

Interfaith Dialogue: A Path to Peaceful Coexistence in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Nigeria is one of the most religiously diverse countries in Africa, characterized by the presence of Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religion. While this diversity has enriched the cultural and spiritual life of the nation, it has also contributed to recurring tensions and conflicts arising from intolerance, political manipulation of religion, and socio-economic disparities. In recent decades, religious conflicts have threatened national unity, social stability, and sustainable development. This study examines interfaith dialogue as a viable pathway for fostering peaceful coexistence in Nigeria. Using a philosophical and analytical approach, the paper explores the meaning and significance of interfaith dialogue and its potential role in promoting mutual understanding, tolerance, and cooperation among adherents of different religious traditions. The study argues that dialogue encourages openness, respect for religious differences, and recognition of shared human values such as dignity, justice, and compassion. It further highlights the contributions of faith-based organizations, community leaders, and national platforms in promoting interreligious engagement and peacebuilding initiatives. However, the paper also identifies several challenges that hinder effective dialogue, including religious extremism, mistrust among religious communities, political interference, and inadequate institutional support. To address these challenges, the study recommends strengthening interfaith education, promoting grassroots dialogue initiatives, and encouraging collaborative efforts between religious leaders, civil society organizations, and government institutions. The paper concludes that sustained interfaith dialogue remains an essential instrument for mitigating religious conflicts and building a culture of tolerance, social harmony, and national integration in Nigeria.

Keywords: Dialogue; Interfaith Relations; Peacebuilding; Religious Diversity; Religious Tolerance.

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria is widely recognized as one of the most religiously pluralistic societies in Africa. The country is characterized by the coexistence of multiple religious traditions that have shaped its social, cultural, and political life. Historically, the religious landscape of Nigeria developed through a combination of indigenous religious traditions and the later introduction of world religions. Before the advent of foreign religions, various ethnic groups practiced forms of African Traditional Religion (ATR), which provided a spiritual framework for social organization, moral conduct, and communal identity (Mbiti, 1990). These indigenous religious systems emphasized communal values, reverence for ancestors, and a deep sense of the sacredness of life. The arrival of Islam in the northern regions of Nigeria between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries through trans-Saharan trade significantly transformed the religious and political structures of the region (Falola & Heaton, 2008). Later, Christianity was introduced in the nineteenth century through European missionaries, particularly during the colonial era, and it spread rapidly in the southern regions through missionary education and evangelization (Kukah, 1993). Today, Nigeria is predominantly composed of adherents of Christianity and Islam, with African Traditional Religion still practiced either independently or alongside the major religions. This coexistence of different religious traditions has created a dynamic but complex religious environment in which diverse beliefs and practices interact within the same social and political space.

Religious diversity in Nigeria is primarily structured around three major traditions: Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religion. Christianity is widely practiced in the southern and central regions of the country, with denominations such as Roman Catholicism, Anglicanism, Pentecostalism, and various Protestant churches playing significant roles in social development, education, and healthcare (Gaiya, 2015). Islam, on the other hand,

is predominantly practiced in the northern regions, with the majority of Muslims adhering to the Sunni tradition, although other Islamic movements and reform groups are also present (Loimeier, 2012). African Traditional Religion continues to influence the spiritual worldview of many Nigerians despite the spread of Christianity and Islam. It represents a complex system of beliefs centered on the worship of a Supreme Being, reverence for ancestors, and the interaction between the visible and invisible worlds (Mbiti, 1990). In many cases, elements of African Traditional Religion coexist with the practices of Christianity and Islam, resulting in a unique form of religious syncretism. The coexistence of these religious traditions demonstrates the depth of Nigeria's pluralistic character, but it also creates potential tensions where differences in beliefs and practices intersect with ethnic and political interests.

The main objective of this study is to examine interfaith dialogue as a pathway to peaceful coexistence in Nigeria. Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. Examine the nature of religious pluralism in Nigeria.
2. Identify the major causes of religious conflicts and intolerance in the country.
3. Analyze the role of interfaith dialogue in promoting mutual understanding and cooperation among religious communities.
4. Propose strategies for strengthening interreligious dialogue as a tool for peacebuilding in Nigeria.

This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the historical and social foundations of religious pluralism in Nigeria?
2. What factors contribute to recurring religious conflicts and intolerance in the country?
3. How can interfaith dialogue promote peaceful coexistence among diverse religious communities in Nigeria?
4. What strategies can enhance the effectiveness of interreligious dialogue initiatives in the Nigerian context?

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS

Meaning of Interfaith Dialogue

Interfaith dialogue, also referred to as interreligious dialogue, is broadly understood as a constructive engagement between individuals or communities belonging to different religious traditions with the aim of fostering mutual understanding, respect, and cooperation. It involves a deliberate and respectful exchange of ideas, beliefs, and experiences among adherents of diverse faiths. Scholars emphasize that interfaith dialogue does not seek to erase doctrinal differences or impose uniformity in religious beliefs; rather, it aims to promote peaceful interaction and build bridges of understanding among people of different faith traditions (Swidler, 2014). In this sense, dialogue becomes a vital instrument for addressing misunderstandings, stereotypes, and prejudices that often arise in pluralistic societies.

Concept of Peaceful Coexistence

Peaceful coexistence refers to the ability of individuals and communities with diverse cultural, religious, or ideological backgrounds to live together in harmony while respecting their differences. It implies a social condition in which diversity does not lead to hostility or violence but instead becomes a source of mutual enrichment. In many scholarly discussions, peace is often interpreted not merely as the absence of violence but as the presence of justice, harmony, and constructive relationships among members of society. The broader understanding of peace is captured in the concept of positive peace, which emphasizes social justice, equitable distribution of resources, and the protection of human dignity. According to **Johan Galtung**, peace should be

understood in both negative and positive terms. Negative peace refers to the absence of direct violence, whereas positive peace involves the elimination of structural inequalities and the establishment of social conditions that promote human well-being. Within this framework, peaceful coexistence requires more than simply preventing conflict; it requires building social structures and cultural attitudes that encourage cooperation, tolerance, and mutual respect.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF RELIGIOUS RELATIONS IN NIGERIA

Understanding contemporary interreligious relations in Nigeria requires an examination of the historical processes that shaped the country's religious landscape. Nigeria's religious diversity did not emerge suddenly in the modern period; rather, it developed gradually through historical interactions among indigenous religious traditions, Islam, and Christianity. These interactions evolved through different phases pre-colonial coexistence, colonial transformation, and post-independence tensions each of which contributed to the present dynamics of religious relations in the country. Before the introduction of Christianity and Islam, religious life in what is now Nigeria was dominated by African Traditional Religion (ATR). Indigenous religious systems were deeply integrated into the cultural and social structures of various ethnic groups such as the Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, Tiv, and Edo. These religious traditions emphasized communal life, reverence for ancestors, and belief in a supreme being alongside various deities and spiritual intermediaries (Falola & Akinyemi, 2016). Religion was not separated from daily life but functioned as a moral and cultural framework that regulated social relations, justice, and governance within communities.

Despite differences in beliefs and ritual practices among ethnic groups, pre-colonial Nigerian societies generally maintained a degree of religious tolerance and coexistence. Indigenous religions were typically inclusive and flexible, allowing for the integration of new spiritual ideas and practices. This openness facilitated relatively peaceful interactions among communities practicing different forms of traditional religion (Ojo, 2018).

The colonial period marked a significant turning point in the religious history of Nigeria. With the establishment of British colonial administration in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Christianity was introduced and expanded rapidly through missionary activities. Christian missionaries established schools, hospitals, and churches, particularly in southern Nigeria, where colonial policies allowed them greater freedom to operate (Sanneh, 2015). Through missionary education and evangelization, Christianity gained a strong foothold in many southern communities. In contrast, British colonial authorities adopted a policy of indirect rule in northern Nigeria, which allowed Islamic institutions to retain considerable influence in governance and social life. Colonial administrators often restricted Christian missionary activities in the north in order to avoid provoking resistance from Muslim leaders (Umar, 2017). As a result, the colonial state effectively reinforced a regional religious divide: Islam remained dominant in the north, while Christianity expanded primarily in the south.

This colonial arrangement contributed to the institutionalization of religious identities within the emerging Nigerian state. Religious affiliation increasingly became intertwined with political administration, educational opportunities, and access to social resources. Scholars argue that colonial policies unintentionally laid the foundation for future religious tensions by reinforcing regional and religious divisions within the country (Falola & Heaton, 2018). Nevertheless, the colonial period also witnessed instances of peaceful coexistence and interaction among adherents of different religions, particularly in urban centers where economic activities brought diverse communities together.

In contemporary Nigeria, interreligious conflicts have become one of the most significant challenges to national unity and social stability. These conflicts often occur in regions where religious and ethnic identities intersect, such as the Middle Belt and parts of northern Nigeria. Violent clashes between communities have led to significant loss of lives, displacement of populations, and destruction of property (Adesoji, 2018). One of the most prominent security challenges in recent years has been the insurgency carried out by extremist groups such as Boko Haram, which emerged in northeastern Nigeria in the early 2000s. The group's violent activities, including attacks on religious institutions, schools, and civilian populations, have intensified religious tensions and contributed to widespread insecurity in the region (Thurston, 2017).

However, many scholars caution against interpreting these conflicts as purely religious. Instead, they emphasize that interreligious violence in Nigeria often reflects a complex interaction of factors, including poverty, weak

governance, political manipulation, and competition for land and resources (Onapajo & Ozden, 2020). Religious identity may serve as a mobilizing factor, but the underlying causes of conflict are frequently rooted in socio-economic and political conditions. Despite these challenges, numerous efforts have been made by religious leaders, civil society organizations, and government institutions to promote peace and dialogue among Nigeria's diverse religious communities. Interfaith initiatives, community peacebuilding programs, and educational reforms have increasingly been recognized as important strategies for addressing the historical roots of religious tensions and fostering a culture of peaceful coexistence.

CAUSES OF RELIGIOUS CONFLICTS IN NIGERIA

Religious conflicts in Nigeria are often perceived as purely theological disputes between adherents of different faith traditions. However, scholarly analyses suggest that these conflicts are usually the result of complex interactions between religious, political, economic, and social factors. Religion often functions as a mobilizing identity through which deeper grievances are expressed. Consequently, understanding the root causes of religious conflicts in Nigeria requires examining the structural and ideological conditions that contribute to tensions among religious communities. Among the most significant factors are religious extremism and intolerance, political manipulation of religion, socio-economic inequality, ignorance and misinterpretation of religious teachings, and ethno-religious identity politics.

Religious Extremism and Intolerance

Religious extremism represents one of the most prominent causes of conflict in Nigeria. Extremism occurs when individuals or groups adopt rigid interpretations of religious doctrines and reject the legitimacy of other beliefs or practices. Such attitudes often lead to intolerance, hostility, and sometimes violence against individuals who belong to different religious traditions. In pluralistic societies like Nigeria, where multiple religions coexist within the same political and social environment, extremist ideologies can easily provoke tensions and confrontations. In recent years, extremist movements have intensified religious conflicts in parts of the country, particularly in northern Nigeria. Violent extremist groups have attempted to impose radical interpretations of religion and reject the legitimacy of secular governance and religious diversity. The activities of groups such as Boko Haram have significantly exacerbated religious tensions by targeting both Muslim and Christian communities as well as state institutions. Scholars argue that extremist ideologies thrive in contexts characterized by social grievances, weak governance, and limited access to education (Thurston, 2017; Onapajo & Uzodike, 2020). These conditions create fertile ground for radical narratives that portray other religious groups as enemies or threats.

Political Manipulation of Religion

Another major factor contributing to religious conflicts in Nigeria is the manipulation of religion by political actors. In many instances, political elites exploit religious identities to mobilize support, gain legitimacy, or weaken their opponents. Because religion plays a significant role in the identity and moral worldview of many Nigerians, it can easily be used as a powerful instrument for political mobilization. Political manipulation of religion often occurs during electoral processes, when politicians appeal to religious sentiments to secure votes from particular communities. This strategy sometimes results in the politicization of religious identities and the creation of divisions between religious groups. Scholars have noted that such manipulation can intensify suspicion and hostility among communities, especially when political competition is perceived as a struggle between religious groups (Kukah, 2019).

Socio-economic Inequality and Marginalization

Socio-economic inequality and marginalization also play crucial roles in fueling religious conflicts in Nigeria. Although religion may appear to be the immediate cause of conflict, underlying socio-economic grievances often contribute to tensions among communities. High levels of poverty, unemployment, and unequal access to resources can create frustration and resentment, particularly among marginalized groups. In regions where economic opportunities are limited, religious identity can become a means of mobilizing individuals who feel excluded from political or economic benefits. Scholars have observed that youth unemployment and lack of

educational opportunities make young people more susceptible to recruitment by extremist groups that promise economic support, social belonging, or ideological purpose (Agbiboa, 2018; Onapajo & Ozden, 2020).

Furthermore, perceptions of marginalization whether real or imagined can intensify religious tensions. When communities believe that they are excluded from political representation, economic development, or social services because of their religious identity, grievances may escalate into conflict. Addressing socio-economic inequality is therefore an important component of efforts to reduce religious tensions and promote long-term stability.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

A theoretical framework provides the conceptual foundation for analyzing the role of interfaith dialogue in promoting peaceful coexistence in Nigeria. Given the complex nature of religious pluralism and interreligious relations, this study draws upon philosophical and ethical perspectives that emphasize dialogue, responsibility, and mutual recognition as essential elements of human interaction. In particular, the philosophy of dialogue and the ethics of responsibility offer valuable insights for understanding how interfaith engagement can contribute to conflict resolution and social harmony in multi-religious societies.

The philosophy of dialogue provides an important intellectual foundation for understanding meaningful engagement between individuals and communities. One of the most influential thinkers in this area is Martin Buber, whose philosophical reflections on human relationships emphasize the centrality of genuine encounter. In his dialogical philosophy, Buber distinguishes between two fundamental modes of human interaction: the “I–It” and the “I–Thou” relationships. The “I–It” relationship treats the other as an object to be used, analyzed, or controlled, whereas the “I–Thou” relationship recognizes the other as a subject with dignity, autonomy, and intrinsic value (Friedman, 2019).

Applied to interfaith relations, Buber’s dialogical framework suggests that genuine dialogue requires participants to approach each other not as opponents or objects of conversion but as partners in a shared search for truth and understanding. Dialogue in this sense involves openness, mutual respect, and a willingness to listen to the experiences and perspectives of others. Such an approach encourages individuals from different religious traditions to engage in constructive communication that transcends prejudice and hostility.

Closely related to the philosophy of dialogue is the ethical principle of responsibility and mutual recognition. In pluralistic societies, peaceful coexistence depends largely on the willingness of individuals and communities to recognize the legitimacy of others’ identities and beliefs. Mutual recognition involves acknowledging the rights, dignity, and moral equality of others regardless of differences in religion, culture, or worldview. Ethical responsibility in interfaith relations requires individuals and communities to move beyond self-centered perspectives and consider the well-being of others. This approach resonates with the ethical philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, which emphasizes that the presence of the other person calls the self to responsibility and ethical response. Such responsibility includes promoting justice, protecting human dignity, and preventing harm in interpersonal and communal relationships.

Mutual recognition also plays an important role in reducing prejudice and discrimination in multi-religious societies. When individuals acknowledge the legitimacy of others’ beliefs and identities, they are more likely to engage in constructive dialogue and cooperation. In the Nigerian context, where religious identities often intersect with ethnic and political affiliations, the cultivation of mutual recognition can help mitigate tensions and strengthen social cohesion.

Furthermore, the ethics of responsibility encourages religious communities to collaborate in addressing common social challenges such as poverty, injustice, and violence. Many religious traditions share moral teachings that emphasize compassion, solidarity, and the pursuit of peace. By focusing on these shared ethical values, interfaith dialogue can create a moral framework for collective action aimed at promoting the common good.

Dialogue has long been recognized as an effective method for resolving conflicts in diverse societies. Conflict resolution scholars argue that dialogue provides a nonviolent platform through which conflicting parties can

express grievances, clarify misunderstandings, and explore mutually beneficial solutions (Lederach, 2015). Unlike confrontational approaches, dialogue emphasizes communication, empathy, and collaboration. In the context of interreligious relations, dialogue can play a crucial role in preventing and managing conflicts. Religious conflicts often arise from misperceptions, stereotypes, and lack of communication between communities. Through structured and sustained dialogue, participants can address these issues by sharing their experiences, correcting misconceptions, and identifying common interests.

Dialogue also contributes to reconciliation by fostering empathy and restoring trust among communities that have experienced conflict. By encouraging participants to listen to each other's narratives and perspectives, dialogue can help humanize adversaries and reduce hostility. This process is particularly important in societies like Nigeria, where historical grievances and communal tensions have sometimes led to cycles of violence. Moreover, dialogue can facilitate cooperation between religious communities in promoting peace and social development. Interfaith initiatives often involve collaborative activities such as community development projects, peace education programs, and humanitarian efforts. These joint activities strengthen relationships among communities and demonstrate that religious diversity can be a source of unity rather than division.

THE ROLE OF INTERFAITH DIALOGUE IN PROMOTING PEACEFUL COEXISTENCE

Interfaith dialogue has increasingly been recognized as a critical strategy for promoting peaceful coexistence in societies characterized by religious diversity. In Nigeria, where Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religion coexist within the same socio-political environment, constructive engagement among religious communities is essential for maintaining social harmony. Dialogue provides a platform through which individuals and communities of different faith traditions can interact, exchange perspectives, and work collaboratively toward common goals. Scholars argue that sustained interreligious engagement helps to reduce hostility, foster understanding, and strengthen relationships among diverse groups (Marshall, 2018; Abu-Nimer, Khoury, & Welty, 2016). Through these processes, interfaith dialogue contributes significantly to peacebuilding and conflict prevention in multi-religious societies.

Building Mutual Understanding and Trust

One of the most important contributions of interfaith dialogue is its ability to promote mutual understanding among adherents of different religious traditions. Religious conflicts often arise from ignorance, stereotypes, and misconceptions about the beliefs and practices of other faith communities. Dialogue creates opportunities for individuals to learn directly from one another, thereby correcting misunderstandings and fostering a deeper appreciation of religious diversity. Through structured conversations, joint workshops, and community engagements, participants are able to share their religious experiences and perspectives in a respectful environment. Such interactions enable individuals to recognize common values that transcend religious boundaries, including compassion, justice, and the dignity of human life. Scholars have noted that sustained dialogue helps to humanize the "other" and reduces the tendency to view people from different religious backgrounds with suspicion or hostility (Appleby, 2019).

In the Nigerian context, where historical grievances and communal tensions sometimes create mistrust between religious groups, dialogue plays a crucial role in rebuilding relationships. When religious leaders and community members engage in open and honest communication, they create opportunities for reconciliation and trust-building. This process helps transform relationships from antagonism to cooperation, thereby laying the foundation for peaceful coexistence.

Promoting Religious Tolerance and Respect

Interfaith dialogue also promotes religious tolerance and respect, which are essential for maintaining harmony in pluralistic societies. Tolerance involves recognizing and respecting the right of others to practice their faith freely without discrimination or persecution. In many cases, intolerance arises when individuals believe that their religious beliefs are the only legitimate or valid expressions of truth. Dialogue encourages participants to appreciate the diversity of religious traditions while remaining faithful to their own beliefs. By interacting with people from different faith backgrounds, individuals learn to respect differences and acknowledge the value of

pluralism. According to peace scholars, such engagement fosters attitudes of openness and empathy that are necessary for peaceful coexistence (Abu-Nimer et al., 2016).

Strengthening National Unity and Social Integration

Interfaith dialogue also contributes to national unity and social integration. In a country as diverse as Nigeria, fostering a sense of shared national identity is essential for political stability and social cohesion. Religious divisions can sometimes undermine this sense of unity when communities perceive themselves primarily in terms of religious affiliation rather than national belonging. Dialogue encourages individuals to see themselves not only as members of particular religious communities but also as citizens who share common responsibilities and aspirations within the broader society. By emphasizing shared values such as justice, peace, and human dignity, interfaith initiatives help cultivate a sense of collective identity that transcends religious differences.

Furthermore, interfaith collaboration can strengthen democratic institutions and civic engagement. When religious leaders and communities work together to address social issues, they contribute to the development of inclusive public spaces where diverse perspectives can be expressed and respected. Such cooperation reinforces the idea that religious diversity is compatible with national unity and democratic governance.

STRATEGIES FOR STRENGTHENING INTERFAITH DIALOGUE IN NIGERIA

Given the persistent religious tensions and challenges facing interfaith dialogue in Nigeria, it is essential to develop comprehensive strategies that enhance dialogue, foster mutual understanding, and promote peaceful coexistence. Strengthening interfaith engagement requires coordinated efforts across multiple levels, including education, institutional support, government policy, community involvement, and media practices. The following strategies highlight practical approaches to enhancing the effectiveness and sustainability of interfaith dialogue in Nigeria.

Religious Education for Tolerance

Education plays a crucial role in shaping attitudes toward religious diversity and promoting tolerance. Integrating interfaith and religious tolerance education into school curricula can help students develop a deeper understanding of different faith traditions and the ethical values they share. This approach can counter stereotypes, reduce prejudice, and cultivate respect for diversity from an early age (Marshall, 2018). Religious education programs should emphasize the shared moral principles of Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religion, such as compassion, justice, and care for the community. In addition, incorporating modules on peacebuilding, conflict resolution, and interfaith cooperation can equip students with practical skills for managing religious differences constructively. Beyond formal education, religious institutions can offer workshops, seminars, and public lectures to promote continuous learning about religious tolerance and coexistence.

Institutional Support for Interreligious Platforms

Strengthening institutional frameworks is critical for the sustainability and effectiveness of interfaith dialogue. National organizations such as the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council should receive adequate funding, logistical support, and professional capacity-building to expand their reach beyond elite circles and urban centers (Omotsho, 2020).

Regional and local dialogue platforms should also be established to facilitate engagement at the grassroots level, where most interreligious tensions originate. Trained facilitators and mediators can help manage sensitive discussions, ensure inclusivity, and promote constructive communication between communities. Coordination among religious councils, civil society organizations, and educational institutions can strengthen networks of dialogue and increase their impact.

Government Policies Promoting Religious Harmony

Government support is essential for creating an enabling environment for interfaith dialogue. Policies and legislation that protect religious freedom, prevent discrimination, and promote equitable access to resources can

reduce tensions and foster confidence among religious communities (Kukah, 2019). Governments at the federal, state, and local levels should actively encourage interreligious initiatives, provide funding for dialogue programs, and create platforms for collaboration among religious leaders. Additionally, transparent mechanisms for resolving religious disputes and addressing grievances can enhance trust in state institutions and reduce the likelihood of conflicts escalating into violence.

Community-Based Peacebuilding Initiatives

Community engagement is central to effective interfaith dialogue. Localized peacebuilding initiatives that involve ordinary citizens, youth, women, and community leaders can help address underlying social tensions and foster direct relationships among religious groups. Programs such as joint cultural events, interfaith forums, and collaborative development projects can create opportunities for interaction, cooperation, and mutual understanding (Onapajo & Ozden, 2020). Such grassroots approaches are particularly effective in regions with historical or ongoing conflicts, as they allow communities to develop context-specific solutions and build trust through sustained engagement. Encouraging participation across demographic lines ensures that dialogue is inclusive and that its benefits reach the broader population.

Media Responsibility in Religious Reporting

The media plays a critical role in shaping public perceptions of religious diversity and conflicts. Responsible reporting can reduce misinformation, prevent sensationalism, and promote constructive narratives about interfaith engagement. Journalists and media organizations should be trained to report on religious issues with sensitivity, accuracy, and fairness (Appleby, 2019). Media platforms can also serve as tools for promoting interfaith dialogue by highlighting success stories, sharing educational content, and facilitating discussions on religious coexistence. Positive media coverage of collaborative initiatives between religious communities can help counter extremist narratives and encourage wider public support for peacebuilding efforts.

Strengthening interfaith dialogue in Nigeria requires a multifaceted approach that combines education, institutional support, government policy, grassroots engagement, and responsible media practices. Implementing these strategies can enhance the capacity of religious communities to engage constructively, reduce tensions, and foster sustainable peaceful coexistence in Nigeria's pluralistic society.

CONCLUSION

Religious diversity in Nigeria presents both profound opportunities for cultural enrichment and significant challenges for social cohesion. This study has examined how Nigeria's multi-religious landscape comprising Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religion—has historically shaped intercommunal relations, while also highlighting the recurring challenges of intolerance, extremism, and ethno-religious conflict. Through a careful analysis of the causes, dynamics, and consequences of religious tensions, the study demonstrates that sustainable peaceful coexistence requires deliberate, sustained, and well-structured engagement across religious, social, and political domains.

The findings underscore that interfaith dialogue serves as a critical pathway for fostering understanding and cooperation among diverse religious communities. Dialogue promotes mutual understanding and trust, mitigates misperceptions, encourages respect for different religious beliefs, and reduces the appeal of radical ideologies. It also strengthens national unity and social integration by cultivating a sense of shared citizenship and collective responsibility. Furthermore, interfaith collaboration in social development projects such as education, humanitarian assistance, and community empowerment illustrates that dialogue can translate into tangible benefits for society, reinforcing the ethical and practical value of interreligious engagement. The theoretical foundations provided by the philosophy of dialogue, particularly the works of Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas, emphasize the ethical and relational dimensions of dialogue. These frameworks demonstrate that dialogue is more than an intellectual exercise; it is an ethical encounter that demands recognition of the other, responsibility, empathy, and genuine engagement. When applied to Nigeria's context, these theories reinforce the notion that sustainable peace depends on fostering relationships rooted in mutual respect and shared moral responsibility.

Despite its potential, the effectiveness of interfaith dialogue in Nigeria faces multiple challenges, including deep-seated mistrust among communities, political interference, extremist ideologies, weak institutional frameworks, and limited grassroots participation. Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach that combines education, institutional support, government policy, community engagement, and responsible media reporting. Religious leaders, policymakers, and civil society actors must work collaboratively to implement strategies that enhance participation, ensure inclusivity, and build confidence among diverse religious groups.

Interfaith dialogue represents not merely a mechanism for conflict mitigation but a transformative strategy for long-term peacebuilding in Nigeria. By fostering ethical responsibility, mutual recognition, and cooperative engagement, dialogue can help transform religious diversity from a source of division into a foundation for national unity, social cohesion, and sustainable development. The adoption of comprehensive strategies that integrate education, policy, institutional strengthening, community-based programs, and media engagement can ensure that interfaith dialogue achieves its full potential, thereby contributing to a Nigeria in which religious differences coexist harmoniously, and where diversity is celebrated as a driver of societal resilience and collective prosperity.

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