

Exploring Religious Leaders' Perspectives on Peacebuilding Across Different Faith Traditions: A Comparative Qualitative Study in Post-Conflict Indonesia

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ABSTRACT: Religious diversity presents both opportunities for social cohesion and challenges for sustainable peace in multicultural societies. Religious leaders often play influential roles in shaping ethical values, promoting dialogue, and facilitating reconciliation following communal conflict. However, comparative qualitative evidence on how religious leaders from different faith traditions conceptualize peacebuilding within the same post-conflict setting remains limited. This study explores the perspectives of religious leaders from multiple faith traditions on peacebuilding in Ambon City, Indonesia, and identifies shared ethical principles contributing to peaceful coexistence. A qualitative multiple case study examined twelve participants representing Islam, Protestant Christianity, Catholicism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism, customary leadership, interfaith organizations, civil society, and academia, selected through purposive sampling based on their leadership roles in interfaith relations. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, supported by field observations and document analysis, and analyzed using thematic analysis, with trustworthiness strengthened through triangulation and member checking. The analysis identified six themes: peace as positive coexistence rather than mere absence of violence; shared ethical values such as compassion and forgiveness; compassion through practical cooperation; justice as a prerequisite for trust; reconciliation as a gradual dialogic process; and tolerance without doctrinal assimilation. Findings also highlight the local tradition of Pela Gandong, reinforcing kinship across communities. The study concludes that sustainable peace depends on ethical leadership, social justice, and culturally grounded reconciliation, offering insights for policymakers and civil society.

Keywords: Peacebuilding, Religious Leaders, Interfaith Dialogue, Positive Peace, Reconciliation, Social Cohesion, Ambon.



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INTRODUCTION

Religious diversity has become one of the defining characteristics of contemporary societies, creating opportunities for intercultural exchange while simultaneously presenting challenges for social cohesion and peaceful coexistence. In many multicultural settings, religious identity functions as an

important source of moral guidance, collective identity, and community solidarity. However, when combined with political competition, economic inequality, historical grievances, or social polarization, religious identity may also become intertwined with conflict dynamics. Consequently, peacebuilding in religiously diverse societies has attracted increasing scholarly attention, particularly regarding the capacity of religious institutions and leaders to facilitate reconciliation, strengthen social trust, and promote sustainable peace. Existing scholarship consistently recognizes that religious actors can contribute positively to conflict transformation when peacebuilding initiatives are grounded in dialogue, mutual respect, and collaborative action rather than theological competition or exclusive identity politics (Giess et al., 2020; Hutabarat, 2024; Kan, 2023; King & Owen, 2020; Meri, 2021; Muslih et al., 2023; Mutalib & Ramly, 2023; Walpita, 2023).

The growing literature on religion and peacebuilding demonstrates that religious leadership extends well beyond spiritual instruction. Religious leaders frequently function as mediators, educators, advocates, and community mobilizers capable of bridging social divisions and encouraging collective responses to common societal challenges. Across Africa, Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and the Americas, empirical evidence indicates that interfaith engagement contributes to trust-building, strengthens social cohesion, and supports collaborative initiatives addressing education, poverty alleviation, humanitarian assistance, and community development (Accad & Hani, 2021; Acquah, 2020; Durrani & Halai, 2018; Hemmet, 2023). Rather than merely preventing conflict, contemporary peacebuilding frameworks increasingly emphasize the creation of positive relationships characterized by justice, cooperation, inclusion, and mutual recognition. Within this perspective, religious leaders become important agents who translate theological values into practical social action capable of sustaining peaceful coexistence in diverse communities (Kan, 2023; Walpita, 2023).

The relationship between religion and peacebuilding has been conceptualized through several complementary theoretical frameworks. Interfaith dialogue has emerged as one of the most influential perspectives, describing dialogue as a process that develops trust, facilitates communication, reduces prejudice, and enables collaborative problem-solving among religious communities (Accad & Hani, 2021; Kan, 2023; King & Owen, 2020; Meri, 2021). Beyond dialogue itself, scholars have introduced cosmopolitan governance perspectives to explain how local peace initiatives become institutionalized through interfaith networks, governmental support, and civil society partnerships (Giess et al., 2020; Koch, 2020). Dialogic models including the dialogue of life, dialogue of action, dialogue of theological exchange, and dialogue of religious experience highlight that sustainable peace depends upon everyday interaction, shared community engagement, and mutual respect rather than doctrinal uniformity (Dhiman, 2023; Syayekti et al., 2023). At the same time, hermeneutical approaches and concepts such as *islah* emphasize reconciliation through ethical interpretation, restorative justice, and practical cooperation while preserving theological integrity (Agboada, 2022; Louw, 2022).

Substantial empirical evidence further demonstrates that interfaith dialogue enhances social cohesion when dialogue is accompanied by concrete collaborative activities. Studies examining the Vatican–Al-Azhar dialogue illustrate how shared commitments to human dignity, education, and socio-economic

development strengthen mutual trust between Muslim and Christian communities while avoiding theological assimilation (Accad & Hani, 2021; Hemmet, 2023; Meri, 2021). Similarly, research on interfaith education, youth engagement, and community-based peace initiatives consistently shows that experiential learning, humanitarian collaboration, and shared civic participation reduce prejudice and encourage collective efficacy more effectively than purely doctrinal discussions (Kusuma, 2020; Mustafa & Khan, 2023; Ogunbiyi et al., 2023). These findings suggest that dialogue becomes transformative when religious communities jointly address practical societal concerns, including education, disaster response, health services, and poverty alleviation, thereby reinforcing both interpersonal trust and institutional cooperation.

Despite these positive developments, the literature also identifies persistent challenges that limit the effectiveness of interfaith peacebuilding. Political instrumentalization of religion, unequal access to institutional resources, fragmented governance, historical trauma, and enduring social mistrust continue to constrain reconciliation efforts in many post-conflict societies (Accad & Hani, 2021; Acquah, 2020; King & Owen, 2020; Louw, 2022; Meri, 2021; Muslih et al., 2023). Several scholars caution that interfaith dialogue may become symbolic or elite-driven if it fails to engage grassroots communities or address structural inequalities affecting everyday social relations (Dhiman, 2023; Kan, 2023; Ogunbiyi et al., 2023; Syayekti et al., 2023). Consequently, successful peacebuilding requires more than formal dialogue between religious elites; it depends upon sustained community participation, inclusive governance, equitable public policies, and practical collaboration embedded within daily social life.

An additional dimension emerging from contemporary scholarship concerns the importance of local cultural traditions in strengthening reconciliation and sustaining long-term peace. Indigenous values, customary institutions, and culturally embedded conflict-resolution mechanisms frequently complement religious teachings by providing socially legitimate pathways toward restoring trust and repairing fractured relationships. African indigenous traditions, *islah*-based reconciliation, and culturally grounded interfaith practices all demonstrate that local moral systems reinforce communal responsibility, solidarity, and mutual accountability (Accad & Hani, 2021; Acquah, 2020; Anisa, 2022). Within the Indonesian context, government-supported interfaith forums, youth-led peace education, and community organizations have further strengthened social cohesion by integrating religious diversity with local cultural values (Muslih et al., 2023; Syayekti et al., 2023). These findings indicate that culturally grounded peacebuilding initiatives often achieve greater sustainability because they align reconciliation efforts with locally recognized norms and community identities rather than imposing externally designed models.

Among Indonesian post-conflict settings, Ambon City in Maluku Province represents one of the most significant examples of community-based reconciliation. Following the communal conflict of 1999–2002, religious leaders, customary institutions, government agencies, civil society organizations, and local communities collectively developed mechanisms to rebuild trust and strengthen interfaith cooperation. The indigenous tradition of *Pela Gandong* has become particularly influential in reinforcing

intercommunal solidarity by emphasizing kinship, reciprocity, and collective responsibility across religious boundaries. Together with the activities of the Forum for Religious Harmony (*Forum Kerukunan Umat Beragama*—FKUB), community dialogue initiatives, and collaborative humanitarian programs, Ambon provides a rich empirical context for examining how religious leaders interpret and practice peacebuilding within a multicultural society. The coexistence of multiple religious traditions and locally rooted reconciliation mechanisms makes Ambon an appropriate setting for comparative qualitative inquiry.

Although the existing literature provides substantial evidence regarding the contribution of interfaith dialogue to social cohesion, several important research gaps remain. First, previous studies predominantly evaluate dialogue programs, institutional policies, or individual religious traditions rather than comparatively examining how religious leaders themselves conceptualize peacebuilding across multiple faith communities (Hutabarat, 2024; Kan, 2023; King & Owen, 2020; Louw, 2022; Meri, 2021; Muslih et al., 2023; Mutalib & Ramly, 2023). Second, local cultural resources are frequently acknowledged but insufficiently integrated into comparative analyses of interfaith peacebuilding. Third, relatively few qualitative studies simultaneously investigate the perspectives of religious leaders representing different faith traditions within the same post-conflict context. Scholars have also called for greater attention to grassroots leadership, youth participation, civil society organizations, and methodological diversity to strengthen understanding of peacebuilding processes and long-term peace outcomes (Dhiman, 2023; Kusuma, 2020; Mustafa & Khan, 2023; Ogunbiyi et al., 2023; Walpita, 2023). Finally, ongoing debates concerning religious freedom, pluralism, and doctrinal integrity indicate the need for further empirical investigation into how religious leaders negotiate these tensions while promoting peaceful coexistence (Agboada, 2022)(Hemmet, 2023).

Responding to these gaps, the present study explores the perspectives of religious leaders representing multiple faith traditions regarding peacebuilding in Ambon City, Indonesia. Specifically, it investigates how religious leaders define peace, interpret religious values that support peaceful coexistence, understand compassion, justice, reconciliation, and tolerance, and describe their experiences in fostering harmonious interreligious relationships. By comparing perspectives across Islam, Protestant Christianity, Catholicism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism, customary leadership, civil society, and academia, this study seeks to identify shared ethical principles as well as distinctive contextual insights that contribute to sustainable peacebuilding. The study contributes to the literature by providing a comparative qualitative analysis situated within a post-conflict multicultural setting where religious teachings and local cultural traditions jointly shape peacebuilding practices. In doing so, it offers both theoretical and practical insights for policymakers, religious organizations, educators, and community leaders seeking to strengthen interfaith dialogue and long-term social harmony in culturally diverse societies.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative multiple case study design to explore how religious leaders from different faith traditions understand and practice peacebuilding in a post-conflict multicultural context. A qualitative approach was selected because the study sought to examine participants' meanings, interpretations, lived experiences, and contextually situated practices rather than quantify predetermined variables. Qualitative inquiry is particularly appropriate for research on religion, conflict, and peacebuilding because these phenomena are embedded in complex historical, cultural, institutional, and interpersonal relationships that cannot be adequately understood through numerical indicators alone.

The multiple case study design enabled the study to examine each participant as a distinct case while also comparing patterns across religious and institutional backgrounds. In this study, the cases consisted of religious, customary, civil-society, interfaith, and academic leaders who had direct knowledge of peacebuilding and interreligious relations in Ambon. This design supported both within-case interpretation and cross-case comparison, allowing the analysis to preserve the particularities of each participant's religious tradition while identifying common themes across cases.

Multiple case study research is valuable in peacebuilding studies because it provides rich contextual understanding and facilitates the identification of mechanisms, conditions, and outcomes across different social settings (Giess et al., 2020; Muslih et al., 2023; Walpita, 2023). It can also contribute to theory refinement by comparing how leadership, dialogue, local culture, and institutional support operate across cases (Lindsay, 2020). Nevertheless, the design requires careful attention to comparability because differences in religious traditions, institutional roles, and social experiences may complicate the identification of shared mechanisms (Anisa, 2022; Mattson, 2023). To address this issue, the study applied a common interview guide and a structured cross-case thematic matrix while remaining sensitive to the distinct context of each participant.

Research Setting

The study was conducted in Ambon City, Maluku Province, Indonesia. Ambon was selected purposively because it represents an important post-conflict setting in which interfaith reconciliation has become a significant feature of public and community life. The city experienced communal violence between 1999 and 2002, followed by extensive peacebuilding efforts involving religious leaders, government institutions, customary authorities, civil-society organizations, youth groups, and local communities.

Ambon also provides a culturally distinctive context through the continuing influence of *Pela Gandong*, a customary system of inter-village kinship, reciprocity, and mutual obligation. This tradition has frequently been mobilized to reinforce interreligious solidarity and rebuild trust across communities. The coexistence of formal interfaith institutions, religious organizations, local cultural practices, and grassroots initiatives made Ambon an analytically relevant setting for investigating how religious leaders interpret peace, justice, compassion, reconciliation, and tolerance.

Providing a detailed account of the research context is important for transferability because readers must be able to judge whether the findings may be relevant to other multicultural or post-conflict settings. Thick contextual description is therefore essential in qualitative peacebuilding research (Anisa, 2022; Giess et al., 2020).

Participant Selection

Participants were selected using purposive sampling. This strategy was appropriate because the study required informants with substantial knowledge of religious leadership, interfaith relations, conflict transformation, reconciliation, or social harmony. Purposeful case selection strengthens qualitative inquiry when participants are chosen because they can provide information relevant to theory development or contextual understanding (Anisa, 2022; Giess et al., 2020).

Twelve participants were included: two Muslim leaders, two Protestant Christian leaders, one Catholic priest, one Buddhist monk, one Hindu priest, one Confucian leader, one interfaith forum leader, one customary leader associated with *Pela Gandong*, one interfaith civil-society activist, and one academic specializing in religious studies. The sample was designed to capture variation in religious tradition, institutional position, leadership experience, and mode of engagement in peacebuilding.

The inclusion criteria required participants to hold a recognized religious, customary, organizational, or academic role; possess direct experience in interfaith relations or peacebuilding; and be willing to discuss their perspectives in an in-depth interview. Participants without relevant leadership or peacebuilding experience were excluded. The study did not seek statistical representation. Instead, it aimed to obtain information-rich cases capable of illuminating shared and divergent understandings of peacebuilding.

Data Collection

Data were collected primarily through semi-structured interviews. This method enabled the researcher to explore a common set of topics across participants while allowing sufficient flexibility to pursue individual experiences, examples, and interpretations. The interview guide addressed six principal areas: the meaning of peace, religious values supporting peacebuilding, expressions of compassion across faith traditions, the relationship between justice and peace, reconciliation practices, and understandings of tolerance.

Follow-up questions were used to clarify meanings, elicit concrete examples, and explore apparent differences across participants. The interview guide was reviewed before field implementation to ensure that the questions were clear, culturally appropriate, non-leading, and relevant to the research objectives. Where necessary, question wording was adjusted to accommodate participants' institutional and religious backgrounds without changing the core analytical focus.

The interviews were complemented by field notes and document review. Field notes recorded contextual observations, nonverbal communication, setting characteristics, emerging interpretations, and reflexive comments. Relevant documents included institutional statements, interfaith program materials, organizational reports, public peacebuilding documents, and materials related to local reconciliation initiatives. The use of multiple data sources enabled methodological triangulation and strengthened the credibility of the findings (Anisa, 2022; Giess et al., 2020; Haji-Othman et al., 2023).

With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed. Each participant was assigned an anonymous code from R1 to R12. Identifying information was removed or generalized during transcription and reporting to protect confidentiality.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. This approach was selected because it provides a systematic yet flexible method for identifying, organizing, interpreting, and reporting patterns across qualitative data. Thematic analysis has been widely applied in research on religion, conflict, interfaith dialogue, and peacebuilding because it enables researchers to connect participants' accounts with broader processes, outcomes, and contextual conditions (Haji-Othman et al., 2023; Regus, 2022; Wagay, 2022).

The analysis proceeded through six stages. First, the researcher became familiar with the data by reading the transcripts repeatedly and reviewing field notes and documents. Second, initial codes were generated to identify meaningful units related to peace, religious values, compassion, justice, reconciliation, tolerance, leadership, trust, and interfaith collaboration. Third, related codes were grouped into preliminary categories. Fourth, categories were compared across cases to identify recurring patterns, differences, and contextual variations. Fifth, themes were reviewed, refined, named, and defined. Sixth, the themes were organized into an interpretive narrative supported by representative quotations.

A hybrid coding strategy was used. Deductive codes were informed by the research questions and literature on peacebuilding, while inductive codes were developed from participants' accounts. This combination allowed the analysis to connect the findings with established theoretical frameworks without preventing unexpected insights from emerging (Koch, 2020; Lindsay, 2020).

Cross-case analysis was conducted through a thematic matrix that compared participants according to religious tradition, institutional role, key concepts, representative statements, and emerging themes. This process helped preserve contextual differences while identifying convergent patterns. The analysis generated six final themes: peace as positive coexistence, shared religious values, compassion across faith boundaries, justice as a foundation of peace, reconciliation through dialogue and trust-building, and tolerance as respect without doctrinal assimilation.

Researcher Reflexivity

Because research on religion and conflict involves sensitive identities and normative assumptions, reflexivity was integrated throughout the study. The researcher maintained reflexive notes concerning personal beliefs, expectations, interpretive choices, and possible power relations during interviews and analysis. Reflexive practice is particularly important in thematic analysis because researchers actively participate in interpreting meaning rather than functioning as neutral extractors of data (Haji-Othman et al., 2023; Regus, 2022).

The researcher also distinguished participants' meanings from subsequent theoretical interpretation. Analytical decisions were documented to make clear how codes, categories, and themes were developed.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was established through credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Credibility was strengthened through data triangulation, member checking, prolonged engagement with the research context, and the use of representative quotations. Provisional interpretations were reviewed where feasible to ensure that participants' perspectives had been accurately represented (Anisa, 2022; Haji-Othman et al., 2023).

Dependability was supported through an audit trail documenting participant selection, interview procedures, coding decisions, category development, theme revision, and analytical conclusions. A structured codebook and data-analysis log were maintained to improve consistency and transparency (Haji-Othman et al., 2023; Regus, 2022).

Confirmability was enhanced through reflexive journaling and explicit documentation of how interpretations were derived from the data. Representative quotations were included to demonstrate the relationship between participants' accounts and the final themes. Transferability was supported through thick description of Ambon's religious, cultural, and post-conflict context, along with a clear explanation of participant selection and study boundaries (Anisa, 2022; Giess et al., 2020).

Ethical Considerations

Participation was voluntary and based on informed consent. Participants were informed about the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks, confidentiality protections, and their right to withdraw. Given the sensitivity of religious identity and post-conflict experiences, interviews were conducted respectfully and participants were not pressured to discuss traumatic or politically sensitive matters. Data were stored securely, and anonymized codes were used in transcripts, analytical files, tables, and publications.

Through these procedures, the study sought to achieve methodological rigor while remaining responsive to the ethical and cultural complexities of interfaith peacebuilding research.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The thematic analysis identified six interrelated themes concerning how religious leaders and peacebuilding actors in Ambon conceptualized peace across different faith traditions. These themes were: (1) peace as positive coexistence, (2) shared religious values as foundations of peace, (3) compassion expressed through cross-faith social action, (4) justice as a prerequisite for sustainable peace, (5) reconciliation through dialogue and trust-building, and (6) tolerance as respect without doctrinal assimilation. Although participants drew on different theological, institutional, and cultural traditions, their accounts revealed substantial convergence in how peace was understood and practiced. Peace was consistently described as a relational, ethical, and social process rather than merely the absence of open conflict.

Peace as Positive Coexistence

The first theme concerned participants' definitions of peace. Nearly all participants rejected a narrow understanding of peace as the absence of violence or communal confrontation. Instead, they described peace as a positive social condition involving security, trust, mutual respect, freedom of worship, cooperation, and harmonious relationships among communities.

R1, a Muslim leader, linked peace to religious freedom and security:

"Peace means that all religious communities can worship without fear and without disturbing the beliefs of others."

This statement emphasized that peace requires not only the absence of violence but also the presence of social conditions that allow individuals to practice their religion safely. R3 similarly highlighted mutual trust:

"Peace is not only when there is no conflict, but when people can continue living side by side with mutual trust."

R8 described peace as balance in human relationships:

"Peace is a balance in the relationship between human beings, society, and the surrounding environment."

These accounts closely reflected the broader concept of positive peace, which emphasizes justice, social wellbeing, cooperation, and the reduction of structural conditions that generate conflict (Ganiel & Yohanis, 2022; Mubarakah, 2023). Participants did not present peace as a static endpoint. Rather, they understood it as an ongoing process that must be maintained through everyday interaction, institutional support, and ethical responsibility.

Several participants also connected peace with human dignity. R5 explained that peace develops when every person is recognized as having equal value, while R12 described peace as "a continuous social process" requiring justice and communication. Such perspectives positioned peace as both relational and structural. Peace depended on interpersonal trust, but it also required social arrangements that protected rights, reduced discrimination, and enabled equal participation.

The findings therefore demonstrate that participants' understandings of peace extended beyond cessation of violence. Peace was identified through visible social indicators: individuals worshipped freely, neighbors assisted one another, communities communicated during disagreements, and religious differences did not prevent cooperation. This emphasis on everyday practices is consistent with scholarship describing positive peace as embodied through dialogue, mutual recognition, empathy, and shared public action.

Shared Religious Values as Foundations of Peace

The second theme concerned the religious and ethical values that participants believed supported peacebuilding. Although the terminology differed across religious traditions, participants consistently identified love, compassion, mercy, forgiveness, brotherhood, justice, dignity, and harmony as central foundations of peace.

R5, a Catholic leader, stated:

"Every religion teaches love toward others. That is the foundation of dialogue."

R6 emphasized compassion from a Buddhist perspective:

"In Buddhist teaching, compassion becomes the basis for ending hatred."

R7 referred to the Hindu concept of *dharmā*:

"Dharma teaches us to maintain harmony with other people and with all living beings."

Muslim participants referred to mercy, brotherhood, and responsibility toward neighbors. Protestant and Catholic participants emphasized love, forgiveness, reconciliation, and service. Buddhist and Hindu participants highlighted compassion, non-harm, balance, and harmony. The Confucian participant emphasized ethical social relationships and respect, while customary and civil-society actors referred to brotherhood, solidarity, and communal responsibility.

Despite these theological differences, the participants did not interpret peacebuilding as requiring doctrinal convergence. Rather, they recognized shared ethical principles that could support cooperation while allowing each tradition to maintain its own religious identity. This convergence reflected broader literature showing that Christian peacebuilding frequently emphasizes forgiveness, reconciliation, justice, and social healing, while Islamic peacebuilding emphasizes justice, nonviolence, welfare, and coexistence. Hindu and Buddhist perspectives similarly foreground nonviolence, compassion, balance, and social harmony.

Participants' responses also suggested that religious teachings acquired peacebuilding significance when translated into social practice. Compassion, love, and justice were not presented solely as theological ideals. They were described as principles guiding assistance, mediation, dialogue, and social responsibility. Religious values therefore functioned as moral resources that legitimized peace-oriented behavior and encouraged communities to recognize common human concerns.

Compassion Through Cross-Faith Social Action

The third theme showed that participants understood compassion primarily through practical action. They repeatedly emphasized that peacebuilding becomes credible when religious communities assist one another during hardship, collaborate in humanitarian activities, and remain present in moments of suffering.

R2 explained:

"When a non-Muslim resident experiences a disaster, we still come and provide assistance."

R4 similarly stated:

“Love is not only expressed in words. It means being present when a neighbor needs help.”

R10 connected this responsibility to the local tradition of *Pela Gandong*:

“Pela Gandong teaches us that we remain brothers and sisters even though we have different religions.”

Participants identified several practical expressions of compassion, including visiting bereaved families, responding to disasters, organizing social assistance, conducting community service, supporting vulnerable households, and participating in joint humanitarian programs. These activities created direct contact between religious communities and enabled participants to encounter one another outside formal theological discussion.

R11 argued that collaborative action was often more effective than ceremonial dialogue:

“Joint programs are far more effective than seminars alone.”

This observation indicates that interfaith peacebuilding was strengthened when dialogue was connected to shared civic concerns. The participants viewed humanitarian cooperation as a way of transforming abstract values into visible social commitments. Through joint action, religious communities demonstrated that religious difference did not eliminate mutual responsibility.

The literature similarly identifies education, health services, disaster relief, poverty alleviation, and social welfare as shared public goods through which religious communities can develop trust and social cohesion (Hemmet, 2023). In the participants’ accounts, such action-oriented peacebuilding made interfaith relations tangible. Compassion was therefore not simply an individual virtue but a collective practice that expanded social solidarity across religious boundaries.

Justice as a Prerequisite for Sustainable Peace

The fourth theme concerned the relationship between justice and peace. Participants consistently argued that peace could not be sustained where groups experienced discrimination, unequal treatment, exclusion, or insecurity.

R9 stated:

“Dialogue will fail if the community feels that it is being treated unfairly.”

R12 similarly explained:

“Social justice is the main condition for the sustainability of peace.”

R1 emphasized equal citizenship:

“All groups must receive the same rights as citizens.”

These responses show that participants did not regard dialogue as sufficient on its own. Dialogue could create understanding, but its effectiveness depended on whether communities experienced fairness in practice. Participants associated justice with equal access to public rights, fair treatment by institutions, nondiscrimination, and balanced participation in social life.

R3 warned that even small experiences of discrimination could revive mistrust. This concern was particularly significant in a post-conflict context, where memories of unequal treatment could reinforce group insecurity. Accordingly, participants described justice as both preventive and restorative. It prevented new grievances from developing and contributed to repairing relationships damaged by earlier conflict.

This finding reflects contemporary peace scholarship that defines positive peace through the reduction of structural violence, inequality, and exclusion (Ganiel & Yohanis, 2022; Mubarokah, 2023). It also aligns with critical arguments that reconciliation cannot depend on forgiveness alone while leaving injustice unaddressed. Participants' perspectives therefore demonstrated an integrated understanding of peace in which moral reconciliation and structural fairness were mutually reinforcing.

Reconciliation Through Dialogue and Trust-Building

The fifth theme concerned reconciliation following communal conflict. Participants described reconciliation as a gradual and demanding process rather than a single event. It involved dialogue, mutual listening, repeated interaction, acknowledgment of past suffering, and the rebuilding of social trust.

R10 explained:

"We began by bringing the leaders together before bringing the wider communities together."

R3 emphasized the time required:

"Rebuilding trust takes many years."

R11 again stressed the importance of action:

"Joint activities are much more effective than seminars alone."

Participants described religious leaders as initial bridge-builders who created safer spaces for communication. Meetings among leaders helped reduce tension, clarify misinformation, and establish confidence before wider community engagement occurred. However, reconciliation was not limited to formal meetings. It also involved everyday encounters, shared cultural activities, mutual assistance, and cooperation in public life.

R5 noted that reconciliation required listening to the experiences of others. This suggested that peacebuilding involved not only future-oriented cooperation but also engagement with memory.

Participants did not advocate forgetting the conflict. Instead, they emphasized learning from it while preventing traumatic memories from becoming renewed sources of hostility.

This understanding reflects scholarship portraying forgiveness, memory, and reconciliation as interconnected but ethically complex dimensions of post-conflict peacebuilding. Reconciliation must include accountability, recognition, and transformed relationships rather than simply encouraging communities to coexist without addressing past grievances.

The local tradition of *Pela Gandong* emerged as an important cultural mechanism in this process. It provided a vocabulary of kinship and mutual obligation that could transcend religious division. Participants viewed this tradition as compatible with religious teachings and useful for restoring relationships. This finding supports scholarship emphasizing the role of indigenous moral systems and customary authority in creating culturally legitimate pathways toward reconciliation (Acquah, 2020; Anisa, 2022).

Tolerance as Respect Without Doctrinal Assimilation

The final theme concerned tolerance. Participants consistently distinguished tolerance from theological agreement or the mixing of religious doctrines. Instead, tolerance was defined as recognizing the rights of others, protecting religious freedom, maintaining respectful relationships, and allowing each group to preserve its own identity.

R5 stated:

"We remain different in faith, but we are united in humanity."

R6 explained:

"Respecting another person does not mean that we must agree with all of their beliefs."

R8 described tolerance as:

"Giving one another space to live."

These accounts demonstrate that participants understood tolerance as active coexistence rather than passive endurance. Tolerance required restraint, respect, communication, and social openness. It also required confidence in one's own religious identity, because participants did not view peacebuilding as dependent on reducing theological difference.

This distinction was particularly important in the participants' understanding of interfaith dialogue. Dialogue was not intended to erase differences but to create relationships in which differences did not produce hostility. Participants therefore framed tolerance as a practical ethic for living together in a plural society.

The findings reflect wider debates about balancing religious freedom, pluralism, and doctrinal integrity. Scholarship has emphasized that interfaith cooperation is often most effective when it focuses on shared civic goods and mutual respect rather than doctrinal harmonization (Hemmet, 2023). At the same time, critical literature warns that tolerance must not become superficial or conceal unequal power relations (Acquah, 2020; Mattson, 2023; Meri, 2021). Participants' responses addressed this concern by linking tolerance with justice, dignity, and equal rights rather than treating it as symbolic politeness.

Cross-Theme Synthesis

Taken together, the six themes reveal a coherent model of interfaith peacebuilding. Religious teachings provided ethical resources such as love, compassion, mercy, justice, forgiveness, and harmony. Religious and community leaders translated these values into dialogue, mediation, social assistance, and public cooperation. These practices strengthened trust, supported reconciliation, and created conditions for social harmony.

The participants' accounts also showed that peacebuilding depended on the interaction between spiritual values, social structures, and local culture. Religious values alone were insufficient unless they were embodied in action. Dialogue alone was insufficient without justice. Reconciliation was incomplete without trust-building and recognition of past harm. Tolerance was fragile unless supported by equality and religious freedom. Local traditions such as *Pela Gandong* strengthened these processes by embedding peacebuilding within culturally meaningful relationships of kinship and responsibility.

The findings therefore support an understanding of peace as simultaneously spiritual, relational, structural, and cultural. Although the participants represented different traditions and institutions, they shared the view that sustainable peace must be continuously produced through ethical leadership, inclusive social arrangements, practical collaboration, and respect for religious difference.

The findings demonstrate that religious leaders in Ambon understand peacebuilding as a multidimensional process grounded in ethical values, social justice, dialogue, reconciliation, and practical cooperation. Across the different faith traditions represented in this study, peace was not defined merely as the absence of violence, but as the presence of trust, security, mutual respect, equal rights, and sustained intercommunal relationships. This understanding is consistent with contemporary conceptions of positive peace, which emphasize relational transformation, institutional fairness, social wellbeing, and the removal of structural conditions that generate exclusion and conflict (Ganiel & Yohanis, 2022; Mubarakah, 2023). The participants' perspectives therefore support a broader interpretation of peace as an ongoing social achievement rather than a temporary condition following the cessation of violence.

The findings also align with relational peacebuilding theories that place sustained relationships and multi-level leadership at the center of conflict transformation. Religious leaders in this study acted not only as spiritual authorities but also as mediators, educators, conveners, and bridge-builders who connected formal institutions with everyday community life. Their roles reflected the importance of middle-range leadership in linking elites, organizations, and grassroots communities through repeated interaction and trust-building (Ramirez & de Beer, 2020; Umeyama & Brehm, 2021). Similar patterns have been reported in Africa, Asia, Lebanon, Myanmar, and Mindanao, where religious leaders have facilitated dialogue, supported humanitarian cooperation, and mobilized communities around shared social concerns (Accad & Hani, 2021; Acquah, 2020; Hemmet, 2023; King & Owen, 2020). The Ambon case therefore reinforces the wider cross-national conclusion that religious leaders are most effective when their authority is translated into inclusive and practical forms of public engagement.

A major contribution of the findings concerns the convergence of religious values across doctrinal boundaries. Participants repeatedly emphasized compassion, love, mercy, forgiveness, justice, human dignity, and harmony. Although these values were articulated through different theological vocabularies, they functioned as shared ethical resources for peacebuilding. This convergence did not require doctrinal assimilation. Rather, it enabled cooperation on common civic concerns while preserving distinct religious identities. This supports the argument that interfaith dialogue is most productive when it is oriented toward mutual recognition and shared public goods rather than theological uniformity (Hemmet, 2023). In this sense, the findings contribute to interfaith peacebuilding theory by demonstrating how doctrinal difference and ethical cooperation can coexist without weakening religious commitment.

The participants' emphasis on compassion through humanitarian action further illustrates the importance of the "dialogue of life" and the "dialogue of action." Joint assistance, disaster relief, visits to grieving families, and community service were described as more effective than ceremonial dialogue alone. These practices created visible evidence of solidarity and allowed religious communities to build trust through shared experience. This finding is consistent with studies showing that interfaith initiatives become more sustainable when they address education, health, poverty, and social welfare through concrete collaboration (Dhiman, 2023; Hemmet, 2023). Practical cooperation transforms peacebuilding from an abstract discourse into an embodied social relationship. It also strengthens legitimacy because religious leaders become credible not only through sermons or formal statements but through their willingness to serve communities beyond their own religious constituencies.

Justice emerged as an equally important condition of sustainable peace. Participants warned that dialogue would remain fragile if communities experienced discrimination, unequal treatment, or exclusion. This confirms critical peacebuilding arguments that reconciliation cannot be separated from structural justice. Forgiveness and dialogue may contribute to healing, but they cannot substitute for accountability, equal citizenship, and fair. The Ambon findings therefore challenge approaches that treat interfaith harmony primarily as a symbolic or interpersonal achievement. Peacebuilding must also address institutional arrangements, access to rights, and the distribution of social opportunities.

Without these structural dimensions, dialogue risks becoming performative and may conceal unresolved inequalities.

The role of *Pela Gandong* demonstrates how local cultural traditions can deepen the legitimacy and sustainability of reconciliation. Participants described this customary system as a source of kinship, reciprocity, and mutual obligation across religious boundaries. Its importance lies in its ability to translate peacebuilding into a locally meaningful moral language. This supports the “local turn” in peace studies, which emphasizes indigenous knowledge, community agency, and culturally grounded practices rather than externally imposed models (Acquah, 2020; Anisa, 2022). However, the findings also suggest that local traditions should not be romanticized. Their contribution depends on inclusive participation and their capacity to engage contemporary social realities. Cultural practices are most effective when they complement justice, institutional support, and interfaith cooperation rather than replace them.

The study also has several practical implications. Policymakers should institutionalize interfaith cooperation through inclusive councils, sustained funding, and joint public programs while protecting such initiatives from political capture (Meri, 2021). Educational institutions should integrate interfaith learning with service-based activities, community engagement, and youth leadership development (Giess et al., 2020; Kusuma, 2020; Muslih et al., 2023). Religious organizations should expand participation beyond senior clergy by involving women, youth, lay leaders, and grassroots activists in dialogue and peacebuilding networks. These measures would broaden the social base of peacebuilding and reduce the risk that dialogue remains elite-driven.

Several limitations should guide future research. The study was conducted in one post-conflict city and involved a relatively small purposive sample, which limits broad generalization. Future studies should undertake cross-national and cross-tradition comparisons to identify both universal mechanisms and context-specific pathways (Hutabarat, 2024; Kan, 2023; Mutalib & Ramly, 2023). Longitudinal and mixed-method research could also measure changes in trust, social cohesion, justice perceptions, and intergroup relations over time (Anisa, 2022; Haji-Othman et al., 2023; Ramirez & de Beer, 2020). Greater attention should also be given to women, youth, customary actors, and grassroots organizations as independent peacebuilders rather than secondary participants. Overall, the findings indicate that sustainable interfaith peace depends on the interaction of ethical leadership, social justice, practical cooperation, inclusive governance, and culturally grounded reconciliation.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how religious leaders from different faith traditions in Ambon City conceptualize and practice peacebuilding within a post-conflict multicultural society. The findings show that participants understood peace not merely as the absence of violence, but as a positive and continuing social condition characterized by trust, security, justice, mutual respect, freedom of religion, and constructive relationships among communities. Across religious and institutional backgrounds,

participants emphasized that peace must be actively maintained through dialogue, ethical leadership, practical cooperation, and inclusive social arrangements.

Six interconnected findings emerged from the thematic analysis. First, peace was conceptualized as positive coexistence rather than passive non-conflict. Second, religious traditions provided shared ethical foundations for peace through values such as compassion, love, mercy, forgiveness, justice, dignity, and harmony. Third, compassion became socially meaningful when expressed through joint humanitarian assistance, community service, disaster response, and support for vulnerable groups across religious boundaries. Fourth, justice was identified as a fundamental condition for sustainable peace because discrimination, exclusion, and unequal treatment can reactivate mistrust and conflict. Fifth, reconciliation was understood as a gradual process involving dialogue, acknowledgment of past suffering, repeated interaction, and long-term trust-building. Sixth, tolerance was defined as respect for religious difference and equal freedom of worship without requiring doctrinal assimilation.

The study demonstrates that religious leaders perform multiple peacebuilding roles. In addition to providing spiritual guidance, they act as mediators, educators, conveners, community mobilizers, and moral advocates. Their effectiveness depends not only on formal religious authority but also on local credibility, sustained engagement, and the ability to translate theological values into practical social action. The findings further indicate that interfaith dialogue becomes more influential when it is connected to shared public concerns, including education, humanitarian assistance, poverty reduction, social welfare, and community development.

A central contribution of this research is its demonstration that doctrinal diversity does not prevent ethical convergence. Participants retained their distinct religious identities while recognizing common responsibilities toward humanity, justice, and peaceful coexistence. This finding contributes to interfaith peacebuilding scholarship by showing that cooperation does not require theological uniformity. Instead, sustainable interreligious relationships can emerge through shared civic action, mutual recognition, and respect for difference.

The study also highlights the significance of local cultural traditions. In Ambon, *Pela Gandong* reinforces peacebuilding by providing a culturally embedded framework of kinship, reciprocity, solidarity, and mutual obligation. Its interaction with religious teachings and formal interfaith institutions illustrates that sustainable reconciliation is strengthened when peacebuilding is locally grounded. This contribution extends existing knowledge by integrating religious leadership, positive peace, relational peacebuilding, and indigenous cultural practice within one comparative qualitative framework.

Practically, the findings suggest that policymakers should support inclusive interfaith institutions, ensure equal treatment among religious communities, and provide sustained resources for community-based peace initiatives. Religious organizations should expand dialogue beyond formal meetings by developing joint humanitarian and social programs. Educational institutions should integrate interfaith learning, peace education, community service, and youth leadership into curricula and extracurricular

activities. Peacebuilding programs should also include women, youth, customary leaders, civil-society actors, and local communities rather than depending primarily on senior religious elites.

The study is limited by its focus on one city and a relatively small purposive sample. Its findings are therefore analytically transferable rather than statistically generalizable. Future research should compare religious leaders' perspectives across different post-conflict regions and national contexts. Longitudinal studies are also needed to assess whether interfaith initiatives produce sustained changes in trust, social cohesion, perceived justice, and intergroup cooperation. Mixed-method designs could combine qualitative accounts with measurable indicators of peacebuilding outcomes. Further research should also examine the distinct roles of women, youth, grassroots activists, and customary institutions in shaping interfaith peace.

Overall, this study concludes that sustainable peace in a religiously diverse post-conflict society depends on the interaction of ethical leadership, social justice, practical cooperation, inclusive governance, and culturally grounded reconciliation. Religious leaders can make a substantial contribution to this process when they move beyond symbolic dialogue and participate in sustained, equitable, and community-centered action. The experience of Ambon offers a valuable model of how religious traditions and indigenous cultural resources can work together to transform former divisions into enduring relationships of solidarity and peaceful coexistence.

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