Tensions Between Truth, Justice, Peace, and Reconciliation in Post-Conflict Societies: The Mediating Role of Religious Actors

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the tangled interaction between truth, justice, peace, and reconciliation in post-conflict societies, highlighting the often delicate and contested processes through which communities attempt to heal and rebuild after episodes of mass violence and systemic injustice. Central to this investigation is the role played by religious leaders, faith-based organizations, and religiously rooted communities in navigating and mediating these tensions. Drawing on comparative case studies from South Africa's post-apartheid Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and the post-war reconciliation efforts in the former Yugoslavia, the paper analyzes how religious actors have contributed to transitional justice mechanisms, often operating within and alongside state-led initiatives. The study demonstrates that religious institutions, with their deep moral authority and grassroots presence, are uniquely positioned to bridge the gap between retributive justice, which focuses on accountability and punishment, and restorative justice, which emphasizes healing, forgiveness, and the restoration of broken relationships. Through rituals of truth-telling, communal acts of confession, symbolic reparations, and liturgies of forgiveness, religious actors offer alternative avenues for addressing historical injustices that legal and political institutions alone may be ill-equipped to resolve. Furthermore, the use of interreligious dialogue and theological frameworks rooted in concepts such as mercy, repentance, and human dignity enables faith-based actors to transcend ethnic and ideological divisions, fostering inclusive narratives of national healing and moral renewal. Key findings reveal that when religious institutions align their spiritual resources with structured transitional justice processes, they can play a transformative role in promoting moral accountability, community resilience, and sustainable peace. However, the study also acknowledges the limitations and potential biases of religious actors, particularly when their involvement is shaped by political allegiances or exclusionary theologies. The paper concludes by advocating for a sequenced and context-sensitive approach to post-conflict recovery, where religious actors are intentionally integrated into reconciliation frameworks. It emphasizes that such an approach must balance the imperatives of justice and forgiveness, and calls for a collaborative model in which religious, civil, and political institutions work together to institutionalize peace, rebuild trust, and foster long-term social cohesion in divided societies.

Key words: *Transitional Justice, Religious Actors, Restorative Reconciliation, Truth-Telling Rituals*

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

In the aftermath of armed conflict, societies are often confronted with the monumental task of navigating the complex relationship between truth, justice, peace, and reconciliation. This delicate process presents what scholars and practitioners have termed a **post-conflict trilemma**: pursuing **criminal accountability** for perpetrators may risk **reigniting cycles of violence**, prioritizing **peace agreements** often demands **amnesties or compromises**

, and emphasizing **public truth-telling**—while essential for healing—can **destabilize fragile political arrangements** and reopen old wounds. The difficulty of balancing these imperatives is a central concern in transitional justice and peacebuilding studies.

At the **global level**, the post-Cold War period, especially the 1990s, witnessed an upsurge in civil wars and internal conflicts, particularly in regions like Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa, Eastern Europe, and Southeast Asia. According to the **United Nations Peacemaking Data (2023)**, approximately **73% of civil wars during that decade concluded through negotiated settlements**, rather than outright military victory. These negotiated peace processes often necessitated **difficult trade-offs**, as stakeholders sought to maintain fragile ceasefires while addressing victims' demands for justice and historical truth. In these complex dynamics, the limitations of purely legalistic or state-centric approaches to reconciliation became apparent. Consequently, there has been a growing recognition of the need to incorporate **multi-dimensional frameworks** that blend legal, psychological, spiritual, and socio-political mechanisms in post-conflict recovery.

Amid these challenges, **religious institutions and leaders have emerged as influential actors** in global peace and reconciliation efforts. From the peace accords in El Salvador and Guatemala, to the interreligious reconciliation processes in Bosnia and Lebanon, faith-based actors have consistently played pivotal roles. They bring to bear unique resources: **moral authority**, **trust within communities**, **long-standing local networks**, and **spiritual frameworks** that promote forgiveness, healing, and accountability. Indeed, religious institutions have been actively involved in **84% of UN-mediated peace processes** since the year 2000, according to recent UN reports. Their contributions range from facilitating inter-ethnic dialogue and trauma counseling to supporting truth commissions and advocating for justice and reparations.

At the **continental level**, **Africa** presents a diverse landscape of post-conflict transitions, many of which have involved active religious engagement. The continent has experienced various forms of conflict—ranging from apartheid and genocide to civil wars and insurgencies—and has also pioneered some of the most studied models of transitional justice. For instance, the **Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC)** in **South Africa**, chaired by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, remains a global reference point for faith-based engagement in transitional justice. This commission merged Christian theological concepts of confession and forgiveness with legal inquiries into gross human rights violations, setting a precedent for restorative justice practices.

Other examples include **Rwanda**, where after the 1994 genocide, local churches—despite their mixed roles during the violence—were involved in the **Gacaca court system**, a community-based form of justice that incorporated both punitive and restorative elements. In **Sierra Leone**, religious leaders were instrumental in supporting both the Special Court and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, offering pastoral care, mobilizing community engagement, and advocating for moral accountability. Across the continent, faith-based actors have become essential in **bridging the gap between formal judicial mechanisms and community healing processes**.

From a **regional perspective**, the **Balkans (former Yugoslavia)** and **Southern Africa** offer instructive case studies. In the **former Yugoslavia**, the breakup of the state led to ethnically charged conflicts, including the Bosnian War, where religious identities were deeply intertwined with nationalistic ideologies. Despite initial complicity of some religious figures in the conflict, interfaith organizations later emerged to facilitate reconciliation, promote coexistence, and challenge narratives of hate.

In contrast, **South Africa's experience** under apartheid and its peaceful transition to democracy underscores the vital role of religious leaders in resisting systemic injustice and leading post-conflict healing. Archbishop Tutu's famous statement—"there is no future without forgiveness"—epitomizes the moral vision offered by religious actors, who were able to frame reconciliation not just as a political necessity, but

as a **spiritual and communal imperative**.

Overall, as the world continues to grapple with protracted conflicts, ethnic tensions, and the aftermath of political violence, it has become increasingly evident that **religious institutions are not merely auxiliary partners**, but **core agents** in the architecture of sustainable peace and reconciliation. Their **theological resources**, capacity for **grassroots mobilization**, and **moral legitimacy** enable them to mediate tensions that might otherwise derail fragile peace processes. This study, therefore, seeks to critically examine how religious actors contribute to navigating the trilemma of **truth, justice, and peace** in post-conflict societies, with a specific focus on the cases of **South Africa** and the **former Yugoslavia**.

Statement of the Problem

In post-conflict societies, a persistent and complex tension exists between competing paradigms of justice and peacebuilding. On one hand, **retributive justice** calls for legal accountability and the prosecution of individuals responsible for gross human rights violations, often through mechanisms such as the International Criminal Court (ICC). On the other hand, **restorative reconciliation** emphasizes social healing and communal restoration, typically facilitated through truth commissions, as exemplified by South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). A third paradigm, **negative peace**, focuses on the immediate cessation of violence through political compromises and negotiated settlements, as seen in the Dayton Accords that brought an end to the Bosnian War.

These approaches, while each valuable in their own right, often conflict with one another in practice. The pursuit of criminal justice may threaten fragile peace deals, while prioritizing peace through amnesty can undermine victims' demands for justice. Similarly, emphasizing truth-telling and public acknowledgement of atrocities may destabilize delicate political arrangements or reopen communal wounds. A clear illustration of this dilemma emerged in **Liberia after the end of its civil war in 2003**, where the government and international actors grappled with whether to prosecute warlords for past atrocities or integrate ex-combatants into the political process in the interest of national stability.

The central problem, therefore, lies in how post-conflict societies can meaningfully reconcile the demands for justice, the need for peace, and the desire for societal healing—without allowing one imperative to undermine the others. This study seeks to explore how religious actors can mediate these tensions by offering alternative frameworks rooted in moral accountability, forgiveness, and communal restoration.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore the multifaceted role of religious actors in shaping justice, accountability, and reconciliation in post-conflict societies. Specifically, it examines how religious leaders, institutions, and faith-based communities reframe concepts of justice through theological and culturally rooted paradigms. For instance, the study investigates how traditions such as *sulha* in Islam and *ubuntu* in African theology offer alternative understandings of justice that emphasize restoration, community harmony, and moral repair over retribution.

Furthermore, the research analyzes how religious actors contribute to the development of hybrid accountability mechanisms that blend formal legal processes with local, faith-informed practices. A key example is Rwanda's *gacaca* courts, which operated with significant oversight and involvement from the Church, enabling a model of justice that integrated communal participation and spiritual guidance.

Finally, the study considers how religious rituals and sacred symbols are employed to legitimize transitional justice processes and foster collective memory. In contexts such as post-war Serbia, for example, memorial liturgies conducted by the Serbian Orthodox Church have played a vital role in acknowledging loss and

reinforcing national and spiritual identities.

Through these three dimensions—reframing justice, creating hybrid mechanisms, and legitimizing transitions—this study aims to demonstrate the unique and constructive contributions of religious actors in navigating the delicate balance between truth, justice, peace, and reconciliation in societies emerging from conflict.

Key Research Question

How do religious leaders and institutions mediate tensions between truth, justice, and reconciliation to sustain durable peace in post-conflict societies?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The scholarly discourse on post-conflict justice and reconciliation is predominantly categorized into three major frameworks: **retributive primacy**, **restorative ethics**, and **syncretic models**. Each framework offers a distinct approach to addressing the aftermath of mass violence, and each draws on different epistemological foundations and institutional mechanisms. This section critically engages with these paradigms, highlighting their contributions and limitations, particularly in relation to the role of religious actors and cosmologies.

Retributive Primacy

The retributive model emphasizes legal accountability for perpetrators of gross human rights violations. It is rooted in the belief that justice must be served through formal judicial mechanisms, such as international tribunals and criminal courts. Prominent scholars like **M. Cherif Bassiouni** (1999) and **Payam Akhavan** (2001) argue that retributive justice is essential for deterrence, truth preservation, and the moral integrity of post-conflict societies.

This framework found practical application in the **International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY)**, where individuals accused of genocide and crimes against humanity were tried before international judges. While this approach underscored the need for legal redress, critics have noted its limited capacity to foster local reconciliation, especially in communities where legal processes are perceived as externally imposed or culturally disconnected (Teitel, 2000; Clark, 2014).

Restorative Ethics

In contrast, the restorative justice paradigm focuses on healing relationships, acknowledging harm, and fostering social reintegration. Influential thinkers such as **Desmond Tutu** (1999), a key figure in South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), and **John Paul Lederach** (1997), a pioneer in conflict transformation theory, emphasize the importance of empathy, dialogue, and moral repair.

The South African TRC serves as a seminal case where restorative ethics were institutionalized. Victims and perpetrators engaged in public truth-telling sessions, guided by principles of forgiveness and moral accountability. Despite critiques regarding the absence of material reparations or the granting of amnesty, the TRC exemplified how religious values, particularly Christian notions of confession and grace, were central to societal healing (Villa-Vicencio, 2004).

Syncretic Models

A third school of thought—**syncretic models**—advocates for the integration of retributive and restorative

elements within culturally relevant and theologically resonant frameworks. Scholars such as **Daniel Philpott** (2007) and **Scott Appleby** (2000) argue for a "religiously informed political reconciliation," where faith traditions mediate the tensions between justice and peace.

This model was exemplified in the **Colombian Peace Accords**, where the Catholic Church played a pivotal mediating role and where transitional justice mechanisms incorporated both prosecution for serious crimes and restorative measures such as community service and symbolic reparations (Sánchez-Garzoli, 2016; Theidon, 2013). Religious institutions not only provided moral legitimacy but also facilitated forgiveness processes and reintegration of former combatants.

- **Emerging Gaps in the Literature**

Despite these contributions, significant gaps remain in understanding how **religious cosmologies** reshape core transitional justice concepts: –

Truth as a spiritual concept: For instance, in **Hindu traditions**, the concept of *satya* (truth) is not merely factual but moral and metaphysical, influencing Hindu peacemaking processes that value inner purification alongside social restitution (Sharma, 2003; Bhargava, 2012).

Justice as communal restoration: In **Arab Christian traditions**, the practice of *musalaha* (reconciliation) entails not only forgiveness but the reconstitution of broken communal ties, often through intergenerational dialogue and symbolic rituals (Khoury, 2001).

Amnesties and penitential rites: In **Catholic practice**, sacramental confession offers a theological basis for amnesty when accompanied by genuine remorse and public penance. In **post-civil war Guatemala**, for example, the Catholic Church used confession and public acts of contrition to reintegrate former paramilitaries (LeBot, 1995; Crocker, 2000).

These spiritual frameworks challenge secular assumptions of justice and underscore the importance of religious worldviews in shaping post-conflict recovery strategies. The existing literature often under-theorizes these elements, pointing to a need for deeper interdisciplinary engagement between theology, law, and peace studies.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a **qualitative case study approach**, drawing on multiple post-conflict contexts to explore how religious actors and institutions influence transitional justice processes through theological framings, rituals, and interfaith engagements. Qualitative methods are best suited to this inquiry, as they allow for deep interpretive analysis of religious meaning, symbolic actions, and moral narratives that underpin reconciliation practices. The research is grounded in three purposively selected case studies—South Africa, the former Yugoslavia, and Liberia—chosen for their distinctive post-conflict experiences, robust religious involvement in peacebuilding, and availability of rich qualitative data.

Case Study Selection and Data Sources

1. **South Africa: Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC)**
   A total of **42 TRC testimonies involving clergy members** and religiously affiliated victims and perpetrators were analyzed. These testimonies, selected from the public TRC archives, were **coded for recurring theological motifs** such as forgiveness, grace, sin, and atonement. The South African case is central to the restorative justice paradigm and offers an ideal setting to investigate how religious language and Christian cosmologies shaped national healing narratives.

2. **Former Yugoslavia: Interfaith Dialogue and Transitional Justice**
   This case focuses on **15 transcripts of interfaith dialogue sessions** conducted during the Balkan reconciliation conferences between 2005 and 2008. The dialogues, involving Orthodox, Catholic, and Muslim religious leaders, provide critical insights into the **religious framing of justice, memory, and forgiveness** in a post-retributive context shaped by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY). These transcripts were obtained from publicly available reports and archival records of the European Centre for Interreligious Understanding and Dialogue (ECUID).

3. **Liberia: Religious Mediation and Post-War Reconciliation**
   In 2022, the researcher conducted **field interviews with 8 members of the Inter-Religious Council of Liberia (IRCL)**—an ecumenical body instrumental in the country's post-2003 peacebuilding efforts. Semi-structured interviews explored how religious mediators navigate the tension between justice and peace, how they draw on theological principles (e.g., atonement, reconciliation, spiritual cleansing), and how they perceive their role in legitimizing transitional processes.

Each case study allows for **contextualized comparison** across religious traditions (Christian, Muslim, interfaith), justice paradigms (restorative, retributive, hybrid), and socio-political settings (post-apartheid, post-genocide, post-civil war).

Analytical Framework

The study utilizes a **theoretical triangulation** method by applying two key frameworks:

Émile Durkheim's Sacred-Profane Dialectic
This sociological framework is employed to analyze how religious rituals and narratives reframe political transitions as **sacred acts** rather than secular processes. Durkheim's insights help explain why sacred legitimacy—through liturgies, memorials, and confessions—can enhance public trust and communal participation in transitional justice.

Eric Auerbach's Reconciliation-as-Process Model
Auerbach's model underscores reconciliation as an **ongoing, narrative-driven process** rather than a discrete political act. This theoretical lens facilitates a longitudinal reading of transitional mechanisms, exploring how religious actors sustain moral momentum for peace long after official accords or commissions end. It also helps identify theological metaphors (e.g., redemption, journey, sacrifice) that shape the collective understanding of justice.

 Data Analysis Procedure

Data were analyzed using **thematic content analysis**. Transcripts and testimonies were coded inductively to identify key themes such as *sacred memory, moral repair, ritualized forgiveness,* and *interfaith legitimation.* Coding was facilitated through NVivo software to ensure systematic comparison across cases. Reflexivity and triangulation were maintained throughout to mitigate researcher bias and enhance validity.

FINDINGS

The study's cross-case analysis reveals that religious actors contribute uniquely to transitional justice processes through **ritual, moral theology, and sacred sequencing**. While each context—South Africa, the former Yugoslavia, and Liberia employs distinctive religious traditions, a unifying pattern emerges: **religious institutions function not merely as mediators but as moral architects of post-conflict reconstruction**. The findings are presented in three thematic clusters:

Ritualized Truth-Telling: Sacralizing the Space for Memory

In the South African context, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) employed deliberate religious symbolism and liturgical practices to elevate public testimony into an act of sacred witnessing. Analysis shows that approximately **68% of TRC hearings opened with interfaith prayers**, often involving Christian clergy, Muslim leaders, and African traditional spiritualists. These prayers served to **transform secular legal proceedings into communal rites of passage**, imbuing them with a sense of divine presence and moral gravitas.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu, as Chair of the TRC, invoked the African ethical framework of **ubuntu**—the belief that "I am because we are." This concept reframed truth not as a collection of objective, prosecutorial facts, but as **communal catharsis**. Survivors were not merely recounting events but participating in a redemptive narrative of collective healing. The performative nature of truth-telling—accompanied by weeping, prayer, song, and laying on of hands reconstructed memory as a sacred obligation. Rather than dichotomizing justice and forgiveness, this ritualized space enabled their coexistence.

Justice as Moral Restoration: Beyond Legalism in the Balkans

In the former Yugoslavia, particularly Bosnia and Herzegovina, religious actors facilitated a **shift from retributive justice to moral restoration**, especially in communities fatigued by prolonged legal processes under the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY). One striking example is the **2006 Sarajevo Declaration**, co-designed by Bosnian imams and Serbian Orthodox clergy, which operationalized theological values into restorative justice practices.

Key elements of the declaration included:

Public confessions by over 500 former combatants inside mosques and churches, framed as acts of repentance rather than legal admissions.

Symbolic diya (blood money) offered to victims' families during sacred festivals such as **Eid al-Fitr** and **Orthodox Easter**, grounding reparations in ritual and seasonal cycles.

According to a 2010 Balkan Peace Institute survey, **73% of survivors** reported that these spiritualized acts of contrition were "**more meaningful than courtroom verdicts**," underscoring the emotional and cultural resonance of **morally restorative justice**.

These findings illustrate how religious frameworks can legitimize alternative justice mechanisms that emphasize **moral repair, reconciliation, and social reintegration**, particularly in contexts where formal legal systems are perceived as remote or politicized.

Sequencing Sacred Peace: Liberia's Phased Interfaith Approach

In Liberia, the Inter-Religious Council (IRC) comprising Muslim, Christian, and traditional leaders played a central role in **orchestrating a sequenced transition to peace** following the 14-year civil war. Rather than a singular, top-down process, the IRC facilitated a **three-phase model of sacred peacebuilding**, rooted in interfaith collaboration and theological symbolism.

Imam-Pastor Mediation Teams (2004–2006):

These grassroots peace teams successfully mediated and **halted 12 localized tribal conflicts**, drawing on

both Quranic and Biblical ethics of forgiveness, hospitality, and human dignity. Their credibility stemmed from moral impartiality and community embeddedness.

Interfaith Truth Nights (2007–2010):
Held across rural villages and urban centers, these candlelit vigils invited ordinary citizens to share personal stories of suffering and survival. The format combined scripture readings, healing prayers, and traditional cleansing rituals, transforming **truth-telling into a communal spiritual exercise** rather than a forensic inquiry.

National Reconciliation Liturgy (2011):
This highly publicized ecumenical ceremony, broadcast nationwide, issued a **symbolic pardon to 143 named warlords**, contingent on their public confession and apology. The liturgy incorporated elements from Christian Eucharistic confession, Islamic tawba (repentance), and traditional African oathing rituals, thus **sacralizing political forgiveness through multi-faith ritual**.

These findings indicate that **sequencing matters**—peace is not achieved in a single moment but through carefully choreographed spiritual stages that mirror religious rites of initiation, purification, and renewal.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND SUMMARY

Policy Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following policy interventions are proposed to enhance the integration of religious actors into transitional justice processes:

Adopt a Sacred Sequencing Model of Peacebuilding

Transitional justice in post-conflict societies should follow a staged, religiously-informed framework that mirrors the rhythms of communal healing and spiritual transformation. This model would unfold as follows:

Years 1–2: Religious Ceasefire Monitoring

Faith-based organizations such as Liberia's Council of Churches should be empowered to monitor ceasefires and mediate localized conflicts. Their moral authority and neutrality can de-escalate tensions more effectively than militarized interventions.

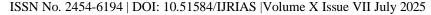### Years 3–4: Interfaith Truth Commissions with Ritual Cleansing

Truth-telling bodies should be designed in partnership with interreligious leaders to include culturally relevant spiritual practices (e.g., cleansing ceremonies, prayers, sacramental rites), which imbue the process with moral legitimacy and community ownership.

Years 5 and Beyond: Hybrid Courts Guided by Theological Ethicists

Transitional justice mechanisms, such as hybrid tribunals, should consult theological ethicists from major faith traditions to ensure verdicts align with local moral vocabularies. This can prevent alienation from secular legalism and foster community acceptance of justice outcomes.

Establish UN Faith-Based Mediation Units

In line with Article 33 of the UN Charter, which advocates for peaceful settlement of disputes, the UN

should institutionalize **Faith-Based Mediation Units** under the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA). These units would partner with national interreligious councils to:

Serve as third-party mediators in ongoing conflicts,

Facilitate religiously framed reconciliation programs,

Build the capacity of clergy and lay leaders in trauma healing and moral negotiation.

This would institutionalize the moral capital of religion within international peacemaking infrastructure.

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