Religion as an Asset: Reassessing Its Role in Nation-Building in African Governments

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Abstract
Africa is the most religious continent in the world, yet African governments have historically treated religion as a problem to be controlled, rather than as an asset for nation-building. This article critically reassesses that assumption arguing that religion functions in Africa not merely as belief, but as moral, social, and institutional capital. Historical methods of description and analysis was deployed for this study because they offered the opportunity to interrogate sources, in order to reconstruct the myth about religion. Findings indicate that when mediated by inclusive institutions and constitutional neutrality, religion builds trust, delivers education and health services where the state is absent, socialises citizens into civic values, and provides moral language for reconciliation and peacebuilding. Evidence from Ghana, Nigeria, South Africa, Zambia, and the Great Lakes region shows this constructive potential. When captured by political elites for electoral mobilisation, ethnic exclusion, or religious majoritarianism, however, the same capital fragments the nation, as seen in Nigeria's Sharia crises, Zambia's Christian Nation project, and Sudan's Islamisation. The study therefore concludes that nation-building in Africa depends not on secularising religion out of public life, but on governing its ambivalence: converting bonding capital within faith communities into bridging capital across them through interfaith partnership, inclusive citizenship, and state-religion collaboration.

Keywords: *Religion, Nation-Building, Social Capital, African Governments, Pentecostalism, Islam, African Traditional Religion*

Statement of The Problem

Despite Africa's deep religiosity, nation-building remains fragile, marked by ethnic division, weak trust in the state, corruption, and recurrent religiously framed conflict. Governments have largely responded by either controlling religion or instrumentalising it for political gain, rather than harnessing it as a developmental asset. Scholarship, too, has often framed religion as either a unifying moral force or a source of division, without explaining the conditions under which it becomes one or the other. This article therefore asks: under what institutional and political conditions does religion function as an asset, rather than a liability, for nation-building in African governments?

Conceptual Clarification

For this study, three concepts must be distinguished, because they are often used interchangeably in African political discourse.

State-building refers to the construction of formal institutions of the state such as bureaucracy, army, judiciary, tax system, and territorial control. Nation-building is broader and deeper. It is the construction of a shared sense of belonging, common identity, trust, and collective purpose among diverse peoples within those borders (Nwadialor, 2018).

A state can exist without a nation. Colonial boundaries in Africa created states without nations, leaving governments to manufacture national cohesion afterwards. Religion becomes relevant here because it is one of the few institutions that already commands loyalty, moral authority, and grassroots presence across ethnic and regional lines. While state-building is top-down, nation-building is both top-down and bottom-up, and religion operates powerfully at the bottom-up level.

Theoretical Framework: Social Capital Theory.

The theory has its roots in Pierre Bourdieu (1986), who defined social capital as resources linked to durable networks of relationships, and James Coleman (1988), who emphasised its function in creating human capital. It was popularised by Robert Putnam in "Making Democracy Work" (1993) and Bowling Alone (2000), where he argued that networks, norms, and trust enable societies to act collectively and make democracy work.

In African studies, the theory has been applied by scholars such as Adasi et al. (2025) and Beukes (2024) to show how religious affiliation generates trust and cooperation for development.

Five Key Concepts, includes:

a) Networks: Social capital resides in relationships. congregations, mosques, prayer groups, and ATR associations not in individuals alone.

b) Norms of Reciprocity: Members learn to give, share, and support one another, creating expectations of mutual help.

c) Trust: Generalised trust allows strangers to cooperate. Religious communities are among the strongest producers of trust in Africa.

d) Bonding and Bridging Capital: This is the central distinction for this study. Bonding capital builds solidarity within homogeneous group (example, within one church or mosque). Bridging capital builds connections across different groups (example: Christian-Muslim interfaith councils). Nation-building requires bridging capital; bonding capital alone can produce exclusion.

e) Linking Capital: A later addition vertical connections between communities and institutions of power, such as between religious leaders and government. This enables faith communities to access state resources and influence policy.

Social Capital Theory has been criticised on three grounds.

First, it is conceptually vague. Critics argue it lumps together too many things trust, networks, and norms making it difficult to measure (Fine, 2001).

Secondly, it is romanticised. It assumes social capital is always positive, ignoring its "dark side bonding capital can produce exclusion, nepotism, and sectarianism, as seen in Boko Haram networks or exclusionary Christian nationalism (Portes, 1998).

Third, it underplays power and the state. Critics argue Putnam focuses on civil society and neglects how the state, inequality, and colonial history shape who has access to networks in the first place.

This study takes these criticisms seriously. It does not assume religion automatically produces good social capital. It asks when it produces bridging capital and when it produces exclusionary bonding capital.

Application of the Theory to this Study. Social Capital Theory is applied in three ways:
a) Religion as a Generator of Social Capital**: Churches, mosques, and ATR institutions are treated** as the most dense and trusted networks in Africa. They generate moral norms and mutual aid that the post-colonial state often cannot provide.
b) Explaining the Ambivalence: The theory explains why religion is both asset and liability. When religious networks produce bridging capital (example) Ghana's interfaith cooperation, Great Lakes Interfaith Platform for Dialogue and Peace (Ntakarutimana, 2023) they support nation-building. Application When they produce only bonding capital, electoral mobilisation along Christian-Muslim lines in Nigeria, they fragment the nation.
c) Prescribing State Action: the theory shifts the role of government from controlling religion to converting bonding capital into bridging capital. Governments can do this through inclusive institutions such as National Peace Councils, constitutional neutrality, interfaith dialogue forums, and faith-based service partnerships. In this way, the state does not create social capital from scratch; it partners with and redirects the capital religion already produced. In short, Social Capital Theory provides this study with a language to argue that religion is an asset not because it is inherently good, but because its networks, norms, and trust can be harnessed if governed inclusively for national cohesion and development.

Introduction
Africa is the most religious continent in the world. According to Pew Research Center (2018), more than 90% of Sub-Saharan Africans identify religion as very important in their lives, and religious affiliation continues to shape voting, marriage, education, health-seeking behaviour, and moral judgement. Pentecostal Christianity is expanding rapidly in Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya and Zambia; Islam remains central to identity and politics in Northern Nigeria, Senegal, Sudan and the Sahel; African Traditional Religion (ATR) continues to underpin festivals, chieftaincy, land tenure and communal ethics even among self-declared Christians and Muslims. In short, religion in Africa is not declining. It is intensifying, diversifying, and becoming more public.
Yet African governments have historically treated religion not as a resource, but as a problem to be managed. This posture is inherited from colonial rule. Colonial administrators viewed missions as useful for education but dangerous for political mobilisation, and viewed Islam as a threat to be contained and ATR as superstition to be eradicated. Post-colonial leaders inherited this suspicion. Kwame Nkrumah, Sekou Touré, and later military regimes in Nigeria attempted to subordinate religious institutions to the project of national unity, fearing that religious loyalty would compete with national loyalty. This has produced a paradox that lies at the centre of this study. Religion provides many of the things African states struggle to provide: schools, clinics, welfare, moral language, grassroots trust, leadership training, and networks of mutual aid. At the same time, religion is repeatedly mobilised for elections, exclusion, and violence from the Sharia crises in Northern Nigeria (1999-2001), to the declaration of Zambia as a "Christian Nation" in 1991, to the Islamisation project under Jaafar Nimeiri and the National Islamic Front in Sudan, to the instrumentalisation of Pentecostal rhetoric in Nigeria's 2023 general elections.

Secularisation theory, which predicted that modernisation would privatise religion, has therefore failed in Africa (Ukah, 2020). Religion has not retreated. It has become more political. The question is no longer whether religion will matter for nation-building, but under what conditions will it becomes an asset rather than a liability. This study argues that religion in Africa is best understood not as belief alone, but as a form of capital - moral, social, institutional, and human capital that can be invested in nation-building or captured for fragmentation. When mediated by inclusive institutions, constitutional neutrality, and interfaith civic engagement, religion builds trust, delivers services, and legitimates the state. When captured by elites for electoral mobilisation or ethnic exclusion, it fragments the nation.

Literature Review

Recent scholarship on religion and development in Africa can be organised into three strands. Together they show religion is ambivalent, neither inherently unifying nor divisive, but they leave a gap this study fills.

Religion as Social Capital and Development. This strand breaks from modernisation theory, which dismissed religion as an obstacle to progress. Adasi, Fusheini and Brobbey (2025), studying Ghana, argue religious institutions drive development through schools, hospitals, and welfare, but risk instability when politicians exploit religious identity. In Ghana, pluralism has largely been managed through interfaith tolerance and the National Peace Council. Similarly, Beukes (2024) and Ntakarutimana (2023) finds that for marginalised youth in South Africa, religion provides belonging, mentorship, discipline, and networks the post-apartheid state has failed to provide. Clarke (2019) shows Christianity contributed to West African nation-building through literacy, education, and a new nationalist elite. Nwadialor (2018) extends this to Nigeria, arguing religion provides the ethical foundation for leadership and justice. Without a shared moral order, anti-corruption and citizenship education lack cultural resonance. This strand recovers religion as productive, but often treats its contribution as automatically positive, underplaying how schools and clinics can become sites of exclusion when access is conditioned on affiliation.

Religion as Political Power and Instrumentalisation. This strand examines elite capture. Obadare (2018) in his work titled “Pentecostal Republic” argues Nigerian Pentecostalism is a political project: pastors are power brokers, candidates seek their endorsement, and spiritual warfare because language has entered electoral discourse. Marshall (2009) in “Political Spiritualities” similarly shows Pentecostalism created a political subjectivity in which politics is spiritual battle. Czerep (2023) extends this to foreign policy, showing mega-church pastors in Nigeria and Ghana act as "God's diplomats." Haynes (2021) offers a comparative case in Zambia, where Chiluba's 1991 declaration of a Christian Nation concretised religious identity in law, curricula, and public symbols, unifying Christians while marginalising Muslims and ATR adherents. Gifford (2015) argues the Catholic Church has a coherent public theology on justice, while much Pentecostalism focuses on prosperity and personal breakthrough rather than structural reform, raising Obadare's (2018) question of whether prosperity gospel depoliticises civil society. This strand corrects romantic views, but focuses so heavily on elite capture that it neglects everyday grassroots cohesion and service delivery. Religion as Peacebuilding and Indigenous Cohesion. Ntakarutimana (2023) documents the Interfaith Platform for Dialogue and Peace in the Great Lakes (PIDP-GL), where Catholic, Protestant, Muslim, and ATR leaders used shared moral language to mediate conflict and rebuild trust after genocide and civil war. In South Africa, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, chaired by Archbishop Tutu, used confession, forgiveness, and Ubuntu to frame reconciliation. Egege (2021) argues ATR provides an indigenous model of

unity through festivals, ancestor veneration, and communal morality, tied to land and community rather than exclusive doctrine. This strand centres African agency, but focuses on exceptional moments of peacebuilding rather than everyday institutional interaction between religion and government. Four gaps remain. First, a governance gap: literature studies religion in society or against the state, not religion with the state, example, National Peace Councils, service partnerships, and religious education policy. Second, a comparative gap: studies are single-country or single-faith, with little comparison of Ghana's pluralist partnership, Nigeria's constitutional neutrality (Section 10), Zambia's confessional model, and Sudan's Islamist model. Third, a theoretical gap: social capital is invoked but rarely used to explain how bonding capital becomes bridging capital. Fourth, an ATR gap: ATR is celebrated but rarely integrated into policy. This study fills these gaps by shifting focus to religion as a governance partner, comparing five cases, using Social Capital Theory to explain conversion from bonding to bridging capital, and integrating ATR. It answers not whether religion is good or bad for Africa, but what governments must do to make it an asset for nation-building.

Religion as Asset - Four Functions.

If religion is understood as a moral, social, institutional, and human capital, then its contribution to nation-building can be analysed through four concrete functions. These functions are not abstract. They are visible in schools, clinics, peace committees, festivals, and everyday acts of mutual aid across Africa. Together, they explain why religion remains indispensable to nation-building even where the state is weak.

Moral and Civic Formation.The first function is the formation of citizens. Nation-building requires more than borders and flags. It requires a shared moral order: norms of honesty, respect for life, stewardship of public resources, obedience to law, and concern for the common good. In many African societies, the state has struggled to produce this moral order on its own. Legal sanctions are weak, corruption is endemic, and trust in government is low. Religion, by contrast, speaks in a moral language that people already trust. In Nigeria, Nwadialor (2018) argues that religion provides the ethical foundation for leadership and national development. Sermons, Friday khutbahs, and ATR proverbs consistently teach that leadership is stewardship, that stealing public funds is a moral offence, not merely a legal one, and that the community has a duty to care for the vulnerable. In Ghana, Adasi et al. (2025) find that churches and mosques function as schools of citizenship, where members learn public speaking, committee work, financial accountability, and voluntary service are skills they later transfer to local government, trade unions, and civil society. This formation is particularly important for youth. Beukes (2024), studying South Africa, finds that for marginalised youth in townships, religious participation provides discipline, mentorship, and a sense of purpose that counteracts gang culture and hopelessness. The church becomes a site where a young person learns to arrive on time, to keep commitments, to lead a choir or youth group, and to imagine a future beyond survival. These are civic virtues, even when they are taught in religious language. Critically, this moral formation is not limited to one faith. ATR, through its emphasis on ancestors, communal obligation, and respect for elders, historically taught that the individual exists for the community. Egege (2021) argues that this ethic “I am because we are” is the indigenous foundation of African citizenship. Islam, through zakat and the concept of “ummah” teaches redistribution and solidarity. Christianity, through the idea of being "salt and light," teaches service to the wider society, not just to the congregation. The point is not that religion makes people automatically good. It is that religion provides a moral vocabulary for nation-building that the state alone cannot generate. When governments partner with religious

institutions for anti-corruption campaigns, civic education, and leadership training, they are tapping into a moral authority that already exists.

Service Delivery: Where the State is Absent. The second, and most material, function is service delivery. Across Africa, churches and mosques are not just places of worship. They are schools, hospitals, clinics, orphanages, water projects, and welfare centres. In many rural areas, the only functional school or clinic is a mission school or an Islamic school. The state is absent; religion is present. Historically, this role was foundational. In Ghana and Nigeria, mission schools produced the first generation of nationalist leaders, civil servants, teachers, and doctors (Clarke, 2019). In the colonial period, the British relied on missions to provide education because the colonial state refused to invest. That legacy continues. In contemporary Ghana, the Christian Council, Catholic Secretariat, and Ahmadiyya Muslim Mission run hundreds of basic schools, senior high schools, and hospitals that serve the general public, not just their members. In Nigeria, Catholic dioceses run some of the best-regarded secondary schools and hospitals in the country, while Islamic organisations run madrasas, clinics, and zakat-based welfare schemes in the North. Ukah (2020) notes that this has led to a "religion and development" turn where international donors now recognise faith-based organisations as development partners. The World Bank, DFID, and USAID have all created faith-based partnership programmes precisely because religious institutions have reach, trust, and staying power that secular NGOs often lack. This service function contributes to nation-building in three ways. First, it builds human capital, that is, literacy, health, and skills which is the foundation of any nation. Second, it builds legitimacy for the nation itself: when a child in a remote village receives education in a church school that teaches both English and national history, she learns to imagine herself as part of a larger nation. Third, it builds trust across groups when services are provided inclusively. A Muslim child attending a Catholic school in Southern Nigeria, or a Christian patient treated in an Islamic clinic in Northern Ghana, experiences the other faith as a source of care, not threat. The danger, of course, is that service delivery can become a tool of proselytisation or exclusion. But when governments formalise partnerships through service agreements, joint funding, and regulation they can ensure that faith-based services serve the nation, not just the faith.

Peacebuilding and Reconciliation.
The third function is peacebuilding, perhaps the most visible contribution of religion to nation-building in post-conflict Africa. Religious leaders possess a unique form of authority in conflict situations: they are trusted by communities, they are present before, during, and after violence, and they can speak a moral language that politicians cannot. Ntakarutimana (2023) documents this in the Great Lakes Region, where the Interfaith Platform for Dialogue and Peace (PIDP-GL) brought together Catholic, Protestant, Muslim, and ATR leaders in Burundi, Rwanda, and the Democratic Republic of Congo to mediate conflict, reintegrate ex-combatants, and rebuild community trust after genocide and civil war. The platform succeeded, he argues, because it used shared moral language such as forgiveness, reconciliation, and the sanctity of life rather than legal or political language alone. South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) is the paradigmatic case. Chaired by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the TRC framed national reconciliation in explicitly religious terms: confession, forgiveness, Ubuntu, and healing. While scholars debate whether the TRC achieved material justice, there is consensus that it provided a national ritual through which South Africans could narrate trauma and imagine a shared future. Without that religious framing, the TRC might have been a purely legal process, with far less public resonance. In Nigeria, similar

work occurs at a smaller scale but with equal importance. In Kaduna, Plateau, and Taraba, states repeatedly affected by Christian-Muslim violence, interfaith mediation committees, often led by the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) and Jama'atu Nasril Islam (JNI), have negotiated ceasefires, organised joint peace markets, and mediated farmer-herder conflicts. These efforts are fragile and underfunded, but they demonstrate that religious networks can be converted from sites of mobilisation for violence into sites of mediation for peace. This peacebuilding function works because religion provides three resources that secular peace processes often lack: moral legitimacy to call for forgiveness; grassroots networks to disseminate peace messages quickly; and rituals such as joint prayers, shared fasting, communal mourning that allow communities to perform reconciliation publicly. In this sense, religion does not just talk about peace; it enacts it.

Social Cohesion and Identity.

The fourth function is the construction of social cohesion and national identity. Nation-building requires a story: who are we, what binds us together, and why should we stay together despite ethnic and religious difference? In Africa, where colonial borders grouped together peoples with different languages and histories, this story cannot be taken for granted. Religion helps provide it. ATR plays a foundational role here, even though it is often marginalised in official discourse. Egege (2021) argues that ATR historically provided a model of unity based on land, ancestors, festivals, and communal morality. Festivals such as the Argungu Fishing Festival in Nigeria, the Homowo Festival in Ghana, and the Reed Dance in Eswatini are not merely cultural events. They are nation-building rituals: they bring together diverse communities, reaffirm shared history, and teach younger generations that identity is communal, not individual. ATR, in this view, is not a relic. It is an indigenous theory of cohesion. Christianity and Islam also contribute to cohesion, but in different ways. In Ghana, the coexistence of the National Chief Imam, the Christian Council, and traditional chiefs in public ceremonies such as Independence Day, state funerals, national prayers, performs a vision of the nation as plural but united. The fact that Ghanaians can celebrate Christmas, Eid, and Homowo as national moments is itself a nation-building achievement (Adasi et al., 2025). In South Africa, the concept of Ubuntu "I am because you are" which has roots in ATR and was popularised through Christian language by Tutu, became a national philosophy of reconciliation. It provided a language for post-apartheid identity that was African, inclusive, and moral, rather than merely legal. Crucially, religion builds cohesion not by erasing difference, but by providing a shared moral framework within which difference can be managed. When a Nigerian is identified as both Igbo and Christian, or Hausa and Muslim, or Yoruba and ATR adherent, religion does not necessarily compete with national identity. It can deepen it, by giving the citizen a moral reason to belong to the larger nation.

Religion as Liability, a Critical Couter-Arguement.

Using Social Capital Theory, the problem is clear: religion easily produces bonding capital, that is intense solidarity within one faith, but nation-building requires bridging capital, that is trust across faiths. African politics, with its competitive elections, winner-takes-all presidencies, and weak institutions, often rewards bonding over bridging. When this happens, religion becomes a liability in four interrelated ways.

First, Instrumentalization by Political Elites.

The most pervasive liability is instrumentalization: politicians using religion not out of conviction, but as a tool to win elections, secure loyalty, and delegitimise opponents. In Nigeria, this has

become structural. Obadare (2018) argues that Nigeria has become a "Pentecostal Republic," where presidential candidates, governors, and legislators actively seek the endorsement of mega-church pastors, attend vigils and crusades for photo opportunities, and frame their campaigns in the language of spiritual warfare. Marshall (2009) shows that this is not merely symbolic. Pentecostalism has created a new political subjectivity in which the born-again citizen understands voting as a spiritual battle between God and Satan, light and darkness. When elections are framed this way, losing becomes not just political defeat, but spiritual defeat, making compromise and concession almost impossible. The 2023 Nigerian general elections illustrate this vividly. The Muslim-Muslim ticket of the ruling party, the public prayers and prophecies of prominent pastors for and against candidates, and the viral circulation of sermons declaring one candidate "God's choice" turned the election into a religious referendum for many voters. Religious identity was mobilised to override policy debate, economic performance, and competence. The result was not national cohesion, but deepened suspicion between Christians and Muslims, North and South, and even within churches. Zambia offers a parallel, but with a different outcome. In 1991, President Frederick Chiluba declared Zambia a "Christian Nation." Haynes (2021) shows that this was not just rhetoric. It was concretised in the constitution (preamble), in school curricula, in public holidays, and in the marginalisation of other faiths. For many Zambian Christians, the declaration provided a sense of national identity and moral purpose. For Muslims, ATR adherents, and Hindus, it signalled that they were second-class citizens in their own country. The declaration unified one group by excluding others, the classic logic of bonding capital. Sudan provides the most tragic example. Maram et al. (2025) argue that Islam was used both as a unifier and a divider in modern Sudanese nation-building. Under Jaafar Nimeiri (1969-1985) and later under the National Islamic Front (NIF) regime of Omar al-Bashir (1989-2019), Islamisation was pursued as a state project: Sharia law was imposed, Arabic was privileged, and the South - predominantly Christian and ATR was framed as a problem to be Islamised or conquered. Rather than building a Sudanese nation, Islamisation deepened the North-South divide and contributed to decades of civil war and ultimately the secession of South Sudan in 2011. Islam, in this case, did not fail because it is inherently divisive. It failed because it was captured by an exclusionary state project that refused to recognise pluralism. In all three cases, the mechanism is the same: political elites convert religious networks into electoral machines. They do not build bridging capital; they weaponise bonding capital. Second, Electoral Mobilisation and Spiritual Nationalism. Closely related is the rise of what can be called spiritual nationalism, put differently, the idea that the nation belongs to one faith. In Nigeria, this takes the form of claims that Nigeria is a "Christian country" or an "Islamic country," despite Section 10 of the 1999 Constitution which prohibits the adoption of any religion as state religion. In Zambia, it takes the form of Christian nationalism. In Sudan, it took the form of Islamist nationalism. Spiritual nationalism is dangerous for nation-building because it redefines citizenship in religious terms. A citizen is no longer a Nigerian, Zambian, or Sudanese first; they are a Christian or Muslim first, and their loyalty to the nation is conditional on the nation reflecting their faith. This undermines the very idea of a plural nation. Czerep (2023) shows that this logic now extends to foreign policy. Pentecostal mega-church pastors in Nigeria and Ghana act as "God's diplomats," shaping how African governments relate to Israel, the United States, and the Muslim world. When foreign policy is driven by religious identity rather than national interest, it can isolate the country internationally and deepen domestic divisions. Spiritual nationalism also makes elections zero-sum. If God has chosen one candidate, then the opponent is not just wrong, but evil. This makes democratic alternation, the peaceful transfer of power theologically difficult. In this way, religion, when instrumentalized, does not strengthen democracy; it makes democracy

harder. Third, Violence, Sharia Crises, and Exclusion of Minorities. The most severe liability is violence. The Sharia crises in Northern Nigeria (1999-2001) is a textbook case. After the return to civilian rule in 1999, twelve Northern states adopted Sharia as the basis of criminal law. For many Muslims, this was a legitimate expression of religious identity and moral order. For many Christians in the North, and for Christians in the South, it was perceived as a step towards Islamisation and the erosion of constitutional neutrality. The result was riots in Kaduna, Jos, and other cities that left thousands of dead (Nwadialor, 2018; Obadare, 2018). Boko Haram, whose name is often translated as "Western education is forbidden" represents the extreme end of this logic. It emerged from a radical Salafi network that rejected the Nigerian state as un-Islamic and sought to create an Islamic state through violence. Boko Haram is not representative of Islam in Nigeria. The vast majority of Nigerian Muslims reject it. But it demonstrates how religious networks, when combined with poverty, corruption, and state failure, can produce violent bonding capital that directly attacks the nation-state itself. A similar pattern, in different form, occurred in the Central African Republic and in parts of the Great Lakes, where Christian and Muslim militias framed communal conflicts in religious terms. Even where religion was not the original cause of conflict but land, cattle, or political power often were religious language made the conflict harder to resolve, because it sacralised it. The liability here is not religion per se, but the absence of bridging institutions. Where there are no strong interfaith councils, no National Peace Council with real authority, and no constitutional enforcement of neutrality, religious difference easily becomes a fault line for violence. Lastly, Prosperity Gospel and Depoliticization. The final liability is subtler, but equally important for nation-building: depoliticisation. Gifford (2015) argues that while the Catholic Church in Africa has developed a relatively coherent public theology around social justice, human rights, and structural reform, much of Pentecostalism, particularly the prosperity gospel, has a weaker public theology. It focuses on personal breakthrough, individual miracles, and spiritual warfare, rather than on collective accountability, policy reform, or institutional change. Obadare (2018) pushes this further. He asks: does the prosperity gospel demobilise civil society? If a believer is taught that poverty is caused by demons, not by corruption or bad policy, and that the solution is prayer, fasting, and sowing seeds (donations), then they are less likely to demand accountability from government, join a protest, or vote on policy. The church becomes a site of escape from politics, not engagement with it. This is a liability for nation-building because nation-building requires active, critical citizens. If millions of citizens are taught to seek individual prosperity rather than collective justice, the state faces less pressure to reform. Religion, in this form, does not challenge the state; it legitimates it by diverting attention from structural problems. This critique must be qualified. Many Pentecostal churches do provide welfare, education, and community support, and many pastors do speak out against corruption. The point is not that prosperity gospel is uniformly depoliticising. It is that it can be, and when it is, it weakens the civic agency that nation-building requires.

Comparative Cases: Five Regimes of Religion and Nation-Building

The argument of this article, that religion is ambivalent, and its effect depends on governance is best tested comparatively. No single country proves the point. Nigeria shows plurality as both asset and risk. Ghana shows pluralism managed well. South Africa shows religion in post-conflict healing. Zambia shows confessional nationalism. Sudan shows exclusionary Islamisation and its failure. Together, they represent five different regimes of state-religion relations, and five different nation-building outcomes.

First, Nigeria: Plurality as Asset and Risk. Nigeria is Africa's most populous country and its most religiously plural: roughly evenly divided between Christianity (South and Middle Belt) and Islam (North), with ATR persisting across both, and with hundreds of ethnic groups layered onto religious difference. Its constitution, Section 10 of the 1999 Constitution, prohibits the adoption of any religion as state religion and guarantees freedom of religion in Section 38. In principle, Nigeria is a model of constitutional neutrality. In practice, Nigeria is the continent's clearest case of ambivalence. As asset: Nigeria's religious institutions are massive providers of services and social capital. The Catholic Church, Anglican Church, Redeemed Christian Church of God, Winners' Chapel, and Jama'atu Nasril Islam (JNI) run thousands of schools, hospitals, universities, and welfare schemes. In many parts of the country, the only functional secondary school is a mission school. Interfaith mediation in Kaduna, Jos, and Taraba often led jointly by the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) and JNI has negotiated ceasefires, organised joint peace markets, and mediated farmer-herder conflicts (Nwadialor, 2018). At the grassroots, everyday interfaith cooperation such as Muslims attending Christian weddings, Christians attending Muslim naming ceremonies, shared markets and transport unions sustains a lived pluralism that politicians often ignore.

As liability: The same plurality is weaponised at election time. Obadare (2018) and Marshall (2009) show how Pentecostal pastors have become power brokers, and how the language of spiritual warfare has entered electoral discourse. The Sharia crises of 1999-2001, when twelve Northern states adopted Sharia criminal law, led to riots in Kaduna and Jos that left thousands of dead. Boko Haram, emerging from a radical Salafi network in the North-East, has killed tens of thousands and displaced millions, framing its violence as a rejection of the "un-Islamic" Nigerian state. The 2023 elections, marked by the Muslim-Muslim ticket controversy and prophecies, declaring candidates as "God's choice," deepened Christian-Muslim suspicion. Lesson to learn here is that Nigeria shows that constitutional neutrality on paper is not enough. Without strong bridging institutions, an empowered National Peace Committee, an independent National Peace Council, and enforced rules against religious hate speech, bonding capital will dominate. Nigeria has the capital; it lacks the conversion mechanism.

Second, Ghana: Religious Pluralism as Foundation for Stability. Ghana is the most positive case in this study, and the one most often cited as a model. Ghana is religiously plural - majority Christian (Pentecostal, mainline, Catholic), significant Muslim minority (concentrated in the North and in Zongo communities), and ATR adherents but it has avoided large-scale religious violence. Adasi et al. (2025) argue that this is not accidental. It is the product of a specific governance regime: pluralist partnership. Three features define this regime. First, the state does not adopt a religion, but it actively recognises and partners with all major faiths. The President attends Christian, Muslim, and traditional ceremonies. National prayers include both Christian and Muslim leaders. Second, Ghana has institutionalised interfaith dialogue through the National Peace Council, established by Act 818 of 2011, which brings together Christian, Muslim, and traditional leaders to mediate elections and chieftaincy disputes. The Council played a decisive role in ensuring peaceful transitions in 2012, 2016, 2020, and 2024, by securing public commitments from candidates to accept results. Third, religious institutions are integrated into service delivery through partnerships with the Ghana Education Service and Ghana Health Service. The Christian Council, Catholic Secretariat, and Ahmadiyya Muslim Mission run schools and hospitals that serve the general public, not just their members (Clarke, 2019). This does not mean Ghana is free of

tension. Pentecostal prosperity gospel, debates over LGBTQ+ rights framed in religious terms, and competition between churches for members all exist. But Ghana shows that when the state invests in bridging institutions, bonding capital can be converted into bridging capital. Religious leaders see themselves not as competitors for the nation, but as co-guardians of it. Theesson here is that Ghana proves that pluralism can be an asset, but only when the state creates a neutral but engaged space for interfaith cooperation. Neutrality does not mean ignoring religion; it means partnering with all faiths equally. Third, South Africa: Religion, Youth and Social Capital Post-Apartheid. South Africa offers a different lesson: religion as a resource for post-conflict healing and youth formation, but with limits. Under apartheid, churches were divided some legitimated apartheid, others resisted it. The Dutch Reformed Church provided theological justification for apartheid, while the South African Council of Churches, led by figures like Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Allan Boesak, became a central site of resistance. After 1994, religion was given a prominent role in nation-building through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). Chaired by Tutu, the TRC used Christian language of confession, forgiveness, and Ubuntu to frame national reconciliation. It provided a national ritual through which victims and perpetrators could narrate trauma. Beukes (2024) adds a contemporary dimension. Studying marginalised youth in townships, he finds that religion provides social capital, that is, belonging, mentorship, discipline, and networks that the post-apartheid state has failed to provide. For a young person in Soweto or Khayelitsha, the church is often the only institution that provides consistent adult mentorship, leadership opportunities, and a moral framework beyond gang culture. Yet South Africa also shows the limits of religious nation-building. The TRC has been criticised for prioritising forgiveness over material justice for asking victims to forgive without redistributing land and wealth. Churches remain racially and denominationally divided in many areas. And the prosperity gospel, as in Nigeria, has grown rapidly, with some mega-churches focusing on individual breakthrough rather than structural transformation (Gifford, 2015). The lesson is that South Africa shows that religion can provide the moral grammar for reconciliation, but it cannot substitute for material justice. Moral capital without economic redistribution produces a fragile nation.

Fourth, Zambia: Christian Nation Building.

Zambia is the clearest case of confessional nationalism where one faith is declared the owner of the nation. In 1991, upon winning democratic elections, President Frederick Chiluba declared Zambia a "Christian Nation." Haynes (2021) shows that this was not merely a speech. It was concretised in the constitution's preamble, in school curricula, in public holidays, in the creation of a Ministry of Religious Affairs, and in the public symbols of the state. For many Zambian Christians, who constitute the overwhelming majority, the declaration provided a sense of identity, moral purpose, and national unity after decades of one-party rule under Kenneth Kaunda. But it also produced exclusion. Muslims (about 1-2% of the population), Hindus, and ATR adherents found themselves formally marginalised. They were citizens, but not fully part of the "Christian Nation." The declaration also created a precedent for politicians to use Christian identity to legitimise themselves. Successive presidents have felt compelled to affirm the Christian Nation declaration, even when they had different policy priorities, for fear of being seen as un-Christian. Zambia's experience demonstrates the paradox of bonding capital as nationalism: it unifies the majority by defining the nation in their image, but it does so by excluding minorities. It also makes the nation vulnerable to internal Christian competition which denomination represents "true" Christianity? and to the instrumentalisation of faith by politicians who have no other source of

legitimacy. The lesson is, Zambia shows that confessional nationalism is a short-term asset for cohesion and a long-term liability for pluralism. It builds bonding capital, not bridging capital.

Fifth, Sudan: Islam as Unifier and Divider. Sudan is the most tragic case, and the clearest warning. Maram et al. (2025) argue that Islam in modern Sudan was both a unifier and a divider. Under Jaafar Nimeiri (1969-1985), and especially after 1983 when Sharia was imposed nationally, Islam was used as a tool of national integration. The argument was that a shared Islamic identity would unify a diverse country. Under the National Islamic Front (NIF) regime of Omar al-Bashir (1989-2019), this project intensified: Arabic was privileged, Sharia was enforced, and the South predominantly Christian and ATR was framed as a problem to be Islamised or conquered. The result was the opposite of nation-building. The imposition of Islamisation deepened the North-South divide, fuelled the Second Sudanese Civil War (1983-2005), which killed an estimated 2 million people, and ultimately led to the secession of South Sudan in 2011. Even after secession, Sudan remained divided, with ongoing conflicts in Darfur, South Kordofan, and Blue Nile, and with the 2023-2026 civil war between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces further fragmenting the country along ethnic and regional lines. Islam did not fail in Sudan because Islam is inherently divisive. It failed because it was captured by an exclusionary state project that refused to recognise pluralism and used religion to justify domination. The Sudanese case shows what happens when the state does not practice neutrality, but practices confessional domination. The lesson is, Sudan is the negative proof of this thesis. When the state tries to build a nation by one religion, rather than with all religions, it destroys the nation.

Policy Implications for African Governments: From State Control to State Partnership.

The comparative evidence in previous discussion points to a clear conclusion: the problem is not religion, but the regime through which governments engage religion. Ghana's pluralist partnership produces stability. Sudan's confessional domination produces disintegration. Nigeria's constitutional neutrality without strong bridging institutions produces ambivalence. Zambia's confessional nationalism produces short-term unity and long-term exclusion. African governments therefore face a choice. They can continue the colonial and post-colonial model of state control of suspicion, co-optation, or instrumentalisation of religion. Or they can move to a model of state partnership constitutional neutrality combined with active, inclusive engagement. This study proposes five policy implications, grounded in Social Capital Theory. The goal is not to make the state religious, nor to make religion an arm of the state. It is to create institutions that convert bonding capital (trust within one faith) into bridging capital (trust across faiths), and linking capital (trust between faith communities and the state).

First, Enforce Constitutional Neutrality. That is, Neutrality as Partnership, Not Indifference. The first implication is the most fundamental: enforce constitutional neutrality. Nigeria's 1999 Constitution, Section 10, prohibits the adoption of any religion as state religion. Ghana's 1992 Constitution guarantees freedom of religion and prohibits religious discrimination. South Africa's 1996 Constitution guarantees freedom of religion and creates a Commission for the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Cultural, Religious and Linguistic Communities. Yet in practice, neutrality is often violated. Governments fund pilgrimages for one faith and not another, appoint religious advisers from one faith, or allow one faith's holidays to dominate the public calendar. In Zambia, neutrality was abandoned altogether with the Christian Nation declaration. In Sudan, neutrality was replaced by Islamisation. Neutrality must be redefined. It does not mean the state ignores religion, as in French laïcité. In Africa, where religion is central to public life, ignoring

religion simply leaves it to be captured by politicians. Neutrality must mean *equal partnership*: the state partners with all faiths equally, funds no faith exclusively, and privileges no faith symbolically.

Practically, this means:
- Auditing state funding for pilgrimages, religious schools, and religious events to ensure parity.
- Ensuring public holidays reflect religious pluralism, including ATR festivals where relevant.
- Requiring that presidential inaugurations, state funerals, and national prayers include Christian, Muslim, and ATR leaders, as in Ghana.

Neutrality, understood this way, is not secularism against religion. It is secularism for_pluralism.

Second, Institutionalise Interfaith Infrastructure. That is, National Peace Councils with Real Power. The second implication is to move from ad hoc interfaith dialogue to permanent, empowered institutions. Ghana's National Peace Council, established by Act 818 of 2011, is the model. It is not a talk shop. It has a legal mandate, a budget, regional offices, and the authority to mediate elections, chieftaincy disputes, and interfaith conflicts. Its success in securing peaceful transitions in 2012, 2016, 2020, and 2024 shows what a well-designed institution can do (Adasi et al., 2025). Nigeria has a National Peace Committee, but it is ad hoc, convened only during elections, and lacks legal backing and funding. The Great Lakes Interfaith Platform for Dialogue and Peace (PIDP-GL) documented by Ntakarutimana (2023) shows the power of interfaith mediation, but it remains donor-dependent and outside the state.

Governments should:
- Establish or strengthen National Peace Councils by law in every country, with representation from Christianity, Islam, ATR, and other faiths, as well as women and youth.
- Give these councils early-warning mandates to monitor hate speech, electoral mobilisation along religious lines, and local conflicts before they escalate.
- Fund them from the national budget, not from donor projects, to ensure independence and sustainability. Interfaith infrastructure is the institutional mechanism for converting bonding capital into bridging capital. Without it, interfaith goodwill remains personal and fragile. With it, it becomes structural.

Thirdly, Formalise Faith-Based Service Partnerships. Churches and mosques already run a significant share of schools and clinics in Ghana, Nigeria, Zambia, and South Africa, yet partnerships remain informal, unregulated, and unequal. Governments should formalise them through service contracts with standards for inclusive access, curriculum, and accountability; joint funding for institutions serving the general public, as Ghana does through the Ghana Education and Health Services; and regulation to ensure civic values are taught and schools do not become sites of proselytisation or exclusion. Partnership, not competition, is rational: the state cannot reach everywhere, but faith institutions can. It also builds linking capital when a community sees its mosque school funded by the state, it sees the state as a partner.

Fourthly, Reform Religious Education for Civic Values. Denominational education, Christian Studies for Christians, Islamic Studies for Muslims, with ATR excluded reinforces bonding capital from childhood. Governments should teach shared civic values such as honesty, tolerance, patriotism through Christian, Islamic, and ATR traditions; introduce comparative religious education; and include ATR as moral philosophy, not superstition (Egege, 2021). The goal is citizens deeply rooted in their own faith and deeply respectful of others.

Conclusion

This study reassess a question that has long divided African scholarship and public debate: is religion an asset or a liability for nation-building in Africa? Its answer is deliberately ambivalent. Religion is neither inherently a divider nor inherently a unifier. It is a form of social, moral, and institutional capital, networks, norms, trust, schools, clinics, and moral language that can be invested in nation-building or captured for fragmentation. What determines the difference is not theology, but governance.

Four conclusions follow from the analysis. First, religion remains indispensable to nation-building because the state alone cannot produce what nation-building requires. In Ghana, Nigeria, South Africa, and the Great Lakes, religious institutions provide moral formation, service delivery, peacebuilding, and social cohesion where the state is absent or distrusted. To ignore this capital, as secularisation theory advised, is to ignore the most trusted and far-reaching institutions on the continent. Second, religion becomes a liability when it produces only bonding capital. In Nigeria's 2023 elections, Zambia's Christian Nation declaration, and Sudan's Islamisation project, political elites weaponised religious identity for electoral gain or exclusionary nationalism. The result was not cohesion, but suspicion, violence, and in Sudan's case, the disintegration of the nation itself. Bonding capital without bridging capital fragments.

Third, the comparative evidence shows that institutions matter more than religiosity. Ghana, with its pluralist partnership model and empowered National Peace Council, has converted religious pluralism into stability. Nigeria, with constitutional neutrality on paper but weak bridging institutions in practice, remains ambivalent. Zambia and Sudan, with confessional models, show that declaring one faith as the owner of the nation produces short-term unity and long-term exclusion or war. The regime of state-religion relations, not the level of religiosity, explains the outcome. Fourth, the way forward is partnership, not control. African governments must move from suspicion and instrumentalisation to constitutional neutrality as equal partnership, permanent National Peace Councils, formal faith-based service partnerships, civic religious education, and regulation of religious political mobilisation that protects both democracy and religious freedom. Crucially, this partnership must include African Traditional Religion and women, both of whom have been marginalised in formal state-religion arrangements despite being central to everyday religious life.

The final point is normative. Religion will not disappear from Africa. Secularisation theory was wrong. Pentecostal churches will continue to grow, mosques will continue to fill, and ATR festivals will continue to gather communities. African governments cannot wish this away, nor can they control it by force. They have only two choices: leave religion to be captured by divisive entrepreneurs, or partner with it critically, inclusively, and constitutionally to build nations where difference is not a threat, but a resource. If they choose partnership, religion can become what this article argues it can be: not a problem to be managed, but an asset to be harnessed for a more just, cohesive, and peaceful Africa.

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