ISSN 2348-3156 (Print)
International Journal of Social Science and Humanities Research ISSN 2348-3164 (online)
Vol. 14, Issue 4, pp: (188-195), Month: October - December 2026, Available at: www.researchpublish.com

EXPLORING THE CONTRIBUTION OF RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS TO PEACEBUILDING IN TANZANIA: A CASE STUDY OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AT KIHESA PARISH, IRINGA MUNICIPALITY

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23527162

Published Date: 21-October-2026

Abstract: **This study critically assessed the role of religious institutions in enhancing peace in Tanzania, focusing on the Catholic Church at Kihesa Parish in Iringa Municipality. The study proceeds from the argument that sustainable peace cannot be reduced to the absence of physical violence but encompasses the quality of relationships, social cohesion, reconciliation, dialogue, tolerance, justice and the capacity of communities to manage differences constructively. Although religious institutions are frequently regarded as natural agents of peace, this assumption requires critical examination because religious institutions may simultaneously promote reconciliation and reproduce exclusion, hierarchy or social divisions. Recent African scholarship similarly cautions against treating religion as either inherently peaceful or inherently conflictual, emphasising instead its contextual and institutional character (Chigudu, 2024). The study examined peacebuilding initiatives undertaken by the Catholic Church at Kihesa Parish, community perceptions of its contribution, challenges affecting religious peacebuilding and strategies for strengthening its contribution to sustainable peace. The study was guided by Religious Peacebuilding Theory and Conflict Transformation Theory and employed a pragmatic philosophy, exploratory approach and case study design within a mixed-methods approach with qualitative dominance. Data were collected through interviews, questionnaires, focus group discussions and documentary review and analysed thematically and descriptively. Findings indicate that the Church contributes to peace through moral and religious education, pastoral counselling, family reconciliation, mediation, youth empowerment, community dialogue, charitable activities and promotion of tolerance and cooperation. However, these contributions are constrained by limited resources, inadequate specialised training, youth-related challenges, social differences, political sensitivities and wider socio-economic pressures. The study argues that religious institutions are better understood as potential and conditional peacebuilding actors, rather than inherently peaceful institutions. Their effectiveness depends on institutional credibility, inclusiveness, competence, community participation and their ability to address both interpersonal relationships and wider structural conditions. The study recommends strengthening professional peacebuilding capacity, youth and women's participation, interfaith dialogue, community-based conflict prevention, referral systems and collaboration with state and non-state actors without compromising religious independence.**

Keywords: **Religious Institutions, Religious Peacebuilding, Conflict Transformation, Peacebuilding, Catholic Church, Kihesa Parish, Tanzania.**

1. INTRODUCTION

Peace is commonly understood as the absence of violence, but such a definition provides only a partial account of what it means for people to live peacefully. A community may experience no open fighting while remaining deeply divided by mistrust, exclusion, unresolved grievances, inequality or damaged relationships. Lederach (2003) therefore conceptualises conflict transformation as a process concerned not simply with ending a particular dispute but with transforming

relationships and structures that allow destructive patterns of conflict to persist. This understanding is important for religious peacebuilding because religious institutions often work at the level of relationships, values and everyday social interaction rather than through formal state authority. Religious institutions occupy a particularly complex position within peacebuilding. Their moral authority, community networks and regular contact with families can provide opportunities for dialogue, reconciliation, counselling and social mobilisation. Yet the existence of these resources does not automatically make religious institutions peaceful actors. Religion can provide moral arguments for reconciliation, but religious identity can also become a source of exclusion or division. Appleby's (2000) concept of the *ambivalence of the sacred* remains useful because it challenges the assumption that religious commitment has a predetermined social effect. More recent African scholarship similarly argues that religion should not be treated as a static or isolated factor because its relationship with conflict and peace is shaped by historical, institutional and contextual conditions (Chigudu, 2024).

This ambiguity is particularly important in Africa, where religious institutions frequently operate within communities where the boundaries between spiritual, social and public life are closely connected. Religious organisations have contributed to education, health, humanitarian assistance, civic engagement, mediation and conflict prevention, but their contribution varies considerably across contexts. Research on religious peacebuilding in Sub-Saharan Africa demonstrates that religious organisations have participated in preventing violence, managing disputes and transforming conflicts, while also showing that their effectiveness depends heavily on context and institutional relationships (Kilonzo et al., 2024). The Tanzanian context provides an important setting for examining this issue. Tanzania has a long history of religious coexistence and interfaith engagement. Makulilo and Henry (2023) demonstrate that the Interfaith Peace Committee has emerged as an important mechanism for conflict management and peacebuilding, particularly through cooperation between religious leaders. However, their analysis also identifies weaknesses in the institutionalisation of the Committee, including limitations in structures, staffing and organisational arrangements. This is analytically important because it demonstrates that good intentions and moral authority are not sufficient substitutes for institutional capacity.

Recent research on churches in southern and southwestern Tanzania reaches a related conclusion. Mshani and Ndaluka (2024) identify early conflict detection, dialogue, counselling, repentance, compromise and agreement among mechanisms used in church conflict management. At the same time, their study identifies avoidance and competing approaches, demonstrating that religious institutions themselves are not free from problematic conflict-management practices. The implication is significant: the question should not simply be whether religious institutions participate in peacebuilding, but how they exercise their authority, whose interests are represented, what mechanisms they use, and whether those mechanisms transform or merely suppress conflict. It is within this broader debate that the present study examines the Catholic Church at Kihesa Parish in Iringa Municipality. The parish provides a useful local case because religious peacebuilding is often experienced most directly at the community level. People encounter religious institutions not only during worship but also during family crises, counselling, youth activities, community programmes, charitable activities and interpersonal disputes. Such everyday interactions can influence how people understand difference, disagreement and reconciliation.

The study does not assume that Kihesa Parish represents all Catholic parishes or all religious institutions in Tanzania. Rather, it uses the parish as a contextual case through which the possibilities, limitations and institutional conditions of religious peacebuilding can be examined. The central argument is that the contribution of religious institutions should be evaluated not merely by the number of peace-related activities they undertake but by the extent to which those activities contribute to healthier relationships, inclusive participation, constructive conflict management and conditions for sustainable peace.

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT AND RESEARCH GAP

Religious institutions are frequently described as important actors in peacebuilding because they possess moral legitimacy, community trust and extensive grassroots networks. However, describing religious institutions as peace actors does not adequately explain whether or why their interventions produce sustainable peace. The danger of an overly positive interpretation is that religious authority can become confused with peacebuilding effectiveness. A respected religious institution may have substantial influence while still lacking professional mediation skills, adequate resources or mechanisms for dealing with complex forms of violence. The literature demonstrates that religious institutions can contribute to peace through dialogue, mediation, reconciliation and social mobilisation. However, the same literature also demonstrates that religion is ambivalent. Chigudu (2024), for example, argues that the relationship between religion,

conflict and peacebuilding in Africa is more complex than the conventional binary that portrays religion as either a source of conflict or an instrument of peace. This provides an important conceptual foundation for the present study because it shifts attention from the mere presence of religion to the conditions under which religious institutions exercise influence.

Within Tanzania, Makulilo and Henry (2023) provide important evidence concerning institutionalised interfaith peacebuilding, particularly through the Interfaith Peace Committee. Nevertheless, their study operates primarily at the interfaith and institutional level. It does not provide sufficient insight into how peacebuilding is experienced through the everyday activities of a particular parish and how community members perceive those activities. Mshani and Ndaluka (2024) provide more localised evidence by examining mechanisms for resolving conflicts within the Moravian Church in southern and southwestern Tanzania. Their findings concerning dialogue, counselling and early conflict detection are highly relevant. However, their emphasis is on conflict resolution within the church rather than on the wider contribution of a Catholic parish to peace in its surrounding community. This distinction is important because internal church conflict management and community peacebuilding are related but not identical processes.

A further gap concerns the tendency to measure religious peacebuilding through activities rather than transformation. It is relatively easy to document sermons, counselling sessions, youth programmes, charitable activities or dialogue meetings. It is considerably more difficult to establish whether these activities change relationships, reduce mistrust, increase inclusion or address underlying causes of conflict. Conflict Transformation Theory provides a way of addressing this gap by shifting analysis from the existence of interventions towards their relational and structural significance (Lederach, 2003). The present study therefore addresses a **contextual, empirical and analytical gap**. Contextually, it focuses on Kihesa Parish, an underexplored local setting in Tanzania. Empirically, it examines community-level experiences and perceptions of religious peacebuilding. Analytically, it moves beyond the assumption that religious institutions are automatically peaceful and instead examines the conditions, capacities and limitations that shape their contribution.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Religious Peacebuilding Theory

Religious Peacebuilding Theory provides the first lens for understanding how religious beliefs, institutions and actors may contribute to the prevention and transformation of conflict. Religious actors can use moral authority, theological teachings, social networks, rituals, dialogue and mediation to encourage reconciliation and peaceful coexistence. In communities where religious leaders are trusted, they may reach people who have limited contact with formal conflict-resolution institutions. However, religious peacebuilding theory becomes analytically weak if it assumes that religion necessarily produces peace. Appleby (2000) demonstrates that religious traditions contain resources that can be directed toward either violence or reconciliation. The relevant question is therefore not whether religion is peaceful but how religious resources are interpreted and institutionalised in particular circumstances.

This perspective is supported by recent research on religious institutions in Africa. Buchanan-Clarke (2025), examining Tanzania and Mozambique, emphasises the importance of formal and informal religious institutions in conflict prevention and highlights the different ways religious structures can shape conflict trajectories. The implication for Kihesa is that the Church's peacebuilding contribution should be assessed through its institutional practices, relationships and community legitimacy rather than assumed from its religious identity alone.

3.2 Conflict Transformation Theory

Conflict Transformation Theory, particularly Lederach's (2003) formulation, complements Religious Peacebuilding Theory by directing attention towards the relationships and structures underlying conflict. Conflict is not simply an event requiring settlement; it can reveal deeper problems in relationships, institutions, social expectations and patterns of exclusion. This theory is appropriate to Kihesa because family conflict, youth challenges, social differences and community disputes cannot always be reduced to isolated disagreements. Economic pressure, communication failures, social expectations and unequal power may contribute to the continuation of conflict. A religious institution that merely persuades people to stop arguing may achieve temporary calm without transforming the conditions that produced the dispute.

The theoretical implication is therefore important: peacebuilding should be assessed by what happens to relationships after intervention, not simply by whether a dispute appears to have ended.

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4. METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a pragmatic philosophical orientation because the research problem required attention to both community perceptions and lived experiences of peacebuilding. Pragmatism allowed the study to combine qualitative and quantitative evidence according to their usefulness in addressing the research questions rather than treating either form of evidence as sufficient on its own. An exploratory approach and case study design were employed, focusing on the Catholic Church at Kihesa Parish in Iringa Municipality. A mixed-methods approach with qualitative dominance was adopted. Interviews and focus group discussions were particularly important because peacebuilding involves experiences, relationships, meanings and perceptions that cannot be fully captured through numerical measures. Questionnaires provided complementary descriptive evidence, while documentary review assisted in understanding the institutional context.

The data were analysed thematically and descriptively. Thematic analysis focused on recurring issues concerning religious education, counselling, reconciliation, mediation, youth participation, community dialogue, charitable activities and institutional challenges. Descriptive analysis was used to complement qualitative findings rather than to replace them. Ethical considerations were treated as an integral part of the research process. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, participation was voluntary and confidentiality was maintained. This was particularly important because discussions concerning family disputes, social tensions and interpersonal conflict can involve sensitive experiences. The study therefore recognised participants not merely as sources of information but as individuals whose dignity and privacy required protection.

5. FINDINGS AND CRITICAL DISCUSSION

5.1 Religious and Moral Education: Prevention or Moral Instruction?

The findings indicate that religious and moral education is one of the principal ways through which the Catholic Church at Kihesa contributes to peace. Through sermons, religious teaching and pastoral programmes, the Church promotes forgiveness, tolerance, respect, responsibility and peaceful coexistence. This contribution is important because peacebuilding begins before conflict becomes visible. Attitudes towards difference and disagreement are formed through repeated social experiences. Religious education can consequently provide a moral vocabulary through which individuals understand responsibility, forgiveness and coexistence.

Nevertheless, the finding should not be interpreted as evidence that religious education automatically produces peaceful behaviour. A sermon about forgiveness does not remove poverty, unemployment, family inequality or social exclusion. Religious teaching can influence how people respond to social problems, but it cannot by itself eliminate those problems. The critical contribution of the Church therefore lies not simply in teaching peace but in connecting moral teaching with practical opportunities for dialogue, participation and social responsibility. This argument corresponds with the broader literature, which stresses that religion's contribution to peace depends on how religious resources are interpreted and institutionalised (Appleby, 2000; Chigudu, 2024).

5.2 Pastoral Counselling and Family Reconciliation

The findings further demonstrate the importance of pastoral counselling in dealing with interpersonal and family conflicts. The Church's proximity to families gives pastoral leaders an opportunity to intervene before some disagreements become more destructive. Counselling can provide a safe space for individuals to speak, listen and reconsider their positions. This is consistent with Mshani and Ndaluka's (2024) findings that counselling and dialogue are among the mechanisms used by churches to address conflict in Tanzania.

However, counselling must be treated critically. A pastoral leader may be trusted without necessarily possessing professional competence in trauma, domestic violence, child protection or serious psychological problems. The assumption that every problem can be solved through prayer or pastoral conversation may unintentionally expose vulnerable people to further harm. The implication is that pastoral counselling should be connected to professional referral systems. Religious leaders can provide spiritual and relational support while recognising when specialised legal, psychological, medical or social services are required. Such collaboration would strengthen rather than weaken the pastoral role. Moreover, reconciliation should not be reduced to encouraging victims to forgive. Forgiveness without truth, accountability and protection can reproduce injustice. Genuine reconciliation requires attention to the causes and consequences of harm.

5.3 Mediation and Dialogue: Strength and Limitation

The study indicates that the Church contributes to conflict management through dialogue and mediation. Religious leaders may possess legitimacy that enables conflicting parties to approach them voluntarily. Such legitimacy can be valuable where formal mechanisms are perceived as expensive, distant or adversarial. Recent Tanzanian evidence supports the importance of dialogue and early identification of conflict within church settings (Mshani & Ndaluka, 2024). However, the same research demonstrates that church conflict management may also involve avoidance and competing approaches. This is important because it challenges the assumption that religious mediation is automatically conciliatory. Religious mediation may fail when a mediator lacks neutrality, when power differences between parties are ignored or when institutional interests become more important than justice. A settlement may end open disagreement while leaving resentment unresolved. Conflict transformation therefore requires more than agreement; it requires attention to the quality of the relationship created after the agreement. Kihesa's mediation role should be understood as a valuable resource whose effectiveness depends on competence, impartiality, confidentiality and the willingness to address underlying causes.

5.4 Youth Empowerment: From Beneficiaries to Peace Actors

The findings indicate that youth empowerment is another important dimension of the Church's contribution. Youth programmes can create spaces for leadership, moral development, social interaction and constructive participation. However, peacebuilding involving young people should move beyond treating youth as passive recipients of religious instruction. Young people possess their own experiences, aspirations and interpretations of social problems. Treating them merely as a group requiring correction can undermine the very participation that sustainable peace requires. The wider literature on religious peacebuilding increasingly recognises community-level participation as important because peace is more sustainable when affected communities have ownership of the process (Kwuelum, 2024). For Kihesa, the critical issue is consequently not merely whether the Church has youth programmes but whether young people have genuine opportunities to identify problems, propose solutions and participate in decision-making.

5.5 Women and Inclusive Peacebuilding

Women and families constitute another important dimension of religious peacebuilding. Because churches are deeply embedded in family and community life, they have an opportunity to involve women in mediation, counselling, education and community decision-making. Yet participation should not be measured simply by attendance. Women may be present in large numbers in religious programmes while remaining underrepresented in decision-making positions. Such participation can create the appearance of inclusion without necessarily redistributing influence. A genuinely transformative approach requires women to participate as peacebuilders, mediators, leaders and decision-makers. Peacebuilding becomes weaker when the experiences of those most affected by family and community conflict are excluded from designing the solutions.

5.6 Charity and Social Support: Relief without Transformation?

The Church's charitable activities were also identified as contributing to peace by assisting vulnerable people and strengthening community relationships. Social assistance can reduce immediate suffering and demonstrate solidarity. Nevertheless, charity has an important limitation. It can relieve the consequences of poverty without transforming the structures that reproduce poverty. A family may receive assistance today and remain economically vulnerable tomorrow. This distinction is crucial for a critical understanding of peacebuilding. Social support becomes more transformative when it is combined with empowerment, education, livelihood opportunities and participation. Religious institutions should therefore avoid measuring their social contribution solely by the volume of assistance provided. The more significant question is whether assistance contributes to people's long-term dignity and capacity to participate in society.

5.7 Tolerance and Interfaith Cooperation

The study further identifies tolerance and cooperation as important contributions of the Church. Tanzania's experience with the Interfaith Peace Committee provides evidence that organised religious cooperation can contribute to conflict management and peacebuilding (Makulilo & Henry, 2023). However, Makulilo and Henry also identify weaknesses in the Committee's institutionalisation, demonstrating that cooperation requires organisational structures rather than goodwill alone. This lesson is important for Kihesa. Interfaith dialogue should not be reduced to ceremonial meetings where religious leaders publicly exchange messages of peace. Meaningful dialogue requires sustained relationships, listening,

willingness to address difficult issues and mechanisms for responding to emerging tensions. Recent African scholarship similarly argues for community-level and context-sensitive approaches to interreligious peacebuilding rather than relying exclusively on elite dialogue (Kwuelum, 2024).

6. CHALLENGES LIMITING RELIGIOUS PEACEBUILDING

The study identifies limited resources as one of the important constraints on religious peacebuilding. Peacebuilding requires trained personnel, time, transportation, communication facilities and sustained engagement. Moral commitment cannot compensate indefinitely for inadequate institutional capacity. A second challenge is inadequate specialised training. Religious leaders may possess theological knowledge and pastoral experience without having sufficient preparation in professional mediation, trauma-informed counselling, gender-based violence, child protection or conflict analysis. Mshani and Ndaluka (2024) similarly recommend stronger preparation of clergy and future church leaders in leadership and conflict-management skills. A third challenge involves the socio-economic environment. Religious institutions operate within communities affected by unemployment, poverty, family pressures and changing social expectations. These conditions can intensify conflict in ways that cannot be addressed through religious intervention alone.

The study also identifies social differences and political sensitivities. Religious institutions must navigate public concerns without becoming perceived as instruments of political interests. Their peacebuilding legitimacy depends partly on maintaining credibility across different social groups. The implication is that religious institutions should neither withdraw from social problems nor claim the capacity to solve them independently. Sustainable peace requires cooperation between religious institutions, communities, government, professional services and civil society.

7. THE CENTRAL CRITICAL ARGUMENT: RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS AS CONDITIONAL PEACE ACTORS

The central finding of this study is that religious institutions should be understood as **conditional peacebuilding actors**. Their potential derives from their proximity to communities, moral authority, organisational networks and capacity to create spaces for dialogue. Their limitations arise from resource constraints, professional capacity, internal power relations and the possibility that religious authority can itself become exclusionary. This position is consistent with the wider African literature. Chigudu (2024) rejects a simplistic binary in which religion is either a source of conflict or a source of peace. Instead, religious influence must be understood within its historical and social context. Similarly, research on religious institutions in Tanzania demonstrates that institutional structures and credibility influence their peacebuilding contribution (Buchanan-Clarke, 2025; Makulilo & Henry, 2023).

The significance of this argument is that it places responsibility on religious institutions themselves. It is insufficient for a church to proclaim peace. It must examine whether its own practices are inclusive, whether its mediation processes are fair, whether vulnerable people are protected and whether its programmes genuinely allow community participation. Peacebuilding is ultimately relational. Behind a community disagreement are people who may have experienced fear, humiliation, exclusion, loss or mistrust. Behind a family dispute are relationships that may have been damaged over time. A religious institution contributes to peace when it helps people deal with these realities constructively. But it must also recognise the limits of its authority and refer problems to appropriate professional or legal institutions when necessary.

8. IMPLICATIONS FOR RELIGIOUS PEACEBUILDING IN TANZANIA

The findings suggest that religious peacebuilding in Tanzania should move from an activity-centred model towards a **capacity-and-transformation model**. Counting seminars, counselling sessions or charitable programmes provides useful information but does not establish whether peace has become more sustainable. Religious institutions should consequently develop mechanisms for assessing the outcomes of peacebuilding interventions. Such assessment could examine whether relationships have improved, whether excluded groups have gained meaningful participation, whether recurring disputes have decreased and whether communities have developed greater capacity to manage future disagreements. The Tanzanian experience also demonstrates the importance of institutionalisation. Makulilo and Henry (2023) show that the Interfaith Peace Committee has contributed significantly to peacebuilding while still facing structural weaknesses. This suggests that religious peacebuilding requires not only committed individuals but also institutional systems capable of surviving changes in leadership and circumstances.

9. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the Catholic Church at Kihesa Parish contributes to peacebuilding through religious and moral education, pastoral counselling, family reconciliation, mediation, youth engagement, community dialogue, charitable activities and promotion of tolerance and cooperation. These activities provide important relational and social resources for peaceful coexistence. However, the findings also demonstrate that religious peacebuilding has boundaries. Religious teaching cannot eliminate structural poverty. Counselling cannot replace professional psychological or legal intervention where specialised services are required. Mediation does not automatically produce justice. Charity does not necessarily transform structural vulnerability. Youth programmes do not necessarily create meaningful participation. Interfaith meetings do not automatically produce trust.

The contribution of religious institutions is therefore best understood as **important but conditional**. Their effectiveness depends on institutional credibility, professional capacity, inclusiveness, community ownership and the ability to combine reconciliation with justice. This conclusion is consistent with contemporary scholarship showing that religious institutions can make substantial contributions to peace while remaining embedded in complex institutional and social environments (Chigudu, 2024; Buchanan-Clarke, 2025). The Kihesa experience consequently demonstrates that religious peacebuilding is most valuable when religious commitment is translated into practical institutional behaviour: listening rather than merely preaching, mediating rather than merely advising, empowering rather than merely assisting, and confronting injustice rather than concealing it under the language of forgiveness.

10. RECOMMENDATIONS

Religious institutions should establish systematic peacebuilding and conflict-management training for clergy, catechists, lay leaders and other pastoral workers. Training should cover mediation, negotiation, conflict analysis, trauma-sensitive counselling, gender-based violence, child protection and referral mechanisms. The Catholic Church should strengthen youth participation by involving young people in identifying community problems, designing peacebuilding initiatives and evaluating their outcomes. Youth should be treated as active peacebuilders rather than merely as recipients of moral instruction.

Women should receive meaningful opportunities to participate in leadership, mediation and peacebuilding decision-making. Participation should be assessed by influence and responsibility rather than numerical presence alone. Religious institutions should strengthen structured interfaith dialogue at community level. Such dialogue should move beyond ceremonial meetings towards sustained mechanisms for early identification of tensions, relationship-building and cooperative problem-solving.

Churches should also strengthen referral relationships with professional counsellors, social workers, legal practitioners, health professionals and relevant government institutions. Such collaboration would recognise the limits of pastoral intervention without diminishing its importance. Finally, religious institutions, government, civil society and communities should develop complementary peacebuilding partnerships. These partnerships should respect the independence and neutrality of religious institutions and should not turn religious organisations into substitutes for government institutions.

11. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The study is based on a single parish and therefore does not claim statistical representativeness of all Catholic parishes or religious institutions in Tanzania. Its significance lies in providing a contextual understanding of how religious peacebuilding is experienced at the community level. Future research should compare Catholic parishes across different regions and examine whether similar peacebuilding mechanisms produce different outcomes in different socio-economic and cultural contexts. Comparative research involving Catholic, Protestant and Muslim institutions could further illuminate the relationship between religious identity, institutional structure and peacebuilding effectiveness. Longitudinal research would also be valuable. Future studies could examine whether disputes resolved through religious mediation remain resolved over time. Such research would help shift scholarship from asking whether religious institutions conduct peacebuilding activities to asking whether those interventions produce durable changes in relationships and community capacity.

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