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# Colonial Legacy, Religious Pluralism, and Post-Colonial World

## Religion, State Formation, and Communal Violence in the Post-Colonial World

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## Zusammenfassung

Religiöser Pluralismus prägte viele Gesellschaften bereits vor der europäischen Kolonialisierung. Kolonialmächte veränderten diese Formen der Koexistenz jedoch grundlegend, indem sie religiöse Identitäten administrativ kategorisierten und zur politischen Kontrolle nutzten. Das Kapitel argumentiert, dass heutige religiöse Konflikte in postkolonialen Gesellschaften daher nicht primär auf „uralte Feindschaften" zurückzuführen sind, sondern auf koloniale Prozesse, die religiöse Trennlinien rechtlich, politisch und administrativ konstruierten und verfestigten. Anhand von Nigeria, Sudan, Britisch-Indien und Sri Lanka werden Strategien wie Klassifizierung, indirekte Herrschaft und getrennte Repräsentation untersucht. Abschließend werden daraus Konsequenzen für historisch reflektierte, inklusive und kontextsensible Friedensförderung abgeleitet.

Schlagwörter: Religiöser Pluralismus, Kolonialismus, Postkolonialismus, Peacebuilding

## Abstract

Religious pluralism characterized many societies long before European colonization. Colonial powers fundamentally transformed these forms of coexistence by categorizing religious identities administratively and using them as instruments of political control. This chapter argues that contemporary religious conflicts in postcolonial societies should therefore not primarily be attributed to "ancient hostilities," but understood as the outcome of colonial processes that constructed and reinforced religious divisions through legal, political, and administrative measures. Drawing on case studies from Nigeria, Sudan, British India, and Sri Lanka, the chapter examines strategies such as classification, indirect rule, elite co-optation, and separate political representation. It concludes by highlighting the implications for historically informed, inclusive, and context-sensitive approaches to peacebuilding and sustainable peace in religiously plural societies.

Keywords: Religious Pluralism, Colonialism, Postcolonial Conflict, Peacebuilding

## Introduction

Religious pluralism, understood as the coexistence of multiple religious traditions within a single political territory, is a defining feature of most societies that were once under European colonial administration. Long before colonial contact, many of these societies already contained considerable religious diversity, and in numerous cases communities of different faiths lived under systems of accommodation, syncretism, or negotiated coexistence. Colonial rule did not simply encounter this pluralism; it actively reorganized it. European powers governed vast and diverse populations with limited personnel and resources, and religion became one of the principal instruments through which colonial administrations classified subjects, allocated privileges, and delegated authority.

Public and policy discourse often attributes conflict between faith communities in the post-colonial world to inherent religious incompatibility or to "age-old" hatreds. This framing obscures the structural and historical role that colonial governance played in constructing, hardening, and institutionalizing religious division. This chapter traces the specific administrative and legal mechanisms through which colonial rule transformed religious pluralism into a source of structural conflict, and it translates that historical understanding into practical implications for post-colonial peacebuilding. The discussion draws on a qualitative synthesis of secondary literature, historical scholarship, and comparative case analysis of Nigeria, Sudan, colonial South Asia, and Sri Lanka three colonial administrative traditions chosen to reveal both context-specific dynamics and cross-cutting patterns of governance. The chapter is organized thematically rather than chronologically or country by country, so that the recurring administrative logics of empire, classification, elite co-optation, constitutional design, and separate representation, can be traced as they appear across otherwise very different colonial settings.

## Empire and the Reconstruction of Religious Pluralism

Scholars of empire have shown that British, French, and Dutch colonial administrations frequently co-opted religious elites into structures of indirect governance, using existing religious authority to control local populations while simultaneously constraining reformist or anti-colonial religious movements. In Sudan and Nigeria, for example, British administrators governed through existing Islamic leadership structures while restricting movements that threatened colonial authority (Metcalf, 1995). Elsewhere, colonial administrations reinforced sectarian divisions as a strategy of control, granting political privileges to some religious

communities while marginalizing others, a pattern most visible in French-administered Lebanon and British India (Makdisi, 2000; Pandey, 1990).

In Nigeria, British indirect rule divided the territory into protectorates and regions administered through local elites, entrenching religious and ethnic favoritism that shaped access to education, land, and political representation, an influence that continues to structure the country's sociopolitical environment (Osaghae & Suberu, 2005). In Sudan, the post-colonial state inherited a bifurcated administrative structure that had separated the Muslim north from the largely Christian and animist south, a division that scholars identify as a direct root of the country's prolonged civil wars and the later conflict in Darfur (Bassil, 2015). In Sri Lanka, the British consolidated a unitary constitutional structure that privileged the Sinhalese Buddhist majority over the Tamil Hindu and Muslim minorities, a legacy that later fed decades of civil war between the state and Tamil separatist movements; much of the island's post-independence pluralist contestation traces directly to the organization of the British unitary constitutional model (Harris, 2018).

A recurring theme across these cases is that colonial administrations did not merely observe religious identity; they codified it. Census categories, legal codes, and administrative boundaries transformed what were often fluid and locally negotiated identities into fixed, mutually exclusive categories that could be counted, ranked, and mobilized (Pandey, 1990). This process is sometimes referred to in post-colonial scholarship as the “hardening” of religious and communal boundaries, whereby the colonial state's bureaucratic need for classification produced social categories with lasting political consequences (Pandey, 1990). Independence movements inherited these categories along with the state apparatus built to manage them, and newly formed governments frequently continued to use religion as a basis for political mobilization, patronage distribution, or electoral competition, reproducing colonial-era hierarchies under a nominally sovereign flag (Mamdani, 1996).

Understanding this colonial genealogy of religious conflict matters because it reframes many post-colonial religious conflicts not simply as ancient hatreds erupting into modern violence, but as the product of specific, traceable administrative decisions (Said, 1978). This reframing carries direct implications for policy and peacebuilding: if conflict lines were constructed through governance choices, they can, in principle, be reconstructed through different governance choices. The remainder of this chapter develops that proposition through a qualitative, comparative examination of colonial administrative mechanisms and their post-colonial afterlives.

### A Note on the Methodological Approach

This chapter adopts a qualitative, document-based, and interpretive approach rather than statistical or experimental methods. Qualitative inquiry suits questions of meaning, historical process, and the social construction of identity categories, phenomena not readily reducible to numerical measurement (Lanka et al., 2021). The analysis draws entirely on secondary sources, peer-reviewed articles, scholarly monographs, working papers, and historical analyses, examined through thematic coding for recurring patterns: religious classification, elite co-optation, legal pluralism, and the post-independence political mobilization of religious identity. Nigeria, Sudan, and Sri Lanka were selected purposively to represent distinct colonial administrative traditions: British indirect rule, British and Anglo-Egyptian condominium administration, and British unitary governance, respectively, so that the analysis can identify both context-specific dynamics and cross-cutting patterns. As a literature-based study, its findings are interpretive rather than causal in the statistical sense; triangulation was achieved by drawing on multiple independent sources for each case and cross-checking historical claims against more than one scholarly account. Its principal limitation is a reliance on secondary literature rather than original archival or field research, an avenue future work could usefully pursue through oral history and archival methods.

## Machanisms of Colonial Religious Division

### Classification and the Hardening of Identity

Across the cases examined, a consistent pattern emerges: colonial administrations converted fluid, often locally negotiated religious identities into fixed administrative categories. Census-taking, legal codification, and the demarcation of provinces along religious or ethnic lines gave religious identity a new political weight it had not previously carried in the same form. Colonial administrations institutionalized and bureaucratized religion in ways that persist today, often hardening boundaries that had previously been far more fluid (Ullah, 2025). In British India, this classificatory logic contributed directly to the entrenchment of Hindu-Muslim communal categories that later shaped the violence of Partition (Pandey, 1990).

### Indirect Rule and the Empowerment of Religious Elites

A second recurring mechanism is the colonial strategy of governing through religious elites, which simultaneously legitimized certain religious authorities and

delegitimized others. In Nigeria and Sudan, the British maintained and strengthened existing Islamic leadership structures to facilitate low-cost administration, a strategy that consolidated religious hierarchy while marginalizing competing reformist or minority religious voices. This selective empowerment created long-term imbalances in political representation that outlasted colonial withdrawal (Mamdani, 1996; Osaghae & Suberu, 2005).

## Constitutional and Territorial Legacies

In Sri Lanka, the unitary constitutional model imposed by British colonial administration left the post-independence state with few institutional tools for accommodating minority claims, contributing to the escalation of Sinhalese-Tamil tensions into prolonged civil conflict (Harris, 2018). Similarly, in Sudan, the colonial administrative separation of the northern and southern regions produced two starkly different governance trajectories that independence could not easily reconcile, culminating in decades of civil war and, eventually, the secession of South Sudan (Bassil, 2015).

## Separate Electorates and the Partition of British India

The 1947 Partition of British India offers one of the clearest illustrations of how colonial administrative choices produced religious conflict on a massive scale. British colonial governance introduced separate electorates and community-based political representation, requiring Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs to vote within their own religious categories rather than as members of a shared political community. This system compelled political leaders to build power by appealing to narrow religious constituencies rather than cross-communal coalitions, and over decades it froze fluid, locally negotiated identities into rigid, competing blocs (Pandey, 1990). The result, at independence in 1947, was a partition of the subcontinent into India and Pakistan accompanied by mass population transfers and communal violence in which an estimated fifteen million people were displaced (Britannica, 2026). Historians note that provinces subject to the most direct colonial administration and census-based communal categorization, such as Punjab and Bengal, experienced dramatically higher levels of violence than princely states that had been governed more indirectly, a pattern consistent with the broader argument that the intensity of colonial classification correlates with the intensity of subsequent communal conflict.

## The Post-Colonial Political Economy of Religious Identity

Beyond these direct institutional legacies, post-colonial elites frequently found it politically advantageous to continue mobilizing the religious categories inherited from colonial rule, since these categories offered a ready-made basis for building patronage networks and electoral coalitions (Horowitz, 1985). This dynamic helps explain why religious conflict in many post-colonial states has often intensified around moments of political competition, such as elections or constitutional reform, rather than remaining constant over time.

At the same time, the colonial legacy of religious division is not deterministic. Comparative research on communal violence in India shows that where cross-cutting civic associations, business networks, and local institutions bridge religious communities, cities have proven considerably more resistant to riot and mobilization than cities where associational life remains segregated along colonial-era communal lines (Varshney, 2002). This finding matters for the argument of this chapter because it suggests that local institutional choices made well after independence can either reinforce or counteract inherited colonial cleavages — which is to say that the structures colonialism built are durable, but not immutable.

## Towards Post-Colonial Repair: Institutional and Communal Pathways

If colonial governance choices constructed the conflict lines examined in this chapter, then different governance choices can, in principle, help dismantle them. Six interlocking interventions follow from the analysis above.

The first is inclusive constitutional and federal design. States should review constitutional and administrative structures inherited from the colonial period to ensure that power-sharing arrangements do not privilege one religious community over others, drawing on federal or devolved models that give minority religious communities genuine political voice. The second is reform of colonial-era legal pluralism. Where colonial administrations left behind parallel religious or customary legal systems, as in Sudan's north-south divide or Nigeria's regional legal frameworks, states should pursue harmonization processes that protect religious freedom while reducing the potential for legal fragmentation to reinforce communal boundaries.

The third is investment in interfaith and intercommunal dialogue institutions. Structured, sustained dialogue platforms involving religious leaders, women's groups, and youth can rebuild trust across communal lines and counter the political incentive to treat religious identity as a zero-sum resource. The fourth is education

reform and shared historical narratives. Curricula should present the colonial origins of religious division honestly, helping citizens understand communal conflict as a historical and political construction rather than an immutable religious fact, which can reduce the perceived inevitability of conflict.

The fifth is truth-telling and historical acknowledgment. Formal mechanisms that acknowledge how colonial policy shaped present-day inequalities between religious communities can help post-colonial states address grievance without requiring one community to accept blame for outcomes rooted in earlier administrative decisions. The sixth is equitable resource and representation policy. Because colonial-era favoritism often produced lasting disparities in education, employment, and political representation among religious communities, targeted policies to close these gaps can reduce the material grievances that make religious mobilization politically attractive.

## Conclusion

Religious conflict in many post-colonial societies cannot be adequately understood without reference to the administrative choices made under colonial rule. Colonial governments did not simply preside over pre-existing religious pluralism; they actively reshaped it through classification, selective elite empowerment, and constitutional design, producing institutional legacies that independence movements inherited along with the state itself. The cases of Nigeria, Sudan, and Sri Lanka illustrate distinct but structurally similar pathways from colonial governance to post-colonial conflict, suggesting that these are not isolated national tragedies but the outcome of a broader pattern in colonial statecraft.

Recognizing this pattern carries an important implication for peacebuilding: because these conflict structures were built through specific governance decisions, they are, at least in principle, amenable to being reformed through equally deliberate governance and institutional change. Sustainable peace in religiously plural, post-colonial societies is therefore likely to depend not only on grassroots reconciliation and interfaith dialogue but also on the harder work of revisiting constitutional structures, legal systems, and representational arrangements that still bear the imprint of colonial rule.

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