RELIGION AND PEACE: INTERFAITH COEXISTENCE, ECOLOGICAL SPACE, AND SUSTAINABLE PEACE ON PLANET EARTH

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Abstract
In an era marked by ecological crises, religious plurality, and persistent social tensions, the quest for peaceful coexistence on planet Earth has become an urgent global concern. This paper examines the relationship between religion and peace through an interdisciplinary framework that integrates social peace, interfaith coexistence, and ecological space. Using qualitative and theoretical analysis, the study engages contemporary scholarship in peace studies, religious studies, and political ecology, with particular attention to Nigerian and broader African contexts. The paper argues that religion is an ambivalent yet powerful social force: while it can exacerbate social and environmental conflicts, it also offers ethical frameworks, communal structures, and spiritual motivations that support reconciliation, justice, and ecological responsibility. Through critical engagement with existing literature and African case analyses, the study demonstrates how interfaith collaboration and faith-based ecological initiatives can transform religious diversity and environmental stress from sources of division into opportunities for cooperative peacebuilding. The findings highlight that peaceful coexistence depends not only on political and economic arrangements but also on moral imagination, inclusive interfaith engagement, and grassroots religious participation that link human well-being with environmental sustainability. By centering Global South and African perspectives often marginalized in dominant peace discourses, this paper contributes to contemporary debates on religion's constructive role in fostering social harmony and ecological stewardship. It concludes that interfaith ecological engagement provides a viable pathway toward sustainable peace and peaceful coexistence on planet Earth.

Keywords: Religion; Sustainable Peace; Interfaith Dialogue; Ecological Peacebuilding; Africa

Introduction

The contemporary global landscape is marked by overlapping crises of social tension, religious polarization, and ecological degradation. These challenges expose not only material vulnerabilities but also deep moral and cultural fractures in how societies relate to one another and to the planet (UNEP, 2023; Leal Filho et al., 2022). Conflicts shaped by identity, belief, and competition over ecological resources- land, water, and livelihoods have intensified

debates about how diverse communities can coexist peacefully (Obi, 2021; Ide, 2022). Within this complex terrain, religion stands out as a powerful, yet ambivalent, social force. Scholarship has moved beyond simplistic portrayals of religion as either a source of violence or a purely pacifying influence. Religion is now understood as a dynamic cultural system capable of both legitimizing domination and fostering resistance, solidarity, and reconciliation (Appleby, 2020; Sheikh & Svensson, 2021). From a social peace perspective, peace extends beyond the mere absence of violence; it requires justice, inclusion, and the creative reimagining of social relations across cultural, religious, and ecological boundaries (Bercovitch & Jackson, 2021; Richmond, 2022).

Contemporary discourse emphasizes coexistence across religious, cultural, and ecological domains. In an era characterized by climate change, environmental degradation, forced migration, and identity-based conflicts, peace is best understood as a relational and spatial condition embedded within social and ecological systems. Sustainable peace depends on moral imagination, environmental responsibility, and intercultural engagement, particularly in plural societies where religious worldviews shape collective life and meaning (Gathogo, 2021; Leal Filho et al., 2022). In African contexts especially Nigeria religious diversity intersects with historical legacies, political contestation, and ecological pressures, producing both conflict and innovative forms of cooperation (Afolayan & Falola, 2022; Adetula & Agbiboa, 2023).

Situated within critical arts and social research, this paper examines religion and peace through an interfaith and ecological lens. It argues that religion, when engaged thoughtfully and contextually, can serve as a cultural resource for reimagining social and ecological coexistence. By centering Nigerian and African experiences, the study amplifies Global South perspectives and contributes to intercultural scholarship on sustainable peace. This paper advances the argument that interfaith ecological engagement constitutes a critical pathway to sustainable peace in plural societies, particularly within African contexts marked by religious diversity and environmental vulnerability. Rather than treating religion as a peripheral or inherently problematic force, the study positions religious actors and ethical traditions as central to reimagining social harmony and ecological responsibility. By integrating social peace theory with interfaith praxis and ecological ethics, the paper contributes a context-sensitive framework that highlights how religion can mediate coexistence between diverse communities and the natural environment.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are to:

i. Examine the relationship between religion, social peace, and ecological space.

ii. Analyze the dual role of religion as both a source of conflict and a resource for peaceful coexistence.

iii. Explore interfaith perspectives on peace and environmental responsibility.

iv. Illustrate the discussion with Nigerian and African case examples.

v. Contribute to contemporary scholarship by highlighting contextual and grassroots religious engagement in sustainable peacebuilding.

Research Questions

The study is guided by the following questions:

i. What is the relationship between religion, social peace, and ecological space?

ii. How does religion function both as a source of conflict and as a resource for peaceful coexistence?

iii. What interfaith perspectives exist regarding peace and environmental responsibility?

iv. What insights can be drawn from Nigerian and African case examples on religion and peace?

v. How can grassroots religious engagement contribute to sustainable peacebuilding?

Significance of the Study

This study is significant academically, socially, and practically. Academically, it links religion, peace studies, and ecological thought, contributing to interdisciplinary scholarship and intercultural social research. By focusing on African contexts, the study amplifies Global South perspectives often underrepresented in international debates.

Practically, the findings provide insights for policymakers, peace practitioners, religious leaders, and civil society organizations seeking sustainable approaches to conflict resolution and environmental stewardship. Emphasizing interfaith cooperation and community-based engagement, the research offers practical pathways for fostering peaceful coexistence in religiously and culturally diverse societies.

Socially, the study challenges reductionist narratives that portray religion solely as a source of conflict. Instead, it positions religion as a potential driver of reconciliation, justice, and ecological responsibility, promoting tolerance and collective stewardship for the planet's future.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, theoretical research design grounded in critical literature analysis and conceptual synthesis. The research draws on peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, and policy-oriented publications published between 2020 and 2024 to ensure engagement with current debates in religion, peace studies, interfaith relations, and ecological scholarship. Sources were selected based on their relevance to peace theory, religious engagement, ecological sustainability, and African or Global South contexts.

The analytical approach is interpretive and thematic. Key concepts such as positive peace, interfaith coexistence, ecological space, and religious peacebuilding were identified and examined across the literature to trace patterns, tensions, and convergences. This thematic analysis enabled the study to interrogate how religion functions both as a source of social conflict and as a resource for peace and ecological responsibility, depending on historical, political, and cultural contexts.

Rather than relying on empirical fieldwork, the study emphasizes conceptual clarity and normative analysis, making it suitable for interdisciplinary scholarship and international conference presentation. Nigerian and African case illustrations are employed analytically to ground theoretical arguments in lived realities, demonstrating how abstract peace concepts manifest within specific socio-religious and ecological contexts. This methodological approach allows the paper to contribute critically to debates on sustainable peace by integrating theory, context, and ethical reflection.

Theoretical Framework.

This study is anchored on Johan Galtung's theory of positive peace and social constructivist theory, which together provide a comprehensive lens for understanding the complex relationship between religion, peace, and ecological coexistence.

Johan Galtung (1969), a pioneering scholar in peace studies, distinguishes between negative peace and positive peace. Negative peace refers to the mere absence of direct violence or war, whereas positive peace involves the presence of justice, equity, cooperation, and harmonious social relations within societies. Positive peace therefore emphasizes the transformation of structural inequalities and cultural attitudes that sustain conflict. In the context of this study, Galtung's framework is particularly useful because it highlights that peaceful coexistence cannot be achieved simply by ending violence; rather, it requires the cultivation of social systems that promote justice, inclusion, and mutual respect among diverse religious communities.

Religion plays a significant role in shaping the cultural and moral values that influence social relations. Religious teachings often promote ethical principles such as compassion, stewardship of the earth, and respect for human dignity. However, religious beliefs can also be manipulated to justify exclusion, domination, or conflict when interpreted within rigid ideological or political frameworks (Appleby, 2020). By applying the concept of positive peace, this study examines how religious traditions can contribute to the creation of just and harmonious societies while discouraging attitudes that foster division or ecological exploitation.

The study also draws on social constructivist theory, which views religion not simply as a fixed system of doctrines but as a social phenomenon shaped by historical, cultural, and political contexts. According to social constructivists, meanings and practices associated with religion are continuously constructed and reconstructed through human interaction and interpretation (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). This perspective allows scholars to understand how religious ideas can produce different social outcomes depending on how they are interpreted and practiced within specific societies.

Within the Nigerian and broader African contexts, religious identities interact with political interests, economic pressures, and environmental challenges. As a result, religion can function both as a source of conflict and as a resource for peacebuilding and ecological responsibility. Religious institutions often serve as moral authorities capable of mobilizing communities toward reconciliation, social justice, and environmental stewardship. At the same time, misinterpretations of religious teachings can fuel intolerance and social fragmentation.

By combining Galtung's theory of positive peace with social constructivist insights, this study provides a theoretical framework that explains how religion can simultaneously generate tensions and promote peaceful coexistence. The framework enables the analysis of religious engagement not only in terms of conflict but also in terms of its potential to foster dialogue, social harmony, and sustainable ecological practices.

Conceptual Clarifications

Religion

Religion refers to organized and lived systems of beliefs, practices, symbols, and moral values through which individuals and communities relate to what they perceive as sacred or transcendent (Durkheim, 1912; Smart, 1998). Religion functions not only as a spiritual framework but also as a powerful social institution that shapes identity, ethical norms, and patterns of social interaction. Within many societies, religious teachings influence attitudes toward justice, human dignity, and the environment.

In the context of this study, religion is examined as a social and moral resource capable of shaping both conflict and peace. Religious leaders and institutions can either reinforce social divisions or promote reconciliation, tolerance, and cooperation among diverse communities. Understanding religion in this way allows this study to explore how faith traditions can contribute constructively to peaceful coexistence and ecological responsibility.

Peace

Peace is often narrowly understood as the absence of war or violent conflict. However, peace scholars emphasize a broader conception that includes social justice, equality, and harmonious relationships within and between communities (Galtung, 1969; Richmond, 2022). This broader

perspective is commonly described as positive peace, which involves the presence of institutions and cultural values that support fairness, dialogue, and respect for human dignity.

Within this study, peace is conceptualized as a multidimensional condition that includes social stability, interreligious harmony, and environmental sustainability. Peaceful coexistence requires not only the prevention of violence but also the creation of social environments where individuals from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds can interact constructively and cooperatively.

Sustainable Peace

Sustainable peace refers to a long-term condition of harmony in which social, political, economic, and environmental structures support justice, stability, and cooperation among communities. Unlike temporary or fragile peace arrangements, sustainable peace addresses the root causes of conflict, including inequality, exclusion, and environmental pressures.

Peace scholars such as Galtung (1969) emphasize that sustainable peace goes beyond the absence of violence, often referred to as negative peace, and instead involves the presence of positive peace, characterized by social justice, inclusive governance, and equitable resource distribution. In this sense, sustainable peace requires the transformation of social systems that generate conflict.

Religion can play a crucial role in promoting sustainable peace by encouraging ethical values such as compassion, reconciliation, forgiveness, and stewardship of the environment. Faith-based organizations often engage in mediation, humanitarian activities, and community development programs that contribute to long-term peacebuilding.

Within this study, sustainable peace refers to a condition in which religious communities contribute positively to social harmony, conflict prevention, and environmental responsibility in ways that ensure stability across generations.

Interfaith Coexistence

Interfaith coexistence refers to the peaceful interaction, mutual respect, and constructive engagement among individuals and communities belonging to different religious traditions. In plural societies, where multiple religious groups share the same social and political space, interfaith coexistence becomes essential for maintaining social harmony and preventing

conflict. According to Appleby (2020), interfaith engagement involves dialogue, cooperation, and shared efforts among religious communities to address common societal challenges.

Interfaith coexistence does not imply the erasure of religious differences. Rather, it encourages the recognition and acceptance of diversity while promoting values such as tolerance, understanding, and mutual respect. In many African societies, including Nigeria, interfaith relationships shape everyday social life, influencing political cooperation, economic activities, and community relations. When properly nurtured, interfaith coexistence can serve as a powerful instrument for conflict prevention, peacebuilding, and social stability.

In the context of this study, interfaith coexistence refers to the capacity of religious communities to interact peacefully while maintaining their distinct identities. It highlights the role of religious leaders, institutions, and grassroots initiatives in fostering dialogue and collaboration among different faith groups.

Ecological Space (Planet Earth)

Ecological space refers to the shared environmental system within which human societies exist and interact. It encompasses natural resources, ecosystems, and the broader planetary environment that sustains human life. Scholars in environmental studies emphasize that ecological space must be managed responsibly to ensure sustainability and intergenerational justice (Leal Filho et al., 2022).

In relation to this study, ecological space represents the planetary context in which religious communities live and interact. Environmental degradation, climate change, and competition over natural resources often intensify social tensions and conflicts. Religious traditions, however, frequently contain teachings that encourage stewardship of the earth and responsible use of natural resources.

By examining the relationship between religion, peace, and ecological space, this study highlights the potential for religious communities to promote ethical environmental practices, interfaith cooperation, and sustainable coexistence on planet Earth.

Literature Review

Contemporary scholarship on religion and peace reflects interdisciplinary convergence between peace studies, religious studies, political ecology, and environmental humanities. Religion is increasingly recognized as a constitutive element of social meaning, cultural power,

and moral imagination (Appleby, 2020; Sheikh & Svensson, 2021). Appleby (2020) shows how sacred narratives can both justify violence and inspire reconciliation. Sheikh and Svensson (2021) emphasize that religious peacebuilding is culturally embedded and context-sensitive. These insights align with post-liberal peace theorists critiquing universalized models detached from lived realities (Richmond, 2022). Küng (2020) advocates a global ethic emphasizing shared moral responsibilities across religions. Scholars caution that such frameworks risk abstraction if they ignore historical inequalities and local agency in the Global South (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021; Richmond, 2022).

Recent studies link religion to ecological peacebuilding. Duffy and Bock (2021) highlight faith-based contributions to environmental protection, while Leal Filho et al. (2022) note religion's role in sustainability practices. Ide (2022) connects climate change to violent conflict, underscoring the urgency of ecological integration in peace studies. Klugman (2023) emphasizes equity and social inclusion as essential to climate-related peacebuilding.

Peacebuilding.

African scholarship provides crucial contextual depth. Afolayan and Falola (2022) show how interreligious engagement and indigenous ethics sustain communal coexistence. Gathogo (2021) emphasizes African religious cosmologies promoting harmony with nature. Obi (2021) situates ecological conflicts in political economy and governance, while Adetula and Agbiboa (2023) analyze faith-based networks mediating insecurity and environmental stress in Nigeria.

Further studies explore African interfaith and grassroots perspectives. Ellis and ter Haar (2020) examine religion's political role, Onapajo (2020) studies Nigerian interreligious dynamics, Kalu (2023) explores Christianity's engagement with justice, Akinade (2021) foregrounds indigenous ecological ethics, and Mustapha (2022) highlights Muslim–Christian relations and everyday coexistence in West Africa.

Despite rich literature, there is limited integrative analysis combining interfaith practice, ecological space, and social peace from African grassroots perspectives. This study addresses the gap by proposing a critical, African-centered framework where religion mediates social harmony and ecological responsibility.

Nigerian and African Case Analysis

Nigeria offers a critical case for examining the intersection of religion, peace, and ecological space due to its pronounced religious plurality, colonial legacies, and ongoing ecological challenges. As Africa's most populous country, Nigeria's Christian–Muslim relations are shaped by political competition, economic inequality, and environmental pressures, including desertification in the north and resource conflicts in agrarian regions (Obi, 2021; Ide, 2022). Interfaith initiatives such as the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC) illustrate the constructive potential of religion when mobilized through inclusive and dialogical frameworks. By facilitating sustained engagement between Christian and Muslim leaders, NIREC has contributed to conflict prevention, public mediation, and advocacy for peaceful coexistence during periods of heightened religious tension. However, its effectiveness remains uneven, constrained by political instrumentalization of religion, limited grassroots penetration, and structural inequalities that fuel distrust. This ambivalence underscores the need for peacebuilding approaches that move beyond elite dialogue to community-level engagement.

Ecological conflicts, particularly farmer–herder tensions, further reveal the importance of integrating environmental considerations into religious peacebuilding. Faith-based organizations across Nigeria and other African contexts have increasingly framed environmental stewardship as a moral and theological responsibility, promoting land ethics, climate awareness, and communal resource management (Duffy & Bock, 2021; Akinade, 2021). These initiatives demonstrate how interfaith ecological engagement can reframe competition over scarce resources into shared ethical responsibility.

The Nigerian case thus illustrates that religion's contribution to peace is neither automatic nor guaranteed. Rather, it depends on inclusive leadership, contextual sensitivity, and the integration of ecological justice into interfaith praxis. When these conditions are met, religion can function as a transformative resource for sustainable peace.

Interfaith Perspectives on Peace and Ecology

Interfaith engagement is central to debates on peaceful coexistence. Across Christianity, Islam, and African Indigenous Religions, shared ethical commitments to justice, hospitality, compassion, and care for the earth provide a foundation for collaborative peace praxis (Küng, 2020; Gathogo, 2021; Akinade, 2021).

Interfaith dialogue is performative, reshaping social imaginaries, redistributing power, and fostering belonging (Richmond, 2022; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021). In Africa, such initiatives often emerge from necessity, responding to ecological vulnerabilities, displacement, and economic precarity (Afolayan & Falola, 2022; Mustapha, 2022). When religious actors address ecological concerns such as land degradation, water scarcity, and climate justice, interfaith cooperation can transform competition into shared responsibility (Duffy & Bock, 2021; Ide, 2022; Klugman, 2023). These practices align with global calls for planetary ethics integrating social peace and environmental sustainability (UNEP, 2023).

Recommendations

i. Religious and interfaith institutions should integrate peace education and ecological ethics into faith-based teaching and community programs.

ii. Policymakers and development agencies should recognize religious actors as partners in social and environmental peacebuilding.

iii. Interfaith dialogue platforms should be strengthened at local and national levels, especially in ecologically stressed and conflict-prone regions.

iv. Faith-based environmental initiatives should be supported as tools for promoting sustainable coexistence and climate resilience.

v. Future research should prioritize empirical African case studies integrating religion, peace, and ecological space within interdisciplinary frameworks.

Contribution to Knowledge

This study contributes to contemporary scholarship in three significant ways. First, it advances an interdisciplinary framework that integrates religion, peace studies, and ecological thought, responding to growing calls for holistic approaches to sustainable peace. Second, by centering Nigerian and African experiences, the research amplifies Global South perspectives that are often marginalized in dominant peace and environmental discourses. Third, the paper extends existing theories of positive peace by foregrounding interfaith ecological engagement as a practical and ethical mechanism for fostering long-term social harmony. In doing so, it bridges

the gap between abstract peace theory and grassroots religious praxis in ecologically stressed societies.

Conclusion

This study has explored the complex relationship between religion, interfaith coexistence, ecological space, and sustainable peace on planet Earth. The analysis demonstrates that religion functions as an ambivalent but powerful social force capable of both intensifying conflict and promoting reconciliation. While religious identities have at times been mobilized in ways that deepen social divisions and environmental competition, religious traditions also possess rich ethical resources that can nurture compassion, justice, and ecological responsibility.

Drawing on insights from peace studies, religious studies, and political ecology, the paper argues that sustainable peace requires more than the absence of violence; it demands the cultivation of social systems that encourage dialogue, inclusion, and responsible stewardship of the earth. Religious institutions and faith-based actors are uniquely positioned to contribute to this process because of their moral authority, community networks, and capacity to mobilize grassroots participation.

Particularly within African contexts such as Nigeria, where religion remains deeply embedded in social life, interfaith engagement and faith-based environmental initiatives provide promising pathways for addressing both social tensions and ecological challenges. Collaborative action among religious communities can transform religious diversity from a potential source of conflict into a foundation for cooperative peacebuilding and ecological sustainability.

Ultimately, achieving peaceful coexistence on planet Earth requires an integrated approach that recognizes the interdependence of social harmony, religious engagement, and environmental stewardship. By highlighting the constructive roles that religious actors can play in these domains, this study contributes to contemporary debates on religion and peace and underscores the importance of inclusive interfaith collaboration in building a more just, sustainable, and peaceful world.

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