

Sacred Mediators: The Role of Religious Leaders in Conflict Mediation and Peacebuilding

A Comparative Review of Moral Authority, Practice, and Institutional Constraint

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Abstract

Religious leaders occupy a distinctive position in conflict-affected societies: they often possess moral authority, local legitimacy, and institutional continuity that formal diplomatic actors lack, yet their peacebuilding contributions remain marginal in mainstream mediation policy and scholarship. This paper reviews recent empirical and theoretical literature on the role of religious leaders and faith-based actors in conflict mediation and peacebuilding, drawing on case evidence from Bosnia-Herzegovina, Mindanao, the Sahel, and United Nations mediation policy. Using John Paul Lederach's conflict transformation framework and the concept of moral authority as organizing lenses, the review identifies three recurring functions religious leaders perform: providing culturally legitimate entry points for dialogue, sustaining relational and community-level reconciliation beyond formal ceasefires, and bridging track-one diplomacy with grassroots constituencies. It also identifies structural constraints that limit their effectiveness, including intra-religious fragmentation, the risk of religious legitimization of violence, and the continued marginalization of religious expertise within secular international mediation institutions such as the United Nations. The paper concludes with a proposed comparative research agenda for evaluating when and why faith-based mediation succeeds or fails across conflict contexts.

Introduction

Since the end of the Cold War, the global proliferation of conflicts bearing an ethno-religious dimension has drawn renewed scholarly and policy attention to the role religion plays not only as a source of conflict but as a resource for peace. Religious identities, norms, and values have moved toward the center of conflict resolution research and practice, even as mainstream mediation institutions have been slow to formally integrate religious expertise into their guidance and staffing (as reflected in UN mediation policy documents, which make only minimal explicit reference to religion despite operating extensively in religiously salient conflict contexts) (Bush, 2024). This paper reviews the growing literature on religious leaders as conflict mediators and peacebuilders, asking two linked questions: what distinctive functions do religious leaders perform in mediation and peacebuilding that secular or state-based actors cannot easily replicate, and under what conditions does their involvement fail to translate theological or moral authority into measurable peacebuilding outcomes?

The paper proceeds in five parts. Section 2 outlines the theoretical basis for religious peacebuilding, centered on Lederach's conflict transformation theory and the concept of moral authority. Section 3 reviews case evidence on the functions religious leaders perform across different conflict phases. Section 4 examines

documented constraints and failures. Section 5 reviews religion's place within formal international mediation institutions. Section 6 proposes a comparative research agenda.

Theoretical Framework: Conflict Transformation and Moral Authority

Much of the contemporary literature on religious peacebuilding draws on John Paul Lederach's conflict transformation theory, developed through his direct mediation experience in Nicaragua, Somalia, Northern Ireland, and the Philippines, among other settings (Lederach, 1997). Lederach distinguishes conflict transformation from conflict resolution or short-term peacemaking: where the latter focus on ending violence and reaching negotiated settlements, conflict transformation is oriented toward the underlying relationships and social structures that generate and sustain conflict over time (Lederach, 1997). This distinction is particularly relevant to religious actors, who, unlike diplomats or policy negotiators focused on short-term settlement, tend to prioritize the transformation of relationships through trust-building, forgiveness, and relational restoration, framing their work as the cultivation of a sustained peace ethos rather than the narrower goal of halting violence (Lederach, 1997). Lederach's related concept of the moral imagination further emphasizes that effective peacebuilders must hold the tension between acknowledging cycles of violence and imagining relational webs that transcend them, a capacity he illustrates through examples ranging from intercommunal mediation in northern Ghana to grassroots reconciliation processes in Nicaragua and Liberia (Lederach, 2005).

A complementary concept in the literature is the moral authority framework, which holds that the legitimacy of faith-based mediation derives from parties' perception of the mediator's moral standing rather than from formal institutional mandate or coercive power (Lederach, 1997). Because religious leaders are frequently embedded within the same communities as conflict parties and draw legitimacy from shared theological or cultural frameworks, they can access levels of trust that external, secular mediators struggle to establish quickly (Lederach, 1997). Lederach's related notion of "middle-range" or "web" approaches to peacebuilding situates religious actors as a distinct mid-level track within a broader peace infrastructure, positioned between elite-level diplomacy and grassroots community relationships, with the capacity to link the two (Lederach, 1997).

Functions of Religious Leaders in Mediation and Peacebuilding

❖ Providing Legitimate Entry Points for Dialogue

Religious leaders frequently serve as trusted intermediaries capable of opening communication channels that secular or state actors cannot access, particularly in conflicts where the state itself is a party or is viewed as illegitimate by one side (Faith-based diplomacy: The role of religious leaders in conflict mediation and peacebuilding, 2025). In Mindanao, religion-based civil society organizations have been documented as active contributors to conflict mitigation rather than, as commonly assumed, a source of continued division; these organizations have evolved toward greater interfaith inclusiveness, incorporating Christian, Muslim, and Indigenous actors into joint peacebuilding structures despite operating amid mistrust between Christian and Muslim communities, unresolved land disputes, and the continued presence of violent extremism (Garcia, De Venecia, & Aliposa, 2024).

❖ Sustaining Relational Reconciliation Beyond Ceasefires

A second recurring function concerns the post-agreement phase, where religious actors often continue reconciliation work long after formal diplomatic engagement has ended. In the Sahel, interreligious dialogue initiatives have been linked to community resilience, functioning as a form of localized peacebuilding infrastructure that persists amid ongoing insecurity and weak state presence (Interreligious dialogue, conflict resolution and peacebuilding: A review, 2025). This sustained, relational form of engagement aligns with Lederach's conflict transformation model: because religious leaders typically remain embedded in their

communities across the conflict lifecycle, they are positioned to carry peacebuilding work through phases that shorter-term diplomatic missions are structurally unable to sustain (Lederach, 1997).

❖ **Bridging Track-One and Grassroots Peace Processes**

Religious leaders also perform a bridging function between formal, elite-level (track-one) negotiations and grassroots (track-three) community relationships, consistent with Lederach's account of religion as a mid-level track within the broader peacebuilding system (Lederach, 1997). Interreligious peacebuilding organizations established over the past decade, including the International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development and longer-standing bodies such as Religions for Peace and the Community of Sant'Egidio, have targeted multiple conflict phases simultaneously, from conflict prevention through mediation to post-conflict reconstruction, reflecting an operational model that spans the tracks that purely diplomatic or purely community-based approaches address separately (Faith-based diplomacy: The role of religious leaders in conflict mediation and peacebuilding, 2025).

❖ **Constraints and Limits of Religious Peacebuilding**

Despite these documented functions, the literature also identifies significant constraints on religious leaders' peacebuilding effectiveness. Based on 75 in-depth interviews with Orthodox, Catholic, and Islamic religious leaders in Bosnia-Herzegovina conducted between 2015 and 2017, one study found that religious leaders frequently navigate an unresolved tension between theological ideals of peace and the pragmatic, often politically constrained realities of operating within still-divided post-war communities, a tension that can limit how far individual leaders are willing or able to act on peacebuilding commitments (Religions, Peace, Politics, and Religion Special Issue, 2024). This finding complicates a common assumption in the literature that religious authority translates directly into peacebuilding capacity; theological commitment to peace does not automatically overcome the political, social, and institutional pressures religious leaders themselves operate under (Religions, Peace, Politics, and Religion Special Issue, 2024).

A second constraint concerns intra-religious fragmentation. Differing faith-based peacebuilding initiatives can generate competing or inconsistent approaches even within a single religious community, particularly where varying theological interpretations lead different leaders or factions to pursue divergent, sometimes conflicting peacebuilding strategies, which can restrict overall peace progress and underscores the need for coordinated interfaith initiatives and structured training programs to build shared professional accountability among religious mediators (Religions, Peace, Politics, and Religion Special Issue, 2024). This fragmentation risk is compounded by the broader and more fundamental danger that religious authority can be mobilized to legitimate rather than restrain violence, a dynamic evident in numerous ethno-religious conflicts where religious leaders have functioned as combatant-aligned actors rather than neutral or transformative mediators (Faith-based diplomacy: The role of religious leaders in conflict mediation and peacebuilding, 2025). The dual potential of religious authority, to either restrain or legitimate violence, means that its peacebuilding effects cannot be assumed and must be assessed case by case (Faith-based diplomacy: The role of religious leaders in conflict mediation and peacebuilding, 2025).

Religion Within Formal International Mediation Institutions

A distinct strand of the literature examines how formal international mediation bodies, particularly the United Nations, engage with religion as a factor in conflict. A thematic analysis of publicly available UN mediation guidance documents found that religion holds a more meaningful place in UN mediation policy than the broader academic and policy literature has generally recognized, and that the UN has taken concrete steps to promote religious sensitivity among its professional mediators, even though the organization's flagship guidance document contains only minimal explicit reference to religion (Bush, 2024). This finding suggests a gap between formal doctrine, which underrepresents religion, and operational practice, which has moved further toward incorporating religious literacy and, in some cases, direct engagement with religious

leaders as mediation partners (Bush, 2024). The broader implication is that religious peacebuilding scholarship should attend not only to religious actors operating independently of the international system but also to the evolving, still-underdocumented ways formal mediation institutions are beginning to incorporate religious expertise into their own practice (Bush, 2024).

Proposed Comparative Research Agenda

The reviewed literature is dominated by single-case, qualitative studies, making cross-context comparison difficult and leaving open the question of which conditions predict successful versus ineffective religious mediation. A structured comparative research agenda should therefore include three elements. First, a common coding framework should be applied across case studies to classify religious leaders' peacebuilding roles along Lederach's track distinctions (track-one diplomatic engagement, track-two intermediary dialogue, track-three grassroots reconciliation), allowing researchers to assess which track-level interventions are more reliably associated with durable outcomes (Lederach, 1997). Second, comparative interview-based research, following the methodological model used in the Bosnia-Herzegovina study, should be extended to additional post-conflict and ongoing-conflict settings to test whether the theological-pragmatic tension identified there is a general feature of religious peacebuilding or specific to the Bosnian institutional context (Religions, Peace, Politics, and Religion Special Issue, 2024). Third, researchers should systematically document cases of religious legitimization of violence alongside cases of religious peacebuilding success, since the current literature's emphasis on positive case studies risks a selection bias that overstates the reliability of religious authority as a peacebuilding resource (Faith-based diplomacy: The role of religious leaders in conflict mediation and peacebuilding, 2025).

Conclusion

Religious leaders occupy a structurally distinctive position in conflict-affected societies, combining local legitimacy, moral authority, and institutional continuity in ways that formal diplomatic actors often cannot replicate (Lederach, 1997). The evidence reviewed here indicates that religious actors are most effective when functioning as trusted entry points for dialogue, sustained relational reconcilers across the post-agreement period, and bridges between elite and grassroots peace processes (Garcia et al., 2024; Lederach, 1997). At the same time, their effectiveness is neither automatic nor uniform: intra-religious fragmentation, the theological-pragmatic tensions individual leaders must navigate, and the persistent risk that religious authority legitimates rather than restrains violence all constrain the reliability of faith-based mediation (Faith-based diplomacy: The role of religious leaders in conflict mediation and peacebuilding, 2025; Religions, Peace, Politics, and Religion Special Issue, 2024). As international institutions such as the United Nations continue to develop religious literacy within their own mediation practice, closer engagement between religious peacebuilding scholarship and formal conflict resolution policy offers a promising direction for both fields (Bush, 2024).

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