**Interreligious Dialogue for Peacebuilding: A Hermeneutical-Philosophical Approach to the Ethics of Understanding in a Post-Conflict Africa**

Abstract:

*This article explores interreligious dialogue as a key tool for peacebuilding in post-conflict African societies. It employs a hermeneutical-philosophical lens to advocate for an ethics of understanding as the basis for healing and reconciliation. Drawing on the philosophical perspectives of Hans-Georg Gadamer and African ethical traditions, the study highlights how dialogical engagement across religious and cultural lines can foster mutual recognition and restore dignity to affected communities. It emphasizes the importance of narrative, memory, and meaning in shaping interreligious ethics. By advancing a transformative approach to dialogue, the article challenges instrumental views of religion and calls for deeper epistemological shifts in peacebuilding practices on the continent.*

*Key words: Interreligious Dialogue, peacebuilding, hermeneutics, African philosophy, ethics*

**1. Introduction**

**Context of post-conflict Africa and the need for sustainable peace**

In the wake of violent conflicts across the African continent—whether driven by ethnic tensions, political instability, or religious extremism—there has been an urgent call for frameworks that facilitate sustainable peace. Post-conflict societies such as Rwanda, South Sudan, the Central African Republic, and parts of Nigeria highlight the deep scars left by violence, dislocation, and mistrust. Healing such fractures requires more than legal and political measures; it necessitates moral and cultural interventions that rehumanize the other and restore intercommunal trust (Galtung, 1996).

To achieve sustainable peace, it is essential to integrate cultural and religious dimensions into the reconstruction process. These dimensions are often marginalized in peace agreements that focus primarily on political power-sharing or economic recovery. Yet, religious communities remain influential in shaping societal values and have unique capacities to mediate tensions through their ethical teachings and community structures (Bouta, Kadayifci-Orellana, & Abu-Nimer, 2005). By centering these resources, post-conflict societies can address not only the structural but also the relational and symbolic wounds of violence.

Moreover, peacebuilding must contend with the psychological aftermath of violence, including trauma, suspicion, and the erosion of moral imagination. Philosophical and theological approaches—especially those grounded in African worldviews—offer valuable perspectives for reconstituting relationships. Such approaches prioritize healing, justice, and social harmony, thereby complementing juridical and diplomatic efforts (Murithi, 2006). Sustainable peace in Africa, therefore, is best understood as a holistic, multidimensional process that must engage ethical, spiritual, and interpretive resources.

Finally, the African experience of conflict often features a religious dimension, either as a contributing factor or as a potential solution. In many instances, religious identities are mobilized for division, but they can also be reoriented toward reconciliation and mutual recognition. This dual potential of religion necessitates careful attention to the interpretive frameworks that guide interreligious relations (Appleby, 2000). Understanding religion’s ethical capacity in peacebuilding contexts is thus indispensable for Africa’s post-conflict recovery.

**Overview of interreligious dialogue as a peacebuilding tool**

Interreligious dialogue refers to intentional, respectful engagement between people of different faiths to promote understanding, trust, and cooperation. In African post-conflict societies, where religious pluralism often intersects with ethnic and political divisions, such dialogue becomes crucial for preventing the reoccurrence of violence and building inclusive communities. It provides a moral space in which shared values like compassion, justice, and human dignity can be rediscovered and rearticulated (Swidler, 2014).

This form of dialogue does more than promote peaceful coexistence; it can actively counteract narratives of exclusion and hatred. Through shared storytelling, theological reflection, and joint action, religious groups can transcend historical grievances and participate in collective healing. Furthermore, interreligious dialogue often re-establishes trust between communities and institutions, which is vital for rebuilding social capital in the aftermath of war or genocide (Little, 2007).

In the African context, religious leaders and institutions have historically played a role in peacemaking—from the interfaith councils in Kenya and Sierra Leone to the work of the Interreligious Council of Uganda. These initiatives demonstrate how interreligious dialogue can support transitional justice and provide platforms for restorative encounters (Haynes, 2007). When properly grounded in mutual respect and hermeneutical openness, such dialogue can serve as a transformative force in societies fractured by religious or political violence.

Crucially, the ethics of interreligious dialogue must be rooted in sincerity, equality, and recognition of the other’s humanity. It cannot be a superficial or instrumental exercise; rather, it must involve a genuine openness to learning from the other’s perspective. This requires a philosophical framework that values interpretation, narrative, and empathy—dimensions often neglected in political peacebuilding strategies (Cornille, 2013). Hence, dialogue should be both a moral imperative and a strategic necessity in peacebuilding discourse.

**Statement of purpose: advocating for an ethics of understanding using a hermeneutical-philosophical approach**

This article proposes a hermeneutical-philosophical framework for understanding interreligious dialogue as an ethical and transformative response to conflict in Africa. Drawing on Hans-Georg Gadamer’s hermeneutics and African philosophies such as ubuntu, the article argues that the ethics of understanding—rooted in dialogue, interpretation, and mutual recognition—is essential for building peace in post-conflict contexts. This approach challenges instrumentalist and pragmatic uses of religion and instead highlights the dialogical encounter as an ethical event (Gadamer, 2004).

The goal is not merely to promote tolerance, but to encourage an epistemological shift in how communities relate across religious divides. This involves reimagining peacebuilding as a process that values listening, humility, and narrative hospitality. The ethics of understanding presumes that genuine dialogue transforms both participants, fostering shared meaning and restoring fractured social bonds (Palmer, 1998). In this sense, dialogue is not only a method but also a moral posture.

By situating peacebuilding within a hermeneutical-philosophical paradigm, the article seeks to deepen scholarly and policy conversations around religion and conflict. It invites practitioners to go beyond traditional diplomacy or security frameworks and embrace interpretive, relational, and ethical practices rooted in both African and global philosophies. Ultimately, the article advocates for a deeper engagement with the moral and epistemic conditions that make genuine peace possible (Volf, 1996).

This approach is especially timely as many peacebuilding efforts in Africa remain disconnected from the spiritual and cultural resources of the communities they aim to serve. The ethics of understanding offers a way to reclaim these resources while promoting reconciliation rooted in justice and human dignity. It urges scholars, faith leaders, and policymakers alike to take seriously the transformative potential of dialogue as both philosophy and practice (Forst, 2002).

**2. Theoretical Framework**

**2.1 Hermeneutical Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer**

Hans-Georg Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics centers on the idea that understanding is not merely a technical process but a dialogical event. At the heart of his theory is the concept of the "fusion of horizons," where interlocutors bring their distinct perspectives into dialogue, and through mutual engagement, arrive at deeper, shared meaning (Gadamer, 2004). This process is rooted in openness, tradition, and the transformative power of language, making it highly relevant for post-conflict contexts marked by division and mistrust.

Gadamer’s hermeneutics challenges the notion that understanding others can be achieved through detached objectivity. Instead, it affirms that understanding emerges from historically situated dialogue, where prejudices (in the non-pejorative sense) shape and enrich the process of meaning-making. This aligns with African oral traditions, where intergenerational narratives and moral discourses are central to conflict resolution and identity formation (Wiredu, 1996). By foregrounding interpretation, Gadamer offers a model for interreligious dialogue that is dynamic, open-ended, and ethically charged.

In post-conflict Africa, where identities have been politicized and weaponized, Gadamer's insights offer a way to rebuild trust through dialogical engagement rather than coercive or performative reconciliation. His emphasis on conversational ethics—where the goal is not victory but understanding—resonates deeply with African communal philosophies that prioritize social harmony and collective flourishing (Gyekye, 1997). Hermeneutics thus becomes a bridge between philosophical traditions and practical peacebuilding.

Furthermore, Gadamer’s work provides a philosophical counterpoint to technocratic peacebuilding approaches that neglect the symbolic and affective dimensions of healing. His theory insists on the importance of narrative, ritual, and shared language in reconstructing communal life. In societies traumatized by war, such elements are essential for restoring meaning and belonging. Hermeneutics thereby offers not only a method but a moral vision of reconciliation (Nicholson, 2013).

**2.2 African Ethical and Philosophical Traditions**

African philosophical traditions provide rich resources for an ethics of peace and reconciliation. Central among these is *ubuntu*, an ethical worldview that emphasizes the interconnectedness of all people—“I am because we are.” Ubuntu rejects individualism and affirms the community as the foundation of moral life. It advocates for empathy, mutual care, and justice as the basis for human dignity and social restoration (Tutu, 1999). This aligns closely with post-conflict needs for healing, rehumanization, and inclusive dialogue.

In addition to ubuntu, African ethics emphasizes *communalism*, where identity is embedded within relational networks. Conflicts are not seen as isolated incidents but as disruptions of communal equilibrium that require collective response. The goal is not punishment but the restoration of social harmony through truth-telling, forgiveness, and reparative action (Mbiti, 1990). This restorative model has influenced transitional justice mechanisms such as Rwanda’s *gacaca* courts, which incorporated public confession and community participation.

Moreover, African traditions frame justice as relational rather than retributive. Unlike Western legal models that prioritize abstract rights and procedural fairness, African justice systems often prioritize reconciliation, compensation, and reintegration of offenders into the community. This ethical orientation supports a dialogical approach to peacebuilding that privileges listening, mediation, and moral accountability over punitive measures (Murithi, 2006). Thus, African philosophies provide both conceptual and practical foundations for interreligious peace dialogue.

These traditions also value intersubjectivity—the recognition that each person’s humanity is affirmed through the humanity of others. In contexts of religious conflict, this principle fosters the ethical imperative to see the other not as a threat but as a mirror of one’s own dignity and vulnerability. In this way, African ethical systems contribute profoundly to a hermeneutics of peace rooted in empathy, relational identity, and moral responsibility (Ramose, 2002).

**3. Ethics of Understanding in Interreligious Dialogue**

**Concept of "ethics of understanding" as a foundation for genuine peace.**

The concept of an "ethics of understanding" calls for a moral framework rooted in dialogical engagement, mutual respect, and the pursuit of meaning across religious and cultural lines. In post-conflict African societies, where trauma and mistrust linger, peacebuilding efforts must transcend legalistic or superficial agreements and delve into the human capacity for empathetic interpretation. Drawing from Hans-Georg Gadamer’s hermeneutics, understanding becomes not merely cognitive but ethical—a willingness to encounter the Other in their difference and to remain open to transformation through dialogue (Gadamer, 2004).

This ethical orientation shifts the peacebuilding paradigm from one of control or management to one of transformative relationship-building. As Palmer (2007) notes, genuine understanding arises not from the imposition of one’s worldview but from a shared space where different narratives coexist and interact. Such an ethics enables participants to see the Other not as a threat or a project but as a co-bearer of meaning and humanity. It foregrounds a moral responsibility to engage difference without prejudice or domination.

In African contexts, where colonial and postcolonial disruptions have deeply affected religious and cultural cohesion, the ethics of understanding becomes particularly crucial. Wiredu (1996) argues that African philosophical traditions emphasize consensus and communal dialogue as essential modes of ethical life. By anchoring peacebuilding in dialogical ethics, interreligious initiatives can draw from indigenous wisdom to reestablish bonds of trust and shared purpose. This synergy between African ethics and hermeneutics fosters a peace rooted in lived experience, not imposed agendas.

Furthermore, the ethics of understanding challenges the reduction of religion to identity politics or utilitarian agendas in conflict zones. It seeks to restore the moral and existential depth of religious life, reminding communities that faith can be a site of healing and reconciliation. As Appleby (2000) emphasizes, religious actors, when guided by ethical principles of understanding, can contribute profoundly to the moral reconstruction of society.

**The role of listening, empathy, and openness in interfaith encounters.**

Listening, empathy, and openness form the bedrock of meaningful interreligious dialogue. These virtues are not passive dispositions but active practices that involve suspending judgment, entering into the world of the Other, and allowing oneself to be reshaped by the encounter. In post-conflict settings, where wounds run deep and suspicion abounds, such ethical engagement is indispensable for genuine reconciliation (Swidler, 1983).

Philosophically, this ethos of empathetic listening aligns with Gadamer’s notion of the “fusion of horizons,” which requires each participant in dialogue to relinquish the certainty of their perspective in pursuit of mutual understanding (Gadamer, 2004). This hermeneutical openness is both epistemological and moral, demanding vulnerability and respect. In African societies, such relational virtues are echoed in the communal principle of *ubuntu*, which affirms that a person becomes a person through others (Mbiti, 1990).

Empathy also serves as a counter to the dehumanization that often accompanies interreligious violence. By humanizing the Other and recognizing their suffering, dialogue participants enact a form of ethical solidarity that transcends doctrinal differences. As Lederach (2005) argues, sustainable peace requires not only political settlements but also moral imagination—the capacity to imagine and feel what the Other experiences, thus creating a space for healing and shared future-making.

In practical terms, interfaith initiatives must cultivate environments where listening is institutionalized as a spiritual and ethical discipline. This includes training leaders and communities in dialogical skills, creating safe spaces for expression, and prioritizing relational over strategic goals. When these practices are rooted in empathy and openness, interreligious dialogue becomes a transformative force in post-conflict peacebuilding (Cornille, 2013).

**Contrast with instrumental and superficial approaches to religion in peace processes.**

Too often, religion is approached instrumentally in peacebuilding efforts—as a source of legitimacy, a channel for political messaging, or a mechanism for social control. Such superficial engagement treats religious leaders and communities as tools rather than as moral agents, thereby undermining the depth and richness of religious life. This reductionist view can exacerbate tensions by reinforcing sectarian identities instead of addressing the deeper spiritual and ethical dimensions of conflict (Haynes, 2007).

In contrast, a hermeneutical-philosophical approach calls for a more profound engagement with religion—not merely as a system of beliefs, but as a lived horizon of meaning. This requires recognizing that faith traditions possess internal resources for peace, forgiveness, and justice that cannot be accessed through external manipulation alone. As Tutu (1999) demonstrated in South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, religious frameworks can offer powerful narratives of healing when authentically engaged.

Superficial approaches also ignore the need for epistemic humility and ethical transformation in peacebuilding processes. When religion is instrumentalized, it often leads to performative dialogues that lack depth and sincerity. As Kadayifci-Orellana (2006) warns, without a commitment to genuine understanding and relational healing, such dialogues may do more harm than good by entrenching power imbalances and silencing marginalized voices.

To avoid these pitfalls, peace practitioners must adopt a deeper, ethics-driven approach to religious engagement—one that centers understanding, mutual learning, and co-creation of meaning. Only then can interreligious dialogue serve as a vehicle for lasting peace rooted in human dignity and spiritual integrity (Little & Appleby, 2004).

**4. The Role of Narrative, Memory, and Meaning**

**Importance of storytelling in African cultures for healing and identity.**

Storytelling plays a vital role in African cultures as a means of transmitting knowledge, preserving identity, and facilitating communal healing. In post-conflict societies, stories allow individuals and communities to process trauma, assert agency, and reconstruct shared narratives of belonging. Through oral traditions, songs, and testimonies, African storytelling offers a rich resource for interreligious dialogue that honors memory and opens pathways to reconciliation (Achebe, 2000).

Narrative practices in Africa are deeply relational, often emphasizing collective over individual experience. This resonates with Gadamer’s hermeneutics, which views understanding as historically and linguistically embedded. Storytelling thus becomes a dialogical act—an encounter between past and present, self and Other, aimed at generating new meanings. As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (1986) notes, reclaiming indigenous narratives is essential for cultural and psychological decolonization.

In interfaith contexts, storytelling can help bridge theological divides by foregrounding lived experiences over abstract doctrines. When religious communities share their stories of suffering and resilience, they discover common ethical ground rooted in human vulnerability. This process fosters empathy and counters religious stereotypes that often fuel conflict. As Lederach (2005) observes, peace emerges from the weaving together of personal and communal narratives into a moral tapestry of hope.

Furthermore, storytelling empowers marginalized voices that are often excluded from formal peace negotiations. Women, youth, and minority groups can use narrative as a tool of resistance, healing, and political assertion. By incorporating storytelling into interreligious dialogue, peacebuilders can ensure a more inclusive and emotionally resonant process—one that acknowledges pain, affirms identity, and gestures toward shared futures (Denis, 2007).

**Memory as a space for moral reflection and reconciliation.**

Memory in post-conflict societies is not merely a record of past events but a contested and moral terrain where communities grapple with questions of justice, accountability, and forgiveness. Interreligious dialogue that engages memory must therefore be attentive to the wounds of history, the politics of remembrance, and the ethical imperative to reckon with the past. As Ricoeur (2004) argues, memory is both constructive and interpretive—it shapes identity and orients action.

In many African societies, communal remembrance rituals such as libation ceremonies, storytelling circles, and ancestral veneration serve as moral frameworks for reconciling with the past. These practices invite collective reflection and reaffirm the dignity of those who have suffered. When integrated into interfaith dialogue, such memory work creates a space where moral responsibility can be shared and healing initiated (Waghid, 2014).

Memory also serves as a bulwark against historical amnesia, which can perpetuate cycles of violence. By naming injustices and honoring victims, religious communities play a vital role in fostering ethical accountability. Truth-telling, when framed within a spirit of reconciliation rather than vengeance, opens possibilities for moral regeneration. As Tutu (1999) emphasized, remembering is a sacred act—one that grounds forgiveness in the recognition of pain and the affirmation of humanity.

Importantly, dialogical memory resists the instrumentalization of history for sectarian purposes. It invites multiple perspectives and embraces ambiguity, thereby cultivating a more nuanced and compassionate understanding of the past. This hermeneutical approach to memory fosters humility and prepares communities to engage in peacebuilding with integrity and hope (Palmer, 2007).

**Meaning-making in religious traditions as a basis for shared values.**

Religious traditions are powerful sources of meaning-making that shape how individuals and communities understand suffering, justice, and peace. In interreligious dialogue, engaging these symbolic and moral worlds enables participants to discover shared values that transcend doctrinal differences. The act of interpreting sacred texts and rituals through a hermeneutical lens can illuminate ethical commonalities essential for peacebuilding (Tracy, 1987).

In African contexts, religious meaning is often deeply intertwined with social life, environmental stewardship, and community welfare. This holistic worldview aligns with the ethics of interdependence and mutual responsibility found in many African philosophies. By drawing on these resonances, interfaith dialogues can foster a sense of spiritual kinship and collective moral purpose (Gyekye, 1997).

Meaning-making also provides existential grounding for individuals grappling with the aftermath of violence. Through prayer, ritual, and theological reflection, religious communities help people make sense of suffering and envision a redemptive future. These practices cultivate resilience and hope, which are indispensable for peace and reconciliation. As Appleby (2000) notes, religious meaning, when guided by compassion and justice, can inspire moral courage and social transformation.

Finally, shared values discovered through meaning-making can inform concrete peace initiatives—such as joint service projects, community rebuilding, and advocacy for justice. When religious communities find common ground in their visions of the good, they become agents of healing rather than antagonists. This transformation is only possible when dialogue moves beyond tolerance to the deeper work of interpretive and ethical engagement (Cornille, 2013).

**5. Interreligious Dialogue as Transformative Practice**

**Beyond tolerance: toward mutual recognition and human dignity.**

The goal of interreligious dialogue must extend beyond mere tolerance to deeper forms of mutual recognition and affirmation of shared human dignity. Tolerance, while valuable as a first step, often implies a passive coexistence without genuine engagement or transformation. In contrast, mutual recognition involves acknowledging the other as an equal moral agent, worthy of respect and dialogical partnership. This shift transforms dialogue from a strategic engagement into a moral and spiritual encounter (Forst, 2002).

Mutual recognition requires a deconstruction of prejudices and assumptions that have historically shaped interfaith relations, particularly in post-colonial African contexts. According to Taylor (1994), recognition is essential to identity formation; when one’s religious identity is ignored or misrepresented, it leads to social and psychological harm. Interreligious dialogue thus becomes a vehicle for restoring dignity, particularly among marginalized or demonized faith groups. Through honest engagement, communities begin to see one another not as threats but as partners in peacebuilding.

In African philosophies, the ethic of *ubuntu* reinforces this orientation. *Ubuntu* posits that one’s humanity is realized in and through the humanity of others—*“I am because we are.”* This ethical grounding makes mutual recognition a communal, rather than individual, imperative. Interfaith dialogue rooted in *ubuntu* creates spaces where diverse communities affirm each other’s sacred worth, leading to social cohesion and moral solidarity (Gade, 2012). By emphasizing mutual recognition, dialogue shifts from transactional coexistence to relational transformation.

**Case examples or theoretical illustrations of transformative dialogue.**

Transformative interreligious dialogue is exemplified in several African initiatives that have prioritized healing and reconciliation. One prominent case is the Interfaith Mediation Centre in Kaduna, Nigeria, co-founded by Imam Muhammad Ashafa and Pastor James Wuye. These former adversaries turned peacebuilders model how dialogue, when grounded in repentance, forgiveness, and mutual learning, can dismantle long-standing hostilities. Their story demonstrates the capacity of faith-based dialogue to rehumanize the Other and rebuild broken relationships (Smock, 2002).

The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) also illustrates how religious frameworks can inform transformative dialogue. Archbishop Desmond Tutu’s leadership infused the TRC with Christian notions of forgiveness, justice, and confession, while also honoring African traditions of truth-telling and restorative justice. The TRC was not a perfect process, but it created a moral space where victims and perpetrators could share their stories and envision a reconciled future (Tutu, 1999). This dialogical model integrated narrative, ritual, and ethical reflection in ways that transcended mere policy.

Theoretically, transformative dialogue draws from Paulo Freire’s (1970) notion of *conscientization*—a deepening of awareness that leads to moral agency and social change. When applied to interreligious engagement, this means moving from surface-level understanding to a critical interrogation of power, history, and shared values. Transformative dialogue is not merely about doctrinal agreement but about forging new ethical possibilities and communal imaginaries. It recognizes that peace is not the absence of conflict but the presence of justice, empathy, and collective vision.

**Dialogue as a process of epistemological and ethical reorientation.**

True interreligious dialogue demands a rethinking of how knowledge and ethics are constructed—what Gadamer (2004) called a “fusion of horizons.” Participants must enter dialogue with the humility to recognize the partiality of their own perspectives and the legitimacy of others’ epistemic worlds. This epistemological shift is foundational for ethical reorientation, as it moves individuals and communities toward deeper moral sensitivity and intellectual openness.

In African contexts, this involves bridging Western philosophical models with indigenous ways of knowing, which often emphasize relationality, oral tradition, and the sacredness of life. As Higgs (2012) argues, indigenous African epistemologies offer holistic frameworks that integrate emotion, spirituality, and community, countering the hyper-rationalist tendencies of Western thought. Interfaith dialogue that honors these epistemologies becomes an act of decolonization and ethical renewal.

Moreover, this reorientation calls into question the binaries that have historically separated sacred from secular, faith from reason, and tradition from modernity. It instead fosters a dialogical imagination that can hold multiple truths in tension, enabling communities to co-create moral visions for the future. Such ethical pluralism does not mean relativism but a commitment to learning from difference and allowing the Other to become a teacher. In doing so, interreligious dialogue becomes not a compromise of truth but a deeper journey into it (Cornille, 2013).

**6. Critique of Instrumentalist Views of Religion**

**Examination of how religion is often used as a tool or obstacle in peacebuilding.**

Religion is frequently instrumentalized in peacebuilding as either a convenient tool for political mobilization or a scapegoat for conflict. This reductionist approach overlooks the complexity and depth of religious traditions, framing them as either inherently violent or inherently peaceful. Such binary thinking fails to account for the contextual factors—economic, political, and historical—that shape religious expressions and identities (Juergensmeyer, 2003).

When religion is treated merely as a means to an end, its ethical and spiritual potential is compromised. Governments and NGOs may co-opt religious leaders for legitimacy, expecting them to pacify communities without addressing root causes of conflict. This manipulative use of religion undermines the authenticity of religious engagement and may deepen mistrust among communities. As Mahmood (2005) warns, instrumentalism often renders religious actors passive agents in externally driven agendas, stripping them of agency and voice.

Furthermore, this approach can ignore intra-religious dynamics and the contested nature of religious authority. Not all religious actors speak with one voice, and conflicts within traditions can be as significant as those between them. Effective peacebuilding must therefore engage religion not as a monolith but as a plural and dynamic force. Recognizing this complexity allows for a more nuanced and respectful partnership between religious and secular actors in post-conflict reconstruction (Appleby, 2000).

**Dangers of politicization and reductionism in religious discourse.**

Politicizing religion involves framing theological doctrines or religious identities as instruments for achieving political goals. This strategy is often employed by elites to consolidate power, marginalize opposition, or incite divisions. In the African context, such politicization has fueled sectarian tensions, exacerbated ethnic divides, and undermined the credibility of religious institutions. By collapsing religious and political identities, this practice erodes the spiritual autonomy of faith communities (Haynes, 2007).

Reductionism compounds this problem by portraying religion in simplistic and essentialist terms. Media and policy discourse often reduce Islam, Christianity, or African Traditional Religions to monolithic ideologies, ignoring the diversity within each tradition. This leads to stereotypes that distort public perception and hinder genuine dialogue. As Said (1978) cautioned in his critique of Orientalism, such reductive portrayals serve political agendas and hinder cross-cultural understanding.

The ethical consequences of politicization and reductionism are severe. They delegitimize religious voices that seek peace, exacerbate identity-based violence, and entrench mistrust among communities. Interreligious dialogue must actively resist these tendencies by promoting critical reflection, historical consciousness, and theological depth. Only by recovering the richness and plurality of religious traditions can dialogue become a force for ethical renewal and social healing (Cornille, 2013).

**Call for a paradigm shift in how religion is engaged in public and peacebuilding spheres.**

To overcome these limitations, a paradigm shift is needed—one that repositions religion not as a tool but as a partner in the moral reconstruction of society. This shift involves engaging religious traditions on their own terms, with respect for their internal logic, ethical teachings, and spiritual insights. It also requires building relationships of trust and reciprocity between religious and secular actors, rooted in shared commitment to justice and dignity (Cady & Hurd, 2010).

This paradigm shift must also be epistemological. Instead of viewing religion as an obstacle to modernity, peacebuilding frameworks should acknowledge its role in shaping moral imagination, social solidarity, and long-term commitment. As Casanova (1994) argues, religion is not retreating from the public sphere but reemerging as a critical force in global ethics. Dialogue that incorporates this insight can harness the transformative capacities of faith for the common good.

Practically, this means redesigning peacebuilding programs to include religious voices from the start, ensuring theological literacy among practitioners, and supporting grassroots interfaith initiatives. It also entails a commitment to long-term engagement rather than event-based interventions. By making room for religion as a complex and constructive force, peacebuilding can become more holistic, inclusive, and contextually grounded (Appleby, 2000; Smock, 2002).

**7. Implications for Peacebuilding in Africa**

**Practical recommendations for policymakers, religious leaders, and educators.**

For peacebuilding to be sustainable in post-conflict African societies, stakeholders—including policymakers, religious leaders, and educators—must adopt a collaborative and ethically grounded approach. Policymakers should prioritize inclusive governance structures that institutionalize interreligious dialogue as part of peace processes. This could involve setting up national interfaith councils, creating mediation platforms, and funding community-level dialogue programs. State actors must recognize the moral and cultural authority of religious institutions and integrate them as partners in policymaking (Boutros-Ghali, 1995).

Religious leaders, on their part, have a moral obligation to transcend sectarian interests and champion peace as a theological imperative. They should invest in theological education that promotes peace, reconciliation, and pluralism. This includes critically reinterpreting sacred texts in ways that affirm human dignity and nonviolence. Moreover, interfaith coalitions should be empowered to speak with a united voice against violence, corruption, and injustice, fostering moral clarity in divided societies (Appleby, 2000).

Educators also play a transformative role by fostering interreligious literacy from early education through higher learning. Curricula should include components on comparative religion, conflict resolution, and ethics of dialogue. Schools can become laboratories for peaceful coexistence when students learn to appreciate religious diversity through structured exposure and reflective engagement. By equipping learners with dialogical skills, critical thinking, and empathy, education can serve as a long-term investment in social cohesion (Levy, 2010).

**Integration of hermeneutical ethics in post-conflict reconstruction.**

The incorporation of hermeneutical ethics into post-conflict reconstruction processes offers a framework for deeper moral healing and inclusive justice. Rooted in the philosophical traditions of thinkers like Hans-Georg Gadamer, hermeneutical ethics emphasizes understanding through dialogue, reflexivity, and openness to the Other (Gadamer, 2004). Post-conflict processes such as truth commissions, reparations, and community healing forums can benefit from this approach by framing them not only as legal mechanisms but as spaces for ethical listening and mutual transformation.

In African societies, where oral tradition and communal narratives play a central role, hermeneutical ethics aligns with indigenous practices of restorative justice. The emphasis on storytelling, symbolic reconciliation, and ritual acknowledgment of harm resonates with many traditional African conflict resolution models (Murithi, 2006). This suggests that reconstructive justice efforts should be culturally embedded and dialogically structured to reflect both philosophical and local ethical worldviews.

Furthermore, hermeneutical ethics offers an alternative to punitive or technocratic approaches that often dominate international peacebuilding interventions. Rather than focusing solely on outcomes, it prioritizes the moral quality of the process—how people are heard, acknowledged, and reintegrated. This orientation is vital in repairing broken relationships and restoring trust among religious and ethnic communities. It turns peacebuilding into a shared ethical journey rather than a top-down policy prescription (Lederach, 2005).

**Cultivating interreligious literacy and dialogical competence.**

Interreligious literacy is essential in a continent as religiously plural as Africa, where misunderstanding and manipulation of religious difference have often fueled conflict. Interreligious literacy entails more than factual knowledge of other faiths; it involves developing attitudes of respect, curiosity, and ethical responsibility. Individuals must learn how to navigate religious difference without resorting to relativism or superiority. This competence is particularly important for those in leadership positions—political, educational, and spiritual (Patel & Hartman, 2009).

Dialogical competence builds on this literacy by equipping individuals with the skills to engage in constructive, respectful, and transformative conversations. These include active listening, empathy, nonviolent communication, and the capacity for critical reflection. Institutions such as universities, seminaries, and civic organizations can play a central role in fostering these competencies through workshops, interfaith exchanges, and community dialogues (Cornille, 2013). Religious institutions, in particular, must model dialogical ethics in both internal and external relations.

Equipping future generations with these skills also serves a preventive function, making societies more resilient to extremist ideologies, religious nationalism, and xenophobia. It builds social capital by strengthening trust across difference. Over time, dialogical competence creates the cultural infrastructure necessary for peace to be sustained—not merely through treaties or institutions but through everyday interactions. This human infrastructure is the most durable defense against conflict (Smock, 2002).

**8. Conclusion**

**Summary of key arguments.**

This article has explored how interreligious dialogue, framed through a hermeneutical-philosophical lens, can serve as a vital tool for peacebuilding in post-conflict African societies. It emphasized the ethical dimension of dialogue—not just as a strategic engagement, but as a transformative practice rooted in empathy, recognition, and shared meaning. Drawing from both African ethical traditions and the thought of Hans-Georg Gadamer, the study proposed an “ethics of understanding” as foundational for reconciliation, dignity, and sustainable peace.

The discussion highlighted the role of narrative, memory, and meaning-making in shaping interreligious ethics, demonstrating how African storytelling traditions and religious rituals can contribute to healing and moral regeneration. By advancing a dialogical and interpretive approach, the article critiqued superficial or instrumental uses of religion in peacebuilding and called for a paradigm shift in how religion is understood and engaged in public life. It also offered practical recommendations for various stakeholders, from policymakers to educators, aimed at embedding dialogical ethics in peacebuilding initiatives.

In sum, interreligious dialogue must be approached not as an optional add-on to peace processes, but as a moral and philosophical necessity. When grounded in mutual recognition and epistemological humility, such dialogue can rebuild fractured relationships, restore communal trust, and foster a culture of peace that is both ethical and enduring. Its transformative power lies not in erasing difference, but in embracing it as a source of moral insight and relational depth (Cornille, 2013; Lederach, 2005).

**Reiteration of interreligious dialogue as a pathway to ethical peace.**

The ultimate value of interreligious dialogue lies in its capacity to generate ethical peace—peace that is not merely the absence of violence, but the active presence of justice, reconciliation, and human flourishing. This vision of peace cannot be engineered through diplomatic negotiations or institutional reforms alone. It requires a transformation in how people understand and relate to one another across religious boundaries. It demands that societies cultivate empathy, listen across difference, and foster relationships that dignify all parties involved (Lederach, 2005).

In African contexts, where religion is deeply woven into social, political, and cultural life, such dialogue is especially urgent. Faith communities possess vast resources for healing, truth-telling, and moral imagination. By engaging these resources ethically and dialogically, post-conflict societies can address historical grievances, prevent future violence, and build inclusive communities. As Appleby (2000) notes, the ambivalence of the sacred means religion can fuel both peace and conflict—thus, the challenge is to harness its constructive power through ethical engagement.

The ethics of understanding proposed in this study offers a way forward. It invites all parties—religious and secular, African and global—to rethink peace not as a technocratic solution but as a relational, moral, and hermeneutical process. Interreligious dialogue becomes a pedagogy of peace, teaching individuals and communities to see, listen, and act with integrity. Such dialogue has the potential to turn post-conflict transitions into genuine moral transformations.

**Future research and policy directions.**

Future research should further explore how hermeneutical and African ethical frameworks can inform interreligious peacebuilding in different African regions. Comparative studies between nations or case studies on grassroots initiatives could illuminate best practices and context-specific challenges. Moreover, interdisciplinary work combining theology, philosophy, anthropology, and peace studies would deepen the conceptual grounding of dialogical ethics and strengthen its applicability in policy contexts (Levy, 2010).

Policy directions should prioritize capacity building for interfaith leaders, institutionalize interreligious engagement in peace processes, and incorporate interreligious ethics into national education curricula. Governments, NGOs, and religious organizations must collaborate to build frameworks that support long-term, community-driven dialogue. This includes not only funding and logistics but also ethical oversight and cultural sensitivity (Cady & Hurd, 2010).

Finally, more attention must be given to youth engagement. Africa's youthful population represents both a challenge and an opportunity. Empowering young people with interreligious literacy, dialogical competence, and moral leadership skills can change the trajectory of entire societies. Through education, mentorship, and digital engagement, a new generation of peacebuilders can emerge—equipped not only with knowledge but with the ethical orientation needed to build just and peaceful futures.

**References**

Achebe, C. (2000). Home and Exile. Oxford University Press.

Appleby, R. S. (2000). The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation. Rowman & Littlefield.

Bouta, T., Kadayifci-Orellana, A. S., & Abu-Nimer, M. (2005). Faith-Based Peace-Building: Mapping and Analysis of Christian, Muslim and Multi-Faith Actors. Netherlands Institute of International Relations.

Cady, L. E., & Hurd, E. S. (2010). Comparative Secularisms in a Global Age. Palgrave Macmillan.

Casanova, J. (1994). Public Religions in the Modern World. University of Chicago Press.

Cornille, C. (2013). The Im-possibility of Interreligious Dialogue. Crossroad Publishing.

Denis, P. (2007). The Morality of Memory: Truth, Healing and Reconciliation in South Africa. In N. Waghid (Ed.), Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa: 10 Years On. Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Forst, R. (2002). Contexts of Justice: Political Philosophy Beyond Liberalism and Communitarianism. University of California Press.

Freire, P. (1970). Pedagogy of the Oppressed. Herder and Herder.

Gade, C. B. N. (2012). What is Ubuntu? Different Interpretations among South Africans of African Descent. South African Journal of Philosophy, 31(3), 484–503.

Gadamer, H.-G. (2004). Truth and Method (2nd ed., J. Weinsheimer & D. G. Marshall, Trans.). Continuum. (Original work published 1960)

Galtung, J. (1996). Peace by Peaceful Means: Peace and Conflict, Development and Civilization. Sage.

Gyekye, K. (1997). Tradition and Modernity: Philosophical Reflections on the African Experience. Oxford University Press.

Haynes, J. (2007). Religion and Development: Conflict or Cooperation? Palgrave Macmillan.

Higgs, P. (2012). African Philosophy and the Decolonisation of Education in Africa: Some Critical Reflections. Educational Philosophy and Theory, 44(S2), 37–55.

Juergensmeyer, M. (2003). Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence. University of California Press.

Kadayifci-Orellana, S. A. (2006). Interfaith Dialogue and Peacebuilding: A Field Guide. United States Institute of Peace.

Lederach, J. P. (2005). The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace. Oxford University Press.

Levy, J. T. (2010). Intercultural Education and the Challenge of Religious Diversity. Educational Theory, 60(2), 223–240.

Little, D., & Appleby, R. S. (2004). A Moment of Opportunity? The Promise of Religious Peacebuilding in an Era of Religious and Ethnic Conflict. In H. Coward & G. S. Smith (Eds.), Religion and Peacebuilding (pp. 1–23). SUNY Press.

Little, D. (2007). Religion, Violent Conflict, and Peacebuilding. In C. A. Snyder (Ed.), Contemporary Conflicts and the Role of Religion: A Critical Assessment. United States Institute of Peace Press.

Mahmood, S. (2005). Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject. Princeton University Press.

Mbiti, J. S. (1990). African Religions and Philosophy (2nd ed.). Heinemann.

Murithi, T. (2006). African Approaches to Building Peace and Social Solidarity. United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR).

Nicholson, S. (2013). The Spirit of Reconciliation: A Practical Guide for Everyday Peacemakers. Wipf and Stock Publishers.

Palmer, P. J. (1998). The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher’s Life. Jossey-Bass.

Palmer, P. J. (2007). A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life. Jossey-Bass.

Patel, E., & Hartman, D. (2009). Building the Interfaith Youth Movement: Beyond Dialogue to Action. Rowman & Littlefield.

Ramose, M. B. (2002). African Philosophy through Ubuntu. Mond Books.

Ricoeur, P. (2004). Memory, History, Forgetting (K. Blamey & D. Pellauer, Trans.). University of Chicago Press.

Said, E. W. (1978). Orientalism. Pantheon Books.

Smock, D. R. (2002). Interfaith Dialogue and Peacebuilding. United States Institute of Peace Press.

Swidler, L. (1983). Religious Liberty and Interreligious Dialogue. Edwin Mellen Press.

Swidler, L. (2014). Dialogue for Interreligious Understanding: Strategies for the Transformation of Culture-Shaping Institutions. Palgrave Macmillan.

Taylor, C. (1994). Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition. Princeton University Press.

Tracy, D. (1987). Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope. University of Chicago Press.

Tutu, D. (1999). No Future Without Forgiveness. Doubleday.

Volf, M. (1996). Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation. Abingdon Press.

Waghid, Y. (2014). Pedagogy Out of Bounds: Untamed Variations of Democratic Education. Sense Publishers.

Wiredu, K. (1996). Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective. Indiana University Press.