

# The Role of Religion in Conflict Resolution: A Special Focus on the Biafran Agitation in Nigeria

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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.1026EDU0051>

Received: 18 January 2026; Accepted: 24 January 2026; Published: 03 February 2026

## ABSTRACT

Religion plays an ambivalent yet powerful role in conflict dynamics, functioning both as a source of division and as a resource for peacebuilding. While existing scholarship has examined the political and ethnic dimensions of the Biafran agitation in Nigeria, limited attention has been given to religion as an institutional and moral actor in conflict resolution processes. This study examines the role of religion in conflict resolution with particular focus on the contemporary Biafran agitation. Using a qualitative, interpretive methodology grounded in peacebuilding theory and document analysis, the paper explores how religious institutions and discourses shape narratives of justice, legitimacy, and reconciliation. Special attention is given to the continued detention of Nnamdi Kanu and the perceived double standards in state responses to agitation, analyzing their implications for trust, governance, and peacebuilding. The study argues that religion, when engaged as a mediating moral force rather than a mobilizing ideology, offers significant potential for conflict transformation and sustainable peace in Nigeria.

**Keywords:** Religion, conflict resolution, Biafra, Nigeria, peacebuilding, justice

## INTRODUCTION

Nigeria's persistent internal conflicts reflect deep structural tensions related to ethnicity, governance, and unequal access to political power. Among these conflicts, the renewed agitation for Biafran self-determination stands out as one of the most enduring and symbolically charged. While the Nigerian Civil War ended in 1970, the underlying grievances that fueled the conflict—political exclusion, economic marginalization, and contested citizenship—remain unresolved.

Religion occupies a central position in Nigeria's social and political life, yet its role in the Biafran agitation has often been treated as peripheral or merely symbolic. Existing studies tend to privilege political economy, security studies, or ethnic nationalism, leaving a gap in understanding religion as a mediating moral and institutional force in conflict resolution. This paper addresses that gap by examining how religious institutions, leaders, and ethical frameworks contribute to—or could contribute to—peacebuilding in the context of the Biafran agitation.

**The study is guided by the following research questions:**

How does religion shape interpretations of injustice and legitimacy within the Biafran agitation?

In what ways have religious institutions engaged with issues of justice, dialogue, and reconciliation in southeastern Nigeria?

How do the continued detention of Nnamdi Kanu and perceived state double standards affect the prospects for religiously mediated conflict resolution?

## METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design. Rather than empirical fieldwork, it relies on document analysis and theoretical interpretation, which is appropriate given the political sensitivity and security constraints surrounding the Biafran agitation. Primary sources include public statements by religious bodies (such as the Christian Association of Nigeria and the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria), court

rulings, government communiqués, and speeches related to the Biafran movement. Secondary sources include scholarly literature on religion and conflict, peacebuilding theory, and Nigerian political history.

The analysis is informed by Lederach's (1997) theory of conflict transformation, which emphasizes justice, restored relationships, and institutional legitimacy as prerequisites for sustainable peace. This methodological approach allows for a critical examination of religious discourse and institutional behavior without reducing the study to advocacy or theological reflection alone.

### **Religion and Conflict in Nigeria**

Religion in Nigeria functions as both a marker of identity and a source of moral authority. Christianity and Islam, alongside indigenous traditions, are deeply embedded in social organization and political imagination. Scholars have noted that religion often becomes entangled with ethnic and regional identities, thereby amplifying conflict when political competition intensifies (Falola, 1998).

At the same time, religious institutions have historically played mediatory roles during crises. Interfaith platforms such as the Nigerian Inter-Religious Council have facilitated dialogue during periods of sectarian violence. These interventions illustrate that religion is not merely a passive reflection of conflict but an active social force capable of shaping outcomes.

### **The Biafran Agitation and Its Religious Dimensions**

The Biafran agitation is rooted in historical experiences of violence, exclusion, and post-war marginalization. For many Igbo communities, predominantly Christian, religion has provided a moral language through which suffering is interpreted and collective identity preserved. Achebe (2012) observes that the memory of Biafra is sustained not only politically but also spiritually, through narratives of sacrifice and moral injustice.

Religious rhetoric within the agitation often frames political demands in ethical terms—justice, dignity, and recognition—rather than purely separatist ideology. This moral framing explains why religious institutions retain credibility among local populations and why they remain potential mediators in the conflict.

### **The Continued Detention of Nnamdi Kanu and Its Implications for Peace building**

The prolonged detention of Nnamdi Kanu represents a critical flashpoint in the contemporary Biafran agitation. Despite court rulings and legal controversies surrounding his arrest and extradition, state compliance has remained inconsistent (Ezeani, 2023). This situation has had profound implications for public trust and conflict dynamics in southeastern Nigeria.

From a peacebuilding perspective, perceived injustice undermines the legitimacy of state institutions and fuels radicalization. Lederach (1997) argues that reconciliation is impossible where parties perceive legal and political processes as fundamentally unfair. The Kanu case has therefore become symbolic, transcending individual culpability to represent broader grievances about citizenship and equality before the law.

Religious leaders have responded by calling for due process, restraint, and dialogue. These interventions highlight religion's potential role as a moral counterweight to state power and as a channel for de-escalation rather than confrontation.

### **Perceived Double Standards and the Erosion of Public Trust**

A recurring theme in public discourse surrounding the Biafran agitation is the perception of double standards in state responses to dissent. Comparisons between the treatment of IPOB and other armed or militant groups in Nigeria have reinforced narratives of selective justice (Nwosu, 2023). Such perceptions deepen alienation and weaken national cohesion.

Religion becomes particularly salient in contexts where institutional trust is low. Appleby (2000) notes that religious actors often gain moral credibility precisely when state authority is contested. By articulating ethical critiques of governance and advocating equitable treatment, religious institutions can contribute to rebuilding trust and fostering inclusive dialogue.

### **The Role of Religion in Mediation and Reconciliation**

Religious institutions possess several advantages in conflict resolution: moral legitimacy, grassroots reach, and

cultural resonance. In Nigeria, churches and mosques often function as neutral spaces for dialogue and reconciliation. Their teachings emphasize forgiveness, justice, and communal responsibility, aligning closely with principles of conflict transformation.

Applying Lederach's framework, religion's contribution lies not only in ending violence but in addressing relational and structural dimensions of conflict. In southeastern Nigeria, faith-based organizations are well-positioned to facilitate dialogues that acknowledge historical grievances while promoting peaceful coexistence within the Nigerian state.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This study is limited by its reliance on document analysis rather than empirical fieldwork. As such, it does not capture firsthand perspectives from affected communities or religious leaders. Future research could strengthen these findings through interviews, ethnographic studies, or comparative analyses of faith-based mediation initiatives across Nigeria.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study has examined the role of religion in conflict resolution with particular focus on the Biafran agitation in Nigeria. It has argued that religion functions not merely as a symbolic backdrop but as a moral and institutional actor capable of shaping narratives of justice, legitimacy, and reconciliation. The continued detention of Nnamdi Kanu and perceptions of state double standards highlight the urgency of restoring trust through lawful, inclusive, and dialogical approaches.

When engaged constructively, religion offers powerful resources for conflict transformation. Its credibility, ethical vision, and social embeddedness position it as a vital partner in Nigeria's search for peace, justice, and national reconciliation.

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