

EXPLORING THE INTERSECTION OF ETHICS, RELIGION, AND PEACE IN NIGERIA: A MULTIDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

This paper examines the intersection of ethics, religion, and peace in Nigeria as a conceptual and theoretical problem. It responds to the need for a clearer explanation of how moral reasoning mediates the social effects of religion in a multi religious society marked by Christian, Muslim, and indigenous religious traditions. Existing scholarship has examined religious conflict in Nigeria largely through the lenses of political manipulation, ethnic competition, federal imbalance, state weakness, and violent mobilisation. While these explanations remain important, they do not sufficiently account for the ethical frameworks through which religious actors interpret justice, loyalty, obligation, violence, forgiveness, reconciliation, and peaceful coexistence. This paper therefore argues that ethics is not an auxiliary concern but the analytical bridge between religion and peace in Nigeria. The study is structured as a conceptual and multidisciplinary analysis, not as an empirical ethnographic study. The paper draws on established scholarship in religious studies, moral psychology, political sociology, and peace and conflict studies to develop a theoretical account of the ethics religion peace nexus. The analysis integrates Moral Foundations Theory, Social Identity Theory, and Galtung's concept of positive peace to show how religion can function either as a resource for reconciliation or as a mechanism of exclusion depending on the ethical narratives through which it is interpreted. The paper contributes to Nigerian religion conflict scholarship by repositioning ethical reasoning as the mediating mechanism that explains religion's ambivalent role in conflict and peacebuilding.

Keywords: Ethics; Religion; Peace; Nigeria; Interfaith relations; Positive peace; Moral reasoning

1. Introduction

Nigeria's socio political landscape is profoundly shaped by its religious plurality. Islam and Christianity constitute the country's two dominant religious traditions, while indigenous religious worldviews continue to shape communal identity, moral imagination, and social practice in many local contexts. This plurality is not merely demographic; it is embedded in law, education, political discourse, public morality, community organisation, and the everyday negotiation of belonging. Consequently, religion in Nigeria functions not only as a private system of belief but also as a public moral language through which individuals and communities interpret justice, leadership, social obligation, suffering, violence, and peace.

The relationship between religion and conflict in Nigeria has generated extensive scholarship. Foundational studies have shown that religious violence cannot be explained apart from colonial legacies, postcolonial state formation, economic inequality, ethnicity, and political competition (Falola, 1998; Kukah, 1993; Suberu, 2001). Other scholars have emphasised identity mobilisation, grievance formation, and the politicisation of group boundaries as key drivers of conflict in plural societies (Horowitz, 1985; Gurr, 1970). Nigerian examples such as the recurring crises in Jos, tensions in Kaduna, and religiously inflected violence in parts of the Middle Belt demonstrate that religious affiliation often overlaps with ethnicity, indigene settler contestation, land disputes, party politics, and perceptions of marginalisation (Higazi, 2011; Krause, 2011; Onapajo, 2012).

These explanations remain indispensable. Yet they do not exhaust the problem. Much of the existing discussion treats religion primarily as an identity marker, a political instrument, or a mobilising ideology. Such treatment is useful but incomplete because it does not fully explain how religious adherents morally interpret conflict itself. Religion does not operate in a moral vacuum. Religious communities produce ethical narratives about what is just, what is sacred, what is owed to the community, what constitutes betrayal, when forgiveness is possible, and whether peace is meaningful without justice. These moral interpretations shape whether religion becomes a bridge for reconciliation or a boundary of exclusion.

The central argument of this paper is that ethics mediates the relationship between religion and peace in Nigeria. Religion is neither inherently violent nor inherently peaceful. Its public effects depend substantially on the ethical frameworks through which religious teachings, identities, and institutions are interpreted and mobilised. Where religious ethics emphasises care, fairness, human dignity, repentance, and restorative justice, religion can provide a culturally resonant resource for peacebuilding. Where religious ethics is narrowed into exclusionary loyalty, sectarian purity, or absolutist claims of divine entitlement, religion can intensify suspicion and legitimise violence. The analytical task is therefore not simply to ask whether religion causes conflict or promotes peace, but to examine how religious moral reasoning shapes both possibilities. The integrated theoretical framework underpinning this analysis is depicted in Figure 1.

This paper makes four contributions to the literature. First, it clarifies the originality of the ethics religion peace nexus by

showing that ethics is the missing mediating category between religious identity and peacebuilding outcomes. Second, it reframes debates on Nigerian religious conflict by moving beyond deterministic accounts of religion as either a problem or solution. Third, it integrates moral psychology, social identity theory, and positive peace theory into a coherent conceptual framework for analysing Nigeria's religious public sphere. Fourth, it offers practical implications for religious leaders, policymakers, and peace practitioners by showing why peace initiatives must engage moral narratives and not only institutional arrangements.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Religion, Conflict, and the Nigerian Context

Scholarship on religion and conflict in Nigeria has consistently emphasised the entanglement of religious identity with political and ethnic competition. Falola (1998) provides one of the most influential accounts of religious violence in Nigeria, showing that religious conflict must be understood within broader histories of colonial governance, regional rivalry, political marginalisation, and ideological contestation. Kukah (1993) similarly demonstrates that religion in northern Nigeria has often been implicated in the struggle for political legitimacy and social authority. Suberu (2001) adds that Nigeria's federal structure, revenue allocation debates, state creation politics, and minority majority anxieties have repeatedly created conditions in which ethnic and religious identities become politically charged.

These studies are important because they resist simplistic explanations that blame religious doctrine alone for violence. Instead, they show that religious identity becomes conflictual when embedded in struggles over power, representation, belonging, and access to resources. Horowitz (1985) provides a broader theoretical basis for this interpretation by demonstrating that ethnic and communal conflict often emerges from group comparison, perceived entitlement, and competition for state resources. Gurr (1970) similarly links political violence to relative deprivation, arguing that collective unrest frequently arises when groups perceive a gap between expectations and achievable conditions.

Nigerian case literature confirms these structural and identity based insights. Higazi (2011) and Krause (2011), for example, examine the Jos crisis as a complex conflict shaped by indigene settler politics, religious polarisation, local governance failures, and cycles of retaliation. Onapajo (2012) argues that democratic competition in Nigeria has often intensified the political use of religion, especially when religious symbols are deployed to mobilise voters or legitimise group claims. Sampson (2014) further shows that ambiguity in Nigeria's state religion relationship has contributed to national security tensions by leaving unresolved the boundary between secular constitutional order and religious political aspiration.

2.2 Religion as a Resource for Peacebuilding

A second strand of literature emphasises the peacebuilding potential of religion. Appleby (2000) argues that religion is ambivalent: the same traditions that can authorise violence can also inspire reconciliation, nonviolence, compassion, and social transformation. This insight is crucial for Nigeria because religious institutions often possess grassroots legitimacy, moral authority,

and dense networks that state institutions may lack. Religious leaders can reach communities through sermons, rituals, pastoral counsel, Islamic teaching circles, interfaith bodies, and local moral authority.

Sampson (1997) demonstrates that religious actors can contribute to peacebuilding through mediation, moral persuasion, reconciliation rituals, and the creation of trusted spaces for dialogue. Lederach (1997) similarly argues that sustainable reconciliation requires attention to relationships, cultural resources, and long term transformation rather than only formal agreements. Paden (2005) provides a Nigerian example by showing how Muslim civic cultures can contribute to conflict resolution within democratic federalism. Abu Nimer (2003) also demonstrates that Islamic resources for nonviolence and peacebuilding are more robust than stereotypes of religious violence suggest. However, peacebuilding scholarship sometimes celebrates religious actors without sufficiently interrogating the ethical conditions under which religious engagement becomes constructive.

2.3 Ethics, Moral Reasoning, and Religious Interpretation

Ethics is central to the study of religion and peace because conflict is never only a struggle over material interests; it is also a struggle over moral meaning. Communities in conflict ask questions such as: Who has been wronged? What is justice? Who deserves loyalty? What must be forgiven? What cannot be compromised? Whose suffering counts? These questions are ethical before they are institutional.

Haidt's Moral Foundations Theory is useful for explaining why moral reasoning varies across communities. Haidt (2012) argues that human moral judgment is shaped by several foundations, including care, fairness, loyalty, authority, sanctity, and liberty. These foundations are not distributed or prioritised identically across cultures and ideological communities. In a religiously plural society such as Nigeria, moral foundations may be interpreted through Islamic, Christian, indigenous, ethnic, and civic narratives. A conflict may therefore be framed as a violation of fairness, a threat to sanctity, a test of communal loyalty, or a crisis of authority depending on the moral lens through which it is viewed. The relationship between these moral foundations and their orientation toward peace or conflict is illustrated in Figure 3.

2.4 Identity, Moral Boundaries, and Intergroup Relations

Social identity theory explains why religious affiliation can become a powerful boundary marker in conflict. Tajfel and Turner (1979) argue that individuals derive part of their self understanding from group membership and often compare their in groups with out groups. Such comparison can generate solidarity, but it can also produce suspicion, stereotyping, and hostility. Juergensmeyer (2003) shows that religious violence often acquires intensity when conflicts are framed as cosmic struggles between good and evil. Mustapha (2014) complicates the picture by showing that northern Nigerian Muslim identities are internally diverse and contested, underscoring that religious traditions are not monolithic containers of fixed meaning but internally debated moral worlds.

2.5 Positive Peace and Structural Justice

The concept of positive peace provides a further lens for understanding the ethics religion peace nexus. Galtung (1996)

distinguishes negative peace, understood as the absence of direct violence, from positive peace, understood as the presence of justice, equity, and life supporting social structures. This distinction is essential for Nigeria because many communities may experience temporary calm without genuine reconciliation or structural repair. The spectrum from negative to positive peace, with the escalating ethical requirements at each stage, is depicted in Figure 4.

Lederach (1997) argues that sustainable reconciliation requires relationship transformation across personal, relational, structural, and cultural dimensions. In Nigeria, religious actors can contribute to positive peace when they challenge injustice, resist manipulation, and cultivate moral practices of coexistence. They can undermine positive peace when they sanctify exclusion, silence victims, or reduce peace to passive tolerance.

Integrated Theoretical Framework for the Ethics-Religion-Peace Nexus in Nigeria

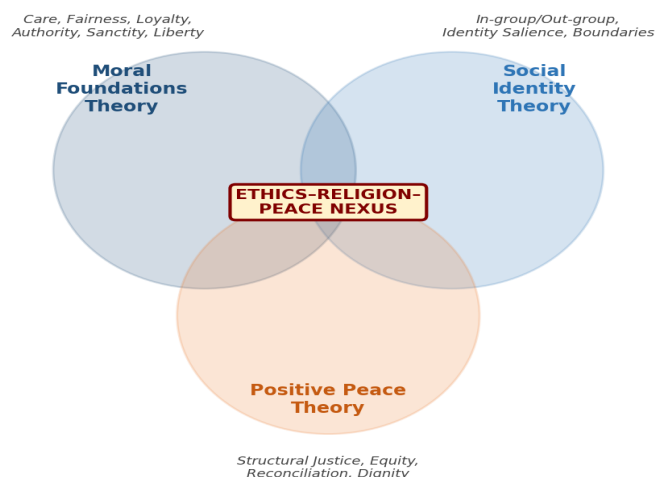


Figure 1: Integrated Theoretical Framework for the Ethics Religion Peace Nexus in Nigeria

The Mediating Role of Ethical Interpretation in the Religion-Peace Relationship

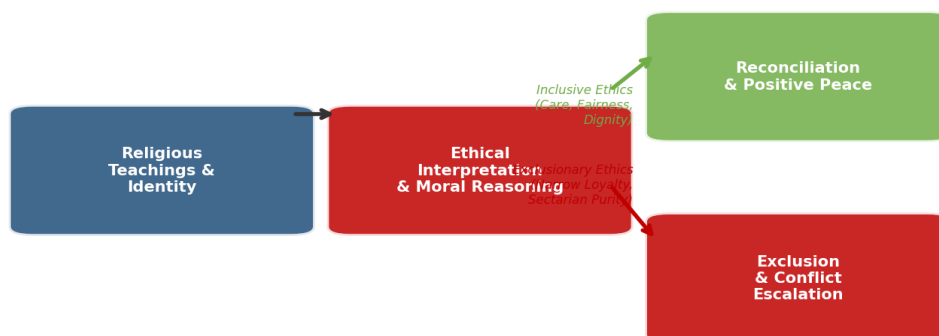


Figure 2: The Mediating Role of Ethical Interpretation in the Religion Peace Relationship

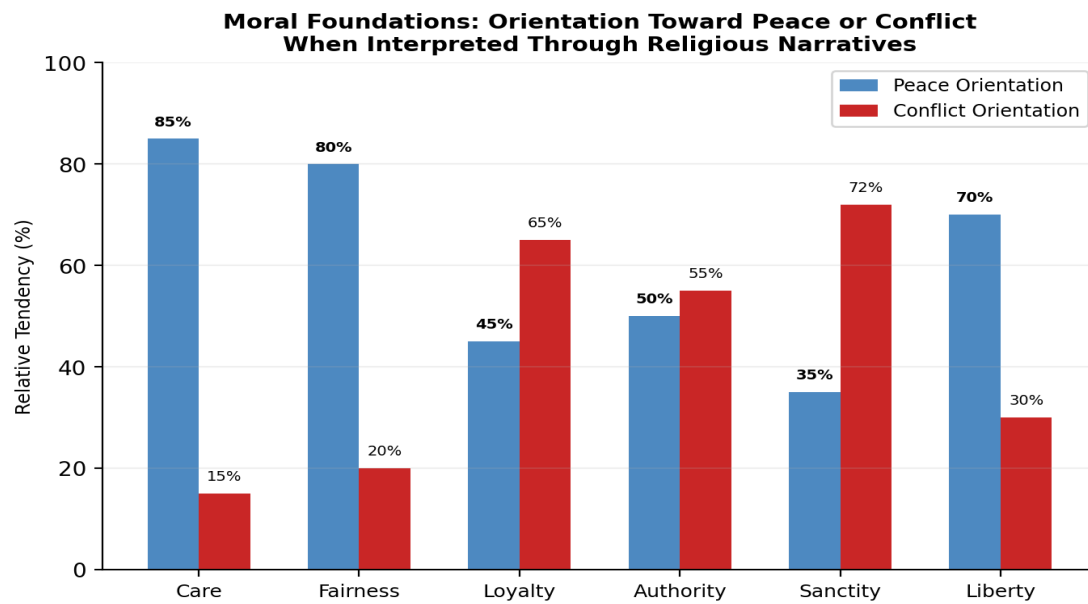


Figure 3: Moral Foundations: Orientation Toward Peace or Conflict When Interpreted Through Religious Narratives (Synthesised from Haidt, 2012; contextualised for Nigeria)

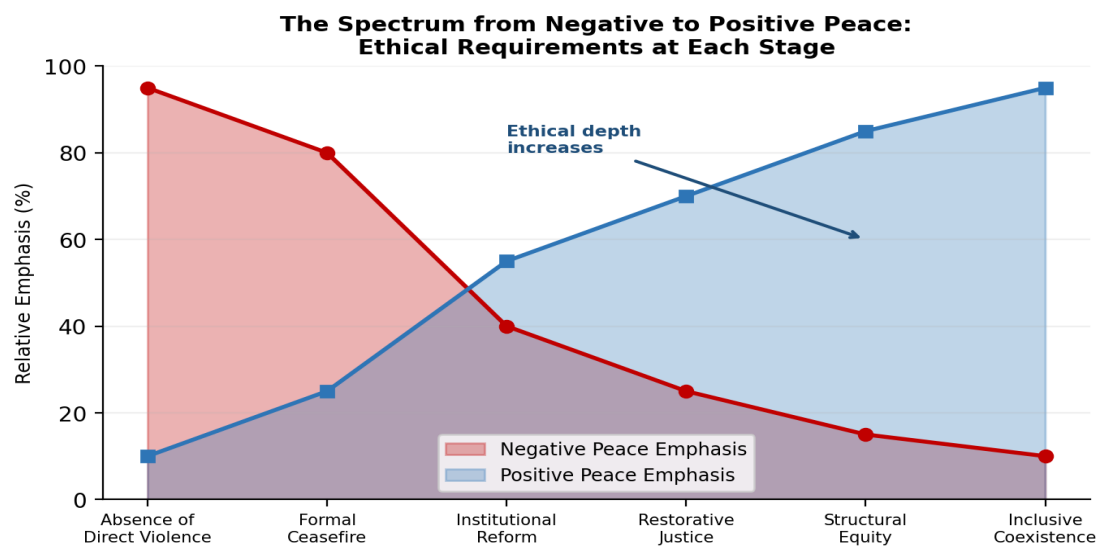


Figure 4: The Spectrum from Negative to Positive Peace: Ethical Requirements at Each Stage (Adapted from Galtung, 1996; Lederach, 1997)

3. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework integrates Moral Foundations Theory, Social Identity Theory, and Positive Peace Theory. These frameworks are used not as separate explanations but as complementary lenses for analysing the relationship between ethics, religion, and peace in Nigeria. Moral Foundations Theory explains the moral grammar through which religious communities interpret conflict. Social Identity Theory explains how religious belonging shapes in group and out group relations. Positive Peace Theory evaluates whether religious and ethical practices merely suppress violence or contribute to justice and sustainable coexistence.

Moral Foundations Theory, associated primarily with Haidt (2012), holds that moral judgment is shaped by intuitive foundations such as care, fairness, loyalty, authority, sanctity, and liberty. In Nigeria, religious teachings often give content to these moral foundations. Care may appear as compassion for victims or hospitality toward strangers. Fairness may appear as justice, equitable treatment, and resistance to corruption. Loyalty may appear as fidelity to one's religious community. Authority may appear as respect for religious leaders or sacred texts. Sanctity may appear as concern for religious purity or sacred space. These foundations can support peace when interpreted inclusively, but they can also intensify conflict when narrowed into sectarian obligation.

Social Identity Theory, developed by Tajfel and Turner (1979), explains how group membership shapes perception, emotion, and behaviour. In Nigeria, religious identity frequently interacts with ethnicity and region. This paper extends Social Identity Theory by emphasising that group boundaries are morally narrated. The out group is not only different; it may be judged as unjust, impure, dangerous, oppressive, or untrustworthy. Ethical reasoning therefore shapes the emotional force of religious identity. Peacebuilding requires not the erasure of identity but the moral re narration of identity in ways that permit coexistence. The mediating role of ethical interpretation is illustrated in Figure 2.

Positive Peace Theory, associated with Galtung (1996), distinguishes peace as the absence of direct violence from peace as the presence of justice, equity, and constructive social relationships. Positive peace requires a moral evaluation of social conditions. It asks whether institutions protect dignity, whether groups are treated fairly, whether past wrongs are acknowledged, and whether communities have meaningful opportunities for participation. The integrated model used in this paper can therefore be summarised as follows: moral foundations shape religious ethical interpretation; religious ethical interpretation shapes social identity boundaries; and these identity boundaries either support or obstruct positive peace.

4. Methodological and Analytical Approach

This paper is a conceptual and theoretical study. It is not an empirical ethnographic investigation and does not report interviews, participant observation, questionnaire responses, focus group discussions, or newly collected field data. The paper's method is qualitative in the interpretive sense: it critically analyses existing scholarship, theoretical frameworks, and documented

Nigerian contexts in order to clarify the ethical mechanisms through which religion may influence peace and conflict.

The analytical approach consists of three steps. First, the paper synthesises literature on religion and conflict in Nigeria, focusing on how scholars have explained religious violence, identity mobilisation, state religion relations, and peacebuilding. Second, it brings this literature into dialogue with moral psychology, social identity theory, and peace studies. Third, it develops a conceptual model that positions ethical reasoning as the mediating factor between religious belief and peace outcomes. The sources used in the paper were selected for their relevance to four domains: Nigerian religious conflict, religion and peacebuilding, moral reasoning, and theories of peace and identity.

Because the paper does not involve human participants or primary fieldwork, ethical clearance for human subject research was not required. The ethical responsibility of the paper lies instead in accurate representation of sources, avoidance of unsupported empirical claims, and transparent presentation of its conceptual scope.

5. Conceptual Analysis

5.1 Religion as Moral Power

Religion exercises moral power because it shapes how communities distinguish right from wrong, sacred from profane, loyalty from betrayal, and justice from injustice. In Nigeria, this moral power is intensified by the public significance of religion. Political speeches, communal disputes, social ceremonies, education, and public morality are frequently shaped by Christian, Muslim, and indigenous moral vocabularies. Religious communities therefore do not merely respond to conflict; they interpret conflict through inherited moral narratives.

The ambivalence identified by Appleby (2000) is visible in this interpretive role. The same religious tradition may generate arguments for peace or conflict depending on which ethical themes are emphasised. A sermon on justice may challenge corruption and call for reconciliation. The same language of justice may also be used to demand revenge if justice is imagined as punishment without restoration. This means that religion's social effect depends on moral selection. The peacebuilding significance of religion therefore lies not simply in the presence of religious institutions but in the ethical direction of religious interpretation.

5.2 Ethical Narratives and Nigerian Conflict Dynamics

Nigerian conflicts often involve competing narratives of victimhood, entitlement, and historical grievance. In the Jos context, for example, literature shows that indigene settler tensions, political exclusion, and religious polarisation have reinforced one another over time (Higazi, 2011; Krause, 2011). Such conflicts are not merely disputes over territory or office; they are also moral disputes over belonging, recognition, and justice. Each community may understand itself as wronged and may interpret the other as beneficiary of injustice.

Where moral narratives remain closed, conflict becomes self reinforcing. Violence is remembered selectively, victims of the in group are centred, and the suffering of the out group is minimised. Religious ethics can either challenge or reinforce this exclusion. A Christian ethic of neighbour love, an Islamic ethic of justice and

mercy, or an indigenous ethic of communal balance can widen moral concern beyond the in group. Yet these resources require interpretation. They do not automatically produce peace. The decisive question is whether religious leaders and communities interpret their traditions in ways that humanise the other, acknowledge wrongdoing, and resist retaliatory moral logic.

Onapajo (2012) shows that religious rhetoric in democratic Nigeria can be politically mobilised in ways that intensify conflict. Sampson (2014) similarly demonstrates that unresolved state religion boundaries can produce insecurity. These analyses point to the need for ethical discernment in public religion. The problem is not simply that religion appears in politics, but that religious political engagement may lack inclusive ethical discipline.

5.3 Interfaith Dialogue as Ethical Reframing

Interfaith dialogue is often presented as a solution to religious conflict, but dialogue is not automatically transformative. It can become ceremonial, elite driven, or superficial if it does not confront the moral narratives sustaining distrust. The significance of interfaith dialogue lies in its ability to reframe the other as a moral subject rather than merely a religious opponent.

Sampson (1997) and Lederach (1997) both emphasise that peacebuilding requires relationship transformation. In the Nigerian context, interfaith dialogue must move beyond polite coexistence toward ethical engagement with memory, justice, accountability, and shared vulnerability. Paden (2005) shows that civic cultures within religious communities can contribute to conflict resolution where they support democratic negotiation and public responsibility. Abu Nimer (2003) also demonstrates that Islamic traditions contain resources for nonviolence, reconciliation, and interreligious engagement. Ethical reframing is therefore central. If Christians and Muslims encounter one another only as rival blocs, dialogue remains fragile. If they encounter one another as communities equally accountable before God for justice, mercy, truth, and the protection of life, dialogue gains moral depth.

5.4 Ethical Leadership and Positive Peace

Ethical leadership is a recurring requirement in the ethics religion peace nexus. Religious leaders often command trust that political institutions lack. Yet moral authority is not guaranteed by office. It is sustained by consistency, fairness, courage, and willingness to criticise one's own community when necessary. Positive peace requires this kind of leadership because structural injustice cannot be resolved by calls for calm alone. Galtung (1996) insists that peace must address the underlying conditions that reproduce harm.

In Nigeria, religious leaders can contribute to positive peace by condemning violence, resisting political manipulation, supporting victims across communal lines, advocating fair governance, and cultivating moral education that emphasises shared humanity. However, ethical leadership must be institutionally supported. Where religious leaders are dependent on political patronage, their prophetic capacity may be weakened. This is why the ethics religion peace nexus must be linked to governance, education, and civic accountability. Best (2006) emphasises the importance of conflict transformation in West African contexts, while Haynes (2007) shows that faith based actors can contribute to development and social repair when they connect peace with justice.

6. Discussion

The conceptual analysis supports the central argument that ethics mediates the relationship between religion and peace in Nigeria. Existing scholarship has rightly shown that religious conflict is shaped by political manipulation, ethnic competition, federal imbalance, and state weakness (Falola, 1998; Kukah, 1993; Suberu, 2001). However, those explanations require an ethical supplement. They explain the conditions under which conflict becomes likely, but they do not fully explain the moral interpretations through which actors justify violence or pursue reconciliation.

The paper's first major contribution is theoretical. By integrating Haidt's Moral Foundations Theory, Tajfel and Turner's Social Identity Theory, and Galtung's Positive Peace Theory, it offers a multilevel framework for analysing religion and peace. Moral Foundations Theory explains how ethical priorities shape judgment. Social Identity Theory explains how religious belonging organises group perception. Positive Peace Theory explains why sustainable peace requires justice and structural transformation. Together, these frameworks clarify how religious ethics can either widen or narrow the circle of moral concern, as illustrated in Figures 1 and 2.

The second contribution is to Nigerian religion conflict scholarship. Instead of treating religion as an independent cause of violence or as an automatic resource for peace, the paper treats religion as a moral field. This makes it possible to explain why the same religious tradition may support different political and social outcomes. It also avoids both secular reductionism and religious romanticism. Religion matters, but it matters through interpretation, leadership, identity, and ethical application. The data synthesised in Figure 3 illustrates how different moral foundations carry differential propensities toward peace or conflict depending on the interpretive lens applied.

The third contribution is practical. Peacebuilding initiatives in Nigeria should engage ethical narratives directly. Training religious leaders in conflict mediation is useful, but it is insufficient if communities continue to interpret the out group as morally threatening. Interfaith dialogue is valuable, but it must address justice, memory, and fear rather than merely performing tolerance. Civic education is necessary, but it should include moral reasoning across religious lines. Policymakers should therefore recognise that peacebuilding in religious societies requires moral legitimacy, not only security enforcement.

The conceptual framework also clarifies the limits of this paper. Because it is not based on original fieldwork, it does not claim to report the lived experiences of specific participants or communities. Its contribution is theoretical synthesis and conceptual clarification. Future research can build on this framework through empirical case studies of interfaith peacebuilding initiatives in Kaduna, Jos, or other Nigerian communities. Such studies could test how ethical narratives operate in sermons, mediation meetings, religious education, youth networks, and community reconciliation processes.

Table 1. Summary of the Three Theoretical Frameworks and Their Analytical Contributions

Framework	Core Concept	Application to Nigeria	Peace Implication
Moral Foundations Theory (Haidt, 2012)	Care, fairness, loyalty, authority, sanctity, liberty as moral intuitions	Religious teachings give content to these foundations; interpretation varies by tradition	Inclusive interpretation supports peace; narrow interpretation intensifies conflict
Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979)	In group/out group boundaries; identity salience	Religious identity overlaps with ethnicity, region, politics	Moral re narration of identity boundaries enables coexistence
Positive Peace Theory (Galtung, 1996)	Negative peace vs positive peace; structural justice	Cessation of violence without reconciliation is insufficient	Religious ethics must support justice, dignity, and equity beyond the in group

7. Conclusion

This paper has restructured the study of ethics, religion, and peace in Nigeria as a conceptual and theoretical inquiry. It has argued that the relationship between religion and peace cannot be adequately understood without attention to ethical reasoning. Religion in Nigeria is a powerful public force because it shapes moral imagination, communal identity, and social obligation. Yet its effects are ambivalent. It can support reconciliation or deepen conflict depending on the ethical narratives through which it is interpreted.

The paper has shown that existing scholarship on Nigerian religious conflict provides strong explanations of political, ethnic, and structural factors, but often leaves the ethical mechanism underdeveloped. By foregrounding ethics, the paper contributes a distinctive analytical perspective: religious identity becomes socially consequential through moral interpretation. Peacebuilding must therefore engage the ethical foundations of religious discourse, not merely its institutional expressions.

The integrated framework developed here suggests that sustainable peace in Nigeria requires three forms of transformation. First, moral transformation is needed so that religious communities interpret justice, loyalty, authority, and sanctity in ways that protect human dignity beyond the in group. Second, identity transformation is needed so that religious belonging does not become a boundary of moral exclusion. Third, structural transformation is needed so that peace is not reduced to the absence of violence but includes justice, accountability, and equitable coexistence. This paper concludes that ethics is not peripheral to religion and peace; it is the bridge between them. Future empirical research can extend this conceptual framework by examining how specific Nigerian religious communities teach, negotiate, and practice moral reasoning in contexts of conflict and reconciliation.

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