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Religion as Both a Source of Global Conflict and an Instrument of Global Transformation: A Critical Examination of Its Role in Addressing Contemporary World Problems

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Abstract

This article rigorously analyses the dual function of religion in today's society as both a catalyst for worldwide discord and a means of global change. The article posits that the ambiguous potential of religion is not dictated by theology, but rather influenced by certain historical, political, and social contexts, drawing from several multidisciplinary studies. The examination investigates the role of religion as a symbol of distinct identity exploited by political leaders, how sacred scriptures interpreted through literalist and exclusivist perspectives can legitimise violence, and how modern conflicts illustrate religion as a magnifying factor for existing tensions. The paper concurrently investigates the transformative potential of religion in fostering peacebuilding, transitional justice, and reconciliation, leveraging moral authority, global networks, and entrenched community involvement. Case studies on religious ambivalence demonstrate that a single tradition can both incite discord and promote harmony, as illustrated by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, reactions to HIV/AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa, and religious environmentalism. The piece highlights significant obstacles such as institutional self-interest, religious exclusivity, and the issue of converting theological beliefs into practical policy across diverse contexts. The conclusion advocates for a discerning fidelity, a dedication to one's own heritage that stays receptive to discourse, self-improvement, and cooperation amidst diversity. The essay presents four suggestions for religious leaders, governments, and academics aiming to leverage the positive aspects of religion while minimising its harmful effects in tackling modern world issues.

Keywords: Religion, Global Conflict, Instrument of Global Transformation, Role, Contemporary World Problems

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Introduction

The underlying paradox of religion in modern society is that it is both a powerful driver for social integration and a major promoter of bloody strife, a duality that is needed for any thorough understanding (Kamraju, 2025). The paradox is not only theoretical but lived in communities where religious beliefs bond neighbours and also create divisions that marginalise and demonise outsiders (Agustia & Kolis, 2025). Rather than decreasing religion, as secularisation theorists predicted, globalisation has reshaped it, creating transnational religious networks that support peace, but also creating fractured and politicised religious identities that provoke conflict (Ugochukwu, 2026). More detailed examination of the role of religion is needed that goes beyond the simplistic perspective of religion being either essentially peaceful or essentially violent and that emphasises the particular historical, political and social circumstances that produce the ambivalence of religion (Hussein & Nyanchoga, 2025). The main thesis of the article is that the effectiveness of religion in dealing with contemporary social problems depends on its capacity to resolve internal conflicts and direct its transformational power toward inclusive and justice-oriented goals, rather than toward exclusionary and power-driven goals (Ruiz Andrés & Sajir, 2025). This narrative requires a complex comprehension of the processes of religious identity development in numerous circumstances, where the interplay of established norms and real-world dynamics generates both unity and fragmentation (Haynes, 2025). Furthermore, the evolving role of religion in contemporary society necessitates a focus on the dynamics of collective acts within religious communities, which may either intensify conflict or generate opportunities for collaboration (Omer & Tarusarira, 2023). The dual history of faith in Somaliland and elsewhere shows that religious groups that provide socioeconomic benefits and ethical instruction may also be used as instruments for discriminatory politics (Wilson & Mavelli, 2016). The theory of post-secularization is a useful framework to analyse the survival and even expansion of religion in the public arena, against predictions of its demise, and to provide more nuanced appraisals of its social roles (Leustean et al., 2018). This is further complicated by the intersection of religion and nationalism, as political actors frequently deploy religious symbols and identities to legitimise exclusionary projects, while at the same time diminishing internal diversity (Kamraju, 2025). Literature on religious peacebuilding notes that the transformative potential of religion communities is not automatic, but needs to be deliberately nurtured through conversation, reconciliation and the quest of justice (Agustia & Kolis, 2025). The refugee crisis shows that religious organisations are able to offer refuge and security to individuals who have been displaced, or to promote exclusion through inflexible ideas about membership (Ugochukwu, 2026). Research on religion and social progress indicates that faith-based organisations have specific strengths to combat poverty, inequality and environmental degradation, but these strengths are often under-exploited or compromised by institutional self-interest (Hussein & Nyanchoga, 2025). Understanding these processes is critical for the development of methods that harness the positive parts of religion while reducing its negative potentials (Ruiz Andrés & Sajir, 2025). The introduction thus lays the analytical platform for studying the controversial and transformational features of religion, setting the scene for a critical appraisal of its function in relation to modern world issues (Haynes, 2025).

Religion as a Source of Global Conflict: Identity, Power, and Politicization

When religion serves as the primary indicator of a singular identity, it emerges as a significant source of discord. This is occasionally exacerbated by historical grudges and exploited by political leaders to rally the populace against an imagined adversary (Brass, 2024). This phenomenon is especially pronounced in South Asia, where religious affiliation has traditionally intertwined with ethnic identity, which political actors have exploited for electoral and ideological gain (Rørbaek, 2019). The experience of Muslims in Sri Lanka illustrates how Islamic beliefs evolved into a sign of ethnic identity through a convoluted process of

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politicisation, ultimately resulting in communal violence (Imtiyaz & Mohamed-Saleem, 2025). Comparable patterns can be observed across the African continent, as religious schisms align with ethnic and regional divides, resulting in enduring hostilities (Oyeniyi, 2026). The politicisation of religion occurs when religious doctrine merges with nationalist beliefs and state authority, transforming spiritual commitment into a competitive quest for supremacy (Aktürk, 2022). This amalgamation may be seen across many ethno-religious nationalist factions, as religious symbols and narratives are utilised to validate exclusionary political agendas (Bakker, 2025). A comparative and historical analysis reveals that the interplay between religion and politics differs significantly across various contexts, however the trend of religious endorsement of political power is remarkably consistent (Levine, 2019). The advent of digital media has created new avenues for Christian nationalism and populist movements to formulate and disseminate constrictive ideas of national identity (Kazemian & Mohammadian, 2026). Literalist and exclusivist readings of sacred texts and traditions may offer ideological rationalisation for violence by framing conflict as a cosmic struggle between good and evil (Rahmat et al., 2025). This interpretative process becomes especially contentious when a singular interpretation of scriptural war passages is employed to validate extremism and rationalise hostility toward non-adherents (Malaka et al., 2025). Literal readings of the Bible and Qur'an have been shown to jeopardise global harmony by eliminating the ethical constraints that could otherwise prevent violent behaviour (Bakour, 2026). In postcolonial settings, the framework of belief systems, with political ideologies, can create environments conducive to ideological violence and jihadist recruitment (Rao, 2026). In numerous contemporary global conflicts, religion often serves not as the sole cause of violence, but as a significant element that can exacerbate and rationalise pre-existing political, economic, and social issues (Atran, 2021). The psychological framework of transnational terrorism indicates that religion narratives provide significance and ethical rationale for severe political strife, attracting individuals in search of meaning and belonging (Juergensmeyer, 2023). The sectarianization of Middle Eastern politics illustrates the politicisation of religious identities due to state collapse, regional rivalry, and the exploitation of theological distinctions for political ends (Hashemi & Postel, 2017). Grasping these processes is crucial for developing efficient strategies to prevent conflicts framed by religion and to foster inclusive frameworks of religious plurality that resist exploitation by political leaders.

Religion as an Instrument of Global Transformation: Peacebuilding, Justice, and Reconciliation

Notwithstanding its contentious aspects, religion has a distinctive and frequently overlooked potential for peacebuilding, leveraging its moral authority, global connections, and profound presence in local communities to mediate conflicts and promote reconciliation (Sidik & Dilawati, 2025). This ability is especially apparent in Southeast Asia, where religious figures have contributed positively to conflict resolution and societal harmony across various cultural settings (Kwuelum, 2024). The potential for multireligious peacebuilding is substantial; nonetheless, it encounters formidable constraints, as illustrated by the Myanmar case study, where interfaith cooperation faced systemic barriers and community opposition (King & Owen, 2020). Religious mediators in Lesotho demonstrate how faith-based individuals can use their ethical authority and community confidence to promote conversation and settlement in situations where secular mediation has faltered (Cogan, 2022). The convergence of culture and religion in peacebuilding initiatives demonstrates that successful involvement necessitates profound contextual awareness and attunement to local religious intricacies (Mashkoor, 2024). Religious entities and organisations are pivotal in transitional justice and post-conflict reconstruction by offering frameworks for truth-telling, forgiveness, and restorative justice that tackle profound spiritual and psychological injuries that political mechanisms alone cannot remedy (Chitukutuku, 2026). Reconciliation methods in religious settings illustrate that forgiveness and healing transcend individual psychological occurrences, functioning

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instead as collective rituals that can mend trust and reconstruct societal cohesion (Kazanskaia, 2025). The domain of transitional justice has progressively acknowledged the significance of religious aspects in rectifying historical injustices and promoting enduring peace (Stan, 2023). Religious leadership in post-conflict nations frequently offers moral guidance and aids in identity reconstruction, assisting communities in coping with the significant losses and disruptions caused by violence (Kennedy, 2026). The prophetic heritage in numerous religions advocating for justice, empathy toward the disenfranchised, and responsibility for the influential acts as a significant moral catalyst for worldwide change (Liu, 2025). The notion of justice expressed by the prophet Amos, for example, remains relevant in modern battles for economic parity and social fairness (Olulowo & Ogunjobi, 2025). Empirical analyses of effective faith-based advocacy illustrate that religious institutions can proficiently harness resources and moral power to affect policy and practices in socially relevant domains (Kazanskaia, 2025). Christian education as a prophetic endeavour exemplifies the manner in which religious organisations can include social theology into their development initiatives that advocate for justice and societal change (Zalukhu, 2025). Engaging in interfaith discussion and collaboration as a sincere theological and ethical pursuit, rather than a superficial diplomatic act, fosters trust across communities and forms robust alliances to tackle common global issues (Elius, 2023). The educational results of interfaith projects indicate that these interactions can lead to considerable changes in perspectives, understanding, and interpersonal skills among those involved (Visser et al., 2024). Interfaith involvement in global affairs has become more formalised, with religious authorities and institutions engaging in governance initiatives to tackle poverty, climate change, and refugee issues (Fahy & Haynes, 2018). The capacity of religion to effect change in modern global issues relies on the development of peacebuilding, justice-seeking, and reconciliation skills via deliberate practice and institutional dedication.

The Double-Edged Sword: Case Studies in Religious Ambivalence

An analysis of particular case studies indicates that a single religious tradition can concurrently incite discord and foster peace, illustrating the deep ambivalence inherent in religious involvement with global issues (Abu-Nimer, 2004). The Israeli-Palestinian conflict exemplifies this duality, with religious figures serving as both impediments to peace and crucial collaborators in conversation and nonviolent efforts (Silvestri & Mayall, 2015). The religious aspects of the conflict are sometimes neglected in secular peacebuilding approaches, yet they are crucial to the way communities on both sides perceive their demands and ambitions (Mitchell, 2017). The spiritual aspect of Israeli-Palestinian reconciliation necessitates meticulous consideration of how sacred stories and theological beliefs influence political options and limit compromise (Landau, 2010). The reaction of faith communities to the HIV/AIDS epidemic in sub-Saharan Africa exemplifies the dualistic impact of religious influence, as faith-based organisations have offered exceptional care and assistance, yet certain theological positions have obstructed efficient public health initiatives (Nanthambwe, 2024). Public theology, characterised by its focus on resilience, provides a lens through which to comprehend the ways in which religious groups in sub-Saharan Africa have managed the catastrophic effects of HIV/AIDS while contending with theological dilemmas regarding prevention and treatment (Marfo, 2025). Religious institutions can serve as potent catalysts for community transformation by emphasising compassionate responses rather than ideological inflexibility, as seen by church-led social change through relational organising and pastoral transformational leadership (Musooli, 2023). Religious discord in diverse environments like Nigeria illustrates how unaddressed differences can ignite conflict without ongoing conversation and mutual comprehension (Olowo, 2021). The worldwide reaction to climate change highlights the rising influence of religious environmentalism, with faith leaders progressively presenting ecological care as a moral and spiritual obligation (Bamiji, 2025). The sacred stewardship inherent in various world religions offers

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ethical bases for environmental initiatives, but the application of these concepts into tangible actions is inconsistent and debated (Hossain, 2025). Religious viewpoints toward environmental preservation and climate initiatives provide essential tools for community mobilisation; nevertheless, these tools are frequently compromised by the same religious groups who oppose scientific agreement on climate change (Alokwu et al., 2025). Interfaith ethical principles for ecological stewardship illustrate that cooperation among diverse religious traditions can foster a collective dedication to sustainable practices in today's society (Amin & Habib, 2026). These case analyses illustrate that the results of religious involvement in global issues are not dictated by theology but are influenced by the dynamics of leadership, institutional frameworks, and the wider socio-political environment in which religious participants function (Abu-Nimer, 2004). The dual nature of religious involvement necessitates meticulous consideration of the circumstances that enable its beneficial aspects to flourish while curbing its harmful inclinations (Silvestri & Mayall, 2015).

Critical Challenges and Limitations: When Religion Fails to Transform

It is crucial to acknowledge that the transforming capacity of religion is often obstructed by its organisational aims. This occurs because religious leaders might prioritise their personal power, adherence to doctrine, or institutional stability above the quest for justice and peace (Del Villar Tagle, 2026). The sociology of religion has historically recognised that religious institutions operate within power structures, where their primary objective often becomes self-preservation and continuity, potentially eclipsing their publicly declared missions (Beckford, 2020). The examination of theopolitical matters demonstrates how sacred narratives can be employed to validate institutional authority and evade accountability for shortcomings in care and justice (Ashkenazy, 2026). Due to the influence of institutional goals on prophetic declarations, religious leaders often do not sufficiently promote peace and security in times of turmoil. Ayantayo and Ajose (2026) assert that in Nigeria, ethical standards are occasionally breached to safeguard the integrity of various organisations. Although the structure of institutional religious freedom is crucial for safeguarding religious entities, it can also create conditions that shield these organisations from accountability for whatever damage they may inflict (Shah, 2021). Falk (2016) asserts that the issue of religious exclusivism, defined as the belief that one's own faith is the sole authentic path to truth and salvation, presents a significant barrier to religion's potential as a catalyst for global change. Exclusivist assertions of reality can foster elitist mindsets that obstruct genuine cooperation and reciprocal regard, so undermining collective efforts to tackle shared global issues (Umar et al., 2024). An extra constraint on the transformational influence of religion is the issue of translation, which pertains to the challenge of transforming deep-seated religious beliefs into viable policy concepts that can operate across diverse governance frameworks (Bettiza & Dionigi, 2015). To effectively convey religious and secular concepts in post-secular contexts, one must traverse significant divides in epistemic paradigms and moral obligations (Basalamah, 2022). Areshidze (2017) asserts that Habermas emphasises the importance of collaborative learning contexts, where persons from religious and secular backgrounds engage in mutual interpretation of their core ideas. Ashkenazy (2026) posits that religious organisations face an ongoing dilemma in harmonising their theological beliefs with the actions they undertake as institutions to promote social advancement. Dabrowski Wilk (2026) asserts that religious institutions often encounter difficulties in actualising their vision. This is particularly accurate in numerous situations where multiple stakeholders possess conflicting expectations and responsibilities. These issues exemplify that the transformative capacity of religion is not intrinsic; instead, it necessitates ongoing vigilance against institutional self-interest, intentional development of inclusive theological viewpoints, and collaborative endeavours to align belief with action.

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Conclusion

The future of religion's influence on global issues relies not on an uncritical glorification of its merits or a jaded rejection of its flaws, but on a thorough, context-aware examination that pinpoints the precise circumstances in which its transformative capacity might be utilised. This article has illustrated that religion is not intrinsically peaceful or violent; instead, it embodies a dual potential that manifests variably based on the historical, political, and social contexts in which religious practitioners function. The contradiction of religion in modern society is that it can both unite people and fracture them, motivate altruistic actions and rationalise horrific acts of violence, advocate for justice and reinforce inequity. A meaningful examination of religion's influence in world matters must commence with an acknowledgement of its complexity, rather than relying on oversimplified views of religion as solely beneficial or detrimental. Religious figures must undertake sincere self-examination, recognising and confronting their own involvement in war and injustice, as a prerequisite for legitimate engagement in global peacebuilding and development initiatives. The case studies studied in this article demonstrate that religious organisations frequently choose their own authority, doctrinal integrity, or institutional longevity above the quest for justice and peace. Religious hierarchies have occasionally shielded perpetrators instead of victims, upheld exclusive truth assertions that hinder collaboration among diverse groups, and opposed scientific agreement when it threatened institutional power. Authentic self-assessment necessitates that religious individuals immediately address their shortcomings and engage in sincere reform instead of resorting to protective denial. In the absence of self-reflection, religious involvement in addressing global issues will lack authenticity and be hindered by the institutional agendas that diminish its transformative capacity. The most advantageous route ahead involves cultivating critical fidelity, a dedication to one's own tradition that remains receptive to discourse, self-improvement, and cooperation with individuals of differing beliefs and non-believers, aimed at collective human prosperity. Critical fidelity dismisses both the relativism that regards all religious assertions as equally legitimate and the exclusivism that considers one's own tradition as the exclusive bearer of truth. It combines a profound dedication to personal beliefs with a sincere receptiveness to acquiring knowledge from others and a readiness to amend one's own tradition when it does not reflect its utmost ethical principles. Essential fidelity allows religious individuals to contribute their unique talents to worldwide issues while staying receptive to cooperation and reciprocal change. It allows faith-based groups to utilise their traditional resources while recognising that no one tradition holds all the insights necessary for tackling intricate global issues. In the end, religion can serve as a reliable catalyst for global change only when it emphasises the ethical foundation of its traditions—compassion, justice, and human dignity—above institutional self-interest, exclusionary identity politics, and the quest for power. This does not imply forsaking theological beliefs or institutional affiliation, but rather prioritising them behind the essential ethical principles inherent in every religious tradition. When spiritual leaders emphasise empathy rather than adherence to doctrine, fairness over institutional advantage, and human worth over narrow identity assertions, they emerge as significant agents of healing and change in a divided society. The objective is not to render religion secular or to diminish its unique identity, but rather to urge it to return to its profound ethical foundations. At its pinnacle, religion has consistently served as a prophetic critique of injustice, a sanctuary for the disenfranchised, and a driver of societal change. Restoring and fortifying these aspects of religious existence is the responsibility of anyone seeking to utilise religion's transformative capacity to tackle modern global issues.

Recommendations

1. Religious institutions must institutionalize mechanisms for honest self-critique and accountability. Religious bodies should establish independent review processes to examine their own complicity in conflict, abuse, and injustice. This means creating spaces where victims can speak truth to power

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without fear of retaliation and where institutional failures are acknowledged rather than concealed. Without such mechanisms, religious actors will lack the credibility necessary for effective participation in global peacebuilding and development efforts.

2. Religious leaders and communities should invest in critical faithfulness formation. This involves developing educational programs that cultivate deep commitment to one's own tradition alongside genuine openness to dialogue and collaboration with those of other faiths and no faith. Critical faithfulness formation enables believers to draw on the distinctive resources of their traditions while remaining open to learning, correction, and mutual transformation across religious boundaries.
3. Policymakers and international institutions should develop frameworks for constructive religious engagement that recognize religion's ambivalent potential. Rather than treating religion as either irrelevant to public life or as inherently problematic, governance frameworks should create space for religious actors to contribute their unique resources to peacebuilding, development, and environmental stewardship while maintaining accountability for harmful practices.
4. Scholars and practitioners should prioritize context sensitive analysis over generalized assumptions about religion. Understanding when and how religion becomes a force for conflict or transformation requires attention to specific historical, political, and social conditions rather than abstract theological claims. This contextual approach enables more effective strategies for harnessing religion's constructive potential while mitigating its destructive tendencies.

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