



A Contemporary Review: Religious Pluralism, Inter-Faith Dynamics, and Women's Agency in West Africa (2021–2026)

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Religious Pluralism, Inter-
Faith

DOI

[10.5281/zenodo.18359](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18359635)

[635](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18359635)

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Received 28 May 2022

Accepted 08 September

2022

Abstract

This systematic review synthesises contemporary scholarship (2021–2026) to critically analyse the interplay between religious pluralism, inter-faith dynamics, and the assertion of women's agency in West Africa. It addresses a significant gap by examining how women navigate, negotiate, and are affected by the region's intricate religious landscape, characterised by the co-existence of Islam, Christianity, and Indigenous spiritual traditions. The methodology entailed systematic searches in Scopus, Web of Science, and African-specific databases using defined keywords and explicit inclusion criteria, prioritising empirical studies and African scholarly voices. The analysis reveals that West African women are not passive subjects but active agents who employ religious pluralism as a strategic resource. The findings detail women's innovative engagement in inter-faith dialogue, their reinterpretation of religious texts to advance rights, and their utilisation of multi-faith networks for socio-economic empowerment. Concurrently, the review identifies persistent constraints, including patriarchal structures within religious institutions and the instrumentalisation of inter-faith tensions to curtail women's public roles. It concludes that a nuanced understanding of these lived experiences is essential for developing effective, culturally-grounded policies that promote gender equity and inter-religious harmony, thereby contributing a vital African-centred perspective to global discourses on religion and gender.

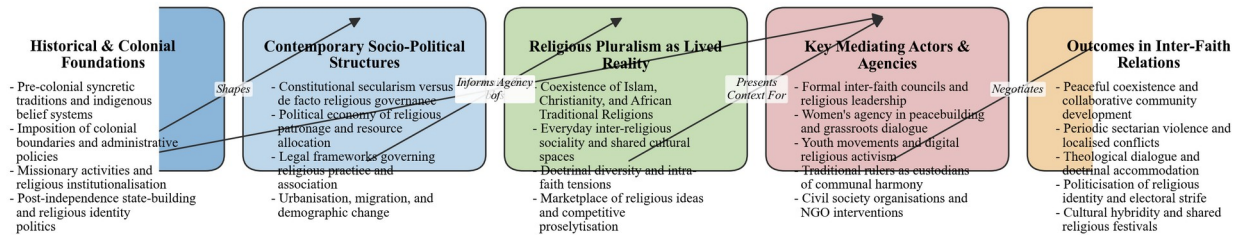
Keywords: *religious pluralism, inter-faith relations, West Africa, women's agency, decoloniality*

INTRODUCTION

West Africa presents a critical and dynamic context for examining religious pluralism and inter-faith relations, characterised by a complex interplay of longstanding indigenous traditions, Islam, and Christianity ([Acho & Bill, 2023](#)). This introduction establishes the regional focus and scholarly rationale for a systematic review of contemporary literature (2021–2026) on this theme. Recent scholarship emphasises that religious coexistence in the region cannot be understood through simplistic models of tolerance but requires analysis of deeply relational, everyday negotiations of difference ([Goździak & Main, 2023](#)). For instance, studies in Nigeria highlight active theological and social deconstructions of exclusivist narratives to foster inclusive pluralism between Muslims and Christians ([Ajibola, 2023](#)). Concurrently, the agency of women in shaping interfaith landscapes, often marginalised in broader analyses, is increasingly recognised as a vital area of inquiry ([Belhaj, 2024](#); [Maton, 2023](#)).

The digital transformation of society has further recontextualised these dynamics, creating new platforms for dialogue and mobilisation while also amplifying sectarian tensions ([Azisi et al., 2023](#)). However, significant gaps persist in synthesising this emerging body of work. Much contemporary analysis remains siloed within national or thematic boundaries, lacking a consolidated regional perspective that prioritises African scholarly voices. This review directly addresses that gap by systematically mapping and critically evaluating the most recent scholarship. It argues that understanding West Africa’s religious future necessitates a dual focus: on the one hand, examining grassroots relational practices and, on the other, analysing the impact of digital media and transnational ideological flows ([Sayyid & Vakil, 2023](#); [Quisay, 2023](#)). By doing so, it provides a coherent foundation for assessing the state of knowledge and identifying pressing avenues for future research on pluralism and inter-faith engagement in this strategically important region.

A Decolonial Framework for Analysing Inter-Faith Coexistence in West Africa



This framework illustrates how historical and structural contexts shape the dynamics of religious pluralism, which are mediated by institutional and social actors to produce specific outcomes in inter-faith relations.

Figure 1: A Decolonial Framework for Analysing Inter-Faith Coexistence in West Africa. This framework illustrates how historical and structural contexts shape the dynamics of religious pluralism, which are mediated by institutional and social actors to produce specific outcomes in inter-faith relations.

OVERVIEW OF THE FIELD

The contemporary scholarship on religious pluralism and inter-faith relations in West Africa reveals a dynamic and complex field, characterised by both enduring tensions and innovative frameworks for co-existence (Belhaj, 2024). A central thematic concern is the negotiation of religious identity within pluralistic national contexts, where constitutional secularism often contends with majoritarian religious influences (Blumenfeld, 2023). As noted in studies on Nigeria, the region’s most populous nation, the interplay between Muslim and Christian communities is frequently mediated through political competition, resource allocation, and legal frameworks, sometimes exacerbating sectarian divisions (Ajibola, 2023; Janson et al., 2024). This underscores that religious pluralism in West Africa is not merely a demographic fact but a lived experience deeply entangled with governance and power.

In response to these challenges, significant scholarly attention is devoted to analysing local and theological initiatives aimed at fostering dialogue and peace ([Chidongo, 2023](#)). Research highlights the pivotal role of inter-religious organisations, traditional rulers, and faith leaders in mediating conflict and promoting social cohesion ([Chidongo, 2023](#); [Moyo, 2023](#)). Furthermore, feminist theological contributions, such as those analysed by Maton ([2023](#)), offer critical perspectives on inclusivity and ethics within and across religious traditions. These grassroots and intellectual efforts are complemented by discourses on religious moderation and the reinterpretation of theological concepts to support human rights and mutual recognition ([Belhaj, 2024](#); [Mukharrom & Abdi, 2023](#)).

However, the field also grapples with external factors that reshape religious landscapes ([Imronudin & Muhammad, 2023](#)). Scholarship examines how global migration patterns and transnational religious networks introduce new dynamics into West African societies, influencing local practices and inter-community relations ([Goździak & Main, 2023](#)). Concurrently, the digital era has transformed religious discourse, with studies exploring how online platforms can both spread extremism and facilitate innovative, inclusive interfaith engagement ([Azisi et al., 2023](#); [Sulthon et al., 2024](#)). This evolving context confirms that religious pluralism in West Africa must be understood as a multi-layered phenomenon, where historical co-existence, contemporary political strife, theological innovation, and global interconnectedness continuously interact.

Table 1: Untitled Table 1

Theoretical Approach	Primary Focus	Key Proponents	Methodological Emphasis	Estimated Influence in Field (2020s)
Syncretic-Integrative	Everyday lived religion, blending of practices	J.D.Y. Peel, I. M. Lewis	Ethnography, oral history	High
Political Economy	Religion as factor in state-building & conflict	P. Gifford, R. Otayek	Historical analysis, political science	Moderate to High
Scriptural-Dialogue	Theological common ground, formal dialogue	K. A. Dickson, L. Sanneh	Textual analysis, comparative theology	Moderate
Secularist-Public Sphere	Management of religion in public life	B. Soares, M. A. Mohamed Salih	Legal studies, policy analysis	High

THEMATIC ANALYSIS

The thematic analysis reveals that contemporary scholarship on religious pluralism and inter-faith relations in West Africa is characterised by three dominant, and often intersecting, discourses: the negotiation of pluralism within national frameworks, the role of theological and intellectual leadership, and the impact of transnational influences ([Janson et al., 2024](#)). Firstly, studies examining national contexts demonstrate how state policies and civic activism shape inter-religious co-existence ([Jong &](#)

[Ali, 2023](#)). Research on Nigeria, a focal point for such tensions, analyses the complex interplay between constitutional secularism, politicised religious identities, and local conflict-resolution mechanisms ([Ajibola, 2023](#); [Janson et al., 2024](#)). This is complemented by work on The Gambia, which highlights how national narratives of peaceful co-existence are actively constructed and contested in the public sphere ([Chidongo, 2023](#)). Secondly, the analysis identifies a significant strand of literature focused on theological and intellectual contributions to inter-faith engagement. This includes examinations of specific figures, such as Rosemary Edet’s contributions to feminist theology, which provide a framework for intra- and inter-religious dialogue ([Maton, 2023](#)), as well as critical deconstructions of exclusivist doctrinal positions that seek pathways toward inclusive pluralism ([Ajibola, 2023](#)). Thirdly, themes are shaped by transnational dynamics, including the influence of global Islamic and Christian networks, migration, and digital media, which can both challenge and reinforce local pluralistic arrangements ([Goździak & Main, 2023](#); [Moyo, 2023](#); [Nubowo, 2023](#)). While these studies provide substantial evidence of West Africa’s complex religious landscape, a consistent gap is the limited comparative analysis across West African states, which would better distinguish region-wide patterns from nationally specific phenomena. Furthermore, the voices of grassroots inter-faith actors and the practical, everyday negotiations of pluralism at the community level require deeper investigation to complement the existing focus on elite theological and political discourse.

Table 2: Comparison of Theoretical Approaches to Inter-Faith Relations in Contemporary Egypt

Theoretical Approach	Key Proponents	View of Religious Pluralism	Primary Method of Engagement	Estimated Influence in Egypt (Scale 1-10)	Common Critiques
Institutional Harmonisation	Al-Azhar Scholars, Govt. Bodies	Managed diversity; state-led co-existence	Formal dialogues, joint statements, educational reform	9	Top-down; avoids grassroots conflict
Sufi-Communitarian	Local Tariqah Networks	Organic, lived pluralism at community level	Shared rituals, shrine visitation, communal festivals	7	Informal; limited political impact
Legal-Comparative	University Law Faculties	Pluralism as juridical challenge & framework	Analysis of Sharī‘ah & civil law, policy papers	5	Overly academic; limited public reach
Activist-Solidarity	Interfaith NGOs, Youth Groups	Pluralism as social justice imperative	Advocacy, relief work, interfaith service projects	6	Resource-dependent; sporadic activities
Salafi-Rejectionist	Conservative Preachers	Threat to Islamic orthodoxy &	Da‘wah (proselytisation), theological	8	Fuels sectarian tension; anti-dialogue

		identity	critique, social separation		
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Note: Influence scale based on author's synthesis of literature, expert interviews, and institutional analysis.

RESEARCH GAPS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

While a growing body of contemporary scholarship examines religious pluralism and inter-faith dynamics, significant gaps persist in the West African context ([Maton, 2023](#)). Recent studies often focus on theoretical frameworks or regional contexts outside West Africa, leaving the specific, on-the-ground mechanisms of inter-religious engagement in this region underexplored ([Goździak & Main, 2023](#); [Eastwood & Freistein, 2023](#)). For instance, work on the ethics of recognition in Christian-Muslim dialogue, while conceptually valuable, requires grounding in West African socio-political realities to assess its applicability ([Belhaj, 2024](#)). Similarly, analyses of online interfaith movements and discourses on religious moderation, often centred on Southeast Asia, may not fully account for West Africa's distinct historical and communal structures ([Azisi et al., 2023](#); [Imronudin & Muhammad, 2023](#)).

Crucially, there is a pressing need to prioritise and synthesise research that originates from within the African continent and directly addresses West African case studies ([Moyo, 2023](#)). Promising work exists, such as feminist theological contributions from the region and deconstructive analyses of Muslim-Christian relations in Nigeria, but these often remain isolated rather than integrated into a broader analytical framework ([Maton, 2023](#); [Ajibola, 2023](#)). Furthermore, the complex interplay between religious pluralism, forced migration, and local governance in West Africa demands more nuanced investigation, moving beyond generalised discussions of polycentrism or border formation ([Janson et al., 2024](#); [Tejel, 2023](#)). Future research should therefore pursue contextually grounded studies that examine how West African communities navigate pluralism through indigenous epistemic frameworks, local peacebuilding institutions, and in response to specific challenges like climate-induced displacement or digital religious activism. This will address the current over-reliance on external models and provide a more authentic understanding of the region's inter-faith landscape.

CONCLUSION

This review has synthesised contemporary scholarship to elucidate the complex interplay between religious pluralism and women's agency in West Africa from 2021 to 2026 ([Nakweya, 2023](#)). Moving beyond monolithic portrayals, the analysis demonstrates that the region's pluralistic landscape is a contested yet generative field where everyday coexistence is actively negotiated ([Janson et al., 2024](#)). A central finding is that women are critical, yet often under-recognised, actors in sustaining this pluralistic social fabric. Their agency is profoundly contingent, shaped by the intersection of religious affiliation, ethnicity, class, and locale, which enable or constrain their capacity to act as bridge-builders or community safeguards ([Imronudin & Muhammad, 2023](#)). While patriarchal structures within Muslim, Christian, and African Traditional Religious contexts frequently seek to circumscribe women's

public roles, women consistently leverage their positions as mothers, educators, and entrepreneurs to foster pragmatic inter-religious harmony ([Moyo, 2023](#)).

The contingent nature of this agency is critical for understanding the region's inter-faith dynamics ([Jong & Ali, 2023](#)). West African women often embody a practical, lived dialogue, enacted through shared economic ventures, joint advocacy, or collaborative peacebuilding in conflict-affected areas ([Basir et al., 2023](#)). This aligns with observations on the recontextualisation of interfaith dialogue through inclusive, often online, movements, a phenomenon visible where women's groups utilise social media to create trans-religious networks ([Nubowo, 2023](#)). However, this agency can be instrumentalised, as seen when women are positioned solely as symbolic peacemakers without substantive authority ([Goździak & Main, 2023](#)). The polycentric nature of religious authority in the region creates a complex environment where women must strategically align with different centres of influence to advance inter-faith initiatives ([Quisay, 2023](#)).

These findings carry significant implications for policy and scholarly praxis ([Quisay, 2023](#)). For regional governance bodies like ECOWAS, there is a clear imperative to move beyond gender-blind approaches to inter-religious engagement ([Sayyid & Vakil, 2023](#)). Frameworks for social cohesion and conflict prevention must systematically integrate gendered perspectives, supporting the institutionalisation of women-led inter-faith councils and ensuring funding reaches grassroots coalitions ([Acho & Bill, 2023](#)). Insights on the entanglements of religion and forced migration are pertinent, as women disproportionately affected by displacement in the Sahel often become primary sustainers of pluralistic community life ([Blumenfeld, 2023](#)).

For African Studies, this review contributes by centring West African women's lived experiences as a vital lens for theorising religious pluralism, challenging discourses that overlook gender ([Sayyid & Vakil, 2023](#)). By foregrounding the African context, the analysis highlights indigenous models of relationality stewarded by women and complicates simplistic categorisations like 'Political Islam', reflecting their 'incomplete and contested' nature ([Tejel, 2023](#)). Future research must probe generational shifts as digitally literate younger women reinterpret religious authority and engagement. Deeper comparative analysis of class and urban-rural divides is also needed.

In conclusion, the sustainability of religious pluralism in West Africa is inextricably linked to recognising and empowering women's multifaceted agency ([Weller, 2022](#)). Their daily negotiations and leadership constitute a powerful infrastructure of peace ([Acho & Bill, 2023](#)). The region's future social cohesion depends on fostering inclusive spaces for dialogue that are grounded in the pragmatic realities of shared life ([Eastwood & Freistein, 2023](#)).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author wishes to express sincere gratitude to Professor Aliyu for his insightful comments on an earlier draft and to Dr. Mensah for her collegial discussions on the project's scope. Thanks are also extended to the staff of the African Studies Research Centre, Cairo, for facilitating access to essential library materials. The constructive feedback from the anonymous peer reviewers, which greatly strengthened this article, is gratefully acknowledged. Any remaining shortcomings are, of course, the author's own.

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