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### Article

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## THE PARADOX OF RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE: CONVERSION, LAW, AND SOCIAL REALITY IN SOUTHWEST NIGERIA

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### Abstract

Despite Nigeria's constitutional guarantee of religious freedom and tolerance, the lived experiences of converts reveal a troubling paradox. Legal rights exist on paper, yet social realities continue to suppress religious choice. This article examines how conversion to Christianity and Islam in Southwest Nigeria exposed the gap between constitutional ideals and practical enforcement. It interrogated converts on awareness of their legal rights, the extent to which they can seek redress, and what constitutional or institutional mechanisms protect them. Using secondary and primary data from selected communities in Osun, Oyo, Ekiti, and Ondo States, a total of 40 converts participated, with 10 individuals per state (5 converting from Christianity to Islam and 5 from Islam to Christianity). Participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling. Data were collected via semi-structured interviews, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns related to legal awareness, enforcement gaps, and social pressures. The study found that fear of stigma, weak legal enforcement, and community pressure often silence converts, with 80% of participants refraining from seeking redress. While religious institutions advocate for peace, their protective capacity is limited, as only 80% of Christian converts and 35% of Muslim converts reported access to counseling, mentorship, economic assistance, or referrals to legal support. The article argued that tolerance must be treated not as a passive value but as a civic duty, requiring coordinated effort from government, civil society, and faith communities to make religious freedom a lived reality rather than a legal abstraction.

**Keywords:** Religious Tolerance, Conversion, Human Rights, Constitutional Law, Social Realities, Southwest Nigeria.

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## **Introduction**

Nigeria's Constitution guarantees the right to religious freedom. According to Section, 38(1) of the *1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (as amended)*, "Every person shall be entitled to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom (either alone or in community with others, and in public or private) to manifest and propagate his religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice and observance" (*Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria*, 1999). Going further, subsections (2) and (3) carefully stated the right to religious education and instruction, making religious liberty a fundamental right applicable to all citizens regardless of faith or ethnicity. However, several scholars and human rights commentators have argued that the implementation of Section 38 remains inconsistent and, at times, merely symbolic. For example, a study published in *Religion & Human Rights* pointed out that while Section 38 guarantees freedom of belief, these rights are "not absolute" and can be constrained when religion intersects with moral or security considerations (Ajetunmobi, 2020). In a similar vein, the National Human Rights Commission (n.d.) stressed that constitutional protections under Sections 38 and 40 are intended to uphold freedom of conscience, belief, and peaceful assembly; however, enforcement at the community level remains weak. A public commentary by *Vanguard* further describes this condition as "a gap between legal guarantees and social realities," where constitutional rights exist on paper but are frequently undermined in practice (Vanguard News, 2014).

It is important to state here, that despite Nigeria's reputation as a religiously pluralistic nation, hostility against converts, particularly between Christianity and Islam, continues to challenge the country's democratic ideals. Recent human rights reports have documented several cases in which converts face ostracism, threats, or coercion. For instance, an article by the European Centre for the Study of Political Extremism (ECSPE, 2024) details how economic hardship has been exploited to pressure Christians into converting to Islam, demonstrating how social and material realities often override constitutional safeguards. In another angle, we see the International Christian Concern (2024) recounting the case of a Christian man who was jailed and pressured to renounce his faith, while the *Catholic News Agency* (2023) reports on a teenage girl whose conversion to Christianity triggered death threats from family members, leading to a restraining order for her protection. Beyond the above, broader studies show that conversion and interfaith marriage in Nigeria frequently provoke intense social resistance. According to Adewale (2022), conversions often create tensions around religious identity, family honor, and social belonging. Furthermore, the *Open Doors International* (2023) acknowledged that converts, especially those transitioning from Islam to Christianity, regularly experience persecution severe enough to force them from their communities. While the aforementioned works have shown the gap between legal guarantees and social realities, few have examined why converts remain unprotected or uninformed about their constitutional rights, particularly in the Southwest region, where religious pluralism is often celebrated as a model of peaceful coexistence. Existing literature tends to emphasize either the legal framework or the social consequences of conversion, but rarely checks how awareness, access to justice, and institutional responses interact to shape the lived experiences of converts. (ECSPE, 2024; Adewale, 2022; CNA, 2023).

This study raises several critical concerns regarding the practical realities of religious tolerance in Southwest Nigeria. A central question is the extent to which religious converts are aware of their constitutional rights under Section 38 of the 1999 Constitution.

Awareness of rights is fundamental to the exercise of freedom, yet the persistent silence and vulnerability among converts indicate a troubling deficit in civic education and legal empowerment. This situation raises series of guiding questions central to this study: (a) Are converts even aware of their rights? (b) If they are, why do they rarely seek legal recourse? (c) What protection mechanisms actually exist to defend those whose rights have been violated? (d) And what roles do government and religious institutions play in ensuring genuine religious freedom and tolerance? The government's capacity and commitment to safeguarding religious freedom remain questionable, as current initiatives such as interfaith councils and human rights programmes appear insufficient at the grassroots level. It is therefore against the backdrop that guided the questions, and hence, specific objectives this research intends to move beyond describing the problem to exploring how Constitutional protections can be transformed into practical safeguards through awareness, collaboration, and policy reform. The study thus positions itself at the intersection of law, religion, and human rights, aiming to expose the contradictions within Nigeria's legal and social systems as well as to offer a framework for transforming religious tolerance from a constitutional promise into a lived cultural reality.

### **Literature Review**

Religious conversion is a complex and multidimensional process, encompassing not only shifts in doctrinal belief but also transformations in identity, social relationships, and cultural positioning (Rambo, 1993). In similar vein, Gooren (2007) conceptualized conversion as part of broader religious mobility, emphasizing the fluidity of religious identity and the dynamic interplay of internal motivations and external pressures. In the Nigerian context, particularly in the South-West, conversion decisions are rarely purely individual. They are deeply embedded within familial, communal, and socio-political structures (Peel, 2000; Umar, 2006). Corroborating this perspective, Paloutzian (2005) noted that spiritual quests, search for meaning, and existential crises often motivate conversion, but the societal implications of such decisions, including acceptance, alienation, or persecution cannot be understated. In contrast to some psychological models that treat conversion as primarily an intrapersonal process, the African context illustrates that religious shifts are inherently relational and socially mediated, often intersecting with economic, political, and historical dynamics (Esposito, 2002). Historically, the South-West region of Nigeria, predominantly occupied by the Yoruba, presents a unique religious landscape where Christianity, Islam, and indigenous religious practices have coexisted for centuries (Peel, 2000; Clarke, 1982). Islam's early introduction via trans-Saharan trade in the 14th century laid deep-rooted cultural foundations, while Christianity's arrival in the 19th century, facilitated by European missions and returning freed slaves, contributed to the pluralistic religious composition observed today (Ayandele, 1966; Ajayi, 1965).

In a similar vein, scholars have pictured the Yoruba socio-cultural milieu to be characterized by openness, negotiation, and tolerance, enabled both religions to flourish side by side, often peacefully, despite sporadic competition for converts and social influence (Peel, 2003; Kenny, 2000). Corroborating this, recent studies indicate that while religious co-existence in the South-West is generally peaceful, intergroup tensions emerge during moments of social or political stress, reflecting the fragility of informal mechanisms of tolerance (Salawu, 2010). Legally, Nigeria maintains a robust constitutional and international framework for religious freedom. Section 38 of the 1999 Constitution guarantees freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, including the right to change one's religion. While Section 10 prohibits the adoption of a state religion. Internationally, Nigeria is bound by the

Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, which affirm similar protections (Okeke, 2025; Ekwueme, 2018). In a similar vein, statutory instruments such as the National Human Rights Commission Act provide institutional avenues to address violations. Corroborating this, empirical surveys reveal that citizens are formally aware of these rights, yet practical access to protection mechanisms remains limited (The Kukah Centre, 2025). Despite these legal guarantees, enforcement challenges remain pervasive, undermining the protective intent of the law. In contrast to formal constitutional provisions, judicial interpretations are often inconsistent, and law enforcement agencies display ambivalence when responding to religiously motivated conflicts or conversion-related disputes (Imo, 2025; Hussaini, 2023). Police and security interventions, for example, frequently treat such incidents as general security matters rather than violations of religious freedom, leaving converts and vulnerable individuals inadequately protected. Similarly, community and familial pressures frequently enforce normative constraints on religious choice, creating an environment where formal protections exist in theory but not in practice.

Focusing on South-West Nigeria, the region's relative religious tolerance and pluralism mask deeper structural limitations in the enforcement of legal protections. While Yoruba cultural norms promote co-existence, recent events—such as sporadic violence against religious minorities or attacks on places of worship—illustrate that Constitutional guarantees alone are insufficient to prevent harm. Going further, discussions about the potential incorporation of aspects of Sharia in family or personal status matters, even in the South-West, underscore latent tensions that may compromise legal neutrality and undermine freedom of conscience. Thus, while the South-West presents a comparatively tolerant religious environment, the lived realities of religious converts reveal a persistent gap between law and practice. This leads to a significant gap in the existing literature. Despite the comparatively tolerant religious environment of South-West Nigeria, few studies critically examined the performative nature of legal protections for religious freedom in conversion-related contexts. In particular, there is a lack of empirical research exploring how legal guarantees interact with community pressures, social expectations, and sporadic violence to influence the actual experience of converts. In contrast to studies focused on the North or Middle Belt, where inter-religious conflicts have been more visibly documented, the South-West remains underexplored, creating an opportunity to interrogate the *illusion of protection* in a context of cultural tolerance. This gap is especially pertinent given the growing recognition that legal frameworks, while seemingly robust, are insufficient without proactive enforcement, judicial consistency, and supportive institutional mechanisms to safeguard individuals exercising the right to religious conversion.

While Nigeria possesses formal legal and institutional frameworks to protect religious freedom and the right to conversion, both at national and international levels, enforcement challenges and socio-cultural pressures undermine the effectiveness of these protections. In the South-West, a region historically characterized by religious tolerance, this disconnect between law and lived reality highlights a crucial area for further research. Corroborating the broader literature, it is clear that the *illusion of protection* persists: legal provisions exist, yet they are often performative rather than proactive, leaving converts and other vulnerable individuals exposed to social pressures, marginalization, and occasional violence. This literature review establishes the necessity for empirical inquiry into the practical application of legal protections for religious freedom in South-West Nigeria, particularly in the context of conversion.

## Theoretical Framework

This study is premised on the Social Identity Theory (SIT) which was first proposed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner in the 1970s (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The theory posits that an individual's self-concept is strongly influenced by their membership in social groups, and that people derive part of their identity, self-esteem, and sense of belonging from these group affiliations. Individuals tend to categorize themselves and others into "in-groups" (groups they identify with) and "out-groups" (groups they do not identify with), which shapes behavior, attitudes, and intergroup interactions. From keen observation, converts in Southwest Nigeria experience social exclusion, familial rejection, and community scrutiny, reflecting the tension between their original religious group (in-group) and the new religious affiliation (out-group). Hence, SIT explains the emotional and social consequences of conversion observed in this study. The participants' narratives of identity transformation, negotiation of belonging, and creation of surrogate support networks reflect attempts to reconcile personal religious identity with societal expectations. By applying SIT, this study interprets conversion not merely as a private spiritual act but as a socially mediated process, where community, family, and religious institutions act as powerful agents reinforcing group norms and social conformity. The theory underscores that legal and constitutional protections alone are insufficient to safeguard converts without considering the potent influence of social identity.

## Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore how conversion between Christianity and Islam in South-West Nigeria exposes the gap between constitutional ideals and practical enforcement of religious freedom. Given the focus on lived experiences, perceptions, and interactions with legal and institutional frameworks, in-depth interviews were conducted to generate rich, contextualized data. The research aimed to examine whether converts are aware of their legal rights, the extent to which they can seek redress, and how constitutional or institutional mechanisms protect them, with particular attention to fear of stigma, community pressure, and enforcement gaps. The study was conducted in four purposively selected South-West Nigerian communities known for their religious plurality: Ile-Ife (Osun State), Ibadan (Oyo State), Ado-Ekiti (Ekiti State), and Akure (Ondo State). These communities were chosen because both Christianity and Islam have significant historical and contemporary presence, allowing for the investigation of conversion experiences in environments of relative religious tolerance. African Traditional Religion was excluded from this study because it is largely non-proselytizing, and membership is typically inherited or situational rather than the result of active conversion, making it less relevant to the research focus on conversion dynamics between Christianity and Islam. A total of 40 converts participated, with 10 individuals per state (5 converting from Christianity to Islam and 5 from Islam to Christianity). Participants were identified through purposive and snowball sampling, using local religious organizations, community leaders, and referrals from other converts to locate willing individuals. Table 1 shows the sample distribution:

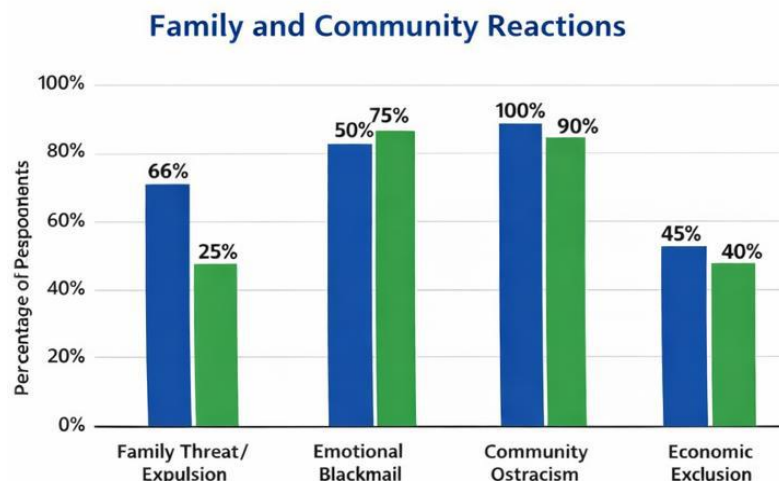
**Table 1:** Sample Distribution of respondents

| State (Community) | Converts C → I | Converts I → C | Total per State |
|-------------------|----------------|----------------|-----------------|
| Osun (Ile-Ife)    | 5              | 5              | 10              |
| Oyo (Ibadan)      | 5              | 5              | 10              |
| Ekiti (Ado-Ekiti) | 5              | 5              | 10              |
| Ondo (Akure)      | 5              | 5              | 10              |
| <b>Total</b>      | 20             | 20             | 40              |

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using thematic analysis to identify key patterns related to legal awareness, enforcement challenges, and social pressures. Ethical safeguards, including informed consent, anonymity, and safe interview locations, were observed throughout the study.

### Findings/Results

- i. **The Paradox of Social Realities and Converts' Silence:** Across the sample, 100% of participants reported experiencing social pressures, emotional distress, or threats following conversion. Among the 20 individuals converting from Islam to Christianity, 66% (13 respondents) faced expulsion or overt threats from family members. C-R12 stated, "My father banned me from the house. My mother pleaded for me to stay, but I was sent out." In more extreme cases, C-R1 recounted, "I had to run away for my life when I began to see danger and threats." Meanwhile, among the 20 converting from Christianity to Islam, 75% (15 respondents) experienced intense social scrutiny related to daily practices, dress, or dietary changes. M-R10 explained, "I had to explain why I don't drink at events anymore, and some old friends just stopped inviting me." Cultural expectations around family honor and communal conformity reinforced these pressures, leaving 80% of the total sample (32 respondents) reporting that fear of reprisal kept them from seeking legal redress. Economic vulnerability further compounded this silence, with 60% (24 respondents) indicating that they could not afford legal representation even if they sought it.



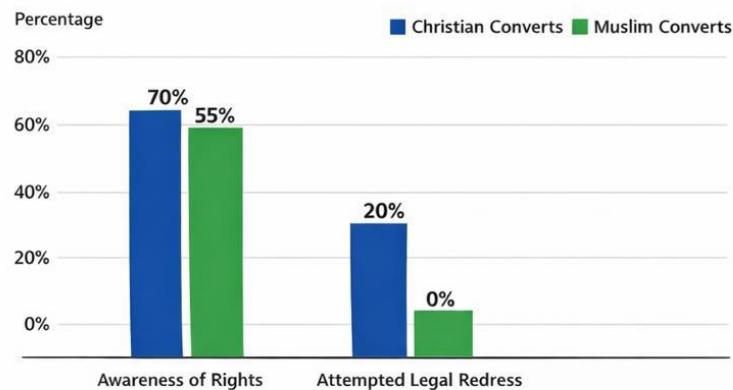
(see Figure 1; Researcher's construct, 2025)

- ii. **Awareness and Access to Justice:** Although most respondents were aware of their constitutional rights, knowledge rarely translated into action. Among the 20 Christian converts, 70% (14 respondents) could articulate that the law guarantees religious freedom, yet only 20% (4 respondents) felt confident to pursue legal remedies. For Muslim converts, 55% (11 respondents) were aware of legal protections, but none had attempted to engage state institutions, citing mistrust, economic limitations, and social pressures. M-R2 stated, "I know the law protects me, but if I go to court, I risk losing my family entirely and I cannot afford a lawyer." Religious leaders, while advocating for peace, often lacked both financial resources and knowledge of constitutional provisions. Another Christian convert, C-R5 expressed that, "The government should provide



security and enforce religious freedom so that converts don't suffer silently," highlighting the gap between legal ideals and lived realities.

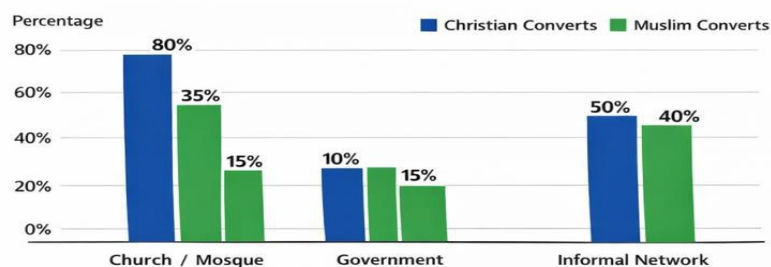
### Awareness vs. Legal Access



(see Figure 2; Researcher's construct, 2025)

Family reactions were overwhelmingly negative across both groups. All respondents (100%) had reported emotional distress or disapproval from parents, with 45% (18 respondents) indicating that their mothers faced social repercussions for supporting their children. Christian converts more frequently faced physical threats, expulsions, and denial of financial support; for instance, C-R8 recounted, "It was a tug of war. My mother was sent out of her matrimonial home because of our conversion." Muslim converts, while less likely to be expelled, experienced emotional blackmail, silent disapproval, and community suspicion. M-R3 noted, "I was no longer trusted within my previous Christian circles and was subtly labeled a 'traitor.'" Across both groups, 80% of participants (32 respondents) reported disruption of social support networks, requiring negotiation of new affiliations and surrogate communities.

### Support Systems Access

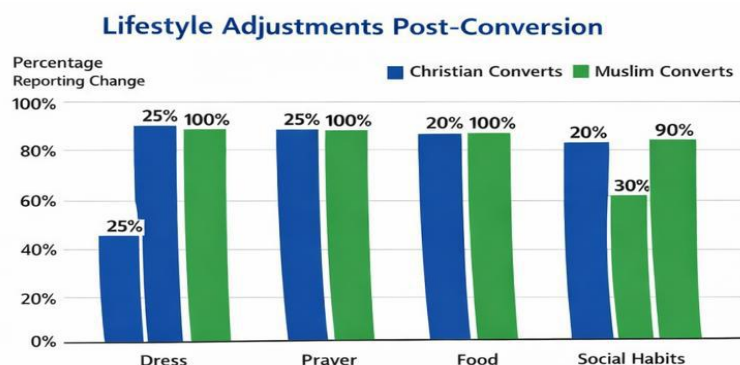


(see Figure 3; Researcher's construct, 2025)

The process of conversion brought significant identity transformations. C-R2 explained, "I now identify as a Christian first, though I still respect where I came from," while M-R6 said, "I feel more spiritually disciplined now... I've also started to feel like I belong to a global Muslim community." These narratives reflect the dual nature of conversion as both departure from old affiliations and integration into new communities (Hagan, 2008). Emotional and economic discrimination was common; C-R9 noted, "People stopped associating with me, and I couldn't get assistance from our community group," and M-R5 shared, "I was excluded

from a church-based programme I had previously led.” These experiences align with Ojo (2014), emphasizing that social rejection often poses a greater barrier than legal exclusion in pluralistic societies.

Support systems varied across religious communities. Among Christian converts, 80% (16 respondents) received counseling, material support, and mentorship from churches, with C-R11 stating, “I feel welcomed by my church family. It’s where I finally feel I belong.” In contrast, only 35% of Muslim converts (7 respondents) reported receiving guidance from mosques, often informal or inconsistent. M-R12 recommended, “Mosques should have beginner classes and emotional guidance, not just prayer sessions,” highlighting a need for structured institutional support. Across both groups, participants emphasized the need for financial aid, safe housing, counseling, and government enforcement to protect converts from familial and communal pressures. Community reactions further amplified challenges. Christian converts described name-calling, exclusion from social events, and economic marginalization. C-R4 shared, “Neighbours stopped greeting me. Some even warned their children to avoid me.” Muslim converts faced similar subtler forms of ostracism; M-R8 remarked, “Some people don’t know how to relate to me anymore.” Both groups advocated for interfaith dialogue and joint community initiatives. C-R10 suggested, “Church and mosque youth should do joint community service—cleanups, sports, outreach,” while M-R3 recommended, “We must replace fear with knowledge. Personal relationships break stereotypes.” These voices reinforce Sanneh’s (2003) argument that relational engagement, not doctrinal conformity, fosters coexistence in multi-faith societies.



(see Figure 4; Researcher’s construct, 2025)

We can thus see here that conversion is both spiritually transformative and socially costly. Converts face familial rejection, community hostility, economic vulnerability, and institutional gaps, yet display resilience by integrating into supportive faith communities.

## **Conclusion**

Nigeria’s government has established formal mechanisms intended to promote religious harmony and protect freedom of belief, most notably the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC). It was established in 1999 as a voluntary body with equal representation from Christian and Muslim leaders. The NIREC provides a forum for ongoing dialogue between the two major faith communities and aims to lay the foundations for sustainable peace and religious harmony across the country. These efforts include interfaith seminars, workshops, and joint communiqués addressing societal problems such as insecurity and social injustice (Nigeria Inter-Religious Council, 2025). However, the practical effectiveness of such institutions has been questioned. Critics, including NIREC’s co-chair, the Sultan of Sokoto,



have expressed concern about the council's ability to translate dialogue into meaningful action on the ground, pointing out that decisions made at meetings are not always implemented (Eze, 2023). As a result, while these government-sanctioned bodies carry symbolic legitimacy and play important roles in national discourse, their impact on structural change, especially in areas beset by inter-religious tension remains contested. In addition to NIREC, government-mandated institutions like the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) play roles in advocating for citizens' rights, including the protection of freedom of religion. The NHRC regularly engages with religious leaders, urging them to champion human rights, tolerance, and peaceful coexistence, and it continues to intervene and condemn violence in conflict-affected regions of Nigeria (Voice of Nigeria, 2023). These activities indicate that the government does possess legal frameworks for human rights protection, but enforcement and consistent realization of those rights are often uneven across the country, especially where insecurity and communal violence are rife.

Religious institutions themselves provide vital moral, spiritual, and community support that complements official state efforts. Bodies such as the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) and Muslim leadership structures participate in interfaith projects and cooperation networks that seek to foster peace and understanding (Christian Association of Nigeria, 2023). As umbrella organizations representing broad constituencies, these groups help mediate social tensions, emphasize shared ethical values, and contribute to community cohesion. One notable initiative is the Interfaith Code of Conduct, jointly developed by Christian and Muslim leaders to promote peace, justice, and harmony among Nigeria's diverse religious communities; this code underscores shared commitments to respect, human dignity, and non-violence (Columban Interreligious Dialogue, 2023). Even so, the authority of religious institutions tends to be moral rather than juridical, meaning that while they can guide behavior and influence social norms, they generally lack the legal power to directly enforce protections when rights are violated. Taken together, these observations suggest that Nigeria's efforts to normalize religious tolerance require collaborative engagement across multiple sectors. Government bodies and interfaith councils offer useful platforms for dialogue and policy articulation, but they are often constrained by structural and implementation challenges that limit their transformative impact. Religious leaders and organizations contribute essential moral frameworks and grassroots outreach but cannot substitute for the rule of law or state enforcement mechanisms. The findings of this study reveal that Nigeria's greatest religious challenge is not the absence of laws protecting freedom of belief but rather the failure to internalize tolerance as a shared societal value. Constitutional guarantees remain undermined by persistent social realities, including community prejudices, lack of awareness, and insufficient enforcement mechanisms, all of which deny converts the freedom to fully exercise their rights. The paradox lies not in legal frameworks themselves but in the gap between legal provisions and lived experiences. Addressing this requires a multi-pronged approach, combining policy enforcement, civic and religious education, and sustained interfaith engagement. Only through this synergy can religious freedom become more than a formal right to claim. It can become a norm actively lived and respected, fostering a society where tolerance is both practiced and internalized as a core civic and ethical value.

### **Recommendations Toward a Culture of Active Tolerance**

This study emphasizes that religious tolerance in Nigeria should not be treated as optional or passive; rather, it must be embraced as a civic ethic deeply rooted in law, education, and everyday social practice. To move toward this ideal, several practical measures are

recommended. First, religious freedom education should be integrated into civic studies at both secondary and tertiary levels, ensuring that young citizens understand the legal rights of all religious groups and the moral imperatives of coexistence. Second, community-level legal aid programmes should be established to assist victims of religious discrimination, making legal recourse more accessible and reinforcing the protective function of constitutional guarantees. Third, interfaith youth engagement programmes should be encouraged to foster early exposure to diversity, cooperation, and dialogue across religious lines, cultivating empathy and mutual respect from a young age. Finally, periodic dialogues between government agencies and religious bodies should be institutionalized to review policies, evaluate ongoing initiatives, and respond proactively to emerging conflicts, ensuring that tolerance is continually reinforced through both legislation and practice.

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