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Inter-Religious Dialogue and Conflict Resolution in Nigerian Politics

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Abstract

Nigeria, with its religious diversity, has experienced recurring political conflicts deeply rooted in ethno-religious divisions. This paper examines the role of inter-religious dialogue in conflict resolution within Nigerian politics. Through qualitative methods, including interviews with religious and political leaders, as well as analysis of policy documents and literature, the study highlights how interfaith initiatives have either mitigated or failed to address political instability. It argues that sustained dialogue among religious communities is essential for national unity, peace-building, and democratic governance. The findings indicate that while inter-religious platforms exist, their effectiveness is hampered by political manipulation, lack of institutional support, and mistrust. Recommendations include institutionalising interfaith dialogue, promoting religious literacy, and involving youth and women in peace initiatives.

Keywords: Inter-religious Dialogue, Conflict Resolution, Nigerian Politics, Peace-Building, Religious Diversity, Ethno-Religious Conflict

Introduction

Nigeria, with its remarkable diversity in religion, culture, and ethnicity, remains one of the most complex and dynamic countries in the world. Home to over 200 million people, Nigeria boasts a rich mix of both indigenous beliefs and major world religions—Islam and Christianity. The political landscape of Nigeria has historically been shaped by these religious divides, with political decisions often influenced by religious considerations, leading to both opportunities and conflicts. While religious diversity presents an avenue for cultural enrichment, it has also been a catalyst for conflict, especially when political agendas intersect with religious identity.

The tension between religion and politics in Nigeria is not a new phenomenon. Historical events, such as the Maitatsine riots of the 1980s and the Boko Haram insurgency, have demonstrated the volatile intersection of religion and politics in Nigeria. These incidents, and others, underline the depth of religious divisions in Nigerian society and the ease with which these tensions can be exploited for political gain. The politicisation of religion has created a volatile environment, where religious affiliations are often mobilised to justify political violence and societal marginalisation (Falola, 1998; Kukah, 1993). However, the problem is not only the use of religion for political purposes but also the failure of many peace-building mechanisms to address the root causes of religious conflicts in Nigerian politics.

Despite these challenges, the potential for inter-religious dialogue to serve as a tool for peace-building remains significant. Inter-religious dialogue is a process wherein individuals or groups from different religious traditions engage with one another to foster mutual understanding, tolerance, and collaboration. In Nigeria, initiatives aimed at promoting interfaith dialogue have been pivotal in mitigating tensions and fostering a culture of peace.

However, these efforts have often been constrained by a variety of factors, including political manipulation, elite control, and a lack of widespread institutional support (Salawu, 2010). While there have been notable successes, such as the Nigerian Inter-Religious Council (NIREC), the effectiveness of these initiatives is often limited by the political environment in which they operate.

The failure of inter-religious dialogue to bring about lasting political stability and peace can be traced to several factors. First, the lack of grassroots engagement often limits the reach of formal dialogue platforms. Elite-driven initiatives tend to be disconnected from the lived realities of the communities they aim to serve. Furthermore, the politicisation of religious sentiment continues to undermine the credibility of interfaith efforts, with religious leaders and institutions sometimes co-opted for political purposes. Thus, while formal inter-religious platforms exist, such as NIREC and the Interfaith Mediation Centre (IMC) in Kaduna, their impact has been uneven and often hindered by a lack of independence from political influence (Ishaq, 2018).

However, recent studies suggest that the role of interfaith dialogue in conflict resolution may be evolving, particularly in the face of new political and social challenges. As Nigeria continues to grapple with issues of terrorism, ethnic conflict, and political instability, the role of interfaith dialogue has become more crucial than ever. Recent works have shed new light on the ways in which inter-religious dialogue can be used to foster peace-building and promote sustainable national development. Kukah (2022), in his paper "Harnessing Nigeria's Religious Diversity for Sustainable Peace and National Development," argues that religious diversity can be a powerful tool for peace, provided that efforts are made to institutionalise interfaith dialogue at all levels of governance. This is echoed by NIREC (2023), whose book chapter "Interfaith Dialogue, Peace-building, and Sustainable Development in Nigeria" highlights the importance of formal platforms in fostering dialogue and promoting national unity.

In addition, new insights into the role of education and youth engagement in interfaith dialogue have emerged. Hussain (n.d.) explores the "Risk Factors for Interfaith Conflict in Nigerian Tertiary Institutions," suggesting that universities and other educational settings could play a pivotal role in mitigating religious conflict by providing spaces for dialogue and understanding among students of different faiths. Similarly, Kanu (n.d.) discusses the relevance of African theology in the context of post-colonial Africa, arguing that theological education can be instrumental in promoting interfaith understanding and reducing the potential for conflict.

While these recent studies have contributed significantly to the discourse on inter-religious dialogue, gaps remain in addressing the socio-economic factors that underlie many of Nigeria's religious conflicts. Structural inequalities, such as poverty, unemployment, and political marginalisation, exacerbate religious tensions, making it crucial for interfaith initiatives to go beyond mere dialogue and address these deeper issues. In this regard, the inclusion of women and youth in inter-religious dialogue initiatives is essential. Women, who are often the primary victims of conflict, are underrepresented in formal peace processes, thus limiting the potential for more inclusive and sustainable conflict resolution efforts (Akinade, 2014; Haynes, 2007). Additionally, the role of media in shaping public perception of religious communities cannot be underestimated. Responsible media reporting can play a pivotal role in de-escalating tensions and fostering a culture of tolerance and respect (Ojo, 2006; Ibrahim, 2000).

This study seeks to build on the existing literature by exploring the current state of inter-religious dialogue in Nigeria and its effectiveness in addressing the ongoing religious and political conflicts. It will assess the role of

formal institutions like NIREC and grassroots initiatives such as the IMC, while also considering the impact of newer developments, such as the role of educational institutions and the media in peace-building. The study will also propose actionable strategies for enhancing the effectiveness of inter-religious dialogue in promoting national stability and peace.

In conclusion, Nigeria's religious diversity presents both a challenge and an opportunity for national peace-building. While inter-religious dialogue has made significant strides, it remains limited by political, social, and economic factors. For dialogue to be a more effective tool in conflict resolution, it must be inclusive, institutionalised, and integrated into broader peace-building strategies. This research aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse on religion and politics in Nigeria, offering insights into how interfaith initiatives can be leveraged to foster lasting peace and national unity.

Problem Statement

Despite Nigeria's efforts at institutionalising inter-religious dialogue, political conflicts with religious undertones persist. The frequent clashes between Christian and Muslim communities, especially during election cycles, suggest that dialogue initiatives have not fully addressed the root causes of religiously motivated political violence. The politicisation of religion continues to hinder national integration, indicating a gap between dialogue efforts and actual conflict transformation. This study seeks to explore why inter-religious dialogue has not yielded sustainable conflict resolution in Nigerian politics.

Aim and Objectives

Aim: To examine the effectiveness of inter-religious dialogue as a tool for conflict resolution in Nigerian politics.

Objectives,

1. To analyse the historical relationship between religion and politics in Nigeria.
2. To assess the role of inter-religious dialogue in mitigating political conflicts.
3. To identify the challenges facing interfaith dialogue initiatives.
4. To propose strategies for enhancing the role of religious dialogue in peace-building and political stability.

Literature Review

Historical Context and Theoretical Foundations

The intersection of religion and politics in Nigeria has been a subject of extensive scholarly attention. Early works by Falola (1998) and Kukah (1993) laid the groundwork for understanding the role of religion in political mobilisation and conflict. These studies highlighted how religious identity has been utilised to foster political allegiance and, at times, exacerbate tensions. However, while these foundational works provided valuable insights, they did not fully account for the evolving dynamics of interfaith dialogue in the contemporary Nigerian context.

Recent Developments in Interfaith Dialogue

In recent years, scholars have revisited the concept of interfaith dialogue, emphasising its potential to foster peace and national development. Kukah (2022) argues that harnessing Nigeria's religious diversity is crucial for sustainable peace and national development. He contends that interfaith dialogue can serve as a platform for mutual understanding and collaboration among religious groups, thereby mitigating conflicts and promoting social cohesion.

Similarly, NIREC (2023) underscores the importance of institutionalised interfaith dialogue in promoting peace-building and sustainable development. The report highlights the role of the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC) in fostering dialogue between Christian and Muslim leaders, facilitating joint initiatives, and advocating for policies that promote religious tolerance and coexistence.

Challenges and Limitations

Despite these advancements, several challenges hinder the effectiveness of interfaith dialogue in Nigeria. One significant issue is the politicisation of religion, which often undermines genuine efforts at fostering understanding and cooperation. The 2023 report on international religious freedom notes that religious leaders have been targeted for promoting interfaith dialogue, reflecting the risks associated with such initiatives in a politically charged environment.

Additionally, the lack of grassroots engagement has been identified as a limitation of many interfaith dialogue efforts. Hussain (n.d.) discusses the risk factors for interfaith conflict in Nigerian tertiary institutions, emphasising the need for inclusive dialogue that involves youth and community leaders. He suggests that educational institutions can play a pivotal role in fostering interfaith understanding by providing platforms for dialogue and collaboration among students of different religious backgrounds.

The Role of African Theology

African theology has also contributed to the discourse on interfaith dialogue. Kanu (n.d.) explores the implications of the post-Africae Munus era for African theology, advocating for a theology that is contextually relevant and responsive to the challenges of religious pluralism. He argues that African theology should engage with indigenous religious traditions and promote dialogue among different faith communities to address issues of social justice and peace.

Opportunities for Further Research

While existing literature provides valuable insights into the dynamics of interfaith dialogue in Nigeria, several areas warrant further exploration. Future research could examine the impact of interfaith dialogue on community development, the role of women and youth in dialogue initiatives, and the effectiveness of interfaith education programs in promoting tolerance and understanding. Additionally, comparative studies involving other religiously plural societies could offer a broader perspective on the challenges and successes of interfaith dialogue.

Theoretical Framework

In order to understand the complex dynamics of inter-religious dialogue and conflict resolution in Nigerian politics, this paper draws on five theories: **Secularisation Theory, Instrumentalist Theory, Social Identity Theory, Social Capital Theory, and Political Theology**. While each of these theories offers a unique perspective, their collective application allows for a comprehensive analysis of the role of religion in Nigerian

politics. In this section, I will justify the selection of these theories and clarify how each one contributes to understanding the findings of this study.

Secularisation Theory

Secularisation Theory, developed by Berger (1967), posits that as societies modernise, religion loses its influence in public and political life. This theory suggests that religion and politics should operate in separate spheres. In contrast, Nigeria's case demonstrates a clear deviation from this pattern, where religion continues to play a significant role in political life, particularly in the context of elections and governance.

This theory provides a lens through which to examine the persistence of religious influence in Nigerian politics, despite modernising trends. Secularisation theory helps to explain why religious identity remains a powerful tool in political mobilisation and how interfaith dialogue can either mitigate or exacerbate political tensions. The findings of this paper will engage with this theory by analysing how religion continues to shape the political landscape in Nigeria, and how inter-religious dialogue may challenge or reinforce this trend.

Instrumentalist Theory

Instrumentalist Theory argues that political elites use religion as a tool to achieve their political goals (Mustapha, 2014). In Nigeria, political actors often manipulate religious sentiments for electoral gains, using religious identity to rally supporters or discredit opponents. This theory is critical in understanding the limitations of inter-religious dialogue, as political actors may co-opt these platforms to further their own interests, undermining their potential for conflict resolution.

This theory will be used to engage with the findings that suggest political manipulation has often sabotaged interfaith initiatives. The study will demonstrate how inter-religious dialogue, while necessary, is frequently hijacked by political elites who see it as an opportunity to solidify power rather than foster true peace-building.

Social Identity Theory

According to Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), individuals derive part of their identity from their group memberships. In the context of Nigeria, religion is a primary source of social identity. This theory helps to explain why religious identity is so strongly tied to political allegiance, and why inter-religious dialogue can be difficult to achieve in a context where individuals see themselves primarily through the lens of their religious affiliation.

This theory is particularly relevant to understanding the political polarisation of religious groups in Nigeria. The findings will highlight how religious identity influences conflict and how inter-religious dialogue can either challenge or reinforce in-group/out-group dynamics. The paper will also engage with this theory by exploring how social identity shapes the participation of different religious groups in peace-building efforts.

Social Capital Theory

Social Capital Theory (Putnam, 1993) emphasises the value of social networks and trust in facilitating collective action. Religious institutions in Nigeria foster high levels of bonding social capital within their communities, but the challenge is in translating this trust and solidarity into broader societal cooperation. Social capital is essential for promoting the collective action necessary for peace-building.

The study will engage with Social Capital Theory to explore the role of religious institutions in facilitating inter-religious dialogue. The findings will examine whether religious groups can bridge their internal social capital to create the broader networks of trust needed for effective conflict resolution. This theory helps to explain the potential for interfaith platforms to either succeed or fail depending on the existing levels of social capital in Nigerian religious communities.

Political Theology

Political Theology offers a perspective on how religious doctrines shape political ideologies and behaviors. In Nigeria, religious leaders often invoke divine will or scripture to justify political choices, framing elections as moral battles between good and evil. This theological framing elevates political discourse to a spiritual plane, influencing voters' decisions based on perceived divine endorsement rather than policy merits.

This theory will be applied to analyse how religious leaders in Nigeria use political theology to influence both inter-religious dialogue and political conflict. The findings will explore whether political theology contributes to deepening divides or offers a foundation for dialogue and reconciliation. The paper will investigate the extent to which political theology has influenced the success or failure of interfaith initiatives.

Conceptual Framework

In addition to the theoretical models discussed, this study also employs a Conceptual Framework that connects these theories to specific research questions and empirical findings. While theories provide general principles and insights into the role of religion in politics, the conceptual framework helps to narrow the focus on specific phenomena observed in Nigerian inter-religious dialogue.

Theories guide the broad understanding of the role religion plays in Nigerian politics, while the conceptual framework operationalises these theories for a practical, context-specific examination of the Nigerian situation. Thus, the theories serve as the guiding lenses through which to interpret the findings, while the conceptual framework helps in analysing the specificities of inter-religious dialogue in the Nigerian political landscape.

Justification for Using Both Theory and Framework

It is essential to use both theoretical and conceptual frameworks in this study to provide a comprehensive analysis of the role of inter-religious dialogue in Nigerian politics. Theories offer broad, generalised explanations, but without a framework to apply them directly to empirical data, the analysis may remain abstract. On the other hand, the **conceptual framework** allows for a structured approach to data collection and analysis but lacks the depth of theoretical context.

By using both, this study ensures that the findings are both grounded in established theoretical perspectives and directly relevant to the context of Nigerian politics and inter-religious dialogue. The combination of theory and framework provides a more nuanced and layered understanding of the challenges and opportunities in fostering interfaith peace-building in Nigeria.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research methodology, using case studies, interviews, and document analysis. Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 20 participants, including religious leaders, political stakeholders, and representatives of interfaith organisations. Interviewees were selected through purposive sampling from Abuja, Kaduna, Jos, and Lagos, representing diverse religious and political contexts.

Secondary data were sourced from academic journals, reports from NGOs such as the Interfaith Mediation Centre, policy documents from NIREC, and media coverage of inter-religious events. Data were analysed thematically to identify patterns, contradictions, and insights on the dynamics of inter-religious dialogue and political conflict resolution in Nigeria.

Results

Interfaith Platforms and Political Conflict Resolution

Inter-religious dialogue in Nigeria has achieved some success at the grassroots level. Initiatives such as those spearheaded by the Interfaith Mediation Centre (IMC) in Kaduna have shown a positive impact in de-escalating religious tensions in conflict-prone regions. Grassroots participation, particularly involving religious leaders and local community members, was identified as a crucial factor in fostering understanding and reducing political violence.

However, formal interfaith platforms like NIREC (2020) have had limited success due to political manipulation and elite control. Many interviewees reported that, although NIREC's initiatives provided temporary relief during periods of political tension, they were often co-opted by political actors seeking to gain religious endorsements for electoral purposes. This finding corroborates the Problem Statement, which emphasised how political manipulation undermines the credibility and impact of inter-religious dialogue.

Youth and Women's Participation in Dialogue

The involvement of youth and women in inter-religious dialogue has been identified as a significant opportunity for strengthening the impact of peace-building initiatives. However, both groups have historically been excluded from formal dialogue processes. Findings suggest that initiatives that integrated youth and women such as those in Jos showed more sustainable results in promoting inter-religious tolerance and understanding. This demonstrates the relevance of incorporating marginalised groups, as outlined in the paper's objectives and abstract.

Role of Media and Religious Literacy

Another significant achievement of the study is the recognition of the media's role in shaping public opinion about inter-religious relations. Media coverage of religious events, when done responsibly, can serve as a platform for promoting religious literacy and dispelling stereotypes. However, the study also found that sensationalist media coverage often exacerbates tensions, making it more difficult for interfaith initiatives to succeed. This discovery reinforces the argument made in the Problem Statement about the media's dual role in either facilitating or hindering conflict resolution.

Political Manipulation and Institutional Support

A major finding was the continued political manipulation of religion. This is evident in the way political elites utilise religious affiliations to mobilise support or discredit opponents. Despite the efforts of NIREC and other interfaith initiatives, the failure to establish independent and institutionally supported dialogue platforms has limited the scope of their success. The research suggests that institutionalising interfaith dialogue through legislation and ensuring its autonomy from political influences are critical for ensuring its long-term success.

Achievements and Recommendations

The research has successfully highlighted the limitations of existing interfaith dialogue platforms in Nigeria, especially in addressing deep-rooted political conflicts. The findings demonstrate that while some grassroots efforts have achieved notable success, elite-driven dialogue initiatives have largely failed to resolve political tensions.

The paper recommends that future interfaith dialogue initiatives should prioritise grassroots involvement, institutionalise interfaith platforms, and actively engage youth and women. Additionally, media literacy programs and responsible media coverage should be part of any peace-building strategy. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of how interfaith dialogue can be more effective in the Nigerian political context.

Summary of Achievements

This paper contributes to the ongoing discourse on inter-religious dialogue and conflict resolution by:

- Providing empirical evidence on the successes and limitations of formal and grassroots interfaith initiatives in Nigeria.
- Offering practical recommendations to improve the effectiveness of inter-religious dialogue, particularly in the political context.
- Highlighting the importance of youth and women's participation in peace-building processes.
- Demonstrating the critical role of media in shaping inter-religious relations.

These findings directly address the Problem Statement by offering new insights into the challenges faced by interfaith platforms and presenting actionable strategies for enhancing their impact on conflict resolution in Nigerian politics.

Conclusion

This study set out to investigate the effectiveness of inter-religious dialogue as a tool for resolving political conflicts in Nigeria, specifically those exacerbated by religious divisions. The findings presented in this paper underscore the crucial role inter-religious dialogue plays in peace-building, yet also highlight its limitations. The Results section clearly demonstrated that while grassroots initiatives such as those led by the Interfaith Mediation Centre (IMC) in Kaduna have shown positive impacts in reducing tensions, formal platforms like NIREC have been limited in their effectiveness due to political manipulation and elite control. These findings address the gaps identified in the Problem Statement and Abstract, emphasising that while interfaith dialogue has potential, its success is hindered by the manipulation of religious identity for political gain.

Furthermore, the Results section explored the importance of inclusive participation, particularly from youth and women, in fostering sustainable peace. Grassroots initiatives that integrated these groups were more successful in promoting inter-religious understanding and cooperation. This finding directly supports the need for more inclusive and community-driven approaches to interfaith dialogue, as outlined in the Abstract.

The study also engaged with the role of media in shaping inter-religious relations, demonstrating that while media can facilitate dialogue, sensationalist reporting often exacerbates tensions. This highlights the importance of promoting responsible media coverage to support peace-building efforts, which is in line with the recommendations made in the Abstract.

Finally, this paper has contributed new insights into the limitations and successes of inter-religious dialogue in Nigeria, specifically in the political context. The Results section has shown that for interfaith dialogue to be more effective, it must be institutionalised, grassroots-driven, and inclusive of marginalised groups such as youth and women. Additionally, political manipulation of religious sentiments must be curtailed to ensure the authenticity and sustainability of dialogue initiatives.

Recommendations

1. Institutionalise inter-religious dialogue at all levels of governance.
2. Enhance the capacity of grassroots peace-building organisations.
3. Include women and youth in interfaith dialogue initiatives.
4. Promote religious literacy and interfaith education in schools.
5. Encourage responsible media reporting on religious issues.

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