

RELIGIOUS VICIOUSNESS AND RELIGIOUS LIBERALITY IN THE STRUCTURE OF SOCIAL COHESION IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Nigeria's profound religiosity creates a fundamental paradox in which religion serves as both a source of communal solidarity and a catalyst for violent fragmentation. This paradox has created a dialectical tension between religious viciousness (extremism, exclusivist soteriology, identity-based violence) and religious liberality (pluralist tolerance), thereby destabilising interfaith coexistence. It has also heightened the salience of religious identity, precipitating viciousness over liberality in multi-religious communities and deepening deficits in bridging social capital. It has given rise to a progressive erosion of social cohesion through the instrumentalisation of faith for political and material ends. Since social cohesion is a pathway to economic prosperity, communal well-being, and societal cooperative resilience to injustice, crime and crises, all of which are necessary for national development, it is essential to study the effect of the coexistence of religious viciousness and religious liberality on social cohesion in the Nigerian context. Theoretically, it draws on Conflict Theory and Social Capital Theory to construct a multi-scalar framework that illuminates the macro-structural conditions and the micro-sociological dynamics of their coexistence in Nigerian society about social integration. The study adopts a qualitative methodology grounded in a systematic review of the literature, government security reports, and ethnographic accounts of interfaith relations. The study concludes that durable national stability demands social cohesion grounded not in religious sentiment but in the shared civic identity of Nigerian citizenship. Thus, it recommends a coordinated policy architecture spanning institutional reform, educational transformation, constitutional enforcement, and digital governance.

Keywords: Religious Viciousness, Religious Liberality, Social Cohesion, Interfaith Relations, Nigeria

Introduction

The concept of social cohesion—understood as the composite of mutual trust, shared national identity, and a disposition towards collective action—is profoundly shaped by how competing religious orientations mediate inter-group relations.

Religion is a foundational axis of Nigerian society, pervading politics, economics, and social interaction with a depth that distinguishes Nigeria as one of the most religious nations in the contemporary world. According to Oloyede (2014), the nation is "a diverse and religious country" where religion is extensively politicised and significantly influences social relationships. Umeh (2013) also notes that Nigerians inherently "live religion and think religiously," with faith functioning as a comprehensive framework for their worldview, influencing everything from family choices to political involvement. Within a constitutionally secular yet profoundly religious polity, Nigeria's pluralistic identity is defined by the overlapping presence of Islam, Christianity, and African Traditional Religion (ATR), each commanding substantial, largely devout followers. As Kukah (2022) observes, religion in Nigeria is not a private or compartmentalised affair but rather a "totalising experience," shaping the terms of public discourse and calibrating the boundaries of social belonging.

Nigerian religiosity has engendered a dual social reality: "religious viciousness" and "religious liberality". These two orientations stand in fundamental tension, and their interplay constitutes the central problematic of this inquiry. The concept of social cohesion—understood as the composite of mutual trust, shared national identity, and a disposition towards collective action—is profoundly shaped by how these competing religious orientations mediate inter-group relations. Scholarly attention has increasingly converged on the structural conditions that transform theological devotion into political violence. Ibrahim (2015: 42) argues that when the state fails to ensure equitable resource distribution, "religion is frequently weaponised as a tool for aggressive competition," displacing spiritual devotion with a vicious contest for survival. This suggests that religious viciousness is not merely a theological aberration but a symptom of deeper structural pathologies within the Nigerian polity. This paper employs a qualitative methodology to systematically map these dynamics. It identifies critical lacunae in prevailing social cohesion policies and offers recommendations to cultivate inter-religious harmony through educational reform, sustained dialogue, legal clarification, and institutional innovation.

Theoretical Framework

This study is primarily grounded in Conflict Theory, which views society as a struggle between groups competing for power, influence and resources. Marx argued that religion can be mobilised to promote group interests and preserve social divisions (Marx, 1844/1970). In the Nigerian context, the theory explains how religious viciousness, in the form of intolerance, extremism and sectarianism, can create intergroup tensions, promote hostility and undermine social cohesion. Conflict Theory therefore offers a useful framework for understanding how religious differences can contribute to social fragmentation and instability in a multi-religious society.

The Social Capital Theory is adopted as a supporting theory to complement the conflict perspective. According to Putnam (2000), social cohesion rests on

networks of trust, reciprocity and cooperation between individuals and groups. The theory distinguishes bonding social capital, which builds solidarity within a group, from bridging social capital, which promotes cooperation between different groups (Putnam, 2000). This paper views religious liberality as a source of bridging social capital, as it fosters interfaith dialogue, tolerance and mutual respect, which in turn enhance social cohesion. By contrast, religious viciousness may create bonding social capital within a religious community, but it may also generate suspicion, exclusion and hostility towards outsiders, thereby eroding broader social cohesion. Together, the two theories explain how religious attitudes and practices can undermine or reinforce social cohesion in Nigeria.

Religious Viciousness

Religious viciousness denotes the instrumentalisation of religious identity and scriptural authority to justify hostility, discrimination, and violence against people of other religions. While Oyeleye and Bello (2022) trace its aetiology to the "narrow-mindedness and extremism of religious devotees," this characterisation risks obscuring the deeper structural and political determinants at work. Nor (2025) offers a more structurally grounded account, attributing viciousness to the exclusivist soteriological claims that animate both Christianity and Islam: each asserts a divine mandate for universal conversion and salvation, thereby positing its deity as the singular locus of truth. This rivalry over the pathway to salvation furnishes the doctrinal raw material for social and political hostility that periodically erupts. Ayantayo (2018) conceptualises the outcome as theological capture—a process whereby religious practitioners "kidnap" the concept of God to legitimise violence and social fragmentation through narrow scriptural interpretation that privileges in-group loyalty over universal ethics. According to Kukah (2021), the political corollary is "politicised spirituality": the mobilisation of religious identity to secure access to state resources and power, which serves as the proximate driver of sectarian riots, insurgent movements, and hate speech.

The institutional ramifications of viciousness extend well beyond communal violence. At the constitutional level, Ibrahim (2019) posits exclusivist soteriology as a centrifugal force undermining the secularity of the Nigerian state. When religious actors campaign to align penal codes and personal law with specific doctrinal requirements, the resulting "legal friction" (Suberu, 2021) alienates other faiths through condescension and corrodes the civic neutrality that democratic coexistence requires. This tension is most starkly crystallised in the adoption of the Sharia penal code across twelve Northern states from 1999 onward. Cases attracting sentences of stoning or amputation—though frequently overturned on appeal—represent what Ezeilo (2021) calls a "clash of jurisdictions" that diminishes the universality of human rights within the Nigerian legal order. In the educational domain, religious intolerance has similarly transformed spaces of learning into arenas of sectarian conflict. A visible example is institutional contestations over the use of the hijab (Oyeleye and Bello, 2022).

Furthermore, viciousness has produced what the Middle Belt literature terms "faith-based enclaves" (Tyoden, 2022), geographically segregated settlements in which inter-group cohesion has collapsed. The North-East has served as the epicentre of extremist movements such as Boko Haram, whose "puritanical and violent interpretation of theology" (Suleiman, 2023) disrupts social structures, while the North-West—particularly Kaduna and Plateau States—has experienced recurrent cycles of communal violence at the intersection of land-tenure disputes and religious identity. In the electoral domain, the tendency to evaluate candidates on confessional rather than competence grounds produces a governance paradigm. The Muslim-Muslim presidential ticket adopted by the All Progressives Congress in 2023 exemplified this dynamic, prompting the Christian Association of Nigeria to characterise it as a "clear disregard for Nigeria's religious dynamics" (Odalonu and Aghahowa, 2025) and reigniting perennial anxieties about Islamisation among religious minorities in Nigerian states (Yusuf et al., 2025).

Religious Liberality

Religious liberality is operationalised as the theological and socio-cultural acknowledgement of the religious 'others' who thereby constitute the structural counterweight to viciousness. Its most instructive empirical manifestation is Yoruba-land in the Southwest, where Laitin's (1986) canonical account identifies a cultural hegemony in which religious affiliation is subordinated to ethnic and family identity. Individuals are constituted primarily as community members and only secondarily as adherents of a particular faith. This structural arrangement effectively pre-empts the "othering" dynamics that catalyse sectarian hostility elsewhere. Nor (2025) advances a complementary argument regarding African Traditional Religion (ATR), whose communal orientation, absence of a centralised scriptural canon, and rejection of a singular "only true path" dogma position it as an inherently harmonious model of pluralist coexistence—a structural contrast to the exclusivist missionary faiths. Adamolekun (2013) frames religious freedom and tolerance as "catalysts for stability," situating liberality not as the passive absence of conflict but as a proactive commitment to pluralism.

Religious liberality is a pluralist orientation evident in the peaceful coexistence of multi-faith families, communities, and institutions across significant swathes of the country. In Putnam's (2000) typology, liberality generates "bridging" social capital, the inter-group ties indispensable to democratic citizenship, in direct contrast to the "bonding" capital that viciousness produces. In Nigeria, this bridging is most visible in the Southwest, where multi-religious household composition is normative: Christians, Muslims, and ATR adherents routinely share domestic space, celebrate one another's festivals, and navigate doctrinal differences through dialogue. Balogun and Obosi (2018) identify Yoruba cultural identity as the operative adhesive, providing a supra-religious basis for solidarity that prevents factional "othering". Oyetoro and Talabi (2023) provide empirical corroboration from Ojo, Lagos, demonstrating that religious tolerance in this region actively promotes national integration and economic productivity, while Olukotun (2023)

characterises interfaith marriages and joint business ventures as "structural stabilisers" within the national social fabric.

At the level of political governance, liberality fosters what Jega (2021) terms a "theology of "engagement". This is a disposition among liberal religious actors to regard the secular state as a neutral arbiter of citizens' rights rather than as a competitor for ultimate allegiance. This orientation is constitutive of the inter-faith democratic compact, without which a multi-religious polity cannot endure. Interfaith councils, such as the Nigerian Inter-Religious Council (NIREC), enact this orientation by de-escalating sectarian tensions through sensitive scriptural reinterpretation that foregrounds mercy and civic responsibility, thereby maintaining what Sanusi (2020) regards as the "thin" social cohesion sufficient to prevent the complete collapse of the national social order.

Social Cohesion in Nigeria

Schiefer and van der Noll (2017) define social cohesion as a multidimensional construct denoting the "quality of collective togetherness," comprising three interrelated dimensions: the quality of social relations, identification with the territorial political unit, and orientation towards the common good. In the Nigerian context, all three dimensions face sustained structural pressure. Allen and Nyiayaana (2023) document measurable declines across each, evidenced by a growing unwillingness to collaborate across identity lines and a widespread erosion of faith in national institutions. Aluko (2022) operationalises cohesion for the Nigerian setting through three composite indicators—inter-ethnic trust, a meaningful sense of belonging to the Nigerian state, and willingness to act cooperatively for the common good—while Ojo (2024) repositions cohesion as a dynamic rather than a static condition, one whose trajectory is shaped by economic equity, political inclusion, and the quality of religious relations. This dynamic framing carries a critical policy implication: social cohesion can be deliberately cultivated or degraded, and religious viciousness and liberality are among the most powerful levers shaping it.

Effects of Religious Viciousness on Social Cohesion in Nigeria

Religious viciousness corrodes social cohesion across four interrelated levels. Psychologically, rising inter-religious tensions erode civic trust and the shared national identity that undergirds collective action. Wachukwu (2024: 561) documents a marked decline in confidence in a unified Nigerian identity as radicalisation intensifies, while the NHRC and Kukah (2025) report that extremist violence creates an "atmosphere of fear and distrust" that renders inter-faith collaboration functionally impossible and, by doing so, dissolves the social contract as citizens retreat into parochial confessional identities.

At the level of capital formation, religious violence converts bridging social capital into bonding social capital, deepening intra-sectarian solidarity while destroying inter-group ties essential to national cohesion. Studies in the North-East and Plateau States show that intolerance "hinders proper development and sustainable

peace" (Atoi and Babale, 2021), leading to irreplaceable losses of human and material capital, mass internal displacement, and the collapse of local trade networks. Amadi (2024) identifies the downstream consequence as a "psychology of fear" that deters foreign investment and depresses economic growth, making religious hostility a structural impediment to development rather than merely a security concern.

Moreover, viciousness has generated residential segregation in cities such as Kaduna and Jos, where Christians and Muslims increasingly inhabit separate "safe zones" (Amadi, 2024). This physical separation forecloses the social benefits of diversity, curtails freedom of movement, and diminishes residents' capacity to leverage collective talents and resources—thereby threatening, as Akinnawo and Akande (2022) observe, not only present development trajectories but also the preservation of prior societal achievements. At the governance level, viciousness displaces competence-based democratic competition with confessional loyalty, producing a zero-sum paradigm in which the state functions as a prize for inter-religious contest rather than a neutral arbiter. Usman (2023) locates the structural root of this failure in the state's inability to construct a civic identity capable of transcending religious loyalty—a vacuum readily exploited by extremist ideologues.

Effects of Religious Liberality on Social Cohesion

Where viciousness corrodes, liberality restores. At the relational level, Kii and Olunlade (2025) document that liberality promotes cross-group "human cooperation and solidarity," which constitute Putnam's bridging social capital. The "web of affiliation" produced by multi-faith domestic arrangements in the Southwest serves as an empirically documented deterrent to large-scale religious violence (Adebanwi, 2020), yielding measurable social peace dividends. This bridging capital extends into economic life through interfaith marriages and joint business ventures Olukotun's (2023) "structural stabilisers" and into civic life through the "altruism, volunteerism, and social justice initiatives" (CARI 2024) that liberal religious communities foster across confessional boundaries.

At the governance level, liberal religious leaders mobilise their moral authority as mediators during political crises, enacting Jega's (2021) "theology of engagement." This disposition to regard the secular state as a legitimate neutral arbiter rather than a theological competitor is constitutive of the inter-faith democratic compact. Liberality further enables the progressive reinterpretation of sacred texts to affirm human rights, including gender equality and minority protection, whose institutional realisation is essential to a cohesive modern democracy.

The Influence of Social Cohesion on Religious Viciousness and Liberality

The causal relationship between social cohesion and religious orientation is reciprocal rather than unidirectional. High social cohesion substantially weakens the structural preconditions for radicalisation: when citizens identify primarily with a shared national identity, the appeal of exclusivist religious mobilisation

diminishes. Okonjo (2021) shows that in cohesive neighbourhoods, residents are measurably more likely to protect neighbours of different faiths during crises; this evidence indicates that cohesion acts as a prophylactic against the conversion of theological difference into communal violence. Bello (2024) sharpens this insight by observing that intensified economic cooperation across faith lines makes "religious liberality a pragmatic necessity rather than just a moral ideal," thereby revealing that religious orientations are embedded in, and therefore transformable by, material social relations.

In cohesive communities, shared values of inclusivity render individuals less susceptible to extremist infiltration and better equipped to detect early signs of radicalisation (IMCTC, 2025). The comparative regional picture confirms this dynamic: where governance failures and the collapse of the social contract have created institutional vacuums, religious extremist formations have filled them; where indigenous governance systems retain operational vitality, religious organisations have successfully promoted peace-building even under significant socio-economic pressure (Okafor, 2021, cited in AJPO, 2026). Discourse analysis of Nigerian sermons further reveals that when religious leaders foreground national cohesion, they deploy "inclusive language and moral framing" that redirects believers from insular devotion towards engagement with collective national challenges (Udoh, 2025). Oyebanjo and Oyebanjo also affirm that religious leaders strategically employ appeals to common values and social harmony to encourage peaceful coexistence. These points demonstrate that the relationship between cohesion and liberality is not merely structural but actively cultivable through deliberate communicative practice.

Towards a Cohesive Nigeria: Policy Imperatives for Managing Religious Viciousness and Liberality

The foregoing analysis makes clear that the challenge of religious viciousness and the cultivation of religious liberality in Nigeria are not merely theological problems amenable to moral exhortation; they are structural problems that demand structural solutions. Addressing them requires a coherent, multi-pronged policy architecture spanning institutional design, educational philosophy, constitutional governance, and the regulation of public discourse.

The most fundamental requirement is to institutionalise social cohesion as a governing priority rather than an occasional rhetorical aspiration. The Nigerian state must establish dedicated social cohesion research and monitoring units at the federal, state, and local government levels, each mandated to rigorously evaluate all public policies through the lens of social cohesion theory. This structural embedding is indispensable because cohesion-eroding consequences of apparently neutral policies—in areas such as resource allocation, appointments, and zoning—are rarely identified until the damage is done. Equally important is the transition from episodic "interfaith summits," which generate goodwill without accountability, to permanent, institutionalised local committees charged with continuous monitoring of inter-religious relations and the proactive de-escalation

of tensions at the grassroots level. It is at the community level, not the national podium, that the early warning signs of radicalisation first appear and where preventive intervention is most effective. Nigeria's current governance architecture is conspicuously deficient in precisely this early-warning and conflict-prevention capacity; remedying that deficiency is the precondition for all other policy interventions.

Structural reform of the educational system constitutes the second pillar of any serious policy response. Education is the most powerful long-term instrument available to the state for reshaping citizens' normative dispositions, yet it has been grievously underutilised in Nigeria's management of religious diversity. Curricula across all levels - primary, secondary, and tertiary should be redesigned around what may be termed "essencism": a pedagogical philosophy that draws students' attention to the shared moral cores of Nigeria's religious traditions rather than fixating on doctrinal divergences. The comparative ethics of compassion, justice, and communal responsibility are not the exclusive property of any single faith; foregrounding them pedagogically would cultivate, from an early stage in civic formation, the disposition towards religious literacy and inter-faith respect that social cohesion requires. A citizenry educated to recognise what its religious traditions share is considerably less susceptible to the demagogic exploitation of their differences.

The third imperative concerns the legal and constitutional framework within which religious identity is permitted to operate in public life. Nigeria's constitutional commitment to secularism provides the normative foundation for religious pluralism, but its practical enforcement has been inconsistent and frequently compromised by political expediency. The state must take deliberate institutional action to ensure that no religious identity infringes the religious rights of others, with particular vigilance for the vulnerability of minority faith communities. This requires, among other things, a rigorous and transparent refinement of the Federal Character Principle - the constitutional provision designed to ensure equitable representation across Nigeria's diverse constituencies to guarantee that its application in practice is genuinely inclusive and participatory rather than a mechanism through which majoritarian interests capture the apparatus of the state under the guise of demographic representation. When citizens perceive constitutional protections as selectively enforced along religious lines, the credibility of the state as a neutral arbiter is fatally undermined, and the retreat into confessional identity politics becomes, for many, a rational response.

The fourth imperative addresses the quality and governance of religious public discourse, both in traditional civic spaces and on digital platforms. Religious leaders and communities across all major faiths bear a special responsibility in this domain, given the moral authority they command over large constituencies. They should be actively encouraged—through civil society engagement, interfaith councils, and, where appropriate, state facilitation—to articulate their traditions' moral teachings in ways affirmatively grounded in equity, balance, and respect for

the dignity of the religious other: neither defensive in the face of theological challenge nor aggressive in the face of difference. This is not a call for doctrinal compromise but for communicative responsibility. Simultaneously, the state must develop and implement regulatory frameworks to curb the proliferation of religious hate speech on social media platforms, which has become one of the most potent accelerants of inter-religious tension in contemporary Nigeria. Such frameworks must be designed with equal care for the protection of legitimate free expression, recognising that the suppression of speech is itself a resource that can be, and historically has been, weaponised against religious minorities.

Taken together, these four imperatives constitute a coherent and mutually reinforcing policy agenda. Institutional reform provides the structural scaffolding; educational transformation builds the civic culture; constitutional clarity establishes the legal boundaries; and the governance of discourse shapes the normative environment in which religious identity is publicly performed. No single intervention is sufficient on its own—religious viciousness is too deeply embedded in Nigeria's structural inequalities and political economy to yield to any single policy lever. But pursued in concert, these imperatives offer the Nigerian state and its civil society partners the most credible pathway to converting religion from a source of fragmentation into the instrument of cohesion it has the latent capacity to be.

Conclusion

The future trajectory of social cohesion in Nigeria depends on the deliberate suppression of religious viciousness and the equally deliberate cultivation of religious openness. The fabric of national unity is currently defined by a high-stakes competition between the "exclusive narratives" propagated by extremist groups and the "inclusive heritage" embodied in Nigeria's rich traditions of interfaith kinship and pluralist coexistence. As the foregoing analysis demonstrates, this competition is not merely theological but structural: it is sustained by state failure, resource inequality, and the absence of robust institutional mechanisms for early warning and conflict prevention deficiencies that the proposed social cohesion monitoring units and permanent interfaith committees are specifically designed to address.

For Nigeria to achieve durable stability, it must engineer a decisive transition from a condition in which religion produces "unrest and polarity" to one in which it functions as a "catalyst for stability." That transition, as the policy imperatives make clear, runs through educational reform that instils essentialism from an early age, constitutional enforcement that protects minority faiths from majoritarian capture, and the responsible governance of religious discourse in both civic and digital spaces. For social cohesion, Nigeria must be grounded not in religious sentiment but in the shared civic identity of Nigerian citizenship, built from the grassroots upward, fostering genuine belonging regardless of confessional affiliation and held together by institutions strong enough to make that belonging credible.

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