"Love Thy Neighbour as Thy Self": An Interrogation of the Implications of Religion on Intergroup Relations in Nigeria, 1914-2025

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Abstract

This study examined the profound implications of religion on inter-group relations in Nigeria from the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern protectorates in 1914 to the present democratic dispensation in 2023. As a multi-ethnic and multi-religious state, Nigeria's social fabric is significantly woven—and often frayed—by the interplay of Islam, Christianity, and Indigenous traditions. Employing a historical-analytical methodology with data derived from secondary sources, this research traces the trajectory of religious identity from a tool of colonial indirect rule, which institutionalized regional divisions, to a potent force for political mobilization, ethno-nationalist conflict, and violent extremism in the post-independence era. The study adopted the use of the Social Identity Theory as a template for analysis. It argued that rather than serving as a cohesive force, religion in Nigeria has frequently functioned as a critical marker of identity that exacerbates ethnic and political cleavages. Key phases of analysis include: the colonial construction of religious boundaries; the politicization of religion during the First Republic; the impact of the Sharia legal code reintroduction in the late 1990s and early 2000s; the emergence of non-state militant groups such as Boko Haram; and the contemporary dynamics of ethno-religious competition for resources and political power. The findings revealed that religious affiliation has consistently influenced patterns of intergroup relations, conflict, cooperation, and governance, often superseding national identity. The implications of this dynamic include cyclical communal violence, strained federalism, the securitization of religious spaces, and significant barriers to sustainable national integration. This

study recommends that religious fundamentalism and extremism be discouraged through deliberate policy frameworks, interfaith dialogue, and civil society engagement to ensure that religion functions as a bridge rather than a barrier in Nigeria's multi-ethnic society.

Keywords: Religion, Intergroup Relations, Ethno-religious Conflict, National Integration, Colonial Legacy.

Introduction

Nigeria is a nation of extraordinary religious diversity. With an estimated population exceeding 220 million people, the country hosts one of the largest concentrations of both Muslims and Christians on the African continent, alongside a significant proportion of adherents of African Traditional Religion (Pew Research Center, 2010). This religious multiplicity, far from being a peripheral feature of Nigerian society, constitutes one of its most powerful social and political forces. Religion shapes political alliances, informs cultural identities, influences economic activity, and at times, ignites violent conflict (Egbejule, 2025).

The historical origins of Nigeria's religious configuration are deeply tied to colonialism. Lord Frederick Lugard's amalgamation of the Northern and Southern protectorates in 1914 brought together communities with vastly different religious orientations under a single administrative entity (Falola, 1998). The predominantly Islamic north, heir to the Sokoto Caliphate's traditions, was merged with a christianised south that had undergone significant missionary transformation since the nineteenth century. This structural arrangement laid the groundwork for a persistent tension between religious communities that continues to define intergroup dynamics to this day (Falola, 2023).

Akinade (2023) posited that intergroup relations in Nigeria, thus, cannot be fully understood without examining the role of religion. Religion acts both as a centripetal force drawing people of diverse ethnic origins into shared communal identities and as a centrifugal force, deepening cleavages and fomenting mutual suspicion. This dual character makes religion one of the most consequential variables in Nigeria's social and political equation (Falola, 1998). This paper, therefore, interrogated the nature, dynamics, and implications of religion on

intergroup relations in Nigeria, drawing on social identity theory as its analytical lens.

Statement of the Problem

Despite decades of nation-building efforts, intergroup relations in Nigeria remain fragile and frequently punctuated by religiously inspired violence. From the Maitatsine uprisings of the 1980s to the Boko Haram insurgency that has devastated the North-East since 2009, religion has repeatedly served as a mobilising ideology for mass violence in Nigeria (Adesoji, 2010). Beyond outright conflict, religious identity continues to shape everyday social interactions, political appointments, and resource distribution in ways that entrench divisions rather than promote national cohesion. The problem, however, is not simply one of religious violence. Equally important is the understudied dimension of religion as a force for cohesion, cooperation, and cross-ethnic solidarity. Crusades, revivals, and Islamic conventions regularly draw millions of Nigerians across ethnic lines. Orthodox, Pentecostal churches and Islamic organisations operate vast economic and welfare networks that transcend communal boundaries. These positive dimensions have received comparatively little scholarly attention. This paper, therefore, argued that a comprehensive account of religion's implications for intergroup relations must address both the destructive and the constructive dimensions of religious life in Nigeria.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative, interpretive research design relying on secondary sources. Data were drawn from peer-reviewed journal articles, government reports, books, and credible online databases. The study employed historical and analytical methods to examine how religion has shaped inter-group relations from the pre-colonial period to the present. The theoretical framework of Social Identity Theory provides the conceptual scaffolding for interpreting the data.

Conceptual Clarification

Intergroup Relations

Inter-group relations refers to the patterns of interaction, perception, and behaviour between members of different social groups. These groups may be

defined on the basis of ethnicity, religion, class, gender, or any other significant social category. According to Tajfel and Turner (1979), inter-group relations are shaped by the ways in which individuals categorise themselves and others into in-groups and out-groups, generating attitudes of solidarity toward members of one's own group and varying degrees of prejudice or hostility toward outsiders. In the Nigerian context, intergroup relations encompasses the complex web of interactions among the country's over 250 ethnic nationalities and its major religious communities principally Islam, Christianity, and African Traditional Religion (Nwachukwu, 2024). These interactions are mediated by historical memories, political competition, economic rivalries, and cultural differences. Understanding inter-group relations in Nigeria therefore requires attention to the multiple layers of identity ethnic, religious, and regional that simultaneously unite and divide its peoples (Suberu, 2001).

Theoretical Framework

Social Identity Theory

Social Identity Theory (SIT), developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner in the 1970s and 1980s, provides the theoretical foundation for this study. The theory posits that individuals derive a significant part of their self-concept from their membership in social groups; family, nation, religion, ethnicity and that this group membership generates both positive self-esteem and in-group favouritism (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). When individuals perceive their group's identity as threatened or stigmatised, they may engage in behaviours designed to restore or enhance the group's prestige, including discrimination against out-groups and, in extreme cases, collective violence.

Applied to the Nigerian context, SIT explains why religious identity functions as such a powerful mobilising force. Muslims and Christians in Nigeria do not merely practice private faith; they belong to vast, institutionally rich communities that provide social support, economic networks, political influence, and moral frameworks. When these communities come into competition over state resources, political power, or symbolic recognition, the dynamics predicted by SIT in-group solidarity, out-group derogation, and inter-group conflict become clearly visible (Nnoli, 1978). Conversely, when conditions favour cooperation and positive

contact, SIT predicts that shared superordinate identities can reduce inter-group hostility.

Historical Background to Religion Intergroup Relations in Nigeria: An Overview

Nigeria's pre-colonial history was characterised by extensive intergroup contact, including trade, intermarriage, and occasional warfare, among the diverse communities of the Niger Delta, the Yoruba kingdoms, the Hausa-Fulani Caliphate, and the Igbo village republics, among others (Ajayi & Crowder, 1985). Religious traditions played an important but not always divisive role in these interactions. The spread of Islam across the Sahel and into the Hausa states from the eleventh century onwards created networks of scholarship, commerce, and political legitimacy that transcended ethnic boundaries (Last, 1967). Similarly, traditional religion provided a shared cosmological framework within many communities, even where political structures differed.

The arrival of Christian missionaries in the nineteenth century introduced a new and often destabilising element into Nigeria's religious landscape. Missionary activity was concentrated in the south, particularly among the Yoruba and Igbo peoples, and was closely associated with Western education and colonial administration (Ayandele, 1966). The differential spread of Christianity and Islam, mapping broadly onto the North-South divides that Lugard's amalgamation institutionalised, created a structural religious cleavage that has shaped intergroup relations over the years. Post-independence Nigeria inherited this divide, and rather than transcending it, saw it deepened through political competitions and marginalization, economic rivalries, and socio-cultural dominance (Nwachukwu, 2024).

According to Uchendu (2024), positive intergroup relations are foundational to Nigeria's viability as a federal state. With over 250 ethnic groups and three major religions, the country's unity depends on the capacity of its diverse peoples to coexist, cooperate, and build common institutions. Intergroup relations facilitate the exchange of ideas, goods, and cultural practices that enrich national life and drive economic development (Osaghae & Suberu, 2005). They underpin the functioning of federal institutions, which require cooperation among groups from

different regions and religious backgrounds. In a country as ethnically and religiously fragmented as Nigeria, healthy intergroup relations is a panacea for a healthy nation (Egbejule, 2025).

Again, a peaceful intergroup relations contribute to social peace and human security. Communities that maintain positive relations with their neighbours are better equipped to manage disputes peacefully, resist the appeals of demagogues and extremists, and recover from natural or man-made disasters. Conversely, deteriorating intergroup relations create fertile ground for elite manipulation, communal violence, and state fragility. Nigeria's recurring experiences of religious violence, thus, underscore the importance of deliberate efforts to build and sustain positive intergroup relations at all levels of society (Michael, 2017).

Influence of Religion on Intergroup Relations in Nigeria

Religion in Nigeria functions as both a boundary-maintaining and a boundary-transcending institution. On the one hand, religious identity generates clear social boundaries between communities. On the other hand, shared religious commitment frequently crosses ethnic lines, creating new forms of solidarity that compete with, and sometimes override, ethnic loyalties. This section, therefore, examined how religion has influenced/enhanced intergroup relations in Nigeria under the following themes:

Mass Religious Gatherings (Crusades, Conventions, Conferences, Ramadan etc)

Pentecostal crusades and Islamic conventions represent some of the most significant cross-ethnic gatherings in Nigeria. Events such as the Shiloh Convention of David Oyedepo's Living Faith Church, the annual conventions of the Redeemed Christian Church of God, Glory Reign of Salvation Ministries, The Experience programme of House on the Rock, 12 Days of Glory of the COZA church, Power Must Change Hands programme of Mountain of Fire Ministries, Holy Ghost Fire Conference of the Dunamis International Gospel Centres, NSPPD of the Streams of Joy annual gathering, LCCN Annual Convention of the Lutheran Church of Christ among others draw millions of worshippers from diverse ethnic and regional backgrounds, fostering a sense of shared Christian identity that transcends ethnicity, unity in diversity, community building, interfaith dialogue, intergroup

marriages, political alliances, economic integration among others (Ojo, 2006). Similarly, the National Islamic Conference and Ramadan activities of organisations such as the Jama'atu Nasril Islam, Tafseer Ramadan Lectures, Quran Recitation Competitions, Maitatsine Movement Anniversary, Tijjaniya and Qadiriya Sufi Orders among others create spaces for Muslims across ethnic lines to affirm a common religious identity (Nwosu & Okeke, 2023). These mass gatherings serve as engines of social integration, facilitating networks and friendships that span Nigeria's diverse communities.

Religious Assignments and Field Work (Posting of Pastors, Imams, and Church Workers)

The practice of deploying religious workers across Nigeria's geopolitical zones has profound implications for inter-group relations. Pentecostal churches, in particular, deliberately post pastors to regions far from their home states, ensuring that congregations encounter religious leadership from different ethnic backgrounds (Falola & Adebayo, 2023). This practice, institutionalised by organisations such as the Redeemed Christian Church of God, serves as a form of inter-ethnic contacts that builds familiarity and reduces prejudice (Marshall, 2009). Islamic missionaries similarly operate across ethnic lines, with Sufi brotherhoods such as the Tijaniyya and Qadiriyya providing pan-ethnic networks of religious solidarity.

Interfaith and Interreligious Marriages

Marriage across religious lines, while less common than marriage across ethnic lines, does occur in Nigeria and has significant implications for inter-group relations. Interfaith families embody in microcosm the challenges and possibilities of religious pluralism, negotiating questions of children's religious upbringing, participation in religious rituals, and communal identity (Okpanachi & Akinola, 2022). In many cases, such families serve as bridges between communities, maintaining ties with multiple religious networks and modelling the possibility of peaceful coexistence. However, they also face social pressures and, in conflict zones, potential danger, highlighting the limits of individual-level integration in the absence of systemic change (Nolte, 2009).

Cultural Exchanges

Religious festivals and observances have historically served as occasions for cross-cultural exchange in Nigeria. Eid celebrations in the north, for instance, have traditionally included gift-giving and feasting practices that incorporate non-Muslim neighbours. Christmas celebrations in predominantly Christian communities similarly involve wider social participation. These moments of festive generosity create opportunities for positive intergroup contacts and the building of reciprocal social capital (Danfulani, 2005). Religious institutions also sponsor schools, hospitals, and welfare organisations that serve populations beyond their own faith communities, further weaving religious networks into the fabric of broader Nigerian society (Uchendu, 2024). Furthermore, religious festivals and gatherings also promote intergroup marriages, cultural borrowings, political alliances and economic integration across ethnic lines thereby enhancing unity in diversity and integration.

Impact of Religious Differences and Conflicts on Intergroup Relations in Nigeria

Nwachukwu (2024) opined that religious differences have also been a persistent source of inter-group tension and violence in Nigeria. The country has experienced numerous episodes of religiously inspired conflict since independence, with devastating consequences for human life and national cohesion. The Maitatsine crisis of the 1980s, originating in Kano and spreading to other northern cities, represented an early and lethal manifestation of Islamist violence in Nigeria. Led by the charismatic preacher Mohammed Marwa (known as Maitatsine), the movement attracted marginalised urban youth and promoted a violently anti-establishment reading of Islam. The crises of 1980, 1982, and 1985 resulted in thousands of deaths and massive property destruction, and deeply unsettled inter-group relations in the north (Isichei, 1987).

Subsequent decades saw recurring outbreaks of communal violence with religious dimensions, including the Kafanchan riots of 1987, the Kaduna religious crises of 2000 and 2002, and the Jos crises of 2001, 2008, and 2010. These conflicts, while often involving ethnic and economic dimensions alongside religious ones, were consistently framed and mobilised in religious terms, with mosques and churches

targeted as symbols of the opposing community (Human Rights Watch, 2001). The cumulative effect has been a profound deterioration of trust between Muslim and Christian communities in Nigeria's Middle Belt and north.

The emergence of Boko Haram in 2002, and its escalation into an armed insurgency after 2009, represents the most severe manifestation of religiously inspired inter-group violence in Nigeria's history. The group's campaign of bombings, kidnappings, and territorial conquest in the North-East has displaced millions, killed tens of thousands, and effectively destroyed inter-group relations in vast swaths of the region (Adesoji, 2010; International Crisis Group, 2014). The Chibok schoolgirl's abduction of 2014 brought global attention to the insurgency and its devastating impact on communities defined by both religious and ethnic ties (Falola & Adebayo, 2023).

Roles of Religious Leaders in Promoting Peaceful and Harmonious Relations in Nigeria

Religious leaders occupy a uniquely influential position in Nigerian society. Their moral authority, institutional resources, and mass following give them the capacity to either inflame or calm inter-group tensions. Encouragingly, there are numerous examples of religious leaders using their influence to promote peace and inter-group understanding (Akinade, 2023). The Nigerian Inter-Religious Council (NIREC), established in 1999, for instance, represents a significant institutional attempt to harness the peace-building potential of religious leadership. Co-chaired by the Sultan of Sokoto and the President of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), NIREC brings together Muslim and Christian leaders to address shared social challenges and mediate communal disputes (Kukah, 2007). Its interventions have been credited with reducing tensions in several flashpoint communities, though its effectiveness has been limited by inadequate funding and political interference.

At the grassroots level, individual religious leaders have taken courageous steps to protect members of other faith communities during episodes of violence. During the Kaduna crisis of 2000, for instance, several Muslim leaders sheltered Christian families in their homes and mosques, and some Christian leaders did likewise for

Muslim neighbours, demonstrating that religious solidarity can coexist with humanitarian concern for the 'other' (Sanusi, 2007). These acts of cross-communal solidarity, while often unrecognised in formal peace-building literature, represent an important reservoir of social capital that can be mobilised for intergroup reconciliation.

Challenges and Prospects Religious activities of Intergroup Relations in Nigeria

The foremost challenge in the implication of religion on intergroup relations in Nigeria since the 1914 amalgamation has been the persistent politicization and instrumentalization of religious identity, which has systematically undermined the development of a cohesive national consciousness. The colonial foundation, which consolidated the predominantly Muslim North and the predominantly Christian South under a single administrative entity, established a structural dichotomy that was later exploited for political ends (Falola, 1998). This divergence became acutely pronounced in the post-independence era, where religious affiliation became a primary marker of political solidarity, most notably during the Sharia implementation crises that began in the late 1990s and intensified in the early 2000s (Nwachukwu, 2024).

Kuna (2023) argued that the declaration of Sharia law in several northern states from 1999 onward was perceived by southern and Christian minorities not merely as a legal reform but as an act of political and religious exclusion, leading to massive ethno-religious riots in states like Kaduna and Plateau that resulted in thousands of fatalities (Kukah, 1993; Ostien, 2009). Such conflicts have consistently revealed the fragility of inter-group trust, as religious identity superseded citizenship, transforming local disputes over land or political representation into sectarian bloodshed.

Furthermore, the emergence of non-state violent extremist groups such as Boko Haram, which leveraged a narrative of religious grievance against a "corrupt" state and sought to impose a puritanical Islamic order, has posed an existential threat to inter-group relations (Pérouse de Montclos, 2014). This insurgency, which peaked between 2009 and 2015, not only devastated communities in the North-East but also deepened the suspicion between Muslim and Christian communities across

the country, framing the conflict as a religious war despite its complex socio-economic underpinnings (Ajibola, 2024). The cumulative effect of these challenges has been the entrenchment of a "religious citizenship," where an individual's access to opportunities, political office, and even physical safety is often predicated on their religious identity and geographic location within the country's federal structure, thus eroding the secular foundation enshrined in the constitution (Nolte & Danjibo, 2009). This enduring legacy of mistrust remains the most significant obstacle to forging a truly pluralistic Nigerian state.

Nonetheless, despite the profound challenges, the prospects for leveraging religion to foster positive inter-group relations in Nigeria lie in the untapped potential of intra-faith and interfaith dialogue, legal reform, and the promotion of theological inclusivity (Orobator, 2025. The same religious structures that have been sources of division also harbor immense capacity for peacebuilding, particularly through the agency of religious leaders and interfaith organizations. Institutions like the Nigerian Inter-Religious Council (NIREC), established in 1999, represent a formal state-sponsored framework for dialogue between Christian and Muslim leaders, providing a platform for de-escalation during crises (Haynes, 2019). The prospect for sustainable peace is contingent upon moving beyond elite-level dialogue to grassroots engagement, where religious teachings that emphasize *sulh* (peace) in Islam and *agape* (unconditional love) in Christianity can be mobilized to counteract extremist narratives (Dagnew, Eshete & Beyene, 2025).

Furthermore, the growing jurisprudence of Nigeria's courts in upholding the secularity of the state, as reinforced in cases challenging the expansion of Sharia or religious symbols in public institutions, offers a constitutional pathway to de-escalating religious tensions by affirming the equal citizenship of all Nigerians irrespective of faith (Bazza, 2018). Another significant prospect lies in the internal theological reforms within both Christianity and Islam in Nigeria. The rise of what scholars call the "theology of development" or "peace theology" among younger clerics who address issues of poverty, corruption, and social justice—common problems that transcend religious lines—offers a pivot away from identity politics toward issue-based solidarity (Ojo, 2007).

Additionally, the demographic and economic interconnectedness of Nigeria, with increasing migration and urbanization creating mixed-religion families and neighborhoods, organically fosters a form of pragmatic coexistence (Egbejule, 2025). In regions such as the Middle Belt, where communities have long experienced conflict, indigenous conflict-resolution mechanisms that integrate religious and traditional practices have shown resilience in rebuilding trust (Hirsch, 2017). Ultimately, the prospect for improved inter-group relations depends on a deliberate civic commitment to reinterpreting religious identity not as a tool of political mobilization but as a moral foundation for justice, mutual accountability, and a shared national destiny, transforming the secular state from a contested arena into a protected space for all.

Recommendations

i. Nigerian government should strengthen and adequately fund NIREC and other interfaith bodies, empowering them to mediate disputes at the local level before they escalate to violence.
ii. Religious education curricula at all levels should be revised to include positive portrayals of other faith traditions and to promote critical engagement with extremist ideologies.
iii. Prosecutorial capacity for religious violence should be strengthened, ensuring that perpetrators face meaningful accountability and that impunity is no longer the default outcome of communal crises.
iv. Civil Society Organisations should be supported to build cross-communal networks in conflict-affected areas, drawing on the documented capacity of shared economic interests and social ties to bridge religious divides.
v. Media organisations should adopt and enforce ethical guidelines on the reporting of religious conflict, to avoid the inflammatory coverage that has been shown to escalate inter-group tensions.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that religion occupies a central and paradoxical place in Nigeria's intergroup relations. It is simultaneously a source of cohesion and conflict, solidarity and exclusion, peace and violence. The Social Identity Theory framework helps to explain this paradox: religious identity generates powerful in-

group loyalties that can either be directed toward constructive cooperation or toward destructive intergroup competition, depending on the broader social, political, and economic context. The historical record demonstrates that Nigeria's religious communities have coexisted in productive and mutually enriching ways for centuries, even as episodes of violent conflict have periodically disrupted this coexistence. The challenge for the Nigerian state and society is to create conditions that amplify the integrative functions of religion while containing its centrifugal tendencies. This requires political will, institutional investment, and the active engagement of religious leaders themselves.

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