



RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY, INTER FAITH DIALOGUE AND NATIONAL UNITY IN NIGERIA.

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Abstract

Nigeria's religious landscape is characterised by diversity, with Christianity and Islam existing side by side within a shared national space. This plural religious environment has significantly influenced social relations, political interactions and national identity. While religion often serves as a source of moral values and communal solidarity, it has also been associated with tension and conflict when mobilised for political or ideological interests. Consequently, the pursuit of national unity within Nigeria's religiously diverse context remains a critical challenge. This paper examines the relationship between religious diversity, interfaith dialogue and national unity in Nigeria. It argues that religious diversity is not inherently conflict-oriented but can become a catalyst for unity when supported by sincere and inclusive interfaith dialogue. Interfaith dialogue is understood as a structured process of engagement that promotes mutual respect, tolerance and peaceful coexistence among religious groups. The paper explores how dialogue initiatives create platforms for cooperation, reduce mistrust and encourage shared civic responsibility in a multi religious society. The study adopts a qualitative research methodology based on documentary analysis of scholarly literature, policy documents and reports on interfaith initiatives in Nigeria. The findings indicate that effective interfaith dialogue contributes to national unity by reducing religious prejudice, strengthening social cohesion and supporting peaceful approaches to conflict management. However, the study also finds that political manipulation of religion, weak institutional support and socio-economic pressures continue to limit the effectiveness of interfaith dialogue in fostering sustainable national unity in Nigeria.

Keywords: Religious diversity, interfaith dialogue, National unity, Social cohesion



Introduction

Being a pluralistic society, religion takes an important place in the lives of the citizens of Nigeria both in personal and social aspects. Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Religion coexist in Nigeria, affecting moral, social and community relations in different parts of the country. Religious diversity is a characteristic feature of Nigeria, being both a positive attribute and a major challenge in terms of building national unity.

In many cases, religious diversity in Nigeria was associated with mutual mistrust, religious intolerance and clashes between different communities throughout history. Such phenomena hindered the development of national unity in Nigeria. Nevertheless, it is necessary to admit that religion in itself is not something negative, which causes conflicts in society. The main issue here is the lack of continuous interaction and discussion between members of religious communities and religious identity abuse.

Interfaith dialogue represents an effective way to address the aforementioned challenges. Dialogue implies active discussions between different parties that seek to understand each other better. Interfaith dialogue helps to find common values in terms of ethics, such as peace, tolerance and justice, which are critical for establishing unity within one nation. In the context of religious diversity in Nigeria, interfaith dialogue can become a guiding principle.

Conceptual framework

Religious Pluralism: Religious pluralism can be defined as the sociological term denoting the situation whereby two or more clearly identifiable religions exist side by side in the same society. As noted by Merino (2010), this concept arises from the existence of various religious bodies existing alongside each other while retaining their different doctrines, beliefs and ideologies.

Interfaith Dialogue: Interfaith dialogue is also known as interreligious dialogue which entails an intentional and constructive process involving persons or institutions from various religions or belief systems. It entails open discussions between different religions with the aim of fostering harmony. It can be carried out on either a personal level or institutional level and its goal is to eliminate misunderstandings and prejudices.

National Unity: National unity can be defined as the process through which a plural society achieves integration into an organic whole, which is based on a sense of common purpose and identity as a nation. According to Sinha (2014), national unity is characterized by the harmonization of a variety of social groups in a nation regardless of their cultural diversity, language or religious affiliation. In a nation there are individuals living within the same geographical location and who share similar interest, aspirations and a common sense of belonging. On the other hand, unity is defined as the act of joining different parts or elements to form a functioning whole. When used in the context of national unity, it implies a state of integration of various elements of a society to work together towards their common progress.

The Diversity of Religion in Nigeria

There is a wide range of religious diversity in Nigeria due to the existence of many religions within a large area that has a number of cultural diversities. The presence of such diversity is not just about the number of people practising certain religious beliefs, but rather it is a social phenomenon that influences government, social relations and ethics. As mentioned by Mbiti (1990), this religious pluralism in Nigeria is seen in cities like Lagos, Abuja and northern ancient towns like Kano and Sokoto through the presence of many mosques, churches and even shrines as indicators of past religious growth and interactions.

Nigeria's religious diversity is rooted in the interplay between historical trends, population movements, political structures, and social interactions throughout the nation. Nigeria does not have a homogeneous religious background. Rather, various proportions of Islam, Christianity, and indigenous religions co-exist in different locations in the nation, at state levels, or even community levels. Such differences have been created and sustained by demographic changes, economic exchanges, colonial interactions, and post-colonial social mobility, all of which impact the demographic distributions of religious communities.

As Dowd (2016) observes, the demographic composition of religions within a community will influence its pattern of coexistence and tolerance. For instance, if there are no dominant religious communities in the community, then there will be a likelihood of peaceful coexistence between religious groups. As evidenced by Dowd's comparison between Ibadan, Enugu, and Kano, in regions where there is an even demographic distribution of religions, some forms of coexistence become common practice, while in regions where a certain religion dominates, there will be high tensions because of the disadvantaged status of minority religious groups.



The other reason for the existence of religious diversity in Nigeria is the fact that even if one group dominates, it does not necessarily mean that there will be peace or conflicts. This shows that simply having diversity is not enough to trigger any form of conflict. It is the culture of the people, leadership, history of interactions among the groups, as well as conflict resolution mechanisms adopted at a community level that determine whether religious diversity exists harmoniously or leads to violent outcomes. As argued by Fearon & Laitin (2003), structure plays a more significant role in determining conflict than grievances alone. Poor governance, bad security structures, and political instability determine whether religious differences are peaceful or violent.

According to Amnesty International (2018), many instances of communal conflict in Nigeria arise due to disagreements on land, resources, and livelihood, rather than differences in theology. Religious identity is sometimes interlaced with issues like economic survival and the environment, which contribute to the reinforcement of religious pluralism. This is achieved through incorporating religion into daily life.

The history of Islam in Northern Nigeria is a good example of such religious foundations that have shaped the existing diversity. Hiskett (1994) opines that Islam came to the area through the trans-Saharan trading routes, involving the arrival of religious scholars, clerics, and traders who helped to spread the teachings of this religion. The formation of the Sokoto Caliphate at the beginning of the nineteenth century helped to strengthen the role of this religion on a political level. As explained by Adogame (2013), such interconnection between politics and religion led to certain cultural, legal, and educational traditions that were developed in the area.

In comparison, Christianity made more impact especially during the colonial era largely due to missionary efforts by the Europeans. Falola and Heaton (2008) argue that the influence of colonial governance in promoting Christianity was evident in terms of providing support for the missionaries who were allowed to build schools, medical facilities and churches which became centers of social progress in the southern part of Nigeria. Literacy, Western education and healthcare contributed to the rapid spread of Christianity within societies where there was a strong emphasis on religion as well as education.

Traditional African religions have coexisted side by side with Islam and Christianity. According to Mbiti (1990), traditional African religions are always connected to the local worldviews and values of communities. As observed by Adegbite (2019), in south-western Nigeria, there have been instances where Christianity, Islam, and traditional religions have interacted with each other within one home or one village. This shows how flexible religion is, and at the same time, it proves that traditional religions can withstand other religions.

Geography highlights religious diversity. In the north, where Muslims form the majority, there is an opposition between the south where Christianity prevails and the southwestern part of Nigeria, where multiple religious groups coexist. According to Uche (2017), urbanisation has escalated inter-religious contacts, since people migrate to towns in search of job opportunities and other benefits such as education. Such contacts provide chances for collaboration and may become sources of conflict when competition for assets or authority overlaps with religion. Nigerian cities like Lagos, Ibadan, Abuja, Ilorin, Port Harcourt, and Onitsha house Muslims, Christians, and followers of local religions, all living and working together in the same environment.

Such interactions make possible inter-religious cooperation. The formation of relationships based on common interests or goals in urban environments tends not to be based solely on religion but on shared economic or civic goals, for example. Cooperation is required in business organizations, residential areas, trade unions, and other civil organizations. In the city, therefore, one experiences a form of tolerance motivated by the practical realities of survival and success that require peaceful coexistence. On the other hand, urbanization can lead to conflict when the competitive spirit is heightened. The urban environment, as stated earlier, is one where the available resources are few. In such circumstances, religion could be an instrument used to express competition. As such, religious differences can be turned into political issues when some people decide to use the religion card for personal gain.

Religious institutions also gain greater prominence within an urban setting. The large number of places of worship within urban settings may encourage spiritual vibrancy among communities, yet may result in a competition among places of worship, adherents, and visibility. This is the reason behind the observation that urbanization not only encourages religious interaction but also creates more room for conflict. Urbanization does not eliminate religious pluralism but alters the manner in which religious pluralism is conducted, necessitating effective dialogue and cooperation.

The existence of political and historical governance mechanisms has helped perpetuate religious pluralism in society. According to Adogame (2013), religious pluralism within Nigeria can be attributed to its federal structure which facilitates the ability of communities within particular regions to adopt practices according to their own



identity. Colonial rule within Nigeria is another mechanism that facilitated this kind of segregation and division in terms of religion; the British ruled according to Islam in the northern region and Christianity in the southern region. In relation to socio-economic factors, religion becomes an important factor in shaping affiliations and practices. Aderale (2023) suggests that the disparities in education, wealth, and access to social amenities, especially between the north and south, often accentuate the role of religious identities. It is common for political elites to capitalize on socio-economic disparities and frame them within a religious discourse to enhance the relevance of religious identities and build their base through this means. Where socio-economic opportunities such as education and employment are minimal, religious institutions play the key role of providing welfare services and moral orientation. Religious institutions often serve the role of providing education, health care, and financial relief to those whose needs are not met by the state.

This constant interaction makes interreligious cooperation possible. In cities, people build relationships not because of religious affinity but because of common interests economically and professionally. Cooperation across religious differences becomes essential within trade organizations, communities of residence, labour unions, and other civil-society associations. Hence, urbanization promotes tolerance based on practicality since one's survival and rise to prominence rely on living harmoniously despite their differences. However, the growth of cities can also cause problems due to growing competition. Cities contain finite resources such as job openings, housing options, political power, and services. The struggle for these limited opportunities may result in competition along religious lines if religion is used to mark competition. Differences that once were manageable can then be politicized as leaders or groups use religion to further their political and economic gains.

Urban spaces, moreover, accentuate the significance of religious organizations. The presence of many churches, mosques, and religious institutions in the city might help to nurture spirituality but might also cause conflicts due to competition over space and followers. In other words, urbanization does not resolve any differences among religions; rather, it changes their dynamics and makes inter-religious contacts even more important. Political systems and governance also helped to strengthen religious diversity in Nigeria. As Adogame (2013) claims, the federal structure of Nigeria made it possible for different regions to have some degree of self-governance and thus institutionalize practices according to their culture and religion. Colonialism contributed greatly to deepening the gap: Falola and Heaton (2008) emphasize that the British favored Islam in the northern parts of Nigeria and Christianity in the south.

The political organisation and governance structure have also contributed to religious pluralism in Nigeria. According to Adogame (2013), the federal structure of Nigeria facilitates the autonomy of different regions in their cultural and religious affairs. The colonial government in Nigeria further exacerbated the differences among religions. As Falola & Heaton (2008) argue, the British government used Islamic scholars in the north while supporting Christian missionary activities in the south. These regional and religious differences have continued to shape political and social relations in Nigeria.

Differences in socio-economic status and access to social services are also important factors that contribute to religious pluralism in Nigeria. Aderale (2023) confirms that the differences in socio-economic statuses of different regions and areas, such as education, income levels and access to welfare services, contribute to the strengthening of different religions. Politicians often use socio-economic differences as an opportunity to consolidate power. By connecting the socio-economic concerns of citizens to religion, politicians can strengthen the importance of religion in politics and society. In places with poor access to formal education and job opportunities, religious organisations tend to offer a wide range of welfare and other social services to their followers. This increased involvement of religious organisations.

In addition, there have been instances when socio-economic divisions have been accentuated as a way of mobilizing political support through the use of religion. For instance, when the economy is struggling, religious minorities may be blamed for causing problems through religious competition or exclusion. Such a dynamic helps to highlight religious differences as well as the role of religion in accessing power and opportunities. As a result, religious involvement in politics leads to heightened levels of participation in religious activities, as individuals seek to assert their religious identities. In this light, the link between religion and socio-economic division in Nigeria becomes clear.

Religious identity also reflects past conflicts and ongoing political competition. Ojonemi, Buzaije, and Eleojo (2025) observe that religious discourse often accompanies political contests. Politicians use such discourse to mobilize members of communities who share their religious views. Such politicization of religion serves to emphasize



communal identity and the intersections of faith, ethnicity, and political preference. When elections take place and when political contestation is high, politicians present themselves as protectors of particular religions or opponents as people trying to harm the interests of another religion.

Religious organizations have an important part to play in supporting diversity. According to Adogame (2013), mosques, churches, theological seminaries, and cultural centers promote belief systems, provide education for followers, and control religious activities. Religious organizations act as custodians of moral values and civic responsibilities that penetrate social, political, and economic realms, thus enhancing the complex nature of Nigerian religions.

Demographic dynamics sustain religious plurality. Nwachukwu (2024) affirms that Nigeria's large, youthful population increases the visibility and influence of religious communities. Larger populations intensify the role of religion in social, political and economic spheres. As population size increases, religion becomes more prominent in social, political and economic life, influencing public discourse, leadership patterns and community organisation. Generational differences also contribute to complexity within religious communities. Younger adherents often interpret and practise religion differently from older generations, adopting new expressions of worship, leadership styles and social engagement. These variations create internal diversity within the same faith traditions, expanding the range of religious experiences and perspectives that shape Nigeria's religious environment.

Migration, both internal and international, also contributes to religious interactions and diversity. Uche (2017) notes that as people move to urban centres, inter-religious encounters become inevitable, occurring in workplaces, schools and marketplaces. While such interactions can foster mutual understanding, they can also intensify competition over resources, social influence and political representation, occasionally generating tensions that require dialogue and mediation. Cultural exchanges and intermarriages have likewise enriched religious diversity. Adegbite (2019) affirms that families increasingly integrate multiple religious traditions, blending rituals and ethical teachings from Islam, Christianity and indigenous faiths. This syncretism illustrates the adaptive nature of religion in Nigeria, enabling coexistence while necessitating negotiation of beliefs and practices.

The Need for Interfaith Dialogue in Nigeria

Religion plays a crucial role in Nigeria's society and politics, and it impacts societal interactions, political actions, and communal identities. According to Adogame (2013), religion in Nigeria not only operates as an ideological construct but also serves as a strong social institution that can either contribute to peace or foster divisiveness, depending on its deployment. When religious identities become interwoven with political rivalries and economic disparities, conflict is likely to arise, making it necessary to pursue interfaith dialogue deliberately. Aderole (2023) states that the majority of conflicts branded as religious in Nigeria may have underlying socio-political issues but are articulated using religious rhetoric. In this case, the lack of dialogue encourages fear and antagonism, perpetuating the sense of being marginalised and victimised. Interfaith dialogue emerges as a critical process for correcting misconceptions and reframing the conflict narratives to foster peaceful existence.

According to Nwachukwu (2024), interfaith dialogue provides a platform for effective dialogue between religious leaders and their communities, allowing them to handle their differences positively. Dialogue fosters mutual recognition and respect while decreasing the likelihood of stereotyping and demonizing the religion "other". Continued dialogue between religions allows them to identify shared values, including justice, compassion, and community responsibility. This shared value system forms the basis for cooperation and peaceful coexistence among different religions.

This issue of institutional dialogues becomes extremely important considering the Nigerian case, where diversity exists among religious beliefs. According to Paramole and Bolawaye (2019), "Inter-Religious Council was founded as an institutionalized form of dialogical interaction between Christian and Muslim clerics with an objective of addressing issues of religious conflicts and advising the government on peace building activities." As shown by their study, these kinds of institutional dialogue have helped improve communication and lower tension between these two religions. NIREC, the Nigerian Inter-Religious Council, was founded as an institutionalized form of interfaith dialogue in which both Christians and Muslims come together in order to address issues of religious conflicts and tension. This step was taken based on the realization that for peace to be sustainable in Nigeria, institutionalized channels were needed through which religious leaders of different faiths could come together and talk about what causes conflicts in society.



The studies conducted regarding the activities of NIREC show that institutionalized dialogue plays an important part in enhancing communication among religious communities. Periodic meetings, common statements, and joint intervention play a significant role in eliminating misconceptions, building trust, and preventing conflicts. In areas with a history of religious violence, NIREC's mediation role in de-escalating disputes, providing early warnings about possible flash points, and undertaking joint initiatives that tackle the social and moral aspects of conflicts has been evident. Through institutionalized cooperation, NIREC builds intercommunity ties, proves that religion plays a positive part in peace-building, and provides a good example of how dialogue can be institutionalized to lessen hostilities and promote cooperation among religions.

Also, interfaith dialogue is crucial when dealing with violent extremism. Iweze (2024) affirms that religious leaders in northern Nigeria employed the concept of dialogue as a strategy of countering extremism in the area through issuing common moral stances against violence. This shows the effectiveness of dialogue in weakening extremist influence and rebuilding trust in the affected regions. Through interfaith dialogue, religious leaders in northern Nigeria dealt with violent extremism in the following ways; leaders from both Christianity and Islam met on many occasions and made common statements against violence. Also, they traveled to affected villages and gave people messages about their true teachings contrary to the propaganda of the extremists.

This helped in building the lost trust within the community. Seeing the religious leaders cooperate and work together to ensure safety, security, and even provision of accommodation for families that have been displaced and solving conflicts among other groups gave the people much hope. It also lowered fear and suspicion, stopped radical organizations from recruiting, and promoted cooperation amongst religions through dialogue. This clearly shows how dialogue could go beyond mere talk when the community is protected through coordinated actions which ensure peace within the society.

The rising levels of urbanization have heightened the importance of interfaith dialogue. As pointed out by Uche (2017), Nigerian urban settings are characterized by the convergence of individuals belonging to various religions into one place. Lack of proper dialogue approaches would create room for disagreements within this urban setting, but this can be solved using dialogue techniques.

Educational and moral development can be aided by interfaith dialogue. According to Mbiti (1990), there is no doubt that Africa has always valued the common good, which is universal and extends beyond religion. Interfaith dialogue aids the common good by encouraging moral cooperation, not competition. According to Aboekwe (2020), interfaith dialogue increases religious education and reduces ignorance and fear, which are key causes of conflict.

Interfaith dialogue is also vital in Nigeria because it tackles the relational aspects of conflict. According to Ojonemi, Buzaije, and Eleojo (2025), any peace-building initiative that excludes inter-religion dialogue will most likely fail in a society where religion is a fundamental social pillar. Consequently, interfaith dialogue must remain an essential tool for promoting harmony in Nigeria's multi-religious setting.

Role of Interfaith Dialogue in the Promotion of National Unity: The Case of Nigeria through NIREC

Interfaith dialogue acts as an important means of promoting national unity through sustained interactions between religious groups that minimize tensions and enhance social cohesion. According to Nwachukwu (2024), dialogue is highly essential in Nigeria's multi-religious context as it fosters mutual respect and ensures that sources of conflicts are sorted out through dialogue to prevent violence. Through dialogue, religions can be respected and not be misused to cause conflict.

The Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC) is one official body where representatives of different religions interact through peaceful discussions. As Paramole and Bolawaye (2019) observe, the NIREC has been playing an important role in facilitating interactions between Muslims and Christians on matters of importance to them while sorting out existing conflicts. This way, religious leaders can take common stands on national issues.

Interfaith dialogue under NIREC also has practical implications for peace-building processes at the grassroots level. According to Iweze (2024), interfaith dialogue between religious leaders in areas experiencing violent conflict, such as the Boko Haram conflict in northern Nigeria, has de-escalated the situation through reconciliation. Creation of peace agreements within the localities, like the Kano Covenant, is one example of how interfaith dialogue has changed the relationship from antagonism to collaboration.

Misunderstandings and stereotypes are common among religions and can contribute to tension. According to Aboekwe (2020), the education aspect of interfaith dialogue initiatives creates opportunities for members to gain insight about each other's faiths and ethical principles. Through learning more about other religions' principles and spiritual values, members develop a higher level of understanding.



Dialogue shapes governance and public policy as well. According to Olunlade (2025), religious organizations that practice inclusive dialogues can serve as intermediaries between the state and communities, thus fostering stability in societies where religious tensions collide with political rivalry. Interfaith platforms motivate the people to set aside their religious considerations and think of the greater interest of the nation by sharing common views on issues of justice, equality and citizenship. Interfaith dialogues enhance mutual trust amongst different communities. As asserted by Onuoha and Ugwueze (2025), moral persuasion through religious leaders helps create environments favorable for collaboration. Dialogue networks ensure unity during times of tension. Dialogue programs targeting youths and women prepare them for resolving conflicts peacefully.

Additionally, dialogue platforms serve as prevention tools by creating a way of addressing conflicts before they escalate. Communities that have established interfaith networks enjoy prompt conflict resolutions and collaboration. Religious leaders who engage in interfaith dialogues share ethical obligations including empathy, justice and human dignity, which inspire collective social work.

Conclusion

In the case of Nigeria, Interfaith Dialogue plays a crucial role in ensuring peaceful coexistence and national unity due to its pluralistic nature. The example of NIREC indicates that systematic communication between religious leaders can have a positive impact on reducing the tensions and misunderstanding between followers, as well as addressing any issues that could escalate into violence. The use of institutionalized platforms like NIREC helps religious leaders collaborate in order to stand up for justice and equity. Moreover, dialogue can lead to increased cooperation between members of various religions when addressing humanitarian and developmental issues. It also helps develop certain qualities in the younger generation, such as conflict management. Thus, dialogue ensures that shared ethical standards become an integral part of society, turning religious differences into advantages rather than sources of conflict. Structured dialogue is beneficial for achieving greater stability and prevents violent conflicts due to religion, indicating that pluralism can be used to create collective identity and strengthen the national state.

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