

Faith-based organizations as intermediate actors in mediating religious accommodations in postcolonial African contexts

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Abstract

This paper explores the Inter-Religious Council of Kenya and the Christian Association of Nigeria as places where people from different faiths come together to encourage dialogue and cooperate in solving shared problems in postcolonial African settings. The two organizations have gradually developed into structured platforms for interfaith dialogue, peacebuilding, and policy engagement. Through their meetings, consultations, mediation, and advocacy, they have shaped national conversations on religious diversity and more inclusive governance. Internal disagreements, political pressure, and the marginalization of smaller faith communities limit their effectiveness. However, they function as important bridge-building institutions in complex and often divided political environments.

Keywords

Faith-based organizations, intermediate actors, religious accommodation, interfaith dialogue, postcolonial Africa, peacebuilding.

1. Introduction

Postcolonial African societies today are defined by a lively and expanding mix of religious traditions, and this diversity brings questions of identity, rights, and belonging into the fabric of everyday life. As people of different faiths live and work alongside one another, the need for religious accommodation becomes im-

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mediate rather than theoretical. At its heart, accommodation is about making room, both in law and in practice, for individuals and communities to live out their beliefs openly, without fear, pressure, or discrimination. But beyond what is written in policies, what really matters is whether people actually feel free and safe to practice their faith in their daily lives.

Understood through a symbolic interactionist lens, religious accommodation is shaped in ordinary, everyday encounters, especially in workplaces such as schools, hospitals, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and public offices, where people interpret and respond to religious difference in real time (Carter & Fuller 2015; Sarangi 2005). In this way, accommodation is not just decided in courts or policies; it is something people actively negotiate in their relationships and interactions.

The societal response to religious diversity is a matter of deep concern. When certain beliefs are restricted or privileged, tensions can grow; when differences are recognized and respected, social trust and stability are more likely to flourish (Grim & Finke 2010; Grim & Hsu 2011). Religious accommodation also safeguards the right to change one's faith, affirming personal freedom of conscience (Wazynska-Finck & Finck 2013), and it is supported by international frameworks such as Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Scolnicov 2011). Within this context, faith-based organizations (FBOs) often act as important bridges between communities and the state. This paper explores how they shape religious accommodation in Kenya and Nigeria, and what this means for governance and the lived experience of religious freedom in workplace situations.

2. Conceptual background

Religious accommodation is, at its core, about how societies make room for people to live out their faith within public life without having to leave their beliefs behind (Modood 2013). In practice, this often takes simple but meaningful forms, such as wearing religious attire, observing faith-based holidays, or following dietary practices. However, accommodation is not only about what policies allow, but also about how people actually experience these freedoms in everyday life. From a symbolic interactionist perspective, accommodation unfolds in daily interactions, especially in workplaces where people of different faiths work side by side (Carter & Fuller 2015; Sarangi 2005). Questions about prayer times, dress, or participation in routines are often worked out informally, through conversations and shared understandings among colleagues. In this way, what counts as 'reasonable' accommodation is not fixed but continuously shaped through every-day encounters where ideas of respect, professionalism, and difference are negotiated.

To fully understand and appreciate how accommodation works, it is also important to look at the role of intermediate actors, i.e. those who operate between local communities and the state. These include NGOs, FBOs, and community leaders who help turn policy into lived reality while also voicing community concerns within broader systems of governance (Kuru 2009). They build trust and cooperation by connecting people and institutions (Tzanakis 2013), even as power dynamics influence whose voices are heard (Gelderblom 2018). In today's governance systems, where collaboration matters as much as authority, such actors play a vital role in shaping decisions and translating lived experiences into policy (Sorensen & Torfing 2016; Ney 2014). Within this broader picture, faith-based organizations stand out because of their deep roots in communities and their moral influence. Beyond connecting different groups, they actively shape how religious accommodation is understood and practiced, making them central to fostering coexistence in diverse societies.

3. Faith-based organizations in Africa

FBOs in Africa take many forms, ranging from church groups and Islamic councils to Hindu temples and interfaith networks (Abossey 2022). Although they are widely known for their work in practical areas such as health and education, the influence of FBOs extends far beyond service delivery. They often help shape moral values, engage in political advocacy, contribute to governance debates, and mediate conflicts. In postcolonial African societies, where religion continues to play a central role in public life, FBOs have become important bridge-builders, connecting religious communities, civil society, and the state. Their role in mediating religious accommodation reflects the realities of diverse societies that are navigating issues of coexistence, development, and peace. FBOs shape how communities think about development, justice, and responsibility by grounding these issues in moral and ethical values. This influence is strengthened by the deep trust many communities place in them and the high level of religious commitment across the continent (Marshall & Van Saanen 2007; Afolabi 2015; Bompani 2015; Bakker 2016; Agensky 2020; Chiabuotu 2022).

At the same time, FBOs are not distant and isolated institutions. They are woven into the everyday lives of people, as is especially visible in workplaces such as faith-based hospitals, schools, and humanitarian organizations. From a symbolic interactionist perspective, they help shape how people understand their roles and relate to one another. By offering shared moral language and meaning, FBOs influence workplace culture in subtle but powerful ways. For example, in a faith-based hospital, caregiving is often seen not just as a job but as a calling. This perception can shape how staff treat patients and colleagues, encouraging compassion, discipline, and a strong sense of ethical responsibility. Through these

everyday interactions, FBOs play an active role in constructing workplace norms, identities, and lived experiences.

4. Historical role of FBOs in political legitimization and public morality

FBOs' ability to move between grassroots realities and formal institutions makes them important bridges in efforts to build more inclusive, peaceful, and just societies. In the political sphere, FBOs carry significant influence in shaping public morality and perceptions of authority. As intermediate actors, they speak both to governments and to ordinary citizens, using moral and religious language to either affirm or question political power. By framing issues like corruption, justice, and human rights in ethical terms, they connect with people's lived experiences and impact public attitudes and actions (Bompani 2015). In contexts where trust in government may be limited, FBOs often step in as moral voices, acting as watchdogs, advocates, and mediators who encourage accountability and civic participation.

Their role, however, does not exist in a vacuum; it is shaped by wider political and legal systems. As Kuru (2009) points out, the balance between secular and religious governance can either open space for FBOs or place limits on their work. In any case, FBOs continue to influence political life through advocacy and moral engagement, at times challenging authoritarian tendencies and promoting accountability (Riedl 2012). They also connect global donors with local communities, mobilizing resources through trusted religious networks while reinforcing accountability through shared values (Thornton et al. 2016). Pertinently, the impact of FBOs is not only seen in public debates but also in everyday life, especially in workplaces. Here, people often draw on religious beliefs to navigate ethical questions, whether they are resisting corruption, promoting fairness, or thinking about leadership issues. Over time, these shared values shape how organizations function, showing how FBOs influence not just public systems but the daily experiences and decisions of individuals.

5. FBOs as ethical-developmental intermediaries

Faith-based organizations play a deeply trusted role in many postcolonial African societies because they connect people's spiritual and moral worlds with the practical realities of everyday life. In areas such as healthcare, education, governance, and conflict resolution, they do more than deliver services. They help communities understand development in ways that feel familiar, grounded in their own religious and cultural values. Consequently, they often enjoy a level of trust that more technical or externally driven organizations struggle to achieve, sitting in a "middle space" between global development agendas and local ways

of life. They shape not only how development is delivered but also how it is understood and experienced.

Various scholars have captured this role in related ways. Bakker (2016) describes FBOs as cultural and ethical intermediaries who translate between donor frameworks and local realities. Eshuis (2016) calls them “frame brokers,” highlighting how they connect different ways of understanding development, while Marshall and Van Saanen (2007) emphasize that they respond to the whole person, in terms of material, emotional, moral, and spiritual needs. Olupona (2014) shows that African religious traditions already carry strong ethical systems that shape daily life, and that FBOs draw on these traditions in community work and governance.

Practically, FBOs are especially important where state services are limited or uneven. They provide healthcare, education, and humanitarian support while also encouraging civic responsibility, peacebuilding, and accountability. Davis et al. (2011) and Lunn (2010) show that their religious grounding helps build trust and stronger community relationships. Ndzovu (2020) adds that they “sacralize” humanitarian work by linking it to local meanings, making communication and advocacy more effective; moreover, because they are locally trusted yet globally connected, they bridge everyday needs with wider development systems. Saliiently, FBOs also shape how development is experienced in everyday spaces like schools, clinics, NGOs, and workplaces. In such situations, development is not just delivered but lived and interpreted. In a faith-based HIV/AIDS organization, for example, staff may see their work as both their professional duty and a moral calling, which affects how they respond to stigma and suffering. In schools, teachers may weave moral and religious values into learning, influencing how students understand responsibility and social life. Thus, in these everyday interactions, development becomes something lived, relational, and continuously given meaning through practice.

6. Identity formation and transnational networking

FBOs are deeply woven into the everyday ways people understand who they are, especially in postcolonial African societies where many face marginalization or live between homelands and diaspora. They help people hold on to a sense of religious, cultural, and community belonging while also connecting them to wider global networks of faith, care, and development. In doing so, they create real bridges by means of which ideas, support, and solidarity move across borders, helping people live with identities that are not purely either local or global but something in between.

In societies marked by diversity, Modood (2013) reminds us that public recognition of religion matters, and African FBOs often step into this space by giving

minority voices a place in national conversations. In diaspora settings, Garbin (2014) shows how Congolese Christian FBOs in cities like London and Atlanta help migrants feel at home while they adjust to new environments, shaping both their spiritual and civic lives. Likewise, Ngo (2015) shows that along migration routes, FBOs provide not just practical help but also emotional support, dignity, and a sense of safety. Jong (2025) further describes how they create spaces where different faiths can meet, talk, and live alongside each other in increasingly diverse societies.

These processes are also visible in everyday work life within transnational FBO networks. In such spaces, identity is shaped through daily interactions with people from different backgrounds. For instance, an African worker in an international faith-based organization may learn to blend global influences with local traditions. Over time, these everyday encounters show that identity is not fixed but continually formed through relationships, work, and lived experience.

7. Interfaith boundary solidarity

Across Africa, FBOs play a quiet but practical role in helping people of different religions live and work together. In contexts where religious differences can easily generate tension, they create spaces for dialogue, cooperation, and shared action around common concerns. Instead of emphasizing doctrinal divides, they encourage communities to focus on shared moral values. Through peacebuilding, humanitarian work, and advocacy, FBOs help build trust, reduce divisions, and strengthen more resilient societies. In this sense, they function as spaces of common witness where interfaith collaboration is lived in practice (Jennings 2016). In Nigeria, they support dialogue and peaceful coexistence among religious groups (Olowo 2021), while in Kenya they contribute to addressing challenges such as extremism (Kapinde 2025). This cooperation also grows in everyday spaces like schools, hospitals, NGOs, and community projects, where repeated interaction helps people move beyond stereotypes, build trust, and develop mutual respect through daily shared experience.

8. FBOs and health issues

In different parts of Africa, especially in rural and underserved areas where public health systems are overstretched, FBOs are often the first and most trusted point of care. Beyond filling service gaps, they also combine medical treatment with emotional, social, and spiritual support, reflecting how many communities actually understand illness and healing in everyday life. In this way, they care not only for the body but also for the wider impact of sickness on families, relationships, and community well-being. Owing to being rooted in local settings, they

play an important role in public health efforts such as maternal care, HIV/AIDS prevention, mental health awareness, and vaccination campaigns, linking global health goals with lived local realities.

FBOs' trusted position also allows them to speak about sensitive health issues in ways that people can relate to and accept. They often help connect spiritual understandings of illness with medical approaches, especially in sensitive areas like HIV/AIDS care (Rheeder 2017; Morrin 2013). In fragile health systems, they provide essential services such as safe delivery, maternal health care, and family planning while also improving health education and access to immunization in remote communities (Widmer et al. 2011; Nicol et al. 2022). At the same time, they bring governments, donors, and religious groups together in more cooperative and inclusive forms of health governance (Awuah-Nyamekye & Appiah 2022).

These dynamics are also visible in everyday hospital and clinic settings. In faith-based facilities, care is shaped not only by medical knowledge but also by shared beliefs and meanings. Healthcare workers may understand their work as an act of compassion rooted in faith, while patients may interpret illness through spiritual lenses that shape how they respond to treatment. This highlights how healthcare is always both medical and deeply human, shaped by belief, meaning, and lived experience.

9. FBOs in peace and reconciliation

In many African societies, conflict and instability remain part of everyday life, and FBOs often step in as trusted companions in the long process of healing and rebuilding relationships. FBOs are closely rooted in local communities and carry moral and spiritual authority, enabling them to reach across ethnic, religious, and political divides in ways that formal institutions struggle to do. Through dialogue spaces, community activities, and religious teaching, they help people begin to forgive, rebuild trust, and imagine life beyond violence. Unlike short-term emergency responses, FBOs usually stay with communities long after crises fade, walking with them through the slower journey of reconciliation.

Their presence is visible across different contexts, including Mozambique, Algeria, and Nigeria, where they have supported peace efforts and recovery processes (Haynes 2009; Hegertun 2010). In Kenya, Christian FBOs played a key role during the 2007-2008 post-election violence by encouraging dialogue and truth-sharing (Murang'ai 2022). In places such as Kaduna State, Nigeria, Christian and Muslim actors have also worked together to address sectarian tensions (Orebiyi 2016), while wider networks continue to influence peacebuilding across sub-Saharan Africa (Rugar 2020; Wafula 2014; Schwarz 2018; Sampson 2020; Stor-

er 2025). Much of this work unfolds in ordinary settings such as community forums and mediation centres, where people gradually rebuild trust through conversation and shared reflection on painful histories.

10. FBOs in religious urbanity

FBOs are an important part of everyday life in many postcolonial African cities, especially in informal settlements where state services are often limited. In these spaces, they are often the closest and most trusted source of support for residents. They help meet basic needs, encourage people to take part in community life, and offer emotional, moral, and spiritual care (Rakodi 2014). In Nairobi, for instance, they not only focus on worship but also help people navigate daily struggles while strengthening neighbourhood ties (Mburu 2011) and contributing to broader changes in the city (Jennings 2013). They also create “spaces of encounter” where people from different backgrounds meet, talk, and learn to live together (Beaumont 2008). Over time, they shape the physical and social fabric of cities by building churches, schools, clinics, and other community spaces that influence how urban life is experienced (Garbin & Coleman 2022).

11. Case studies

11.1. Inter-Religious Council of Kenya

The Inter-Religious Council of Kenya (IRCK) emerged in 1983 as the Kenyan chapter of the World Conference of Religions for Peace, originally established to coordinate Kenya’s participation in the 1984 global assembly held in Nairobi (Ochanda 2012). For nearly two decades, it operated informally, focusing on ad hoc interfaith dialogues and cooperative actions. In 2004, the council was formally institutionalized as the IRCK, adopting a structured governance framework and broadening its mandate to include peacebuilding, social justice, interfaith cooperation, and public policy engagement (Wambugu and Kyalo, 2024). Today, the IRCK functions as a national coalition of major religious communities, including Christians, Muslims, Hindus and African Instituted Churches, and therefore serving as a central platform for dialogue, advocacy and coordinated responses to national crises.

The IRCK’s core objectives are anchored in promoting religious pluralism, fostering mutual understanding and enhancing national cohesion. These objectives are implemented through interfaith collaborations addressing issues such as electoral justice, gender-based violence, reproductive health, HIV/AIDS prevention and peace education (Irwin & Kyande 2023). The council’s interventions during the 2007-2008 post-election violence exemplify its capacity for communi-

ty-level peacebuilding, while its lobbying on constitutional reform illustrates its influence at the policy level (Wambugu & Kyalo 2024). Its programming is rooted in culturally sensitive and theologically grounded approaches that allow for both grassroots acceptability and institutional legitimacy, particularly in areas where state institutions struggle to engage religious constituencies effectively.

As an intermediate actor, the IRCK mediates between religious communities, civil society and the state, using its multi-faith legitimacy to articulate moral arguments in support of inclusive governance and social cohesion. The council provides a structured platform for religious groups to collectively address sensitive national issues such as violent extremism, youth radicalization, environmental degradation and public health emergencies (Golicha 2022). The IRCK's role in translating human rights and democratic values into religiously relevant terms enables it to engage both policymakers and communities, fostering policy outcomes that are not only legally sound but also spiritually grounded. Its institutional evolution from an informal dialogue network into a nationally recognized faith-based intermediary illustrates the transformative potential of FBOs in shaping inclusive public discourse in postcolonial African societies.

11.2. The Christian Association of Nigeria

The Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), established in 1976, emerged as a unifying platform for Nigeria's diverse Christian communities amid rising concerns about Christian marginalization and increasing Islamization of public policy in the post-civil war era. It brought together five major Christian blocs – Catholics, Mainline Protestants, Pentecostals, evangelicals and African indigenous churches – to advocate for Christian interests and unity in a complex, multi-religious society (Mbachirin 2006; Olorunnimbe 2017). CAN's political role intensified following the Nigerian government's controversial attempt to join the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in 1986, prompting its transition from a spiritual fellowship to a strategic socio-political actor (Ogunbadejo & Ojo 2024).

The CAN's five primary objectives include fostering Christian unity, defending Christian rights, promoting ethical leadership, engaging in interfaith dialogue with Islamic bodies such as the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NS-CIA), and addressing national development issues such as education, health and poverty (Ilo 2015; Oko 2015; Adedotun & Ikeola 2024). As an intermediate actor, the CAN bridges religious constituencies and the state, particularly in volatile regions including northern Nigeria, where it mediates conflict and provides humanitarian relief to internally displaced persons.

The CAN's advocacy against Sharia implementation in secular states and demand for equitable Christian representation in governance exemplify its polit-

ical relevance (Olorunnimbe 2017). Despite facing internal fragmentation and accusations of politicization, the CAN remains a vital force in promoting religious pluralism, peacebuilding and civic engagement in Nigeria's postcolonial society. Its efforts in youth and clergy development through capacity-building initiatives ensure continuity in Christian ethical leadership, reinforcing its role in shaping Nigeria's democratic and interfaith landscape (Adedotun & Ikeola 2024).

11.3. Challenges faced by IRCK and CAN

FBOs like the IRCK and the CAN are critical intermediate actors in promoting religious accommodation in postcolonial Africa. However, their effectiveness is challenged by internal fragmentation, political interference, and limited resources. The IRCK, comprising Christians, Muslims, Hindus, and African traditionalists, often grapples with internal theological disagreements on issues such as reproductive rights and gender equity, which complicate its ability to form and express unified positions (Irwin & Kyande 2023). Additionally, the IRCK's reliance on donor funding affects its sustainability, while secular political structures in Kenya limit its influence in public policymaking (Wambugu & Kyalo 2024; Golicha 2022).

The CAN, on the other hand, operates in Nigeria's volatile religious and political environment, and its internal divisions among Catholic, Protestant, Pentecostal, Evangelical, and Indigenous blocs hinder its cohesion (Olorunnimbe 2017). Perceptions of political bias further erode its neutrality, and its interfaith dialogue with Muslim bodies like the NSCIA is undermined by deep-seated mistrust and recurrent violence, especially in northern Nigeria (Ogunbadejo & Ojo 2024; Ilo 2015). The ongoing threat of terrorism complicates the CAN's advocacy and peacebuilding strategies. Both organizations also struggle with limited youth and female representation in leadership, hindering inclusivity and innovation. To sustain their legitimacy and impact, the IRCK and the CAN must strengthen their internal unity, financial autonomy and political neutrality while fostering structural reforms that reflect diverse religious constituencies in their governance frameworks.

11.4. Towards inclusive religious accommodation

FBOs have evolved as crucial intermediate actors in the mediation of religious accommodations across postcolonial Africa. Rooted in historical legacies of missionary engagement and indigenous religious traditions, FBOs possess both moral authority and structural reach that allow them to act as effective intermediaries between governments, civil society and local communities (Beaumont 2008; Rheeder 2017). In postcolonial societies where colonial-era religious hierarchies and administrative divisions often institutionalized religious inequality,

FBOs play a critical role in reconstructing inclusive spaces for religious expression (Agensky 2017). Their role extends beyond mere religious propagation; they engage in policy advocacy, conflict mediation, and cultural translation of human rights principles into faith-based language that relates with local populations (Awuah-Nyamekye & Appiah 2022). In Kenya, for instance, the IRCK exemplifies this intermediary role through its work in advancing interfaith harmony and lobbying for religious representation in public decision-making (IRCK 2023). Through structured interfaith platforms and local dialogue forums, such organizations help to bridge divides among religious groups, especially in regions historically affected by sectarian violence or marginalization (Orebiyi 2016).

In countries like Nigeria, where religious plurality intersects with regional and ethnic identities, FBOs such as the CAN and the NSCIA have become key actors in ensuring religious accommodation and political inclusion (Abossey 2022; Rugar 2020). These organizations serve as institutionalized voices for their respective faith communities, engaging with the state on constitutional reforms, educational policies and humanitarian interventions (Jennings 2013). Their involvement in governance processes, whether through peace negotiations, policy consultations or disaster response, underscores the ability of FBOs to function as mediating agents that transform grassroots religious concerns into national discourse (Widmer et al. 2011). In addition, FBOs contribute to the formation of ethical public spaces where divergent religious worldviews can coexist (Garbin et al. 2022). This is particularly significant in urban areas where migration, economic disparity and demographic change often produce tensions over religious identity and spatial belonging (Mburu 2011). In such settings, FBOs help facilitate mutual recognition among different faiths, promoting not just tolerance but shared civic values grounded in spiritual teachings. However, this intermediary role is not without challenges. FBOs may be hindered by internal doctrinal divisions, politicization or lack of inclusive representation for non-dominant religious groups, such as indigenous or new religious movements (Nicol et al. 2022). These limitations often affect their legitimacy and capacity to mediate effectively.

Moving towards more inclusive religious accommodation in postcolonial Africa requires FBOs to continuously adapt and reflect on their own structures and ideologies. To serve as truly pluralistic agents of mediation, FBOs must cultivate internal mechanisms for interfaith learning and accountability, ensuring that their engagement is not limited to dominant religious narratives but extends to the full spectrum of Africa's religious landscape (Agensky 2020; Awuah-Nyamekye & Appiah 2022). Strengthening transnational and regional networks among FBOs can also enhance their capacity to share best practices, coordinate peacebuilding efforts, and engage international partners in support of locally grounded, faith-sensitive approaches to

reconciliation and governance (Orebiyi 2012). Moreover, FBOs must strategically engage youth and marginalized communities within their constituencies, empowering them as stakeholders in inclusive religious discourse (Rheeder 2017).

As Africa continues to grapple with the legacies of colonial religious policy and contemporary religious extremism, FBOs have a unique opportunity to model dialogical, peaceful, and inclusive modes of religious co-existence. By doing so, they not only address immediate social and political needs but also contribute to the long-term cultivation of a civic culture in which religious diversity is embraced as a democratic asset rather than a source of division.

12. Conclusion

Faith-based organizations such as the IRCK and the CAN play important, often quiet roles in holding societies together in postcolonial Africa. They act as trusted bridges between religious communities, the state, and wider society, creating spaces for dialogue, advocacy, and peacebuilding. Their influence is not limited to big national conversations, but it shows up in everyday places like hospitals, schools, and NGOs, where they help people navigate religious differences, ease tensions, and find practical ways to live and work together respectfully.

In countries like Kenya and Nigeria, where religion shapes daily life and trust in government institutions can sometimes be uncertain, FBOs help make formal policies feel more relatable and meaningful within local faith contexts. Seen from everyday life, they are not just formal organizations but active participants in how people interact, negotiate differences, and build a sense of belonging. Through these ongoing, ordinary encounters, they help make peaceful coexistence something that is lived, not just discussed.

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