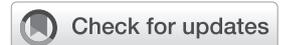


Sacred contradictions: Religion, conflict and peacebuilding in Northern Nigeria



Authors:

Teddy C. Sakupapa¹ 
Oladele P. Adehanloye¹ 

Affiliations:

¹Department of Religion and Theology, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, University of the Western Cape, Bellville, South Africa

Corresponding author:

Teddy Sakupapa,
tsakupapa@uwc.ac.za

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This article explored the ambivalent role of religion in Northern Nigeria's ethno-religious conflicts in ways that move beyond reductionist interpretations. It aims to offer a nuanced and contextual analysis of how religion simultaneously fuels division and fosters peace and reconciliation. Methodologically, this study adopts a qualitative, literature-based methodology, engaging interdisciplinary scholarly sources on religion in Africa, African theology, peace studies and political theory. Drawing on Scott Appleby's concept of the ambivalence of the sacred and Gerrie ter Haar's multidimensional understanding of religion as descriptive and analytical framework, the article conceptualises religion as a holistic and embodied mode of knowing and being. This research revealed that religion in Northern Nigeria is deeply intertwined with identity politics, historical grievances and socio-political structures. It operates both as a catalyst for violence and as a resource for peacebuilding, depending on how it is interpreted, lived and mobilised. The article interrogated colonial legacies, postcolonial state formation and structural inequalities in Nigeria that shape the deployment of religious narratives, actors and institutions.

Contribution: The findings of this contribution highlight the need for a transformative, context-sensitive ecclesial engagement that embraces the lived realities of faith communities. Such an approach affirms religion's capacity to contribute to sustainable peace when grounded in historical consciousness and a hermeneutics of reconciliation. This study contributes to theological and interdisciplinary efforts to reimagine religion's role in conflict transformation in Northern Nigeria, in particular and Africa, in general.

Keywords: ambivalence of religion; religion and conflict; peacebuilding; ethno-religious conflict; Northern Nigeria; African theology; Ter Haar; ambivalence of the sacred; ecclesial model of conflict transformation.

Introduction

The persistent eruption of ethno-religious conflict in Northern Nigeria has generated a complex body of literature across political science, peace studies, and theological and religious studies (Ibrahim 2000; Kukah 1993; Ter Haar 2005). At the heart of this discourse lies the problematic framing of religion either as a pathology of violence or as a panacea for peace. This binary approach obscures the ways in which religion operates simultaneously as both a source of division and a catalyst for peace and reconciliation. Nowhere is this more evident than in Northern Nigeria, where religion simultaneously inspires peace and incites conflict. This raises the question, 'when does religion become violent?' (Appleby 2015:47).

This article builds on Scott Appleby's (2000) seminal concept of the ambivalence of the sacred, which posits that religious traditions possess intrinsic capacities to both promote peace and justify violence, depending on how they are interpreted, embodied and instrumentalised. Appleby's framework offers a powerful corrective to reductionist accounts of religion in conflict settings in ways that foreground the interpretive agency of religious actors and the embeddedness of religious discourse in socio-political structures. In conversation with Appleby, this article also draws on Gerrie ter Haar's (2005) multidimensional model of religion as a lived reality encompassing ideas, practices, experiences and institutions. This perspective moves beyond doctrinal analysis to consider religion as a socio-cultural force that shapes and is shaped by historical memory, communal identity and political contestation. These theoretical perspectives support the central thesis of this article, namely, that the role of religion in Northern Nigeria's ethno-religious conflicts cannot be adequately understood through essentialist or mono-causal interpretations. Instead, religion must be examined within its broader historical, sociological and structural contexts. This approach resonates with African visions and notions that emphasise the inseparability of religion

from everyday life, and the importance of contextual, embodied and community-oriented interpretations of faith. Such perspectives open up new possibilities for reconceptualising religious agency in ways that are not only critical and constructive but also contextual.

Accordingly, this article interrogates the ambivalent role of religion in Northern Nigeria's ethno-religious conflicts, with particular attention to the historical continuities, structural inequalities and theological contestations that shape this reality. It argues that while religion has undeniably been instrumentalised to foment violence, it also contains underutilised resources for peacebuilding and social transformation. The challenge, therefore, is not to discard religion as inherently dangerous, but to engage it critically and constructively within the dynamics of local contexts.

The structure of the article unfolds in five sections. Following this introduction, the second section outlines the theoretical framework that underpins this research with a view to conceptualise the ambivalence of religion in conflict. The third section traces the colonial and postcolonial trajectories that have shaped the ethno-religious landscape of Northern Nigeria, highlighting how historical state formations contributed to present-day tensions. The fourth section explores the contemporary manifestations of this ambivalence by examining both the state's responses and the theological interventions of religious actors. The final section affirms a transformative ecclesial model of conflict engagement that is rooted in local realities and responsive to the lived realities of faith communities as a viable pathway towards conflict transformation in Northern Nigeria.

Methodologically, this study adopts a qualitative, literature-based methodology, engaging interdisciplinary scholarly sources on religion in Africa, African theology, peace studies and political theory. The review critically draws on theoretical frameworks, notably Scott Appleby's concept of the ambivalence of the sacred and Gerrie ter Haar's multidimensional view of religion.

Reframing the ambivalence of religion: Theoretical and conceptual considerations

This article is grounded in Scott Appleby's (2000) seminal thesis on the ambivalence of the sacred as a theoretical lens through which to interrogate the dual role of religion in the ethno-religious conflicts of Northern Nigeria. The article is further aligned with African epistemological understandings of religion as embedded in the social and political fabric of life, as elaborated by Ter Haar (2005).

Reframing the category of religion

The concept of religion is admittedly complex. Stephen Ellis and Gerrie ter Haar (2004) offer a definition of religion that is analytically generative for the African context. In their view, religion (Ellis & Ter Haar 2004):

[I]s best understood as a belief in the existence of an invisible world, distinct but not separate from the visible one, which is home to spiritual beings that have powers over the material world and can influence events in it (p. 15).

In the African cosmology, the sacred permeates every aspect of social life; religion is not merely a set of beliefs or practices, but a comprehensive way of knowing, being and acting in the world. Thus conceived, religion is not a distinct domain of life but a holistic and integrative framework through which reality is apprehended, interpreted and negotiated (Ellis & Ter Haar 2007:387). In this regard, religion is best understood not as an abstract, theological category but as a dynamic cultural and political force.

Constructively, Ter Haar (2005:22–27) categorises religious resources into four interrelated dimensions, namely, religious ideas (belief systems), religious practices (rituals and ethical actions), religious experiences (personal encounters with the divine) and religious organisations (institutional structures). These categories allow for a more nuanced interrogation of how religion operates not only as a personal or communal experience but also as a form of institutional and political power. Ter Haar's conceptualisation is particularly useful for African contexts where religion is not confined to the private or spiritual realm but is deeply interwoven with public, social and political life. As Ellis and Ter Haar (2007:387) put it, religion in Africa partly functions as a prism through which many people 'understand and interpreted' the world.

Taking a cue from Sakupapa (2023), this article adopts Ter Haar's conceptualisation of religion with a view to exploring how religion becomes entangled in conflict dynamics in Northern Nigeria – both as a source of violence and as a means of resolution. Ter Haar's framing of religion allows for an appreciation of how religion intersects with ethnicity and culture, providing both identity markers and fault lines in multi-religious societies. To better understand the relationship between religion and conflict in Northern Nigeria, this article will further draw on Scott Appleby's (2000) foundational work that underscored the paradox of what he termed the ambivalence of the sacred as a description of religion's inherent capacity to promote both violence and peace. Thus, while religion can be a source of inspiration and motivation for people to work towards the common good and promote social harmony, it can also be used as a tool for mobilising people to engage in violent or divisive actions (c.f. Tambiah 1996).

The ambivalence of religion in conflict

Appleby contends that the sacred is ambivalent precisely because religious traditions embody immense moral and symbolic capital, which can be appropriated by actors within contexts of political instability, socio-economic inequality and identity-based marginalisation. He argues that the moral and symbolic power of religion can be harnessed towards both destructive and constructive ends. Depending on how the resources of religion, such as sacred texts, symbols, institutions and leaders, are interpreted and mobilised within

specific historical and political contexts, religion is capable of inspiring both peace and violence. The interpretive nature of religious texts compounds the ambivalence of religion. As Clinton Bennett (2008:192–216) has argued, scripture may be used to justify conflict and that alternative hermeneutical frameworks are essential if this tendency is to be reversed. Appleby (2000) illuminates this insight, attributing religion's susceptibility to violent mobilisation to widespread 'religious illiteracy', a gap that allows political and religious elites to distort doctrine for personal gain. Thus, while religious teachings may contain peace-oriented norms, their application is contingent on interpretation, context and the agency of religious leaders. This ambiguity is, as Ter Haar (2005:16) has argued, 'an inherent feature of all' religious traditions.

This intrinsic fluidity renders religion susceptible to both constructive and destructive deployments. Thus, the 'ambivalence of the sacred' manifests when the same religious systems that uphold compassion and peace are appropriated to justify exclusion, discrimination or violence. In his words, religious traditions are 'internally plural, fluid, and evolving, responsive to new interpretations' (Appleby 2000:281). Put differently, the ambivalence of the sacred underscores both the agency and accountability of religious actors (Jakelić 2020:100).

At the heart of Appleby's (2000) thesis lies the insight that religion is not inherently predisposed to either violence or peace, but rather possesses a morally ambivalent character. In particular, he highlights the ambivalent character of human responses to religion (Appleby 2000:28). Understandably, scholarly debates on the intersection of religion and conflict span a broad spectrum of concerns, including the involvement of religious leaders in peacebuilding efforts, the influence of religious institutions in shaping conflict dynamics, and the deployment of religious symbols and rhetoric to legitimise or mobilise support for violence. For instance, in *People Building Peace II or Faith-Based Diplomacy*, various chapters call for the redefinition of religion not as a challenge to contain but rather as a strategic asset to be harnessed in diplomacy and conflict resolution. The volume further includes a comprehensive set of primary religious documents in the form of statements, charters, faith-community pronouncements and peace resolutions compiled across multiple religious traditions. Similarly, in their 2011 study drawing on the Religion, Peace and Conflict in Sub-Saharan Africa (RSSA) dataset, Basedau, Strüver and Vüllers (2011) systematically analysed religion's ambivalent role in both conflict and peace across 48 sub-Saharan African countries between 1990 and 2008. In line with Appleby's (2000) concept of the ambivalence of the sacred, Basedau et al's (2011) study provided systematic evidence of how religious dynamics can both fuel violent conflict and support peacebuilding, depending on contextual and institutional factors. Unarguably, Appleby's work remains foundational in so far as it has contributed towards a more reflexive and nuanced study of religion in international relations. As Fabio Petito (2020:89–90) argues, Appleby's thesis contributed a

significant shift, namely, the rise of 'religious engagement' in foreign policy. Appleby's contribution continues to challenge static and instrumentalist views of religion in foreign policy and international relations. It is worth noting that Appleby's thesis 'surpassed the moment of its origin', namely, the secularist and modernist bias that dismissed religions (Jakelić 2020:100). Therefore, we foreground Appleby's thesis given its salience in expanding our analytic and interpretive lenses of the Nigerian case. Moreso, Appleby's concept carries profound normative implications for theorising and analysing religion insofar as it links religious actors' political agency and responsibility. In a subsequent essay to the 2000 publication, Appleby (2015) operationalised the theoretical lens of ambivalence and categorised religious actors' behaviours in concrete socio-political contexts by distinguishing between three types of religious actors, namely, the strong, weak and pathological. Appleby emphasises that religious actors cannot be simplistically categorised as 'good' or 'bad'. He articulates how religious actors' potential for violence or peace depends on their social position, resources and context.

In light of the above studies, we argue that Appleby's framework provides a nuanced alternative to reductionist readings of religion as being either violent or pacific. His notion of ambivalence directly undergirds our central argument in this article, namely, that religion in Northern Nigeria functions both as a catalyst for conflict and as a resource for peacebuilding. By applying Appleby's thesis of the ambivalence of religion as a descriptive and analytical framework, this article interrogates how religious leaders, institutions and narratives have been variously instrumentalised.

Ethno-religious entanglements

In contexts such as Northern Nigeria, the analytical separation of religion and ethnicity often obscures the ways in which these identities are mutually constitutive. Rather than treating them as discrete categories, a growing body of scholarship (e.g. Dike 2001; Egwu 2001; Salawu 2010) demonstrates that religious and ethnic identities in Nigeria are intertwined in dynamic and historically situated ways. As Egwu (2001:49) insightfully notes, the relationship between ethnic and religious identities is one of mutual reinforcement, shaped by overlapping affiliations, symbolic imaginaries and political loyalties. Across Africa and especially in Northern Nigeria, religion intersects with ethnic identity, political marginalisation and socio-economic grievances in ways that often blur the lines between spiritual conviction and political mobilisation. Drawing on the South Asian context, anthropologist Stanley Tambiah (1996) demonstrates how Hindu, Muslim and Buddhist identities (read: ethno-religious identities) in India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka are often mobilised politically. Tambiah (1996) illuminates the role of religious rumours, appeals to sacred duty and the invocation of faith in rallying participants to engage in collective violence. In this way, he demonstrates not only the ambivalence of the sacred but also opines on the intersection between ethnic and religious identity.

In Nigeria, as in many African contexts, there is a close association between religion and culture in ways that may infer the interconnectedness of religion and ethnicity, albeit in more nuanced ways given the historic spread of world religions such as Christianity and Islam. This partly explains the salience of certain religions among certain ethnic groups. The entanglement of religion and ethnicity is especially pronounced in Northern Nigeria, where Islam is closely associated with the Hausa-Fulani, while Christianity is often linked to minority ethnic groups in the Middle Belt (Falola & Heaton 2008:147). Such associations are not merely demographic but are embedded in long-standing social formations and contested narratives of belonging, power and identity. In conflict-prone settings, the convergence of ethnic and religious markers of identity functions as a potent fault line along which grievances, fears and claims to legitimacy are articulated. In Nigeria, these grievances are often compounded by a sense of political exclusion (Hafez 2003:30), economic marginalisation and spatial segregation (Selway 2011). Where religious communities are geographically concentrated, as in much of Northern Nigeria, the likelihood of organised mobilisation, whether violent or peaceful, increases (Gurr 1993).

From the foregoing, it is evident that ethnicity and religion are closely intertwined and may well be said to represent different aspects of culture. As Collier et al. (2003:45) have shown, social, economic, political and cultural factors interact in complex ways that influence conflict dynamics. Put differently, cultural identity, including its religious and ethnic dimensions, shapes political expectations, reinforces collective memory and can catalyse either peace or violence depending on prevailing conditions of marginalisation or inclusion. The intersection of religion and ethnicity is similarly recognised in many other contexts, such as Northern Ireland. Nevertheless, it must be noted that there are different patterns of interrelation of ethnicity and religion as Ruane and Todd (2010) have shown. Moreso, the intersection of religion and ethnicity manifests differently across conflict settings, with the relative weight and salience of each component varying in context-specific ways (Ruane & Todd 2016:69). However, Ruane and Todd (2010:6) point out that comparatively little attention has been given to the historical variations in how ethnicity and religion intersect over time. The following section on historical and political context takes up aspects of this concern within the Nigerian context. Suffice it to note here that in the context of this contribution, ethno-religious conflict will be understood as 'a form of conflict supposedly generated based on real or imagined "difference" rooted in ethnic and religious identities' (Egwu 2001:49). This conceptual lens enables a more integrated analysis of conflict dynamics in Nigeria and informs the framing of ethno-religious conflict in this article.

Historical and political context: Colonial legacies and postcolonial tensions

Religious leaders, institutions and narratives in Northern Nigeria have at times been complicit in the exacerbation of ethno-religious conflicts, and at other times offered moral legitimacy for peace processes and interfaith dialogue in the

region. For instance, the same Islamic and Christian traditions that uphold teachings of compassion and justice have, in Northern Nigeria, been used to legitimise violence against perceived religious or ethnic 'others'. Conversely, they have also served as powerful resources for reconciliation and community resilience. Nevertheless, this paradoxical role of religion is not unique to Nigeria. What might be telling from the Nigerian case is the ways in which the ambivalence of the sacred has been shaped by historically embedded patterns of ethno-religious identity formation, political manipulation and institutional fragility. Most significantly, understanding the contemporary ambivalence of religion in Northern Nigeria requires a historical excavation of the colonial and postcolonial state. Therefore, in what follows, we explore how specific historical trajectories, colonial legacies and contemporary political dynamics have shaped the religious landscape of Northern Nigeria.

Colonial legacies

The enduring religious and ethnic tensions in Northern Nigeria cannot be divorced from the legacies of British colonial rule. Far from being a neutral administrative system, colonialism entrenched divisions by institutionalising preferential treatment for certain groups, particularly the Hausa-Fulani elites. British reliance on indirect rule through the Sokoto Caliphate reinforced the authority of the Fulani aristocracy, establishing a hegemonic order that marginalised other ethnic and religious communities (Peel 1996:606–607). Colonial authorities selectively codified Islamic traditions to consolidate their administrative interests, thereby politicising Islam and entrenching a hierarchical socio-political structure that persisted into the postcolonial era (Gwamna 2014; Peel 1996).

Meanwhile, Christian missionary activities were largely confined to non-Muslim areas, especially in the Middle Belt, a policy that further deepened religious bifurcation. Byimui Umaru (2013:31) observes that the colonial prohibition of Christian missionary work in core Muslim regions sowed the seeds of future religious antagonism. Shenton (1986:38) also highlights the racialised assumptions that informed colonial policy in Northern Nigeria, where the British construed the Fulani elite as inherently more 'civilised' and therefore more fit to rule. This ideological bias reinforced ethnic hierarchies and created structural inequalities that endure today.

Postcolonial continuities

In the postcolonial period, religion has remained a salient factor in the political landscape of Northern Nigeria. Scholars such as Obi (2006) and Onapajo (2012) have shown that political actors frequently instrumentalise religion to mobilise constituencies, assert legitimacy and consolidate power. This politicisation of religion has, in many instances, exacerbated interreligious tensions and contributed to violent conflict, particularly in contexts of perceived marginalisation or exclusion.

A pivotal moment in the religious-political nexus was the reintroduction of the Sharia legal system in several northern states from 1999 onwards. While ostensibly framed as a

cultural or religious reclamation, the revival of Sharia law has been widely interpreted as a political strategy by Muslim-majority elites to assert identity and respond to socio-political grievances under democratic rule (Gwamna 2014:125; Obi 2006:89). Onapajo (2012:44, 48) notes that the Sharia project coincided with a broader Islamic resurgence that sought to counteract the perceived encroachment of Westernisation and Christianity. This phenomenon is often conflated in the political discourse of Northern Nigerian Islam. While Islamic governance in Northern Nigeria has historical roots in the Sokoto Caliphate (1804–1903), the late 20th-century push for Shariah implementation was shaped by a combination of internal socio-political conditions and external influences. Among these, Saudi-Wahhabi networks played a significant role through funding, infrastructure development, dissemination of religious literature and educational exchange programmes, which promoted more conservative interpretations of Islam (Adesoji 2010; Comolli 2015; Paden 2005). Arguably, the combination of foreign ideological influence and local grievances such as poverty, corruption, political marginalisation and competition for resources created conditions where ethno-religious violence became more frequent and intense. Stated differently, these influences acted as a catalyst that made existing tensions more likely to erupt into ethno-religious conflict.

Localised case studies, such as the Sayawa-Hausa-Fulani-Jarawa conflict in Tafawa-Balewa (Bauchi State), reveal how these dynamics manifest at the grassroots level (see Garba & Dankano 2017). While earlier disputes were largely political, the post-1999 period witnessed increasingly religious inflexions, particularly following the imposition of Sharia, which provoked resistance from Christian minorities and sparked violent confrontations (Danfulani & Fwatshak 2012). This historical trajectory illustrates how colonial-era policies established structural asymmetries, while postcolonial regimes have often exploited religion as a political resource. As Toft (2007:103) contends, religion itself is not inherently violent; rather, its mobilisation by political actors can function as a powerful catalyst for conflict.

Building on the preceding analysis, it is evident that the postcolonial Nigerian state not only inherited but also entrenched the religiously infused political structures established during colonial rule. This legacy is compounded by constitutional ambiguities, notably the coexistence of Sharia law alongside a secular legal system, which has intensified socio-political tensions. Furthermore, persistent economic disparities, entrenched political patronage networks, and ethno-religious manipulation of political boundaries have deepened communal grievances, thereby exacerbating fault lines within Nigeria's complex socio-political landscape.

Theological and institutional approaches to conflict transformation in Northern Nigeria

The foregoing has demonstrated that the complex interplay between religion, politics and identity in Northern Nigeria is

at the heart of ethno-religious conflicts in the region. Historically, responses to ethno-religious conflict in Northern Nigeria have ranged from state security interventions to ad hoc interfaith initiatives and constitutional reforms. However, these responses have often lacked theological depth, contextual sensitivity and long-term efficacy. Building on the theoretical foundations laid out earlier namely, Appleby's notion of the ambivalence of the sacred and Ter Haar's (2011) concept of religion as a lived, embodied resource, we now turn to an appraisal of past approaches. Ter Haar's (2011) emphasis on religion as a holistic mode of knowing further highlights the need to integrate ritual, narrative and institutional reform within peacebuilding praxis. On the basis of this appraisal, we will propose a contextually grounded approach to peacebuilding.

State responses: Constitutionalism, militarisation and institutional limitations

The Nigerian state's approach to managing ethno-religious conflict is deeply shaped by constitutional pluralism, legal secularism and a historical reliance on militarised interventions. The 1999 Constitution enshrines secularism explicitly, with Section 10 declaring that 'The Government of the Federation or of a State shall not adopt any religion as State Religion', and Section 38(1) guaranteeing the right to freedom of religion and conscience (Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999). These provisions, in principle, safeguard religious plurality and protect citizens' religious freedoms. However, as Akanji (2010:68–70) critically observes, the practical implementation of these constitutional guarantees is uneven and frequently compromised by political partisanship, entrenched ethno-regional interests and judicial inertia, which collectively undermine the secular ideal.

Militarised responses, particularly in the context of the Boko Haram insurgency, have been a central feature of the state's security strategy, but with limited success and significant humanitarian costs. Kukah (1993:194) insightfully critiques the legacy of military rule in Nigeria, arguing that it entrenched the use of violence as a normalised instrument of governance, which erodes the ethical foundations necessary for peaceful conflict resolution. The militarisation of ethno-religious conflicts, especially in the volatile Northeast, has not only intensified civilian suffering but has also deepened the mistrust between communities and state institutions. Gwamna (2014:23) highlights how counter-insurgency operations frequently provoke retaliatory attacks by armed groups, perpetuating a vicious cycle of violence that frustrates prospects for sustainable peace.

Attempts at policy reform and conflict mitigation, such as the Strategic Conflict Assessment (SCA) of 2002, have underscored the perilous intersection of religion, politics and ethnicity in Nigeria. Yet, as Akanji (2010:81) laments, the failure to implement the SCA's critical recommendations has reinforced widespread public cynicism towards institutional mechanisms designed to address conflict. Similarly, commissions of inquiry convened post-crisis have often fallen short of delivering tangible reforms or restorative justice, largely

because of political interference and fatigue in enforcement, further eroding trust in state capacity and neutrality.

Moreover, humanitarian interventions such as the establishment of internally displaced persons (IDP) camps, while providing necessary short-term relief, risk perpetuating structural vulnerabilities and intercommunal tensions. The IDP settlements can exacerbate underlying grievances concerning land rights, compensation and cultural identity (Otite & Olawale 1999). These sites, instead of serving as safe havens, may inadvertently become flashpoints for renewed conflict, underscoring the need for conflict-sensitive approaches to displacement and rehabilitation.

Theological contributions to peacebuilding: Hospitality, dialogue and resistance

In response to the shortcomings of state-led interventions in managing ethno-religious conflict in Northern Nigeria, religious actors and theologians have advanced alternative frameworks that draw deeply on indigenous cultural practices, scriptural ethics and interfaith solidarity. A notable contribution to this discourse is Akanji's (2010:258) theology of hospitality, which urges faith communities to embrace relational openness and neighbourliness within Nigeria's pluralistic context. Conceived this way, hospitality is not passive tolerance but an active and structured framework for interfaith coexistence in a plural society. This theology of hospitality invokes a radical ethic of relationality that transcends sectarian boundaries. It urges moral solidarity across religious boundaries, resonating profoundly with both Islamic and Christian traditions in the region and offering a practical ethos for coexistence grounded in mutual respect and shared humanity. Grounded in biblical and Qur'anic injunctions towards neighbourliness, hospitality here is not a passive tolerance but an active engagement in pluralism, demanding openness and moral solidarity.

Komboh (2017) extends this discourse through an African theology of dialogue that harnesses indigenous communal rituals such as storytelling, the use of proverbs and enacted forgiveness ceremonies. These are envisaged to function not merely as cultural expressions but as potent theological resources that carry spiritual significance and moral authority for peacebuilding. These practices, imbued with spiritual significance, facilitate restorative justice and embody what Lederach (1997) conceptualises as 'conflict transformation', emphasising relational restoration over punitive justice. Further, this reframes traditional customs as dynamic, living sources for conflict transformation rather than relics of the past. By drawing on rituals that resonate deeply within community life, Komboh broadens the scope of peace praxis beyond abstract theological discourse, showing how embodied practices can function as living instruments of reconciliation.

Complementing the above perspectives, the theology of peace advanced by Turaki (2003) and Yerokun (2010) foregrounds nonviolence, reconciliation and the pursuit of

the common good as foundational Christian and Islamic imperatives. These approaches directly challenge exclusivist theological positions that sanctify violence or 'demonise' the religious 'other'. Instead, they advocate for compassion, justice and interfaith cooperation as indispensable to societal healing and durable peace. Although not exhaustive, the above theological frameworks offer a rich and contextually grounded repertoire for reimagining religion's role not only as a source of division but as a vital force for peace in Northern Nigeria's complex ethno-religious landscape. The above further demonstrates that despite its complicity in violence, religion also offers vital resources for peacebuilding.

Interreligious dialogue as theological praxis for peacebuilding

In light of the foregoing, we argue that interreligious dialogue can be seen as a theologically grounded and contextually relevant strategy for fostering sustainable peace in Northern Nigeria. In a region marked by deeply entrenched ethno-religious divisions, such dialogue must transcend superficial or performative encounters and evolve into a transformative praxis that is both theologically robust and ethically serious. Meaningful dialogue requires more than diplomatic civility; it demands a posture of epistemic humility; that is, a recognition that truth is not the monopoly of any one tradition, and that the religious 'other' may be a bearer of divine wisdom. This resonates with what Ter Haar (2005:97) describes as the 'new forms of dialogue and engagement that can accommodate the complexity of religious diversity without erasing the differences that make it meaningful'.

As Wiles (1992:92) observes, interreligious dialogue entails a 'reciprocal process', in which the parties involved see the need to receive as well as to give and see other religions in some sense as 'a revelation of God from which each needs to learn'. In a similar vein, Abu-Nimer (2007:19), drawing on peacebuilding experiences in pluralistic societies, insists that authentic interfaith engagement necessitates a willingness to embrace vulnerability without collapsing doctrinal particularity.

Umaru (2013) points to the shared Abrahamic roots of Islam and Christianity as a fertile theological ground for mutual understanding and collaboration. This common heritage, however, must be activated not merely as historical trivia but as a basis for a shared theological ethics of peace, justice and reconciliation. To this end, joint initiatives such as interfaith peace committees, ecumenical and interreligious theological forums, and community-based academic exchanges can provide institutional support for nurturing what Swart et al. (2010) describe as a 'shared hermeneutic of peace' within divided societies.

As the World Council of Churches (2003) observes, 'Dialogue is a co-operative and collaborative activity'. Building on this vision, Adehanloye (2024:195) calls for interfaith engagement to be reclaimed as a theological vocation that gives expression to agapeic solidarity that is deeply rooted in divine love and guided by spiritual discernment. In this light, the church is

challenged to participate in the Spirit's movement beyond ecclesial boundaries, echoing the insight of John 3:8 that the wind of the Spirit 'blows where it wills', often beyond institutional confines. This theological posture is especially vital in Northern Nigeria, where religious affiliations are often conflated with ethnic and political loyalties. A dialogical theology, grounded in humility, mutual recognition and shared moral commitments, can serve as a counter-narrative to the politicisation of religion, to ideologies of exclusion, and the sectarian logics that fuel conflict. It invites the church and other faith communities into a space of deep listening and co-responsibility in the work of peace. This calls for an interfaith praxis that is informed by African communal values and a pneumatological openness to God's work across traditions. By grounding peacebuilding in theological conviction and contextual discernment, interreligious dialogue becomes not only a tool for coexistence but a sacred vocation towards societal healing and justice.

Contours of conflict and possibilities for peace: Mobilising religious resources for peace

We argue that the ambivalence of religion in Northern Nigeria's conflict landscape must be understood not as a binary of peace versus violence. Rather, it is a dynamic spectrum shaped by interpretation, identity and structural conditions. In contexts where the religious and the sacred are deeply interwoven into the fabric of social life, the challenge lies not in religion as a discrete phenomenon, but in the socio-political conditions that shape, sacralise and mobilise religious worldviews in divergent and often conflicting ends. Here, Ter Haar's theorisation of religious resources in terms of religious ideas, religious practices, religious experiences and religious organisations becomes useful. Religious institutions are not neutral spaces. Religious institutions may themselves become arenas of political struggle, competing for authority, influence, and control over symbolic and material resources. It is often through the vehicle of social organisations, whether religious or secular, through which ideologies find their expression (Ter Haar 2005:22). Talal Asad (1993) has long demonstrated that religion is not simply what people believe but that it is sustained through discursive and institutional practices embedded in networks of power.

Other than religious institutions, it is crucial to interrogate religious ideas as these often provide the ideological foundations of conflict. As Seul (1999:554) warns, when 'conflict-oriented principles' dominate a religious community's worldview, the potential for violence escalates sharply. These ideologies often vilify religious 'others', constructing theological justifications for intolerance and exclusion. Further, as Kadayifci-Orellana (2009:10) notes, religious ideology can be 'instrumentalized to construct social hierarchies and legitimize political authority'. In the Nigerian context, this is evident in the country's history, where the manipulation of religion by state and non-state actors has exacerbated identity-based conflict.

Nonetheless, religion's capacity to foster peace is not negligible. In a deeply divided society such as Nigeria,

harnessing the reconciliatory potential of religion remains one of the most urgent yet underutilised avenues for sustainable peace. Addressing the ambivalence of religion requires enhancing religious literacy, promoting inclusive identity formations and holding religious leaders accountable for the doctrinal foundations they propagate. In this vein, the formative role of religious teachings is vital in educating the public about Nigeria's ethnic, religious, cultural and socio-political diversity. Numerous scholars have highlighted the profound influence of religion in shaping individuals' values, worldviews, behaviours, attitudes and beliefs (Deneulin & Bano 2009; Rakodi 2012; Sakupapa 2023). In contexts of conflict, religion has the potential to provide moral legitimacy for reconciliation, serve as a framework for intergroup dialogue, and offer non-state channels for justice and forgiveness. This cannot be divorced from inclusive religious identities and peace-oriented leadership. It is the case that in many contexts, 'religious actors tend to enjoy institutional legitimacy, have an available methodology, and possess the structures and networks necessary for the mobilisation of people' (Ter Haar 2005:20–21).

Drawing on the theoretical and conceptual analysis that has been offered in this article, we argue that religious educational initiatives, liturgical practices and pastoral leadership must be recalibrated to nurture dialogical capacities, foster empathy and cultivate theological literacy. This calls for contextualised case studies. Therefore, mindful of constructive proposals for harnessing the peacebuilding potential of religion as articulated by scholars such as Ter Haar (2005:22–25), the theoretical and conceptual analysis offered in this article grounds our development of a transformative ecclesial approach to conflict engagement that is rooted in local realities as a viable pathway towards conflict transformation in Northern Nigeria (see Sakupapa & Adehanloye 2025). In this vein, we have proposed a transformative ecclesial model that is tailored to be responsive to local realities and one that is shaped by the lived experiences of faith communities. This model envisions the church not as a passive religious entity, but as a proactive agent of reconciliation, engaging holistically with the spiritual, interpersonal and structural dimensions of conflict (see Sakupapa & Adehanloye 2025).

Conclusion

This article has critically examined the ambivalent role of religion in Northern Nigeria's recurrent ethno-religious conflicts. It moved beyond reductive analyses that depict religion either as an inherently violent force or as a panacea for peace, and instead argued that religion functions as both depending on its interpretation and mobilisation in specific socio-political contexts. Drawing on Appleby's (2000) concept of the ambivalence of the sacred, the analysis demonstrated how religion's moral and symbolic capital can either intensify conflict or contribute to peacebuilding efforts. This ambivalence was explored theologically and contextually, enabling a more textured reading of religion's capacity to shape and be shaped by conflict dynamics.

Informed by Ter Haar's (2005) understanding of religion as a lived reality encompassing beliefs, practices, communities and spiritual experiences, the article situated religion as deeply embedded in the political and cultural fabric of Northern Nigeria. It further demonstrated how colonial legacies and postcolonial configurations have institutionalised religious difference, and how religious actors, narratives and symbols are actively drawn into struggles for power, identity and legitimacy.

By foregrounding these dynamics, the article challenges essentialist readings of religion and calls for a more nuanced, interdisciplinary and theologically grounded approach to religious agency. In conclusion, it advocates a transformative ecclesial praxis rooted in contextual theological reflection and inclusive peacebuilding as a viable pathway towards sustainable reconciliation. This praxis envisions the church not as a passive institution but as an active agent of healing and justice in deeply divided societies.

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

T.C.S. was responsible for the theoretical conceptualisation of the article, development of the methodological framework, provided critical input in the formal analysis, and was responsible for the review and substantive editing of the manuscript. He also provided academic supervision and intellectual guidance throughout the research process. O.P.A. undertook the investigation and data collection, drafted the first draft of the article, and contributed to the formal analysis.

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Data availability

The authors declare that all data that support this research article and findings are available in the article and its references.

Disclaimer

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