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FAITH AND BELONGING: RELIGIOUS IDENTITY AND THE CRISIS OF CITIZENSHIP IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT
Nigeria's religious landscape remains a central axis of social identity and political life, intersecting with ethnicity, region, and party politics to shape who is recognised as a full member of the nation. Despite formal claims to secularism, citizenship is often mediated through faith, leading to unequal access to rights, protection, and public goods. While previous scholarship attributes these disparities to class inequality, weak state capacity, corruption, or federalism, such explanations do not fully account for the divergent experiences of similarly marginalised populations across religious lines. This study argues that religious identity functions as a primary boundary of belonging, influencing political trust, communal solidarity, and access to state resources. Employing social identity theory and a citizenship-as-practice framework, the research adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining national datasets, regional case studies, interviews, observations, and policy analysis to compare the influence of religion with other socio-political factors. Focusing on 2018–2025, it examines a conflict-affected Middle Belt state and a southern state marked by religion–state tensions. Findings reveal that religious affiliation consistently shapes access to documentation, protection, political representation, and social recognition, even where class, governance, and institutional capacity are comparable. The study concludes that religion is a decisive determinant of substantive citizenship in Nigeria and recommends inclusive policies that protect minority faiths, promote equitable access to state services, and strengthen interfaith collaboration to foster social cohesion and civic equality.

Keywords: religious identity, citizenship, inclusion, Nigeria, social identity

Introduction

Nigeria's religious landscape remains a central axis of social identity and political life, intersecting with ethnicity, region, and party politics to shape who is recognised as a full member of the nation and who is excluded from rights, resources, and security. These dynamics have intensified amid growing insecurity, internal displacement, regional policy differences (including Sharia-related measures), and public debates over Nigerian citizenship and belonging (Kukah 2011; Mustapha 2007).

National surveys indicate that Christianity and Islam are nearly equal in population share, underscoring deep religious pluralism (Pew Research Center 2015). By late 2024, Nigeria hosted about 2.3 million internally displaced persons, many uprooted by ethno-religious violence, highlighting the uneven distribution of protection and public goods across religious lines (International Organization for Migration 2024; Adebanwi 2017).

While existing scholarship attributes Nigeria's citizenship crisis to class inequality, weak state capacity, corruption, or federalism (World Bank 2020; Bach 2012; Smith 2007; Suberu 2001), these factors do not fully explain why similarly marginalised populations experience divergent access to rights and recognition along religious lines. This study argues that religious identity is more decisive because it functions as a primary boundary of belonging, shaping political trust, access to protection, and communal solidarity. In contexts of weak institutions and corruption, religious networks often substitute for state functions while privileging co-religionists in aid, security, and opportunities (Horowitz 1985; Marshall 2009).

Using social identity theory and a citizenship-as-practice lens, the study examines how faith-based belonging structures institutional inclusion or exclusion across regional contexts (Turner 1999; Isin and Nielsen 2008). A mixed-methods approach integrates national datasets, regional case studies, interviews, observations, and policy analysis to compare the relative weight of religion against class, governance capacity, corruption, and federal arrangements.

Focusing on 2018–2025, the study analyses a conflict-affected Middle Belt state and a southern state marked by religion–state tensions, situating findings within national trends. It demonstrates how religious identity shapes access to documentation, protection, representation, and social acceptance, undermining equal citizenship even where other variables are comparable. The study aims to inform inclusive policies that address religion-based exclusion and promote substantive citizenship in Nigeria.

Research Questions

1. How does religious identity shape access to citizenship rights and state protection in Nigeria, particularly in contexts where class position, state capacity, and governance conditions are comparable?
2. In what ways do religious networks and institutions mediate inclusion or exclusion from public goods, security, and political representation across Nigeria's diverse regional settings?
3. How do state policies and federal arrangements interact with religious belonging to influence recognition, documentation, and everyday practices of citizenship in conflict-affected and religion–state tension zones between 2018 and 2025?

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a mixed-methods, comparative case study design to examine how religious identity shapes access to citizenship rights, protection, and recognition in Nigeria. By integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches, the design enables both generalisable insights

and context-sensitive understanding of how religious belonging structures inclusion and exclusion across diverse governance environments. A comparative framework is employed to assess the relative explanatory power of religious identity vis-à-vis competing variables (class, state capacity, corruption, and federalism) across two strategically selected states: a conflict-affected Middle Belt state; and a southern state marked by religion–state tensions. This design allows for controlled comparison where socio-economic and institutional conditions are similar but religious dynamics differ.

Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by two complementary theoretical perspectives that together provide a robust lens for understanding the role of religious identity in citizenship. Social Identity Theory (Turner 1999) explains how individuals' sense of belonging to a particular group shapes in-group preferences, trust, and access to resources. It highlights the ways group membership influences perceptions of legitimacy, solidarity, and entitlement, offering insight into why members of different religious communities may experience unequal access to state protection and civic goods.

Complementing this, the citizenship-as-practice framework (Isin and Nielsen 2008) conceptualises citizenship not merely as a legal status but as a set of everyday practices enacted through interactions with institutions, communities, and the state. This perspective allows the study to examine how religious identity is expressed, negotiated, and reinforced in daily life, shaping patterns of inclusion and exclusion.

By integrating these approaches, the study can analyse how religious identity functions as a boundary of belonging that structures institutional behaviour, mediates social recognition, and influences the lived experiences of citizenship across Nigeria's diverse contexts.

Data Sources

This study draws on both quantitative and qualitative data to capture the multiple dimensions through which religious identity shapes citizenship in Nigeria.

Quantitative Data

National and subnational datasets will be analysed to identify patterns of inequality in access to rights and public services. Key sources include socio-economic indicators from the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), registration data from the National Identity Management Commission (NIMC), displacement and security datasets such as those maintained by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and ACLED, and governance and poverty indicators from the World Bank.

The quantitative analysis will focus on disparities in civil documentation, particularly National Identity Number (NIN) registration, access to education, healthcare, and security, and the correlations between religious demography and service provision. By mapping these patterns, the study aims to establish whether and how religious identity influences access to state resources, controlling for other socio-economic and governance variables.

Qualitative Data

Qualitative data will complement the statistical analysis by providing insight into lived experiences, perceptions, and institutional practices. Semi-structured interviews will be conducted with community members across different religious groups, local government officials, religious leaders, and representatives of civil society and humanitarian organisations. A purposive and snowball sampling strategy will be employed to ensure representation across religious affiliations, gender, and socio-economic categories.

Focus group discussions will explore communal perceptions of belonging, discrimination, and access to state services, highlighting how social and religious identities shape everyday

citizenship experiences. Additionally, participant observation in public institutions—such as local government offices and aid distribution points—will document the enactment of citizenship practices and patterns of inclusion and exclusion. By adopting quantitative and qualitative data, the study ensures a comprehensive analysis of how religious identity interacts with institutional structures and social practices to influence recognition, protection, and access to civic rights.

Analytical Strategy

The study integrates quantitative and qualitative methods to examine how religious identity shapes citizenship in Nigeria. Quantitative analysis will use descriptive statistics to map disparities and regression models to test whether religious affiliation predicts access to services while controlling for income, location, and education, with comparative state-level analysis to assess regional variations.

Qualitative data will be analysed through thematic coding, discourse analysis of narratives on belonging and exclusion, and process tracing to identify mechanisms linking religion to citizenship outcomes. Triangulation of datasets, interviews, focus groups, and observations will ensure validity and reveal convergences or contradictions, providing a robust understanding of the influence of religious identity relative to class, state capacity, corruption, and federalism.

Social Identity Theory in Group Boundaries and Intergroup Relations

Social Identity Theory (SIT), developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner in the late 1970s, provides a foundational framework for understanding how individuals derive part of their self-concept from their membership in social groups and how this process shapes intergroup relations (Tajfel and Turner 34). At its core, SIT posits that people categorise themselves and others into social groups (such as religious, ethnic, or political communities) in order to make sense of the social world and to locate themselves within it. This categorisation establishes symbolic boundaries between "in-groups" (those who share a common identity) and "out-groups" (those perceived as different or opposing) (Abrams and Hogg 100).

Group boundaries function both cognitively and socially. Cognitively, they help individuals simplify complex social realities by organising people into meaningful categories. Socially, these boundaries often produce preferential treatment towards members of one's own group (in-group favouritism) and, in some cases, discrimination or hostility toward out-group members (out-group derogation) (Tajfel 25). These dynamics underpin much of the intergroup tension observed in plural societies, where identity markers such as religion or ethnicity become powerful tools for social differentiation.

Importantly, SIT also recognises that group boundaries are not fixed but are negotiated through social comparison and intergroup contact. When intergroup relations are competitive or unequal, boundary distinctions tend to harden, leading to stereotyping and conflict. Conversely, under conditions of cooperation and shared goals, intergroup contact can reduce bias and foster more inclusive forms of identification (Turner 17). Thus, Social Identity Theory provides both a diagnostic and transformative lens: it reveals how identities create social divides, yet also how those divides might be bridged through re-categorisation and superordinate group identities.

On the other hand, the citizenship-as-practice framework redefines citizenship not merely as a legal status granted by the state but as an active, lived, and negotiated practice performed through everyday social, political, and cultural actions. This perspective moves beyond the conventional understanding of citizenship as a static category defined by rights and duties, to emphasise how individuals and groups enact citizenship through their participation in public life, claims-making, and engagement with state and non-state institutions (Isin and Nielsen 3).

According to this approach, citizenship is best understood as a process rather than a possession. It is constituted through acts of inclusion and exclusion, through which individuals assert belonging, recognition, and legitimacy within a political community (Lister 16). These practices may range from formal participation (such as voting, advocacy, or public service) to informal and symbolic acts, such as protests, community organisation, or even expressions of faith that claim moral authority in public discourse (Isin 379).

The framework also highlights the spatial and relational dimensions of citizenship. Citizenship is performed across multiple sites (the household, the community, the workplace, religious institutions, and the digital sphere) where individuals negotiate their relationship to power, authority, and identity (Holston 35). These sites reveal how belonging is both contested and contextual, particularly in postcolonial or plural societies where state recognition does not always guarantee social inclusion.

In Nigeria, where religion deeply shapes public life, Social Identity Theory explains how Christian and Muslim identities define group boundaries, fostering in-group solidarity but also intergroup tension (Ysseldyk, Matheson, and Anisman 66). The citizenship-as-practice framework complements this by showing how belonging and rights are negotiated through religious and regional affiliations, as citizens use faith-based spaces to assert justice and inclusion beyond formal state structures (Isin and Nielsen 9; Marshall 191).

The Entanglement of Religion and State Formation from Colonial to Postcolonial Nigeria

The relationship between religion and state formation in Nigeria is deeply rooted in colonial history and continues to shape the postcolonial political landscape. During the colonial period, the British administration deliberately institutionalised religious divisions by adopting an indirect rule system that reinforced Islamic authority in the North while promoting Christian missions in the South. As Falola observes, "colonial policy privileged Islam in the North by recognising emirs as political intermediaries, while Christian missions were allowed to flourish in the South" (102). This dual policy laid the foundation for enduring regional-religious disparities in access to education, governance, and economic opportunities.

The colonial state's selective accommodation of religion blurred the line between faith and governance, embedding sectarianism into Nigeria's political fabric. According to Kukah, "religion became a tool for both colonial control and postcolonial mobilisation, producing identities that were at once spiritual and political" (54). This fusion of religious and political authority persisted after independence, as postcolonial leaders often relied on religious affiliation to consolidate power and legitimacy.

In contemporary Nigeria, the legacy of these colonial arrangements remains evident in patterns of sectarian privilege and exclusion. The implementation of Sharia law in several northern states, for instance, demonstrates the continued overlap between religion and state functions. As Suberu notes, "the persistence of religious politics in Nigeria reflects the failure to construct a truly secular state capable of guaranteeing equal citizenship across confessional lines" (112). Thus, the entanglement of religion and state formation—from colonial patronage to postcolonial governance—has entrenched faith as both a marker of identity and a mechanism of political power. The result is a nation where access to citizenship, representation, and state resources is often mediated through religious belonging rather than universal civic equality.

Religious identity in Nigeria functions as a powerful axis of social differentiation and political belonging, intersecting deeply with ethnic and regional loyalties to shape who is regarded as a "true Nigerian." The historical overlap between religion and geography (Islam predominating in the North and Christianity in the South) has produced competing narratives of national identity.

As Falola observes, "religious divisions have become embedded in Nigeria's regional and ethnic configurations, transforming faith into a marker of political loyalty" (87). This dynamic means that citizenship is often interpreted through the lens of faith and region rather than through shared civic principles.

The result is a form of religious nationalism in which both Christian and Muslim communities claim moral ownership of the nation. According to Kukah, "each faith projects itself as the guardian of Nigeria's divine destiny, seeking to define national identity in its own religious image" (42). This competition is not merely theological but extends into the distribution of political power, public employment, and state resources. As Suberu argues, "religious identity operates as a gatekeeper to full participation in the polity, determining access to legitimacy and representation" (108).

Furthermore, the interaction between religion and ethnicity amplifies the politics of exclusion. In many contexts, being "indigenous" to a region and belonging to the dominant religion are treated as intertwined criteria for belonging and entitlement. This intersection, as Mustapha notes, "creates layered hierarchies of citizenship where some Nigerians are perceived as more legitimate than others" (25). Such dynamics perpetuate what Laitin calls "religious regionalism"—a condition in which religious identity substitutes for civic belonging, thereby fragmenting the sense of a shared national community (92). Consequently, national belonging in Nigeria is not an inclusive civic construct but a contested moral and spiritual field. Competing Christian and Muslim imaginaries of the nation continue to define boundaries of loyalty, legitimacy, and recognition, complicating efforts to build a cohesive and secular national identity.

Crisis of Citizenship, Marginalisation of Minority Faiths, and the Erosion of Civic Equality

Nigeria continues to grapple with a profound crisis of citizenship rooted in the historical entanglement of religion, ethnicity, and politics. Despite the constitutional claim to secularism, religious identity remains a central determinant of social belonging and political legitimacy. Empirical data indicate that citizens belonging to minority faiths—such as adherents of African Traditional Religion or smaller Christian and Muslim sects—experience lower levels of political representation, access to civil documentation, and public services compared with members of dominant religious communities (Pew Research Center 2015; International Organization for Migration 2024). Suberu observes that "the Nigerian state privileges dominant faith traditions while systematically marginalising minority groups" (109). Kalu similarly notes that "the Nigerian political space is not neutral but sacralised, as access to state power and resources often mirrors the confessional identity of those who control it" (211).

This marginalisation manifests both structurally and symbolically. Structurally, state institutions exhibit religious biases in political appointments, education, and law. For instance, the adoption of Sharia in northern states privileges Muslim citizens while constraining non-Muslims' access to justice and governance, effectively creating a dual system of citizenship (Suberu 115). Quantitative data from NIMC registration and service delivery records show lower enrolment and access rates for minority faith members, highlighting systematic disparities in formal civic inclusion (NBS 2023). Symbolically, public discourse frequently delegitimises minority religious expressions, portraying them as "unorthodox" or "pagan," reinforcing hierarchies of belief and shaping social perceptions of civic legitimacy (Ibrahim 47).

Alternative explanations for citizenship gaps (such as class, state capacity, corruption, and federalism) offer partial insights but do not fully account for faith-mediated disparities. While class inequality affects access to services broadly (World Bank 2020), regression analysis controlling for income, education, and location demonstrates that religious affiliation remains a significant

predictor of differential treatment in documentation, political representation, and social service provision. Similarly, weak state capacity and corruption can limit service delivery (Bach 2012; Smith 2007), yet interviews and observations indicate that dominant religious networks often mediate access to resources, allowing co-religionists to bypass institutional inefficiencies while minority groups face compounded exclusion. Federalism introduces policy variation across states (Suberu 2001), but disparities persist even among states with comparable governance indicators, suggesting that religious identity exerts an independent effect on citizenship outcomes.

The politicisation of religion further deepens civic inequality. Empirical interviews reveal that political offices are disproportionately occupied by members of the majority faith, limiting minority representation in local councils and state assemblies. One respondent from a Southern state explained, "Even if you are legally a citizen, your faith can limit your chances of being considered for leadership positions" (Respondent, Southern State). These patterns align with Social Identity Theory, where in-group solidarity among dominant religious communities restricts political and social opportunities for out-group members (Tajfel and Turner 34). Similarly, the indigene–settler phenomenon in states such as Kwara, Kaduna, and Plateau illustrates how religious affiliation intersects with local identity to shape access to employment, resources, and political office (Mustapha 33).

Access to essential services also reflects the practical dynamics of citizenship-as-practice. Quantitative data show delays or restrictions in healthcare, education, and welfare access for minority faith members, while qualitative interviews indicate that connections with influential religious leaders or community networks often mediate service delivery (Respondent, Middle Belt). Church–state relations further illustrate how religious institutions (particularly Pentecostal and other Christian organisations) serve as alternative arenas for negotiating civic recognition, moral authority, and access to resources, especially where state capacity is limited (Marshall 62).

Together, these empirical observations demonstrate that religion is one of the decisive factors in shaping access to rights, security, and political influence, even when controlling for class, governance capacity, corruption, or federal policy differences. Citizenship in Nigeria is therefore not only a legal status but a socially mediated practice, stratified along religious lines. Addressing this crisis requires reimagining the Nigerian state as a space of plural citizenship, where all faith communities participate equally in defining civic and political life. Interventions must combine inclusive policy design, protection of minority rights, and the promotion of interfaith collaboration to ensure that citizenship transcends sectarian boundaries and promotes substantive civic equality.

Findings

In Nigeria, citizens frequently deploy religious symbols, discourse, and institutional affiliations to negotiate belonging and assert moral authority within the state. Empirical data from interviews, focus groups, and service-access records indicate that beyond formal legal recognition, citizenship is often mediated through faith-based frameworks, where religious affiliation becomes a key resource for claiming legitimacy, social recognition, and access to material resources (Isin and Nielsen 11; NBS 2023). Religious institutions (churches, mosques, and interfaith organisations) serve as critical arenas in which citizens perform these acts of belonging, shaping public discourse and mediating access to education, healthcare, and political participation.

Religiously inflected identities have profound implications for nation-building. Strong affiliation to Christian or Muslim communities can fragment national cohesion, as competing moral, political, and cultural claims sometimes overshadow civic principles. Quantitative data from NIMC registration and local government records show that members of minority faiths

experience lower rates of political representation and access to services, even when controlling for income and location, highlighting the structural advantage conferred by majority religious identity (Pew Research Center 2015; International Organization for Migration 2024). As Suberu observes, "religion continues to mediate access to power and resources, shaping both the perception and reality of who belongs to the Nigerian polity" (108).

Respondents reported that engagement in faith-based civic activities—such as interfaith dialogue, community service, or participation in religiously affiliated welfare programmes—enhances their perceived moral credibility and recognition within the community and state institutions. One Middle Belt respondent noted, "Your faith can open doors to leadership and influence where formal legal status alone may not" (Respondent, Middle Belt). These observations align with Social Identity Theory, illustrating how in-group solidarity among dominant religious communities' privileges co-religionists while limiting opportunities for out-group members (Tajfel and Turner 34). Similarly, the indigene–settler phenomenon, prevalent in states such as Kwara, Kaduna, and Plateau, demonstrates that religious and local identity combined confer preferential access to resources and political office, often marginalising religious minorities despite comparable class or economic status (Mustapha 33).

Other explanations such as: class inequality, weak state capacity, corruption, and variations in federal policy interact with these dynamics but do not fully explain faith-based disparities. While class may broadly influence access to services (World Bank 2020), regression analyses controlling for income, education, and location indicate that religious affiliation remains a statistically significant predictor of unequal access to documentation, welfare, and political representation. Similarly, although state capacity and corruption shape resource distribution (Bach 2012; Smith 2007), they do not eliminate the persistent advantage enjoyed by members of dominant religious groups. Yet dominant religious networks can circumvent institutional weaknesses, allowing co-religionists preferential access while minority groups face compounded exclusion. Federalism introduces regional variation in governance and policy implementation (Suberu 2001), but similar patterns of exclusion emerge in states with comparable institutional capacity, indicating that religious identity exerts an independent influence on citizens' experiences of inclusion.

Religious symbols and rituals are also strategically mobilised to convey moral credibility and public trust. Public prayers, sermons, interfaith events, and the visible involvement of religious leaders in political campaigns serve as markers of alignment with perceived ethical norms, enhancing legitimacy in local and national arenas (Marshall 62; Kalu 214). Quantitative observations reveal that in areas where state institutions are weak, participation in faith-based welfare or political networks significantly improves access to services, illustrating the practical enactment of citizenship-as-practice (Isin and Nielsen 11).

Faith-based institutions additionally provide platforms for advocacy, dispute mediation, and communal welfare. Interfaith coalitions in conflict-prone regions, for instance, have mobilised to promote dialogue, mediate disputes, and deliver social services, demonstrating that religious affiliation can be leveraged to foster inclusive governance and social cohesion. Empirical accounts indicate that for many citizens, particularly those marginalised along ethnic or regional lines, religious institutions are essential arenas for asserting rights, claiming moral authority, and negotiating civic belonging (Respondents, Middle Belt; Marshall 62; Isin 379).

Findings indicate that religious identity is a decisive determinant of access to citizenship rights and state protection in Nigeria, even when class, income, education, and governance conditions are comparable. Members of minority faiths face delays or exclusion from documentation, welfare, and political representation, while dominant religious groups enjoy

preferential access (NBS 2023; NIMC 2023). Religious networks and institutions—such as churches, mosques, and interfaith organisations—mediate inclusion and exclusion, providing welfare, political mobilisation, and dispute resolution for co-religionists, while sometimes offering platforms for minority advocacy in conflict-prone regions (Marshall 62; Isin 379). State policies, including Sharia implementation and federal arrangements, interact with religious affiliation to shape access to rights, yet similar disparities persist across states with comparable governance, showing that religion exerts an independent effect on citizenship (Suberu 115). Citizens often navigate these constraints by leveraging faith-based networks, enacting what Isin and Nielsen (11) describe as citizenship-in-practice. Overall, the evidence demonstrates that religion structures both formal and lived experiences of civic inclusion, outweighing alternative explanations such as class, state capacity, corruption, or federal policy, while highlighting the dual potential of faith to both reinforce exclusion and foster social cohesion.

Conclusion

The findings of this study underscore the profound influence of religious identity on access to state services, civic protection, and political representation in Nigeria. Christian and Muslim affiliations, intertwined with regional and ethnic loyalties, continue to shape who is recognised as a legitimate citizen, often privileging majority faiths while marginalising minorities. This dynamic not only reflects the operation of Social Identity Theory, where in-group solidarity constrains out-group inclusion (Tajfel and Turner 40), but also illustrates the lived realities of citizenship-as-practice, where belonging and rights are negotiated through social and religious networks rather than guaranteed by law (Isin and Nielsen 15).

Despite these challenges, the study also reveals avenues for promoting inclusive citizenship. Religious institutions and interfaith initiatives emerge as critical spaces for mediating rights, fostering dialogue, and asserting moral authority, enabling citizens to claim recognition beyond sectarian boundaries. Cultivating a civic ethos grounded in ethical engagement, interfaith solidarity, and equitable access to resources can help bridge divides, ensuring that citizenship in Nigeria is experienced as both legal and socially meaningful. Advancing national cohesion requires a dual strategy: strengthening formal mechanisms of equality while supporting the social and moral practices through which citizens negotiate inclusion. By foregrounding civic ethics and collaborative interfaith engagement, Nigeria can begin to realise a vision of citizenship that transcends sectarian affiliation and embodies the principles of equity, participation, and shared national belonging.

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