "intra-religious diversity can itself become a source of conflict" (Mustapha, 2014). Effective peacebuilding thus requires intra-faith as well as interfaith dialogue.

Institutional and Financial Weakness

A sixth constraint is capacity. Many faith-based peace initiatives depend on charismatic founders, ad hoc funding from foreign donors or government, and volunteer labour. When founders die, donors change priorities or governments withdraw support, initiatives collapse. "Even the IMC, despite international recognition, has had to rely heavily on external partners. Bouta and colleagues observe that faith-based actors frequently lack professional training in conflict analysis, mediation and monitoring" (Bouta *et al.,* 2005).

The Problem of the State

Finally, faith-based peacebuilding cannot substitute for a functioning state. Where security forces fail to protect communities, where judicial processes are slow or compromised, and where indigeneity provisions in law and policy institutionalise exclusion, the best efforts of religious leaders will remain limited. Hackett's "analysis of religious freedom regulation in Africa highlights the role of the state in either managing or exacerbating religious pluralism" (Hackett, 2011). "The International Crisis Group has repeatedly recommended reforms in policing, land administration and accountability as preconditions for peace" (International Crisis Group, 2010, 2017). Faith-based peacebuilding should therefore be understood as complementary to, not a replacement for, state responsibility.

Towards a Re-examined Model of Faith-Based Peacebuilding in Nigeria

The foregoing analysis suggests that the role of faith-based organisations in Nigerian peacebuilding must be re-examined along several dimensions. The aim is not to diminish the contributions of religious leaders but to situate them within a more coherent and sustainable framework.

From Episodic Dialogue to Peace Infrastructure

First, faith-based peacebuilding should be institutionalised as part of a national and sub-national peace infrastructure. State-level interfaith councils, linked to local government peace committees and community early warning networks, would allow religious leaders to act before violence escalates. Such structures should have predictable funding, clear mandates and independence from partisan control. Lederach's insistence on a long-term, multi-level infrastructure provides the theoretical basis for this recommendation (Lederach, 1997).

Strengthening the Middle Range

Second, investment should be redirected from high-profile summits towards the middle and grassroots levels. District heads, local pastors and imams, women's leaders, youth leaders and religious schoolteachers are the actors best positioned to translate national commitments into local change. "Training in conflict analysis, mediation, trauma healing and rumour management would strengthen their capacities. Abu-Nimer's model of interreligious peacebuilding training, which integrates religious values with practical skills, offers a useful template" (Abu-Nimer, 2001).

Integrating Justice and Reconciliation

Third, FBOs should explicitly integrate justice into their peacebuilding theology and practice. This means documenting violations, supporting victims' access to justice, advocating for the prosecution of perpetrators regardless of religious affiliation, and supporting reparations and restitution of property. Philpott's "multidimensional model of reconciliation provides a theological and ethical resource that resonates with both Christian and Islamic traditions" (Philpott, 2012). A reconciliation that bypasses justice risks reproducing the cycle of grievance documented in Jos and Kaduna.

Hermeneutics of Peace and Counter-Narratives
Fourth, religious leaders must take responsibility for the hermeneutics taught in their institutions. Seminaries, Bible colleges, Islamiyya schools and madrasas should incorporate teaching on religious pluralism, the theology of peace and the history of coexistence in Nigeria. Pentecostal and charismatic churches, given their reach among youth, have a particular responsibility to reframe spiritual warfare in terms that do not demonise neighbours of other faiths. Appleby's argument that "peacemaking draws on the internal resources of traditions implies that such hermeneutical work cannot be imposed from outside; it must arise from within" (Appleby, 2000).

Intra-Faith Dialogue and Accountability
Fifth, interfaith engagement must be accompanied by intra-faith dialogue. Christian and Muslim umbrella bodies should develop codes of conduct for preachers, mechanisms to address hate speech within their own ranks, and channels for engaging groups that sit outside mainstream structures. This would address the fragmentation that currently weakens representative bodies.

Partnership with the State Without Capture
Sixth, FBOs should engage the state as partners without surrendering their independence. Toft, Philpott and Shah's thesis that religious actors contribute most to peace when they maintain "consensual independence" from the state is directly applicable (Toft *et al.,* 2011). In practical terms, this means transparent funding arrangements, refusal of partisan endorsements by peace bodies, and willingness to criticise government failures in security and justice.

Centring Women, Youth and Everyday Coexistence
Seventh, a re-examined model must centre women and youth and build on everyday practices of coexistence. Joint economic projects, shared markets, inter-school programmes, sports and cultural festivals and interfaith neighbourhood committees can create cross-cutting ties that make violence less likely. Mustapha and Ehrhardt's emphasis on "everyday coexistence provides empirical support for such approaches" (Mustapha *et al.,* 2018).

Addressing the Structural Drivers
Eighth, FBOs should engage the structural drivers of conflict identified throughout this article: indigeneity, land and resource competition, unemployment and governance failure. "Religious organisations already operate schools, hospitals, microfinance schemes and agricultural projects. Deliberately designing these services to serve mixed communities and to reduce competition over scarce resources would translate theological commitments into structural peacebuilding, consistent with Galtung's call for positive peace" (Galtung, 1996).

The re-examination undertaken in this article confirms the explanatory power of Appleby's ambivalence thesis for the Nigerian case. Religious leadership in Nigeria has been neither uniformly destructive nor uniformly constructive. The same institutional networks that transmitted rumour and fear during the Kaduna crises later transmitted messages of peace through the IMC. The same communal identities that defined the battle lines in Jos also provided the vocabulary of shared humanity invoked by peace committees. This duality means that the critical variable is leadership: the choices that religious leaders make about interpretation, alliances and priorities.

The analysis also supports Galtung's insistence on the structural dimension of violence. Faith-based peacebuilding that addresses only attitudes and relationships, while neglecting land, citizenship and justice, is likely to produce negative peace at best. The most robust Nigerian initiatives, such as those of the Catholic JDPC and the IMC's community-level work, are those that combine dialogue with development, advocacy and victim support.

Finally, the Nigerian experience validates Lederach's emphasis on the middle range. NIREC's top-level symbolism is valuable but insufficient; the IMC's success derives from its capacity to connect the elite and the grassroots. A peacebuilding strategy that invests disproportionately in national summits while neglecting local religious leaders, women and youth will continue to struggle.

These findings carry implications beyond Nigeria. In many African societies where religion is central to public life, peacebuilding strategies that ignore religious actors are likely to fail, but strategies that romanticise them are likely to disappoint. The Nigerian case suggests the need for a critical partnership in which the moral authority of religious leaders is mobilised within a framework of justice, accountability, professional capacity and state responsibility.

Conclusion

This article set out to re-examine the role of religious leadership and faith-based organisations in conflict resolution and peacebuilding in Nigeria. It has argued that religion in Nigeria is profoundly ambivalent: it has supplied the identities, narratives and networks through which conflict has been mobilised, and it has also supplied the moral authority, grassroots presence and spiritual resources through which reconciliation has been pursued. The historical record from Maitatsine to Kaduna, Jos, Boko Haram and the farmer-herder conflicts demonstrates that religion rarely acts alone, but that it consistently amplifies conflicts rooted in structural grievance and elite manipulation.

Faith-based organisations, including the Interfaith Mediation Centre, NIREC, CAN, JNI, NSCIA, the Catholic JDPCs, Anglican and Protestant dioceses, Pentecostal churches and Muslim women's associations, have made genuine contributions to prevention, mediation, humanitarian relief and reconciliation. Their effectiveness, however, has been constrained by politicisation, reactive approaches, the neglect of justice, theological exclusivism, fragmentation, limited capacity and the failures of the state.

A re-examined model of faith-based peacebuilding in Nigeria must therefore be institutionalised rather than episodic, middle-range and grassroots-anchored rather than elite-centred, justice-oriented rather than merely conciliatory, hermeneutically self-critical rather than defensive, and complementary to rather than a substitute for responsible governance. In Lederach's terms, it requires a moral imagination capable of perceiving the web of relationships that binds Nigerians of different faiths together (Lederach, 2005). If religious leaders can cultivate and sustain that imagination, the sacred in Nigeria may yet become far more a bridge than a barrier.

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