

THE INTERFAITH DIPLOMACY IN FRAGILE STATES: RELIGIOUS ACTORS' CONTRIBUTIONS TO PEACEBUILDING AND SOCIAL COHESION IN NIGERIA AND SIERRA LEONE.

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Abstract

In the study of conflict resolution in fragile states, religious actors are gaining recognition for their potential to support peacebuilding where secular efforts often fall short. This article comparatively analyzes interfaith diplomacy in Nigeria and Sierra Leone, two West African countries with significant Christian-Muslim populations facing ethno-religious tensions and varying post-conflict trajectories. Drawing on hybrid peacebuilding theory and R. Scott Appleby's concept of the "ambivalence of the sacred," it examines how interfaith organizations leverage moral authority, dialogue, mediation, and ritual practices amid identity-based conflicts. Employing a qualitative comparative case-study approach based on secondary sources, institutional reports, and scholarly evaluations, the study contrasts Sierra Leone's post-civil war experience with Nigeria's ongoing fragility. In Sierra Leone, the Inter-Religious Council of Sierra Leone (IRCSL) effectively acted as a neutral moral guarantor, facilitating the Lomé Peace Accord and supporting the Truth and Reconciliation Commission through grassroots legitimacy and pre-existing interfaith tolerance. In contrast, the Nigerian Inter-Religious Council (NIREC) has achieved more modest outcomes, constrained by its top-down structure, elite politicization, and the complex structural drivers of violence involving Boko Haram and farmer-herder conflicts. Findings reveal that interfaith diplomacy's efficacy depends on contextual factors such as institutional autonomy, pre-existing social capital, conflict temporality, and state-religion relations. The study contributes to peacebuilding scholarship by challenging secular biases in International Relations theory and advocating for faith-sensitive hybrid models that integrate religious actors into stabilization strategies. Policy implications for governments, regional bodies, and international donors are discussed.

Keywords: interfaith diplomacy, religious peacebuilding, hybrid peace, fragile states, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, social cohesion

Introduction

Religion has long occupied a marginal position in mainstream international relations theory, often viewed through secular lenses that prioritize state actors, material interests, and power balances (Philpott, 2007). For decades, dominant International Relations paradigms, rooted in realist, liberal, and constructivist traditions, assumed that modernization and secularization would confine religion to the private sphere, rendering it irrelevant or even destabilizing in global politics (Fox, 2004). However, the post-Cold War resurgence of faith in global politics, marked by ethno-religious conflicts from the Balkans to the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa, the rise of faith-inspired transnational movements, and the evident limitations of purely secular approaches to conflict resolution, has prompted a profound reevaluation. Scholars now recognize religion's enduring influence on identity formation, legitimacy, and social cohesion,

particularly in the Global South where state institutions remain weak and societal trust is often channeled through faith communities (Appleby, 2000; Smock, 2002).

In fragile states, defined by the Fund for Peace (2022) as those characterized by weak institutions, identity-based cleavages, post-conflict legacies, and high vulnerability to internal and external shocks, religious actors frequently emerge as pivotal non-state diplomats. Their moral authority, grassroots legitimacy, extensive social networks, and capacity for symbolic reconciliation offer unique resources for peacebuilding where formal diplomacy and state-led interventions falter (Mac Ginty, 2011). Interfaith diplomacy, involving collaborative efforts by leaders of different faith traditions to prevent violence, mediate disputes, and foster social cohesion, represents a key manifestation of this dynamic.

This article aims to comparatively examine the contributions of interfaith diplomacy to peacebuilding and social cohesion in Nigeria and Sierra Leone, two West African fragile states with significant Christian-Muslim populations but divergent conflict trajectories. Specifically, it addresses the central research question: Why have religious actors achieved relatively greater impact in mediating and resolving conflict in post-war Sierra Leone than in ongoing fragile conditions in Nigeria? Subsidiary questions include: (1) How do interfaith organizations operationalize their moral authority in mediation and reconciliation? (2) What contextual factors condition the efficacy of such initiatives? (3) How does interfaith diplomacy complement or challenge traditional state-centric approaches within hybrid peace frameworks?

By addressing these questions, this study contributes to the literature on religion and peacebuilding in three ways. First, it provides a systematic comparative analysis of interfaith mechanisms in two similar yet contrasting West African contexts, addressing a gap in case-specific studies. Second, it applies hybrid peacebuilding theory (Mac Ginty, 2011; Richmond, 2011) to demonstrate the conditions under which local religious agency generates “positive hybridity.” Third, it offers policy-relevant insights for integrating faith-sensitive approaches into international and regional stabilization efforts in the Global South. The analysis draws on secondary sources and institutional analyses. The next section reviews the relevant literature on religion and peacebuilding within the framework of hybrid peace theory. Subsequent sections present detailed case studies of Nigeria and Sierra Leone, followed by a rigorous comparative analysis. The discussion highlights policy implications for international actors, regional organizations, and donors seeking to support faith-sensitive peacebuilding approaches in West Africa and similar fragile contexts globally.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The study of religion within international relations (IR) and peacebuilding scholarship has undergone a profound transformation over the past three decades. Historically marginalized by dominant secular-liberal paradigms that viewed religion as a pre-modern

relic destined for privatization under processes of modernization and secularization, faith-based actors have re-emerged as influential non-state agents in global conflict dynamics (Philpott, 2007). This resurgence is particularly evident in fragile, post-colonial states of the Global South, where religion often serves as a primary source of social identity, moral authority, and community mobilization amid weak state institutions (Appleby, 2000; Smock, 2002).

Central to this literature is R. Scott Appleby's seminal concept of the "ambivalence of the sacred," which posits that religion inherently possesses both destructive and constructive capacities. Appleby (2000) argues that the same sacred texts, symbols, and institutions that can legitimize exclusionary violence and extremism may equally inspire non-violent militancy, forgiveness, and justice-oriented peacebuilding. This ambivalence arises from religion's unique ability to frame conflict in transcendent terms, mobilizing adherents through moral suasion, ritual, and narratives of redemption. Complementing Appleby, Daniel Philpott (2007) emphasizes religion's contribution to "the politics of peace," highlighting how faith traditions offer distinctive resources, such as repentance, reconciliation rituals, and appeals to transcendent justice, that secular diplomacy often lacks.

Interfaith diplomacy operationalizes religion's constructive potential by positioning faith leaders as non-state diplomatic agents in fragile contexts. Religious actors function through their moral authority and community legitimacy, employing several key mechanisms: (1) moral suasion and public condemnation of violence; (2) Track II elite mediation and direct engagement with conflict parties; (3) Track III grassroots dialogue and confidence-building via shared rituals, prayer, and humanitarian aid; and (4) post-conflict reconciliation through truth-telling and forgiveness processes. Unlike traditional state-led diplomacy, which relies on formal negotiations, power balances, and material incentives, interfaith diplomacy draws on spiritual legitimacy, community embeddedness, and transcendent values of justice and forgiveness. In fragile states, this allows religious leaders to operate effectively where state institutions lack credibility (Johnston & Sampson, 1994; Smock, 2002).

This article situates interfaith diplomacy within the broader framework of hybrid peacebuilding theory, which critiques the limitations of liberal peace models that prioritize top-down, secular, and institutionally driven interventions while overlooking local agency and cultural legitimacy (Mac Ginty, 2011; Richmond, 2011). Hybrid peacebuilding emphasizes the dynamic interplay between international norms and local practices, advocating for "hybrid forms of peace" that integrate bottom-up actors, including religious councils, into formal processes (Mac Ginty, 2011).

This ambivalence and operationalization of interfaith diplomacy are central to the present study and are applied directly to the empirical cases. In Sierra Leone, religious actors predominantly harnessed religion's constructive capacities through neutral mediation and reconciliation rituals enabled by pre-existing social capital. In Nigeria, however, the politicization of faith has often amplified its divisive potential, intertwining with ethnic and economic grievances. The theoretical discussion thus moves beyond description to contextual and empirical application, informing the analysis of how the IRCSL and NIREC navigate these tensions in their respective settings. In sub-Saharan Africa, this

literature underscores the effectiveness of interfaith platforms in high-trust religious contexts, where leaders act as moral guarantors and early-warning sentinels (Ludovic, 2020; Berinyuy, 2025). Critically, however, scholars caution against romanticizing religious peacebuilding; politicization, elite capture, and exclusionary theologies can undermine efficacy, particularly when faith intersects with ethnicity, resource competition, or transnational extremism (Roelofs, 2020; Williams, 2023).

Case Study

Sierra Leone: The Inter-Religious Council as Moral Guarantor

Sierra Leone's civil war (1991–2002), led by the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) under Foday Sankoh with external backing from Liberia, killed over 50,000 civilians and displaced more than two million people, fueled by grievances over diamonds ("blood diamonds"), corruption under the All People's Congress one-party rule, economic collapse, and youth marginalization (Turay, 2000). The conflict unfolded in phases: an initial insurgency (1991–1996) marked by brutal tactics including amputations and child soldier recruitment; a fragile peace interrupted by the 1997 AFRC coup; escalation in 1998–1999 with the RUF invasion of Freetown; and eventual stabilization after the Lomé Accord. Amid widespread atrocities and the collapse of state institutions, religious leaders, previously politically quiescent, formed the Inter-Religious Council of Sierra Leone (IRCSL) in April 1997. Comprising the Supreme Islamic Council, Council of Churches, and representatives of other denominations, the IRCSL united the Muslim and Christian communities under a shared moral commitment to peace with justice (Turay, 2000; Hurd, 2016).

The IRCSL's neutrality and moral authority proved decisive across multiple phases. In the early conflict management stage (Phase One, 1997–1998), it condemned human rights abuses by all sides and urged compliance with emerging accords, though initial efforts yielded mixed results due to the intensity of fighting (Hurd, 2016). By 1999, during the critical escalation following the RUF's invasion of Freetown, IRCSL delegations, led by co-chairs such as Alimamy P. Koroma (Muslim) and Bishop Joseph Humper (Christian), met directly with President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah and detained RUF leader Foday Sankoh. These engagements facilitated the first direct talks post-invasion. Co-Chair Koroma later recounted how radio contacts, bush visits, and humanitarian aid (clothing and food supplies) built rebel trust, leading to the release of 54 child soldiers and paving the way for broader negotiations (Turay, 2000). The Council's strategy emphasized remaining neutral yet insistent on moral imperatives, using prayer sessions and caucusing to humanize the "other" side and break impasses.

In the Lomé Peace Accord negotiations (July 1999), the IRCSL acted as informal mediators and moral guarantors, supported by the World Conference on Religion and Peace (WCRP). A 15-member team remained present throughout, employing religious symbolism, joint prayers and appeals to shared Abrahamic and indigenous values, to encourage compromise on power-sharing, disarmament, and amnesty provisions (Hurd, 2016). The Accord explicitly recognized the IRCSL's role by establishing a Council of Elders and Religious Leaders (Article VIII) to mediate disputes over interpretation, underscoring its institutional legitimacy (Lomé Peace Agreement, 1999). Post-Lomé, the

Council disseminated thousands of copies of the accord to civil society and NGOs, conducted bi-weekly “experience-sharing” sessions on themes of reconciliation, and supported humanitarian aid distribution in rebel-held areas (Turay, 2000; Day, 2021).

The IRCSL’s contributions extended into post-conflict reconstruction. Founder Bishop Joseph Humper chaired the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC, established 2002 under the Lomé framework), embedding religious values of repentance, forgiveness, and restorative justice into national healing processes (Hurd, 2016). The TRC’s final report (2004) highlighted the IRCSL’s role in community-level forgiveness rituals, which complemented formal disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) programs. Day (2021) attributes this success largely to pre-existing “everyday practices of toleration”, interfaith marriages, shared sacred spaces (e.g., mosques and churches hosting joint events), and cultural norms of coexistence influenced by African traditional religions. These practices created a reservoir of social capital that enabled the IRCSL to translate moral appeals into tangible outcomes, including rebel demobilization, civilian protection, and sustained post-war stability. By 2013, UN experts praised the IRCSL as a “vital asset” for rebuilding, with its model influencing regional interfaith efforts (UN News, 2013). Long-term, the IRCSL has continued advocating for peace during subsequent crises, such as the 2014–2016 Ebola outbreak and 2017 mudslides, demonstrating institutional resilience (Hurd, 2016). Overall, the IRCSL exemplifies positive hybridity: local religious agency hybridized international mediation to produce durable social cohesion in a post-war fragile state.

Nigeria: NIREC and the Limits of Institutionalized Interfaith Dialogue

Nigeria’s religious landscape, roughly equal Christian-Muslim populations concentrated regionally, has been marked by recurrent violence since the 1980s, from Maitasine-North west (Kano) exacerbated by the Boko Haram insurgency in Northeast and Fulani Militia violent attacks in the Middlebelt region. Boko Haram, a Salafi-jihadist group opposing Western education and secular governance, has killed over 35,000 and displaced millions, primarily in the northeast, while framing its campaign in religious terms that polarize communities (International Crisis Group, 2017). Fulani Militia Violence, driven by ideological radicalization and ethnicity, environmental degradation and cattle migration, have proven even deadlier in recent years, with over 2,500 deaths reported in 2016 alone and thousands more thereafter; these violence is mostly ethno-religious pitting predominantly Muslim Fulani Militia against Christian farming communities in the Middle Belt (International Crisis Group, 2017; Bello, 2025). Electoral violence and elite manipulation of religious identities further intensify tensions, creating a chronic, multi-layered fragility.

The Nigerian Inter-Religious Council (NIREC), established in 1999 by government initiative with equal Christian-Muslim representation and co-chaired by the CAN President and the Sultan of Sokoto, emerged as the primary national interfaith platform (Williams, 2023). NIREC’s mandate encompasses dialogue, conflict mediation, policy advocacy, and promotion of shared Abrahamic values to counter extremism. It has issued joint statements condemning violence, organized national peace conferences, and supported grassroots initiatives. For instance, following 2018 attacks in Benue state, NIREC facilitated dialogues between farmers and Fulani herders (who are different from

the Militia but believed to be working together), counseling forgiveness and patience drawn from religious teachings while establishing early-warning systems and mediation units in collaboration with local governments (New Security Beat, 2023). In Kano and Kaduna, religious leaders under NIREC auspices have brokered localized ceasefires and reconciliation forums amid Boko Haram fallout, yielding moderate successes in de-escalation (Berinyuy, 2025). NIREC has also engaged in broader sustainable development efforts, linking interfaith dialogue to poverty reduction and climate adaptation (Azubuike, 2024).

However, NIREC's efficacy remains constrained by structural and contextual factors. Its top-down origins and ties to political elites undermine perceived neutrality, exposing it to accusations of co-optation during electoral periods or when aligned with federal policies (Roelofs, 2020). Unlike Sierra Leone's organic formation amid acute crisis, NIREC operates in a chronic conflict environment where underlying drivers, radicalization, poverty, land grabbing, climate-induced migration, and elite manipulation, persist beyond faith-based remits (Williams, 2023; International Crisis Group, 2017). Studies indicate that while local religious trust remains high in some communities, national-level coordination falters amid sectarian media, transnational influences (e.g., radical Islamist ideologies), and fragmented implementation (Azubuike, 2024; Roelofs, 2020). NIREC has not prevented major escalations, such as post-2011 election violence or ongoing farmer-herder killings, highlighting limits when faith is intertwined with ethnicity, economics, and resource scarcity (Bello, 2025). Complementary faith-based organizations, such as the Interfaith Mediation Centre in Kaduna, have achieved localized impacts through community dialogues and restorative justice, but these efforts remain ad hoc and under-resourced (Saleh, 2022).

Overall, Nigeria's experience reveals religion's ambivalence in protracted fragility: interfaith platforms like NIREC provide episodic de-escalation and moral framing but struggle to address structural grievances or achieve transformative cohesion without deeper state-society integration and international support. This contrasts sharply with Sierra Leone's more decisive outcomes, underscoring the importance of context in hybrid peacebuilding.

Comparative Analysis

Sierra Leone and Nigeria share important structural similarities as West African fragile states shaped by colonial legacies of indirect rule that politicized ethnic and religious identities, high levels of ethno-religious pluralism, and persistent governance deficits that elevate non-state actors in peace processes (Fund for Peace, 2022; Ludovic, 2020). Both nations feature roughly comparable Christian-Muslim demographic balances and have experienced identity-based violence intertwined with resource competition and elite manipulation. Yet the divergent trajectories of interfaith diplomacy, marked by the IRCSL's transformative contributions in Sierra Leone versus the more constrained role of NIREC in Nigeria, reveal how contextual variables mediate religion's ambivalent potential in hybrid peacebuilding. This section systematically compares these cases across four interrelated dimensions: institutional formation and autonomy, pre-existing social capital, the nature and temporality of conflict, and state-religion dynamics, drawing

on hybrid peace theory to explain why religious actors achieved greater efficacy in one context than the other (Mac Ginty, 2011; Day, 2021; Roelofs, 2020).

First, the timing and mode of institutional formation fundamentally shaped legitimacy and operational independence. In Sierra Leone, the IRC SL emerged organically in April 1997 as a grassroots response to acute civil war atrocities, uniting previously quiescent Christian and Muslim leaders under a unified moral banner without initial state sponsorship (Turay, 2000; Hurd, 2016). This bottom-up genesis preserved neutrality, enabling the Council to serve as a trusted “moral guarantor” that physically delivered the Lomé Peace Accord to rebel camps and facilitated child soldier releases through humanitarian gestures and prayerful mediation (Hurd, 2016; Day, 2021). By contrast, NIREC was established top-down in 1999 by federal government initiative as a formal platform with equal Christian-Muslim representation, co-chaired by high-level figures such as the CAN President and the Sultan of Sokoto (Williams, 2023). While this structure provided national visibility, it exposed NIREC to elite capture and political co-optation, particularly during electoral cycles, thereby eroding grassroots trust and limiting its ability to function as an impartial intermediary amid chronic violence (Roelofs, 2020; Berinyuy, 2025). Hybrid peace theory illuminates this divergence: Sierra Leone’s IRC SL exemplified “local resistance” that hybridized international mediation with indigenous moral authority, whereas NIREC’s elite-driven model risked reproducing liberal peace’s top-down biases (Mac Ginty, 2011).

Second, pre-existing social capital in the form of everyday interfaith tolerance proved decisive in amplifying religious peacebuilding efficacy. Sierra Leone benefited from deeply ingrained cultural norms of coexistence, interfaith marriages, shared sacred spaces, and communal rituals, that predated the war and created a reservoir of trust upon which the IRC SL could draw (Day, 2021). These practices enabled the Council to translate moral appeals into tangible reconciliation outcomes, such as disseminating the Lomé Accord and supporting the TRC’s forgiveness rituals under Bishop Joseph Humper’s chairmanship (Hurd, 2016; Turay, 2000). In Nigeria, however, historical tensions, exacerbated by sharia implementation debates in the north, resource-based farmer-herder clashes in the Middle Belt, and colonial-era divide-and-rule legacies, have eroded such social capital, rendering interfaith initiatives more reactive than transformative (Williams, 2023; Roelofs, 2020). Although local religious trust remains high in some communities, national-level polarization and sectarian media have constrained NIREC’s reach, confining its impact to episodic statements rather than sustained cohesion-building (Azubuike, 2024). This contrast underscores hybrid peacebuilding’s emphasis on “everyday peace” as a foundation for scalable interfaith diplomacy, where Sierra Leone’s embedded toleration norms allowed religious actors to outperform secular efforts, while Nigeria’s fragmented social fabric diluted similar initiatives (Day, 2021; Mac Ginty, 2011).

Third, the nature and temporality of conflict influenced the scope for unified religious intervention. Sierra Leone’s war presented a relatively binary structure, government versus a singular rebel force (RUF), that permitted the IRC SL to act as a neutral bridge-builder during a discrete acute phase, culminating in the Lomé Accord and post-conflict TRC processes (Hurd, 2016). The Council’s interventions aligned neatly with a clear

transition from violence to reconstruction, enabling measurable outcomes such as demobilization and community healing (Turay, 2000). Nigeria's conflicts, by comparison, are chronic, multi-layered, and geographically dispersed, involving Boko Haram/ISWAP insurgency, Fulani Militia violence, electoral manipulation, and transnational influences that resist singular mediation (Roelofs, 2020; Berinyuy, 2025; International Crisis Group, 2017). This diffusion has fragmented NIREC's efforts, yielding localized successes (e.g., ceasefires in Kano and Kaduna) but failing to address root structural drivers like poverty and land grabbing, which lie beyond purely faith-based radicalization (Williams, 2023). Within hybrid peace frameworks, these differences highlight how acute crises can amplify local religious agency in "positive hybridity," whereas protracted fragility often produces "negative hybridity" marked by incomplete integration of faith actors (Mac Ginty, 2011; Richmond, 2011).

Finally, state-religion relations determined the degree of external support and autonomy. The IRC SL benefited from international backing by the World Conference on Religion and Peace and UN-aligned processes, which enhanced its legitimacy without compromising independence (Turay, 2000; Hurd, 2016). Nigeria's NIREC, reliant primarily on domestic resources and prone to government alignment, has struggled with sustainability and scale, particularly when political elites instrumentalize religious platforms for legitimacy (Roelofs, 2020). Collectively, these factors explain the IRC SL's "significant, if uneven" success in fostering durable social cohesion versus NIREC's more modest contributions (Hurd, 2016). The comparison thus advances hybrid peace theory by demonstrating that interfaith diplomacy thrives when local legitimacy, pre-existing tolerance, acute conflict windows, and supportive external scaffolding converge, lessons with direct applicability to other religiously plural fragile states.

Discussion and Policy Implications

Religion's dual role in the cases examined underscores the need for faith-sensitive hybrid peacebuilding that integrates religious actors without romanticizing their contributions or overlooking structural constraints (Mac Ginty, 2011; Appleby, 2000). The comparative analysis reveals that interfaith diplomacy excels when anchored in local legitimacy, everyday social capital, and timely intervention, yet falters under elite capture, chronic conflict, and politicization, dynamics that challenge both realist International Relations paradigms (which dismiss non-state faith actors) and liberal peace models (which privilege secular institutions) (Philpott, 2007; Richmond, 2011). By centering religion's ambivalence, this study extends hybrid peace theory to West Africa, showing how "positive hybridity" in Sierra Leone produced resilient post-conflict cohesion through ritual reconciliation and moral guarantees, whereas Nigeria's experience illustrates "negative hybridity" risks when faith-based efforts remain disconnected from addressing socio-economic grievances (Day, 2021; Roelofs, 2020; International Crisis Group, 2017).

Several limitations temper these findings. Reliance on secondary sources, while triangulated across institutional reports and scholarly evaluations, limits granular insights into grassroots perceptions or gender dynamics within interfaith structures; future research should incorporate primary fieldwork, including interviews with women and youth faith leaders, to assess inclusivity (Berinyuy, 2025; Driessen, 2025). Quantitative metrics of social cohesions such as intergroup trust surveys or conflict incidence data

could further validate qualitative claims. Moreover, the study's focus on two cases, while offering depth, invites broader comparative extension to other West African contexts like Ghana or Liberia to test generalizability (Ludovic, 2020).

Policy implications are both regional and global. For Nigeria, targeted reforms should prioritize depoliticizing NIREC through independent funding mechanisms, youth and women inclusive programming, and integration with structural interventions addressing religious deradicalization, land issues, climate adaptation, and poverty, thereby enhancing grassroots resonance (Williams, 2023; Roelofs, 2020; Bello, 2025). Regionally, the African Union (AU) and Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) should institutionalize Sierra Leone-style models by establishing early-warning interfaith networks and ritual-based reconciliation protocols within peacekeeping mandates, leveraging the IRCSL's proven moral authority (Kii, 2026; Berinyuy, 2025). International donors and the United Nations should adopt "faith-sensitive" guidelines for stabilization strategies, prioritizing partnerships with credible local religious platforms while safeguarding autonomy to avoid instrumentalization (Driessen, 2025; Johnston & Sampson, 1994). Such approaches must also mitigate risks, including exclusionary theologies, gender imbalances in leadership, and post-funding sustainability, through capacity-building in theological education for peace and long-term monitoring frameworks.

Ultimately, sustainable peace in religiously plural fragile states demands recognizing religious actors not as peripheral supplements but as indispensable partners in the global peace architecture. By embedding interfaith diplomacy within hybrid models that balance local agency with international support, policymakers can harness faith's constructive potential to build enduring social cohesion across West Africa and beyond, transforming religion from a potential conflict multiplier into a cornerstone of resilient peace (Appleby, 2000; Mac Ginty, 2011).

Conclusion

This comparative study of interfaith diplomacy in Nigeria and Sierra Leone illuminates the complex yet promising role of religious actors in peacebuilding and social cohesion within fragile states. In Sierra Leone, the Inter-Religious Council of Sierra Leone (IRC SL) exemplified religion's constructive potential by leveraging moral authority, neutrality, and pre-existing interfaith tolerance to facilitate mediation, support the Lomé Peace Accord, and contribute to post-conflict reconciliation through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Hurd, 2016; Turay, 2000; Day, 2021). The Council's organic, grassroots formation during an acute crisis enabled it to act as a trusted bridge between warring parties, demonstrating how faith-based initiatives can fill governance vacuums and promote hybrid forms of peace that integrate local legitimacy with international processes (Mac Ginty, 2011).

By contrast, Nigeria's Nigerian Inter-Religious Council (NIREC) illustrates the limits of interfaith efforts in contexts of chronic, multi-layered conflict. Despite issuing joint statements, organizing dialogues, and promoting shared Abrahamic values, NIREC's top-down structure and susceptibility to elite politicization have constrained its impact amid persistent Boko Haram/ISWAP insurgency, Fulani Militia violence, and electoral

tensions (Roelofs, 2020; Williams, 2023; International Crisis Group, 2017). The comparison highlights critical contextual differentiators, timing of institutional emergence, levels of pre-existing social capital, the nature of conflict, and state-religion relations, that determine whether religion functions primarily as a divider or a unifier (Appleby, 2000; Philpott, 2007).

These findings challenge traditional secular-liberal International Relations theories that marginalize faith in peace processes and reinforce the value of hybrid peacebuilding frameworks that actively incorporate religious actors (Richmond, 2011). Interfaith diplomacy emerges not as a panacea but as a vital complement to secular efforts, particularly when supported by enabling conditions such as institutional autonomy and everyday tolerance norms. For policymakers, the lessons are clear: international and regional organizations should invest in faith-sensitive approaches that strengthen credible local platforms like the IRCSL while addressing structural drivers of conflict in settings like Nigeria. This includes depoliticizing interfaith bodies, enhancing inclusivity (especially for women and youth), and fostering sustainable partnerships with donors and governments (Berinyuy, 2025; Driessen, 2025).

Looking forward, future research should expand this comparative lens through primary fieldwork and cross-national studies to refine our understanding of religion's ambivalent contributions in diverse fragile contexts. Ultimately, sustainable peace in West Africa and beyond requires moving beyond simplistic secular assumptions to recognize religious actors as indispensable stakeholders in the global peace architecture. By harnessing faith's capacity for moral suasion, reconciliation rituals, and community trust-building, interfaith diplomacy can help transform fragile states into resilient societies grounded in social cohesion and shared humanity (Appleby, 2000; Mac Ginty, 2011).

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