

Research Article

Religious Statecraft and the Governance of Insecurity in Nigeria: Strategic Pathways for Peace, Security, and Sustainable Development

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Abstract

Contemporary trends and dynamics of insecurity in Nigeria is shaped by a complex interplay of religion, law, and governance, yet the strategic role of religion within security management remains insufficiently theorised in legal and policy scholarship. This article advances the concept of religious statecraft to examine how religious identities, narratives, and institutions are deliberately mobilised by state and non-state actors to influence security outcomes in Nigeria. Drawing on doctrinal legal analysis, institutional review, and documentary evidence, the study interrogates how constitutional secularism operates in practice amid persistent violence, including Islamist insurgency, ethno-religious crises, and farmer–herder conflicts. It demonstrates that religion functions dually as a source of legitimacy and mobilisation as well as a potential catalyst for polarisation when politicised or selectively engaged. The article analyses the insurgency of Boko Haram, recurrent Middle Belt conflicts, and related communal violence to illustrate how religious narratives intersect with structural grievances such as governance deficits, inequality, and weak rule of law. It argues that state responses have largely prioritised militarised and *ad-hoc* approaches, while failing to institutionalise constructive engagement with religious actors despite constitutional guarantees of freedom of religion and equality. This gap, the study contends, has undermined public trust, reinforced perceptions of bias, and limited the effectiveness of conflict prevention strategies. Conversely, evidence from interfaith councils, mediation initiatives, and grassroots peacebuilding programmes demonstrates that positive religious statecraft that is anchored in constitutional neutrality, human rights norms, and institutional accountability can mitigate violence, foster reconciliation, and strengthen social cohesion. The article concludes that embedding structured engagement with religious actors within Nigeria’s legal and security frameworks is essential for effective security governance. By aligning religious authority with constitutionalism and human rights obligations, religious statecraft can be transformed from a source of insecurity into a strategic asset for peacebuilding, conflict prevention, and sustainable development.

Keywords

Religious Statecraft, Constitutional Secularism, Security Governance, Freedom of Religion or Belief, Peacebuilding, Conflict Prevention, Human Rights

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1. Introduction

Nigeria's contemporary security environment is characterised by complex, interwoven threats that transcend conventional state-centric responses. These include Islamist insurgencies in the Northeast, ethno-religious conflicts in the Middle Belt, and recurrent farmer–herder violence in North-Central Nigeria. While socioeconomic deprivation, weak institutions, and political marginalisation are widely recognised as drivers of insecurity, the strategic role of religion in shaping governance and security outcomes has received comparatively limited scholarly attention. Yet, religion operates not merely as a social or cultural marker but as a legitimating and mobilising tool deployed by state actors, political elites, and non-state groups alike [12, 31].

The concept of religious statecraft refers to the deliberate mobilisation of religious identities, narratives, and institutions to achieve political, security, or governance objectives. In the Nigerian context, it operates at the intersection of law, politics, and security policy, shaping both state responses to violence and the strategies of armed actors. Constitutional provisions guarantee freedom of religion and secular governance: Section 10 of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999) mandates that the government shall not adopt any religion as a state religion, while Sections 38–42 safeguard individual religious liberties. However, the absence of a clear operational definition of secularism has created a paradoxical environment in which religion, though formally neutral, is politically potent, influencing policy, appointments, and security governance [22].

Onodugo [24] demonstrates that political actors routinely mobilise religious identities to consolidate electoral support, legitimise authority, and influence policy priorities. For instance, northern states' implementation of Sharia law and unspoken religious quota arrangements in appointments illustrate the *de facto* incorporation of religion into governance frameworks, challenging constitutional neutrality [4, 21]. This strategic engagement extends to security governance: extremist groups such as Boko Haram exploit religious symbolism to frame their insurgency as divinely sanctioned, while the state's selective engagement with religious actors can either mitigate or exacerbate insecurity [5, 20]. Similarly, in the Middle Belt, recurrent farmer–herder clashes are often rhetorically framed in religious terms, though underlying drivers are resource competition and governance deficits [32].

Understanding religious statecraft is therefore critical for developing effective, rights-based, and contextually grounded security governance strategies. Integrating religious actors into formal peacebuilding and conflict prevention frameworks, while maintaining constitutional neutrality, presents an opportunity to leverage moral authority and social capital to promote sustainable peace, reduce polarisation, and advance development. This article examines the legal and institutional dimensions of religious statecraft in Nigeria, highlighting both its potential as a tool for constructive governance and the risks

posed by its politicisation.

2. Conceptualising Religious Statecraft in Nigeria's Governance and Security Architecture

The concept of religious statecraft refers to the strategic mobilization of religious identities, narratives, and institutions by state actors and political elites to advance political, security, or governance objectives [18]. In legal and political analysis, this concept intersects jurisprudence on secularism, constitutional governance, and public policy, especially in states marked by religious pluralism [7, 9]. It extends beyond mere coexistence of religion and politics to encompass the instrumental use of religion to shape state legitimacy, policy priorities, and security governance outcomes [7, 9].

Section 10 of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999) formally enshrines the principle that “The Government of the Federation or of a State shall not adopt any religion as State Religion”. This constitutional provision represents Nigeria's formal secular identity, designed to safeguard the religious freedoms of its diverse citizenry. However, neither the phrase “secular state” nor a clear operational definition appears in the constitutional text, leading to significant debate over the depth and practice of secularism in Nigerian governance [22]. Scholars describe this as a paradox of secularism, whereby religion is constitutionally neutral but politically potent in governance and policy [22]. Moreover, Nigerian governments at federal and subnational levels routinely observe Christian and Islamic holidays in official calendars and public budgets, further blurring formal secular commitments with religio-political practice.

Religion deeply influences Nigerian political culture and policy. Nigerian political elites often deploy religious identities as mobilizing tools during elections, legislative campaigns, and intra-party contests, reinforcing the salience of religious affiliation in public choice. Analyses of electoral dynamics document that political parties and candidates frequently appeal to religious sentiments to secure votes, a practice that entrenches religious polarization and shapes governance outcomes [24]. This entrenched religio-political engagement undermines the constitutional ideal of neutrality by aligning state actors with religious constituencies, thereby shaping policy preferences and security agendas [28].

The strategic use of religion by political actors in Nigeria does not occur in a vacuum. It reflects the pragmatics of political competition in a multi-faith society, where political actors perceive religious symbolism as a resource for legitimacy and mass mobilisation. For instance, the deployment of religious language, appointments along unspoken religious quota arrangements, and faith-oriented public pronouncements suggest that religion operates as *de facto* political currency, even

without constitutional endorsement [4, 21]. In some northern states, the implementation of *Sharia* penal codes illustrates a quasi-institutional embodiment of religion within state governance frameworks, challenging the constitutional secular norm and transforming state identity within specific federal units.

These developments illustrate that religious identities are not merely descriptive markers but have acquisitive and coercive political value. Political incumbents and challengers alike leverage religious solidarity to construct narratives of inclusion, exclusion, threat, and protection—thereby shaping public policy and security priorities. Such mobilisation can induce instrumental trust among co-religionists, while simultaneously deepening cleavages among religiously diverse communities.

Understanding religious statecraft is especially critical in the context of security governance. Nigeria's security challenges, manifested in prolonged Islamist insurgency in the Northeast and recurrent ethno-religious crises in the Middle Belt have been partly shaped by how religious narratives are co-opted by state and non-state actors alike. Extremist groups such as Boko Haram have deliberately invoked religious motifs to frame insurgency as a struggle for divine legitimacy against a perceived secular or corrupt state [12, 31]. Although socio-economic factors contribute substantially to radicalisation, the political instrumentalisation of religion in public discourse and policy responses can inadvertently validate insurgents' narratives or alienate segments of the population. This dynamic underscores the urgency of developing institutional mechanisms through which religion can be engaged as a constructive statecraft resource, rather than a vector for polarisation.

3. Religious Statecraft and Nigeria's Contemporary Security Threats: A Legal-Institutional Analysis

In the Nigerian context, religious statecraft operates at the intersection of law, politics, and security, shaping both the state's strategic responses to violence and the mobilization of armed actors. While religion is constitutionally separated from the formal organs of government, its instrumentalization within public policy and security governance has profoundly influenced patterns of conflict and state response. Section 10 of the 1999 Constitution (as amended) commits the Nigerian state to "ensure the free exercise of religion," yet the recurrent use of religious narratives by political elites and non-state actors reveals a disjunction between constitutional ideals and practical governance.

The insurgency led by *Jama'atu Ahlis Sunnah Lidda'awati wal-Jihad* (Boko Haram) illustrates how religious identity is instrumentalized as both rhetoric and operational justification for violent rebellion. Although Boko Haram's public discourse frames its struggle as a religious obligation to establish

an Islamic polity, rigorous scholarship demonstrates that its ideological narrative is entangled with socio-economic marginalization, structural exclusion, and perceived political illegitimacy in the Northeast [5, 20]. In the early 2010s, violence attributed to the group directly targeted both state institutions and civilian populations, dramatically disrupting constitutional order and territorial control in Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe states. Over 16 years, tens of thousands of lives have been lost, and over 3 million Nigerians have been displaced, a testament to the depth of the crisis beyond purely doctrinal religion [5].

From a statecraft perspective, the Nigerian government's counterinsurgency measures have alternated between militarized suppression and tentative engagement with local religious networks. The state's failure to fully integrate legitimate religious leaders into de-radicalization and community security frameworks has at times widened the legitimacy gap between the state and disaffected communities. Moreover, the recurrent framing of Boko Haram's violence as religious extremism in isolation from political and structural drivers risk misdiagnosing the phenomenon, thereby undermining constitutional commitments to justice and equity [12].

Beyond Islamist militancy, Nigeria's history of ethno-religious riots underscores how religion functions as a mobilizing factor in broader struggles over governance, rights, and political representation. Incidents such as the 2000 Kaduna riots, which erupted over the contentious implementation of *Shari'a* law in a religiously mixed polity, resulted in an estimated 1,000–5,000 deaths and widespread displacement, illustrating the legal-political potency of religious identity in public order breakdowns [10]. Similarly, the 2001 and 2008 Jos conflicts were triggered by disputes over political appointment and electoral outcomes, manifested complex overlaps between ethnic identities and religious affiliation that rapidly mutated into constitutional crises over equality, security of person, and freedom of worship. These conflagrations resulted in hundreds of deaths, mass displacement, and a protracted erosion of trust in state institutions tasked with protecting all citizens equally [11].

Under Nigeria's legal framework, the state bears affirmative obligations to protect religious freedom and to maintain public order without bias. Yet, states of emergency, military deployments, and selective enforcement of law often reflect ad-hoc responses shaped by political considerations rather than a consistent application of constitutional norms. The result is a cycle in which religious identity becomes both a marker of victimhood and a rallying point for political actors, further complicating policy responses to communal violence. This evidence a core dynamic of religious statecraft: when the state fails to institutionalize genuinely neutral governance, religion becomes a strategic resource in competition for security and political advantage [3].

The persistent violence between predominantly Muslim pastoralist herders and largely Christian farming communities in Nigeria's Middle Belt is often mischaracterized in popular

discourse as an ethno-religious conflict. However, rigorous analyses reveal resource competition, land rights, and governance deficits as primary drivers, with religious affiliation frequently deployed rhetorically by actors to reinforce group boundaries and political claims to state protection [32]. This dynamic illustrates how religious statecraft operates indirectly: political elites and local authorities may amplify religious narratives to consolidate support, secure electoral advantage, or legitimize security priorities. In contexts where rural populations perceive unequal access to justice and security under constitutional guarantees, religion becomes a proxy for broader governance grievances, leading to cyclical violence that escapes easy legal categorization under established conflict frameworks.

4. Religious Statecraft and Nigeria's Contemporary Security Threats

A nuanced examination of Nigeria's security landscape reveals that religion functions not merely as an identity marker but as a strategic variable in political and social mobilization that intersects with ethno-regional dynamics, institutional failures, and state security policy. This reality underscores the salience of religious statecraft as the instrumental use of religious narratives, actors, and affiliations by state and non-state actors to both exacerbate and ameliorate threats to peace, security, and development.

The Boko Haram insurgency, which emerged formally in 2009, represents the most sustained violent campaign in Nigeria's modern history and illustrates the interplay between religion and insecurity. While socioeconomic marginalization and governance deficits are significant structural drivers, the movement's self-representation as a religious revolution reflects a deliberate appropriation of religious symbolism to legitimize its political aims. Boko Haram's founding ideology explicitly rejected Western education and secular governance on the basis that they were antithetical to its interpretation of Islam, and it sought the establishment of an Islamic state in northern Nigeria — objectives that have underpinned decades of lethal violence [34]. This pattern is visible in repeated attacks on civilian targets, including religious sites. Contemporary incidents continue to demonstrate the insurgents' capacity to leverage religious identity as an operational element, with recent bombings at places of worship in Maiduguri illustrating persistent instability and vulnerability of religious spaces in conflict theatres [1]. Although military responses have degraded some operational capacities, the insurgency's religious framing complicates negotiation and de-radicalization processes, thereby prolonging insecurity and societal disruption.

From a legal perspective, Nigeria's constitutional commitment to freedom of religion (Section 38, Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999) demands that state re-

sponses to insurgency safeguard religious rights while maintaining public order. However, security operations shaped by a narrow counterterrorism lens, absent robust engagement with religious actors and communities risk reinforcing insurgent narratives of state hostility toward Islam, thereby undermining legitimacy and complicating peacebuilding.

Intercommunal conflicts in Nigeria's Middle Belt, particularly between agrarian communities and Fulani pastoralists, are frequently portrayed in public discourse through the prisms of religion and ethnicity. Quantitative data, however, suggest that while religious affiliations intersect with these clashes, religion is not necessarily the principal driver of violence at the macro level. Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) analysis indicates that only a small fraction (approximately 4.3%) of recorded conflict events between 2020 and 2024 were explicitly "religion-targeted," with ethnic and communal variables significantly outsize purely religious targeting in incidence and fatalities [29]. Nonetheless, the religious undercurrents of these communal conflicts cannot be dismissed. Many Fulani pastoralists are Muslim, while several farming communities in the Middle Belt have predominantly Christian identities, a configuration that contributes to *perceptions* of sectarian antagonism even where the proximate causes are land-use competition, climate pressures, and weak local governance. Historical examples, such as the December 2023 massacre in Plateau State (Bokkos and Barkin Ladi), where coordinated attacks on rural settlements resulted in approximately 200 deaths and widespread displacement, underscore how resource disputes acquire ethno-religious coloration with grave security consequences [6].

Religion can shape perceptions and responses to conflict. For example, regression analysis of Afrobarometer survey data suggests that religious affiliation influences how individuals perceive the farmer-herder conflict: Muslims and Christians may report differing levels of concern about these clashes, reflecting how religious identity informs sociopolitical attitudes even when religion is not the core cause of violence [30].

The state's response to herder-farmer conflict engages multiple normative frameworks: the Land Use Act (1978) governing land tenure, the National Grazing Reserves Act, and state anti-open grazing laws, alongside constitutional guarantees of freedom of religion and non-discrimination. The failure to enforce anti-open grazing laws uniformly and to protect property rights has exacerbated perceptions of bias and contributed to cycles of retaliation, thereby implicating religious statecraft indirectly — where policy implementation is perceived as favoring one religious community over another, even if the legal basis is ostensibly secular.

A comprehensive assessment of these security threats must recognize that religion operates both as a legitimating narrative and as a mobilizing structure. Boko Haram's religious framing of insurgency and the religious repertoires invoked in herder-farmer conflicts demonstrate how religious identity in-

tersects with insecurity. At the same time, conflict data caution against reductive sectarian explanations that obscure underlying socio-economic and political drivers [29]. In terms of public policy, this underscores two imperatives: first, developing conflict responses that address socio-economic grievances and governance deficits without inadvertently reinforcing religious polarization; and second, engaging religious institutions and leaders constructively as partners in peacebuilding and social cohesion. Integrating religious statecraft insights into security policy and legal frameworks such as through structured roles for interfaith councils in early warning systems, reconciliation mechanisms, and community policing strategies could advance more nuanced and sustainable responses to Nigeria's security challenges.

5. Positive Religious Statecraft in Conflict Mitigation

A critical dimension of effective religious statecraft in Nigeria lies in the strategic engagement of religious actors and institutions as active partners in conflict mitigation and peacebuilding. Unlike approaches that marginalize or instrumentalize religion for narrow political ends, positive religious statecraft entails institutionalised, rights-affirming engagement with faith communities as part of the state's legal and policy framework for managing insecurity. This section examines evidence from Nigeria's multi-faith peacebuilding initiatives, demonstrating that structured inclusion of religious leaders and interfaith mechanisms can reduce violence, reconfigure communal narratives, and strengthen adherence to constitutional norms such as freedom of religion and belief.

Plateau State context illustrates the potency of religious leaders in moderating conflict behaviours when incorporated into structured peacebuilding programmes. Mercy Corps' Inter-religious Peacebuilding in Northern Nigeria (IPNN) programme (2013–2016) found that religious leaders significantly influenced attitudes and behaviours among disputing communities by promoting non-violence and rebuilding trust across religious lines. For instance, over 94% of respondents identified religious identity as linked to conflict dynamics, yet a majority reported increasing trust due to religious leaders' interventions, and 68% expressed willingness to cease adversarial economic interactions upon counsel from their religious leaders, suggesting a tangible influence on conflict-related behaviour [19]. These findings are legally significant given Nigeria's constitutional commitment to freedom of religion (Section 38, Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999) and the imperative to ensure that religious differences do not undermine public order. Positive religious statecraft operationalises this constitutional promise by empowering faith leaders to act as agents of peace rather than as proxies for political or ethnic mobilisation [35].

Institutional mechanisms such as the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC) and the Interfaith Mediation Centre

(IMC) exemplify formalised structures through which religious statecraft can operate within the interstices of law and policy. NIREC, established as a statutory consultative body, brings together major religious organisations to engage on matters of national concern, including conflict prevention and religious freedom protections. Its collaborative engagements with Christian and Muslim bodies to pre-empt and respond to ethno-religious crises illustrate how structured multi-faith dialogue can function as a legally recognised platform for peacebuilding [14]. Similarly, the Interfaith Mediation Centre in Kaduna, founded by former adversaries Pastor James Wuye and Imam Muhammad Ashafa, institutionalises faith-based mediation rooted in non-violence and reconciliation, actively contributing to crisis intervention and community reconstruction after communal riots in the 1990s. These institutionalised approaches underscore that religious statecraft extends beyond ad hoc engagement to systematic, rights-based partnerships that align religious influence with governance and conflict resolution.

More recent multi-stakeholder initiatives further reinforce the practical value of religious inclusion in peace governance. The Joint Initiative for Strategic Religious Action (JISRA), implemented across Plateau and Kaduna States (2021–2025), explicitly engaged faith leaders, women's groups, youth, and civil society in fostering social cohesion. At its close-out ceremony in 2025, stakeholders reported enduring impacts such as strengthened interfaith networks, enhanced community advocacy capacities, and the integration of women into traditional councils as mediators for peace [33]. These outcomes resonate with Nigeria's broader legal obligations under international human rights law, including the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (Article 9) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Article 18), which protect freedom of thought, conscience, and religion while mandating state measures to foster peaceful coexistence. Positive religious statecraft operationalises these legal norms by transforming religious platforms into vehicles for conflict mitigation rather than conflict drivers.

Beyond elite religious actors, emerging peacebuilding structures involve youth and grassroots participants in religious dialogue and conflict resolution. Recent youth-led interfaith town hall meetings in Plateau State have aimed to empower young Nigerians in defending Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) and to expand interfaith peace structures such as the Plateau Peacebuilding Agency, illustrating the decentralisation of positive religious statecraft to local levels [33]. This trend aligns with legal scholarship on participatory governance, which asserts that sustainable peace requires the inclusion of diverse societal actors in public decision-making. Constitutional provisions that guarantee participation and equality (Sections 14 and 42, Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999) are thus reinforced when youth and grassroots actors are integrated into peace architectures alongside religious leaders.

Collectively, these Nigerian examples show that positive

religious statecraft embodied in structured dialogue platforms, institutionalised interfaith councils, and inclusive peacebuilding programmes can materially contribute to conflict mitigation and the realisation of constitutional and international human rights obligations. By anchoring religious actors within legal and policy frameworks for security governance, the Nigerian state can harness religion not as a source of division but as a stabilising force that reinforces the rule of law, protects fundamental freedoms, and enhances sustainable peace.

6. Policy Gaps and Challenges: Inconsistent State Engagement with Religious Networks

A central deficiency in the governance of insecurity in Nigeria is the absence of a coherent, legally grounded framework to systematically engage religious actors and institutions in national conflict prevention, management, and resolution strategies. While Nigeria's constitutional order guarantees freedom of religion and conscience under Section 38 of the 1999 Constitution (as amended) and simultaneously mandates the protection of every person's right to life and human dignity under Sections 33 and 34, the operationalization of these rights in security policy continues to be undermined by weak institutional mechanisms and strategic incoherence between religious and security sectors. At the legal-policy interface, Nigeria's security architecture embodied primarily in the National Security Strategy, the Nigeria Police Act 2020, and other sectoral policies, largely operates within a secular security paradigm that treats religion as an emotive societal factor rather than a strategic governance resource.

These legal and operational lacunae manifest in three primary ways:

6.1. First, policy instruments lack explicit mechanisms for incorporating religious institutions into peacebuilding and early warning frameworks. For instance, despite Nigeria's protracted history of ethno-religious conflict in regions such as Jos, Plateau State, where hundreds have been killed in recurrent communal violence, official security planning rarely institutionalizes the role of religious networks in preventive diplomacy or grassroots peace initiatives [8]. Scholars have shown that holistic peace processes like the Jos Forum Inter-communal Dialogue Process, which brought diverse ethnic and religious communities together over sustained dialogue contributed to measurable reductions in violence, but these were largely civil society-driven efforts with limited statutory support from state apparatuses [2, 8].

6.2. Second, state engagement with religious leaders and organizations remains ad hoc, episodic, and politically instrumentalized, rather than systematic and rights-anchored. The Nigerian government's occasional endorsement of networks that bring policymakers and religious leaders together, such as the roundtable launched with support from the Interreligious Dialogue Centre (KAICIID) and Nigerian security leadership,

reflects political commitment but lacks statutory backing or implementation mandates that ensure accountability and continuity [16, 23]. The absence of regulatory instruments that delineate roles, responsibilities, and accountability standards for faith actors in security governance undermines their potential positive impact while risking co-optation by partisan interests.

6.3. Third, the security policy apparatus disproportionately frames religious dimensions of conflict through a militarized lens, treating sectarian and religious violence primarily as criminality or terrorism, rather than multidimensional phenomena requiring hybrid governance interventions. This is evident from public discourse and official responses in the wake of violent attacks on religious institutions, such as mosque bombings in Borno State and church attacks in Kwara State — events that have prompted school closures and heightened military posture but limited structured engagement with faith-based peace networks or legal protections tailored to persecuted communities [17, 27]. Such reactive militarization risks deepening perceptions of state partiality in religious affairs, exacerbating grievances, and undermining the rule of law.

From a jurisprudential perspective, the failure to integrate religious actors into formal conflict governance contravenes established norms of inclusive governance and human security, as expressed in the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights and Nigeria's own commitments under international human rights law. Legal scholars emphasize that durable peace requires not only the enforcement of civil and political rights but also institutional recognition of societal governance actors, including religious communities whose moral authority and social capital can be harnessed to uphold rights and reduce tensions [23]. The policy gap reflects not an absence of religious actors' capacity or willingness to contribute to peace, but rather a structural failure within the state's legal and strategic frameworks to engage religion as an asset rather than merely a security risk. Closing this gap demands statutory reforms that embed religious-state engagement within Nigeria's security governance regime, including legislative mandates for interfaith participation in early warning systems, peace mediation protocols, and community resilience strategies.

7. Strategic Recommendations: Legal and Policy Frameworks for Effective Religious Statecraft in Nigeria

To operationalize religious statecraft as a constructive pillar of security governance and sustainable development in Nigeria, it is imperative that policymakers move beyond ad hoc engagement with religious actors toward a structured, legally undergirded, and inclusive policy framework. The current security landscape, marked by persistently high violent incidents, including Boko Haram/ISWAP insurgency, herder-farmer clashes, and banditry demonstrates that religion, while not the

primary driver of all violence, significantly influences community perceptions of governance and conflict responses when mobilized by state and non-state actors [29]. Strategic policy reform in this domain should be anchored on constitutionalism, institutional collaboration, accountability, and evidence-based conflict prevention.

Nigeria's constitutional framework guarantees freedom of religion while mandating equal protection under the law (SS 38–42 of the Constitution). Yet the law remains silent on formal mechanisms for integrating religious institutions into peace and security governance. To bridge this normative gap, the federal government should establish a National Council on Faith and Security (NCFS) a statutorily constituted body tasked with facilitating sustained dialogue between security agencies, religious leaders, and community stakeholders. The NCFS would have legal authority to advise on policy formulation and implementation relating to interreligious tensions; serve as an early-warning and mediation arm in communal disputes; and institutionalize engagement protocols between religious leaders and security actors. This recommendation aligns with emerging policy practice where networks of policymakers and faith leaders seek to build preventive measures against ethno-religious conflict [15]. Institutionalizing such collaboration under law safeguards it from political vacillation and ensures continuity.

Oyebanji & Oyunwola [26] demonstrate that in Southwest Nigeria sustained Christian–Muslim dialogues contribute significantly to tension reduction and trust building. Scaling such initiatives demands legal recognition and resourcing of interfaith peace committees at the state and local government levels, particularly in high-risk zones like Plateau, Benue, Kaduna, and parts of the Northeast. In these subnational contexts, traditional mechanisms of dispute resolution, historically acknowledged under Nigeria's Customary Law system, can be harmonized with statutory governance to strengthen community-based mediation and restorative justice practices; support localized early-warning systems through religious networks; and enhance reporting and accountability for conflict triggers. This approach is not merely aspirational. Continuous interfaith engagement in over 20 local government areas has reportedly correlated with decreased retaliatory violence, as documented by local humanitarian organizations [25].

A pronounced challenge in Nigeria's peace and security landscape is the politicization of religious identities by elites to attain or maintain power. This undermines both state legitimacy and the unifying potential of faith leaders. In alignment with constitutional secularism principles, amendments to the Electoral Act and Political Parties' Code of Conduct should explicitly prohibit religiously divisive campaigning and sanction political rhetoric that exploits religious identities for electoral advantage. Such legal safeguards would echo Nigeria's commitments to peace and non-discrimination under both domestic and international law.

Religious leaders possess immense moral authority but often lack specialized training in conflict analysis, human rights

norms, and mediation techniques. State and non-state partnerships should design continuous professional development programmes for faith leaders focused on conflict sensitivity and non-violent communication; human rights and constitutionalism; and intersection of religion and modern governance. Programmes supported by multilateral institutions have shown that trained religious actors can effectively address underlying drivers of conflict, including climate insecurity and food scarcity which intersect with violence dynamics in regions such as Benue and Rivers States [13]. Finally, a robust legal-policy framework for religious statecraft requires systematic monitoring and evaluation (M&E) mechanisms embedded within the NCFS and in partnership with academic institutions. Given challenges in conflict data representation, particularly the conflation of religion with other drivers, M&E should prioritize disaggregated data on conflict causes, actors, and impacts to inform adaptive policy responses. Transparent reporting and accountability mechanisms will ensure that religious engagement remains responsive to on-the-ground dynamics without reinforcing stereotypes or exacerbating tensions.

8. Conclusion

This study has examined the dynamics of religious statecraft within Nigeria's complex security landscape, emphasizing its dual potential as both a driver of conflict and a strategic resource for governance, peacebuilding, and sustainable development. Empirical and legal analyses demonstrate that religious identities and narratives, while constitutionally protected under Nigeria's secular framework are routinely mobilized by state and non-state actors to achieve political, security, and governance objectives. The Boko Haram insurgency, recurrent ethno-religious crises in the Middle Belt, and the herder–farmer conflicts illustrate that religion, even when not the primary cause of violence, profoundly shapes perceptions, legitimacy, and operational outcomes in security governance.

The Nigerian experience underscores a paradox: the constitutional commitment to secularism and freedom of religion exists alongside pervasive religio-political instrumentalization. When left unregulated or inconsistently engaged, religious mobilization exacerbates insecurity, undermines public trust, and complicates law enforcement. Conversely, positive religious statecraft, operationalized through structured interfaith councils, legally recognized mediation platforms, and inclusive grassroots initiatives, has proven effective in reducing violence, fostering reconciliation, and aligning community behavior with constitutional norms. Strategic recommendations emphasize the necessity of institutionalizing religious engagement within security governance, empowering local interfaith structures, implementing legal reforms to prevent politicization of religion, building the capacity of religious actors in conflict prevention, and establishing systematic monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. Collectively, these measures align with both domestic constitutional obligations and Nige-

ria's commitments under international human rights law, including the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights and the ICCPR.

The effective governance of Nigeria's insecurity requires that religion be treated not merely as a social or cultural factor, but as a constructive instrument of statecraft. By embedding religious actors within formal legal and policy frameworks, the Nigerian state can harness faith-based authority to strengthen societal cohesion, enhance the rule of law, and promote sustainable peace and development. Religious statecraft, when strategically and ethically deployed, thus emerges as an indispensable component of Nigeria's comprehensive approach to security governance and nation-building.

Abbreviations

ACLED	Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project
AP	Associated Press
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
FGN	Federal Government of Nigeria
FoRB	Freedom of Religion or Belief
FRN	Federal Republic of Nigeria
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
IMC	Interfaith Mediation Centre
IPCR	Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution
IPNN	Inter-Religious Peacebuilding in Northern Nigeria
ISWAP	Islamic State West Africa Province
JISRA	Joint Initiative for Strategic Religious Action
KAICIID	King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
NCFS	National Council on Faith and Security
NIREC	Nigeria Inter-Religious Council
PaRD	International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development

Author Contributions

Paul Andrew Gwaza: Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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