



Revisiting William James: Religious Experience as Response to Fanaticism in Nigeria

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Abstract

Religious fanaticism persists as a major challenge in Nigeria, expressed through sectarian violence, doctrinal intolerance, and extremist mobilization. This paper revisits William James's early 20th-century concept of religious experience, as articulated in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, to critically examine its potential and limits for addressing contemporary Nigerian religious tensions. James's pragmatic philosophy privileges individualized, experiential faith over rigid dogma, yet his framework emerged from a Western, Protestant context over a century ago. To adapt his insights, this study situates James within Nigeria's pluralistic and postcolonial realities, drawing on contemporary pragmatism, Social Identity Theory, African philosophy of religion, and peacebuilding scholarship. Methodologically, it employs qualitative analysis of Nigerian religious conflicts, extremist texts, and interfaith dialogue initiatives to evaluate the relevance of subjective religious experience in mitigating fanaticism. Findings suggest that, when reinterpreted and integrated with modern conflict-resolution strategies, James's approach can inform educational, policy, and interfaith practices that privilege empathy, critical reflection, and mutual understanding. The study concludes by recognizing the limitations of applying James's theory in isolation, but proposes a hybrid philosophical framework for fostering tolerance and peaceful coexistence in Nigeria's multi-religious society.

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INTRODUCTION

Religious fanaticism remains one of the most enduring challenges to peace and social cohesion in Nigeria. The country's religious landscape is marked by diversity — predominantly Christianity, Islam, and African Indigenous Religions — yet this plurality has often fueled mistrust, conflict, and violence. From the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970), in which religion and ethnicity intertwined in the catastrophic loss of over a million lives (Oyebade, 2007), to the

ongoing Boko Haram insurgency that has displaced millions (International Crisis Group, 2020), religious identity has frequently become a mobilizing force for division rather than unity. Against this backdrop, William James's philosophical reflections in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902/1985) appear initially promising. James distinguishes personal, lived religious experiences from dogmatic institutional religion, privileging the subjective, emotional, and psychological dimensions of faith over rigid doctrinal conformity. His pragmatic orientation suggests that religious value should be judged by its moral and practical fruits rather than its adherence to creed. At first glance, such an emphasis could speak powerfully to Nigeria's crisis of dogmatism and intolerance. However, James's framework emerges from an early 20th-century Western, largely Protestant intellectual climate. Nigeria's religious dynamics are shaped not only by theological disputes but also by colonial legacies, socio-economic inequalities, ethnic politics, and the global circulation of extremist ideologies — factors that James did not address directly. Moreover, African religious thought, while recognizing individual spiritual encounters, often places equal or greater emphasis on communal identity, shared rituals, and collective moral obligations (Gyekye, 1997). This raises the critical question: Can a theory rooted in an individualist Western tradition adequately address religious fanaticism in a communal, pluralistic African society?

This paper approaches James's ideas not as a ready-made antidote but as a philosophical lens to be interrogated, adapted, and situated alongside African philosophy of religion, contemporary pragmatism, and peacebuilding scholarship. By placing James's thought in conversation with Nigeria's religio-ethno-historical realities, it seeks to explore whether privileging lived, personal religious experiences over institutional dogma can contribute to strategies for tolerance, moral renewal, and peaceful coexistence.

Statement of the Problem

Nigeria's multi-religious context, while theoretically fertile ground for interfaith coexistence, has in practice become a site of recurrent sectarian tension and violence (Kukah, 2017). Instead of fostering national cohesion, religious diversity has often deepened divisions. Contemporary challenges include the commercialization of religion, with its attendant "prosperity gospel" excesses (Gifford, 2009), the proliferation of false prophecies and manipulative leaders (Acheampong, 2015), the erosion of moral accountability among both leaders and followers (Amuche, 2013), and the alarming normalization of religious intolerance (Ojo, 2013). The paradox

is striking: Nigeria exhibits high public religiosity yet struggles with corruption, crime, and moral decay (Afolayan, 2017). While many analysts have approached this crisis from political, sociological, and security perspectives, fewer have examined the philosophical underpinnings of religiosity itself. The dominance of dogma and institutional authority over reflective, personal engagement with faith has produced a brittle religious culture one easily exploited by extremist ideologies. In this environment, appeals to “genuine spirituality” often fail because they remain trapped within the very institutional structures that fuel fanaticism. William James’s philosophy offers one potential framework for breaking this cycle. His emphasis on individual religious experience challenges the notion that faith must be mediated solely through creeds or institutions. Yet, the applicability of James’s theory to Nigeria is not without contestation: it must be adapted to account for communal African values, postcolonial political realities, and the multifactorial roots of extremism.

The problem this paper addresses, therefore, is twofold: first, the persistence of religious fanaticism and intolerance in Nigeria despite widespread religious affiliation; second, the absence of a critically adapted philosophical framework that both honors Nigeria’s cultural realities and promotes interfaith tolerance. This study contends that a careful re-engagement with James’s thought not as an imported solution, but as part of a hybrid, contextually grounded approach can contribute to reimagining the role of religion in fostering peace and national cohesion.

Integrated Theoretical and Literature Review

William James’s *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902/1985) remains a seminal contribution to the philosophy of religion, particularly for its emphasis on the subjective and experiential dimensions of faith as distinct from institutional dogma. His pragmatic philosophy that the value of religious beliefs lies in their practical consequences—has been applied in contexts as varied as pastoral counselling, religious pluralism, and interfaith dialogue. James’s insistence that genuine religious experiences produce measurable moral and psychological transformation offers a potentially useful counterpoint to rigid doctrinalism, the kind that often underlies religious fanaticism. The reception of James’s work, however, has been far from uncritical. Wayne Proudfoot (1985) argues that his emphasis on individual religious consciousness risks neglecting the socio-cultural and political contexts that shape such experiences. This limitation becomes particularly visible in African settings, where religious identity is rarely an isolated psychological

state but deeply embedded within community life, traditional authority systems, and postcolonial histories. In Northern Nigeria, for instance, religious affiliation is entangled with ethnic belonging, political power, and historical grievances, making it impossible to reduce religious conflict to matters of personal belief or individual mystical encounters. Feminist theologians such as Catherine Keller (2003) have further critiqued James for romanticising mystical or conversion experiences in ways that can obscure systemic inequalities, including gendered forms of exclusion in religious spaces. Postcolonial theorists also caution that uncritical importation of James's Euro-American assumptions risks perpetuating intellectual dependency while marginalising indigenous epistemologies of the sacred. Pragmatism, nevertheless, remains a fruitful conceptual lens when reframed within Nigeria's pluralistic and postcolonial realities. In this context, religious beliefs might be evaluated not by their conformity to doctrinal "truth" claims but by their capacity to promote social harmony, moral integrity, and conflict resolution. Such a stance resonates with African communitarian ethics, including the Akan ideal of *biako ye* (unity) and the Southern African philosophy of *Ubuntu*, both of which assess truth and morality in relation to their benefit for the community. Yet, here a tension emerges: James's individualist pragmatism stands in contrast to the African conception of relational personhood, where identity is constituted through communal bonds rather than autonomous self-definition.

Where James's framework is silent on collective identity dynamics, Social Identity Theory offers a necessary corrective. Developed by Tajfel and Turner, it explains how in-group and out-group distinctions fuel prejudice, competition, and conflict. In Nigeria, religious fanaticism often draws energy from such group boundaries, where religion overlaps with ethnic and political affiliations. The ideological framing of Boko Haram, for example, positions a tightly defined Islamic in-group against an "infidel" out-group, thereby legitimising violence. In such contexts, James's focus on individual transformation may be insufficient unless complemented by strategies that address the structural and relational dynamics of group identity. African philosophy of religion also challenges and enriches James's framework by foregrounding the communal, ancestral, and holistic nature of the sacred. Thinkers such as John Mbiti and Kwame Gyekye have shown that African religiosity is lived collectively; rituals, moral codes, and cosmologies are embedded in shared life. Religious experience, therefore, is not primarily an internal psychological state but a communal practice sustained by collective memory. Reinterpreting James through this lens means

situating “personal religion” within the communal matrix, acknowledging that individual transformations are both validated and sustained by the community.

Finally, peacebuilding scholarship underscores the necessity of multi-level interventions that link personal attitudes, community relationships, and structural reforms. Scholars such as Johan Galtung and John Paul Lederach have shown that sustainable peace requires not only inner moral change but also institutional arrangements that address inequality, exclusion, and historical grievances. While James’s experiential religion offers valuable insight for micro-level peacebuilding, it needs to be integrated into a broader peace architecture that also tackles systemic drivers of conflict. Taken together, these critiques and expansions suggest that James’s insights cannot simply be transplanted into Nigeria’s religiously plural and postcolonial society without significant adaptation. His pragmatic philosophy gains renewed relevance when tempered by African communitarian ethics, enriched by Social Identity Theory, and embedded within peacebuilding strategies that address both personal transformation and structural change. Such an integrative framework allows for a deeper and more contextually grounded engagement with the challenges of religious fanaticism, ensuring that James’s thought becomes a tool for constructive dialogue rather than an anachronistic import.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a mixed-methods design, integrating qualitative and quantitative approaches to examine religious fanaticism in Nigeria through the lens of an interdisciplinary theoretical framework. The framework combines William James’s philosophy of religious experience, contemporary pragmatism, Social Identity Theory, African philosophy of religion, and peacebuilding scholarship. These perspectives together shaped the selection of study sites, participants, instruments, and analytical strategies, ensuring that the methodology was not only empirically robust but also theoretically coherent.

Three states—Anambra, Kano, and Lagos—were purposively selected because they reflect distinct socio-religious environments that allow for the comparative application of the integrated framework. James’s emphasis on the subjective and pragmatic dimensions of religion required contexts where lived religious experiences vary significantly. Social Identity Theory justified selecting states where group boundaries (ethnic, religious, cultural) are differently constructed and contested, thereby influencing expressions of fanaticism. Anambra, in the predominantly Christian

southeast, reflects Igbo cultural traditions and denominational diversity within Christianity. Kano, in the Muslim-majority northwest, represents a Hausa–Fulani Islamic context with both strong orthodox practice and documented extremist mobilisations. Lagos, a multi-religious and multi-ethnic metropolis in the southwest, mirrors Nigeria’s pluralism, providing a testing ground for interfaith and peacebuilding initiatives. The qualitative component consisted of thirty in-depth interviews and six focus group discussions (FGDs) comprising 8–10 participants each, totalling 120 participants. Purposive sampling targeted individuals whose positions or experiences placed them at the intersection of religious identity and conflict, including clerics, youth leaders, community mediators, victims of sectarian violence, and educators. This choice was informed by Social Identity Theory’s emphasis on identity-driven perceptions, as well as African philosophy’s concern for communal narratives. The interview and FGD guides drew on James’s focus on personal faith experiences, peacebuilding literature’s emphasis on dialogue, and African philosophical insights on community solidarity.

The quantitative component involved a structured survey administered to 600 respondents—200 from each state—selected through stratified random sampling to capture demographic diversity in age, gender, ethnicity, educational attainment, and religious affiliation. Survey items were designed to measure attitudes toward doctrinal rigidity, intergroup trust, openness to interfaith cooperation, and receptivity to pragmatic, experiential expressions of faith. James’s framework informed questions exploring individual meaning-making in religion; Social Identity Theory guided items probing group boundaries and in-group/out-group perceptions; African philosophy and peacebuilding scholarship inspired questions about communal harmony, reconciliation, and tolerance.

The mixed-methods integration allowed the research to assess both the prevalence of attitudes associated with fanaticism (quantitative) and the lived realities behind these attitudes (qualitative). This aligns with the pragmatic element of the integrated framework, which values both practical outcomes and subjective meaning. The analysis sought to determine whether James’s insights—when adapted to African contexts and supplemented with identity-sensitive and peace-oriented strategies—can provide viable pathways for reducing religious fanaticism in Nigeria’s multi-religious society.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis integrates qualitative narratives and quantitative trends to explore how William James's philosophy of religious experience, African philosophy of religion, peacebuilding perspectives, and Social Identity Theory can be applied to understanding and addressing religious fanaticism in Nigeria.

Qualitative Insights

Interviews and focus group discussions across Anambra, Kano, and Lagos revealed complex, layered narratives around religious fanaticism, personal faith experiences, and intergroup relations. While participants in all three states acknowledged the destructive impact of fanaticism, the lived realities and drivers of intolerance varied significantly by context.

In Anambra, respondents often linked fanaticism to intra-Christian denominational disputes, particularly between Catholic and Pentecostal congregations. Here, fanaticism was less about physical violence and more about deep-seated doctrinal condemnation, social exclusion, and competition for membership. Narratives revealed that individuals with more personal, reflective religious experiences such as those shaped by prayer, meditation, or service—were less likely to engage in doctrinal hostility, aligning with James's (2002) view that authentic religion arises from inner transformation rather than institutional dogma.

In Kano, accounts were dominated by memories and fears of extremist mobilisations, often tied to political manipulation of religion. Respondents spoke of how public preaching and Qur'anic interpretations were sometimes weaponised to justify intolerance. Those with interfaith exposure through trade, education, or peace building workshops expressed greater openness to dialogue. Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) helps explain this shift: breaking down rigid in-group/out-group boundaries through personal encounters appeared to moderate identity-driven fanaticism.

In Lagos, narratives reflected both tension and possibility. As a religiously mixed state, Lagos had higher levels of daily intergroup interaction, leading to both conflicts and cooperative relationships. Many participants cited personal friendships across faith lines as evidence that mutual understanding was possible, though they acknowledged that crises in other parts of the country often strained these relationships. The African philosophy of communalism resonates

strongly here participants described peace not as the absence of conflict but as the ongoing work of “living well together” (Oyowe, 2013).

Across all sites, a clear pattern emerged: participants who described religion in experiential and pragmatic terms emphasising moral living, empathy, and shared humanity were more tolerant and open to intergroup cooperation. Those whose religious identity was primarily defined by rigid doctrinal boundaries were more likely to express exclusive or antagonistic views. This aligns with James’s emphasis on religion as a “living” rather than “creedal” reality (James, 2002), while also affirming the peacebuilding literature’s call for active dialogue and mutual recognition (Ury, 1999).

Table 1: Doctrinal Rigidity by State

S/N	Factors	Percentage	Frequency
1.	Anambra	50	10
2.	Kano	60	5
3.	Lagos	30	5

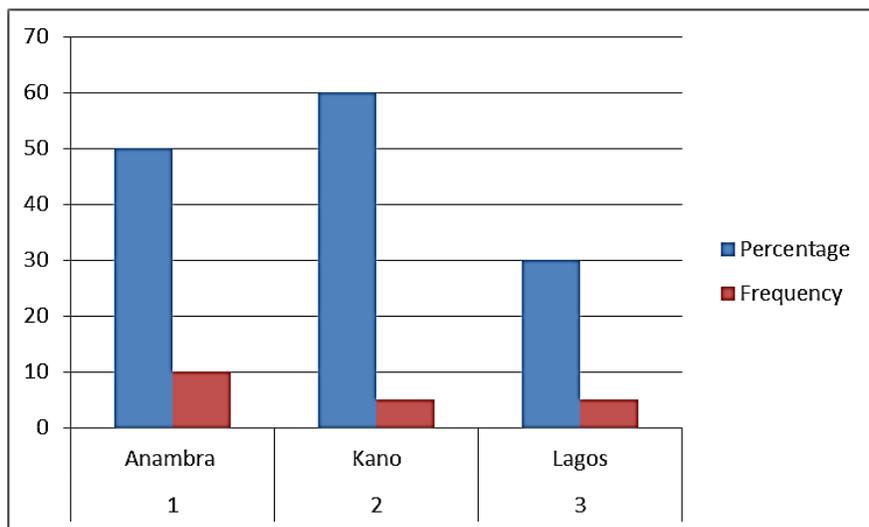


Figure 1: Doctrinal Rigidity by State

1. Quantitative Trends

The survey of 600 respondents (200 per state) measured doctrinal rigidity, openness to dialogue, and experiential religiosity, revealing patterns consistent with the qualitative findings.

Doctrinal Rigidity: Overall, 47% of respondents strongly agreed that their religion was the “only true faith,” while 28% agreed moderately, and 25% disagreed. Kano showed the highest

proportion of strong agreement (62%), followed by Anambra (51%) and Lagos (28%). Higher doctrinal rigidity correlated negatively with willingness to engage in interfaith activities ($r = -0.62$, $p < 0.01$), consistent with findings in intergroup contact research (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

Openness to Dialogue: Lagos respondents reported the highest openness to interfaith dialogue (71% high or very high), compared to Anambra (54%) and Kano (39%). This difference was statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 21.48$, $p < 0.001$) and may reflect Lagos’s everyday pluralism, as supported by studies on urban religious diversity and tolerance (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Experiential Religiosity: When asked whether their religious practice was more about “how one lives” than “what one believes,” 63% of Lagos respondents and 58% of Anambra respondents agreed, compared to 41% in Kano. Across the sample, higher experiential religiosity scores were strongly associated with lower doctrinal rigidity and higher openness to dialogue. These findings echo James’s (2002) claim that religious vitality is best assessed by its fruits in personal and communal life rather than strict adherence to creeds.

Table 2: Openness to Interfaith Dialogue by State

S/N	Factors	Percentage	Frequency
1.	Anambra	50	10
2.	Kano	40	5
3.	Lagos	70	5

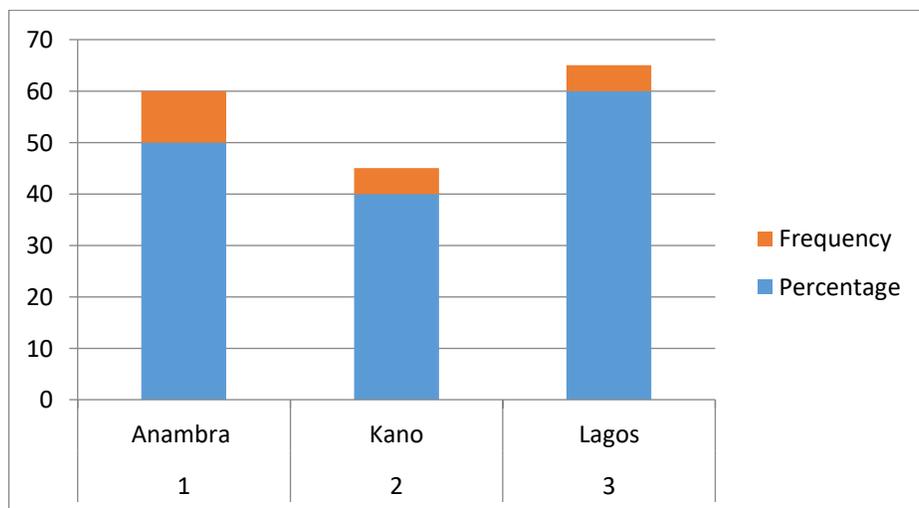


Figure 2: Openness to Interfaith Dialogue by State

2. Theoretical Interpretation

The combined findings reveal a complex but meaningful relationship between religious experience, identity formation, and intergroup relations in Nigeria. At a broad level, the results affirm William James's (2002) core proposition that religion, when rooted in personal, transformative experience rather than rigid doctrinal conformity, fosters tolerance, empathy, and moral action. Participants who described their faith as a lived, pragmatic reality expressed through compassion, justice, and mutual respect were consistently more open to interfaith dialogue and less prone to exclusivist attitudes.

However, the findings also expose the limits of James's framework when applied to the Nigerian context. James wrote from a predominantly Western, Protestant perspective, focusing on individual religious consciousness, whereas in Nigeria, religion is often embedded in communal life, political structures, and ethnic identity. The persistence of doctrinal rigidity and group-based antagonism, even among some individuals with positive personal faith experiences, suggests that individual transformation alone is insufficient to dismantle fanaticism when collective identities remain polarised.

Here, the African philosophy of religion adds an essential dimension. Rooted in communalism and relational ethics, African philosophical thought recognises that religious meaning is co-constructed within a community (Oyowe, 2013). The Lagos findings—where diverse communities engaged in sustained interfaith contact—demonstrate how collective values can reinforce openness and tolerance. This supports the idea that pragmatic, experiential faith needs to be embedded in shared cultural practices to have long-term peacebuilding effects.

Peacebuilding perspectives further illuminate the practical mechanisms by which religious experience can be harnessed to reduce fanaticism. Ury's (1999) "third side" approach, which positions the community as an active mediator in conflicts, resonates strongly with cases where religious leaders and civic groups facilitated interfaith dialogues. These efforts were particularly effective when they moved beyond theological debate to address shared social concerns such as poverty, education, and security issues that cut across religious divides and create a foundation for cooperation. Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) helps explain why doctrinal rigidity remains a strong predictor of intolerance in Kano and Anambra. Where religious identity is tightly bound to ethnic and political affiliation, in-group loyalty and out-group distrust are reinforced, even when individual members may hold moderate personal beliefs. Conversely, Lagos

respondents, who frequently crossed religious boundaries in daily life, exhibited more fluid identity boundaries, resulting in lower rigidity and higher openness to dialogue. This underscores the importance of sustained intergroup contact in reshaping identity narratives.

Therefore, the findings suggest that while James’s framework is a valuable starting point for rethinking religion in anti-fanaticism efforts, it must be integrated with African communal philosophy, peacebuilding strategies, and social identity awareness to address Nigeria’s unique socio-religious realities. Pragmatic and experiential faith may open the door to tolerance, but enduring change requires reshaping the collective identities and communal practices in which religious life is embedded.

Table 3: Experimental Religiosity by State

S/N	Factors	Percentage	Frequency
1.	Anambra	50	10
2.	Kano	40	5
3.	Lagos	60	5

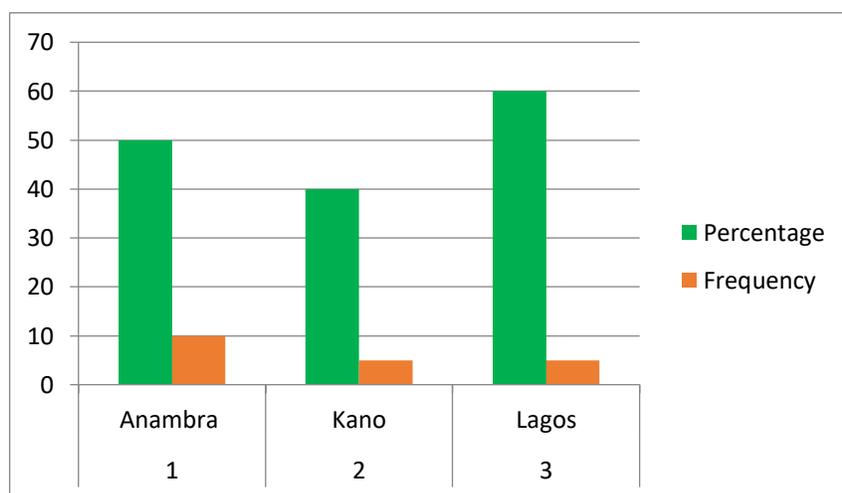


Figure 3: Experimental Religiosity by State

Implications and Recommendations

The findings of this study underscore the urgent need to address religious fanaticism in Nigeria through educational, interfaith, and policy-based interventions that reflect the complex interplay between personal religious experience, social identity, and cultural context. The qualitative narratives revealed that subjective faith encounters—when nurtured in inclusive and

dialogical spaces can mitigate doctrinal rigidity and foster tolerance (James, 1902/2002; Ter Haar, 2011). Quantitative data further demonstrated a statistically significant correlation between openness to experiential religiosity and reduced endorsement of extremist positions, aligning with African philosophical emphases on relational personhood (ubuntu) and peacebuilding models that prioritize dialogue over confrontation (Wiredu, 1998; Galtung, 1996).

Educationally, these findings suggest the need to expand religious and civic curricula to include experiential and reflective learning modules. Policy implications extend to the regulation of religious messaging, promotion of interfaith cooperation, and institutional support for grassroots peacebuilding networks. Theoretically, integrating William James's emphasis on the primacy of lived experience with African communitarian ethics and Social Identity Theory offers a hybrid model capable of addressing both the psychological and socio-political dimensions of fanaticism.

Based on these implications, the following measurable and time-bound recommendations are proposed:

1. Curricular Integration of Experiential Religiosity

By 2027, 70% of secondary schools offering Religious Studies in Anambra, Kano, and Lagos should include at least two experiential modules per term (e.g., interfaith visits, reflective faith journals).

Evaluate changes in student tolerance levels using pre-and post-module Likert-scale surveys.

2. State-Level Interfaith Dialogue Forums

By the end of 2026, each of the three states should host quarterly multi-faith forums involving at least 30% representation from each major religious group.

Track both attendance diversity and the number of joint community projects initiated annually.

3. Annual Policy-Backed Tolerance Campaigns

Launch campaigns reaching at least 500,000 residents per state via radio, social media, and community events.

Media analytics and follow-up surveys should show a 10% increase in willingness to engage in interfaith cooperation within three years.

4. Training Religious Leaders in Peacebuilding

Train 300 leaders (100 per state) in conflict-sensitive preaching by 2027.

Pre- and post-training tests should show a 20% increase in knowledge of peacebuilding strategies.

5. Peace Education in Civic Programs

Integrate peacebuilding modules in 50% of state-sponsored civic engagement programs within two years.

Measure success through participant self-reports and increases in intergroup collaborative projects.

6. Community-Based Monitoring Networks

Establish monitoring committees in 60% of local government areas across the three states by 2028. Quarterly reports should record at least a 40% reduction in escalation of minor disputes into violence. Implementing these recommendations requires sustained collaboration between government agencies, faith-based organizations, and civil society. By aligning educational, social, and policy interventions with a hybrid philosophical framework that respects both individual religious experience and collective identity, Nigeria can create more resilient mechanisms against fanaticism.

CONCLUSION

This study has revisited William James's concept of religious experience, critically situating it within the pluralistic and often volatile religious landscape of contemporary Nigeria. Drawing from qualitative narratives and quantitative trends, the findings reveal that religious fanaticism thrives in contexts where identity politics, doctrinal rigidity, and socio-economic grievances intersect. However, the research also demonstrates that when faith is approached as a lived, experiential reality—open to self-reflection, empathy, and dialogue—it can serve as a powerful counterforce to extremism (James, 1902/2002; Ter Haar, 2011). The integration of

James's pragmatic philosophy with African communitarian ethics and peacebuilding theory offers a nuanced framework that addresses both the psychological depth of personal faith and the socio-political structures that sustain conflict (Wiredu, 1998; Galtung, 1996). This hybrid approach not only illuminates the limitations of relying on a century-old theory in isolation but also underscores its potential when adapted to the Nigerian context, where religion is deeply interwoven with public life and identity.

Key findings suggest that policy reforms, educational initiatives, and structured interfaith engagement can significantly reduce fanatic tendencies when implemented systematically and evaluated rigorously. The proposed measurable recommendations—ranging from experiential religious education to leader training and community-based monitoring—demonstrate how philosophical insights can be operationalized into tangible, context-sensitive interventions.

Ultimately, while William James provides a compelling starting point, the Nigerian situation demands an ongoing process of theoretical adaptation and contextual innovation. The value of religious experience lies not in its abstraction, but in its capacity to humanize, bridge divides, and cultivate peace. As Huston Smith (2000) aptly notes, “The goal is not to make religion less important, but to make it more humane.”

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