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A Journal of Philosophy

Published by the Department of Philosophy, University of Abuja

Volume 1 (2025), Article 3, <https://doi.org/10.70118/SSJP0003>

Religious Pluralism and the Ethics of Coexistence in Sierra Leone

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Abstract

This paper explores the religious atmosphere of Sierra Leone through a philosophical lens, examining how pluralism and interfaith relations are experienced and conceptualised in a complex socio-religious context. While the nation's reputation for religious tolerance is often celebrated, this study argues that such coexistence raises deeper epistemological and ethical questions regarding religious truth claims, identity, and social cohesion. Drawing from African philosophy of religion—especially the works of John Mbiti, Kwasi Wiredu, and communalist ethics—as well as global frameworks like Habermas's discourse ethics and Rawlsian toleration, the paper develops a normative reflection on the possibilities and limits of peaceful religious plurality. Methodologically, this research integrates empirical data gathered from religious leaders and adherents across major regions in Sierra Leone with a conceptual analysis of pluralism. The findings reveal a widespread pragmatic ethos of tolerance that is not always accompanied by deeper philosophical engagement with difference. By examining this gap, the paper makes a case for a more reflexive and philosophically grounded model of coexistence that transcends mere harmony and embraces constructive, dialogical pluralism.

Keywords: African Philosophy of Religion, Pluralism, Religious Epistemology, Interfaith Ethics, Sierra Leone

Introduction

Religious pluralism is often approached as a sociological fact or political achievement—but at its core, it is also a deeply philosophical concern. The coexistence of multiple religious traditions within a shared social space challenges fundamental assumptions about truth, meaning, moral obligation, and human identity. This is particularly true in postcolonial African societies such as Sierra Leone, where religious pluralism is not a novel phenomenon but a historical reality woven into the cultural and political fabric of the nation. Sierra Leone's reputation for religious tolerance is well documented. Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religions (ATR) have coexisted for centuries, with relatively minimal large-scale religious conflict. Interfaith marriages, joint religious festivals, and collaborative humanitarian projects testify to the nation's pragmatic ethos of tolerance. Yet the question remains: *What underpins this peaceful coexistence?* Is it the result of mutual respect and deep interreligious understanding? Or is it a surface-level accommodation shaped by political convenience and

historical contingency? This paper argues that Sierra Leone's religious atmosphere offers fertile ground for rethinking the philosophy of religious pluralism in the African context. Rather than simply describing pluralism as a demographic reality or policy goal, this study reframes it as a normative philosophical problem that demands conceptual analysis, ethical reflection, and critical engagement with African and global thought traditions.

At the heart of this inquiry lies the tension between truth and tolerance. If religions make competing metaphysical claims about the nature of reality and ultimate salvation, how can adherents remain committed to their faith while also recognizing the legitimacy of others? Western liberal theorists such as John Rawls and Charles Taylor have addressed this dilemma through the concepts of "reasonable pluralism" and "deep diversity" respectively. Meanwhile, African thinkers such as Kwasi Wiredu and John Mbiti have emphasized communal rationality, consensus, and ontological interconnectedness as key features of African religious epistemology. This paper situates itself at the intersection of these philosophical traditions. It draws on African communal ethics and Western theories of discourse and toleration to explore what it means to sustain pluralism beyond peaceful coexistence—towards a deeper dialogical pluralism that embraces difference without collapsing into relativism. By analysing the lived experiences of religious actors in Sierra Leone, this study also brings empirical insight into conversation with normative theory, treating the religious practices and perspectives of Sierra Leoneans as philosophical data worthy of serious reflection. In this way, the paper contributes to the growing field of African philosophy of religion, challenging the tendency to marginalize African religious experiences in global debates about pluralism. It affirms that the question of how to live together with radical religious difference is not only a Western liberal concern but a human concern—one that African societies have long wrestled with and continue to negotiate creatively.

Philosophical Framework

The central philosophical question guiding this study is: *What ethical, epistemological, and metaphysical foundations can support religious pluralism in a postcolonial African context like Sierra Leone?* To explore this, we draw on three intersecting philosophical traditions—African communal thought, religious epistemology, and contemporary theories of toleration and discourse. These frameworks allow us to move beyond descriptive sociology into the realm of critical reflection on truth, coexistence, and the ethics of recognition. African philosophy offers a robust framework for understanding pluralism not as an abstract tolerance of difference but as a lived ethos rooted in community. As Kwasi Wiredu argues, traditional African societies often resolve conflict through consensus rather than adversarial debate, reflecting a belief in *harmonious co-existence as a moral good* ([Wiredu 1996: 27]). Similarly, John Mbiti's famous aphorism—"I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am"—reflects a metaphysical orientation in which individuals find their identity within a network of communal relationships ([Mbiti 1971: 108]). In this view, pluralism is not a threat to unity but its condition. The presence of multiple religions in Sierra Leone becomes philosophically valuable insofar as it challenges individuals and communities to re-articulate their beliefs in relation to others. Pluralism thus becomes not only tolerable but spiritually enriching. This insight is consistent with the African value of Ubuntu, which emphasizes mutual respect, empathy, and interdependence. Ubuntu ethics suggest that coexistence is not passive but active—a constant process of affirming one's humanity through the humanity of others. In Sierra Leone, the persistence of interfaith collaboration, joint worship events, and cross-religious family structures can be seen as an expression of this deeper moral orientation.

A central dilemma in religious pluralism is the epistemological status of religious truth claims. Can competing claims about God, salvation, and sacred authority all be true? If not, how can they coexist in the public square? Alvin Plantinga's reformed epistemology defends the rationality of religious belief as "properly basic"—justified apart from inferential evidence ([Plantinga 2000: 241]). While this provides a basis for respecting internal religious conviction, it does little to explain the *public legitimacy* of diverse faiths in a shared polity. Alternatively, John Hick proposes a pluralistic hypothesis: that all major religions are culturally conditioned

responses to the same Ultimate Reality ([Hick 1989: 120]). This model fits the Sierra Leonean context, where many religious practitioners combine traditional African cosmologies with Abrahamic faiths. However, Hick's model has been criticized for reducing particularistic commitments to mere cultural filters, thereby undermining the self-understanding of believers. In contrast, William Alston's pluralist epistemology accepts that multiple, mutually incompatible religious doxastic practices can be epistemically justified within their own frameworks. Applied to Sierra Leone, this view affirms the rationality of multiple religions coexisting without requiring syncretism or relativism. This philosophical problem becomes urgent when practitioners confront conflicting truth claims in daily life. In Sierra Leone, many adherents affirm the exclusivity of their faith while maintaining peaceful relations with others. This paradox invites a *meta-epistemological humility*: the recognition that religious knowledge, while meaningful and motivating, is also limited by the finitude of human understanding.

Western liberal theories of toleration offer additional tools for conceptualizing pluralism. John Rawls's idea of "reasonable pluralism" insists that in a free society, citizens will inevitably hold incompatible yet reasonable comprehensive doctrines ([Rawls 1993: 36]). For Rawls, political stability depends not on religious agreement but on an overlapping consensus on constitutional essentials. This resonates with the Sierra Leonean context, where Christianity, Islam, and Traditional Religions operate under a shared commitment to peace and public order. However, Rawls's framework may be too state-centric for contexts where civil society—not the state—mediates religious tolerance. Jürgen Habermas's theory of *discourse ethics* offers a more dialogical alternative. He proposes that legitimacy arises from communicative action in which all stakeholders participate on equal terms ([Habermas 1996: 306]). Religious traditions, in this view, must translate their claims into publicly accessible reasons when entering deliberative spaces. This idea aligns with the work of the Inter-Religious Council of Sierra Leone, which fosters structured dialogue among faith communities. Finally, Charles Taylor offers a theory of *deep diversity*—a pluralism that respects not only difference but the sources of meaning that sustain people's identities ([Taylor 1994: 43]). Taylor's concept of *recognition* is particularly relevant to postcolonial societies like Sierra Leone, where religion is closely tied to cultural heritage and historical memory. Recognition entails more than tolerance; it requires that religious communities see each other as morally serious participants in a shared national project.

Together, these philosophical traditions—African communal ethics, religious epistemology, and global theories of toleration—provide the scaffolding for this study's analysis. They reveal that pluralism is not a simple fact but a complex philosophical challenge. Sierra Leone's lived religious tolerance is commendable, but it becomes philosophically significant only when understood as part of a broader ethical and epistemic commitment to dialogue, dignity, and shared humanity.

Methodology

Philosophy has traditionally been associated with abstract reasoning and conceptual analysis. However, contemporary approaches in the philosophy of religion, especially within African and applied philosophical traditions, increasingly recognize the value of integrating empirical insight. This study adopts a philosophically grounded interdisciplinary methodology, combining conceptual analysis, communitarian ethics, and empirical engagement to explore the nature and implications of religious pluralism in Sierra Leone.

Although empirical research is more common in the sociology of religion, this paper draws on philosophical precedents to justify its integration. Thinkers such as Paul Ricoeur and Charles Taylor have argued that empirical realities offer access to lived meanings, which in turn demand hermeneutic and ethical interpretation. In an African context, scholars like Kwasi Wiredu and Kwame Gyekye have emphasized that African philosophy should remain grounded in the lived experiences of its people, where metaphysics, ethics, and social realities are intertwined. By collecting and analysing data from religious leaders and adherents, this study does not aim merely to describe tolerance in Sierra Leone. Rather, it seeks to examine the

implicit ethical commitments and epistemological assumptions that sustain such tolerance. This moves the inquiry from mere sociology to applied philosophy: asking not only *what is happening*, but also *why it matters* philosophically.

A semi-structured questionnaire was distributed to a stratified sample of religious leaders and adherents across five major cities—Freetown, Bo, Kenema, Makeni, and Moyamba. The respondents were drawn from the three dominant religions (Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religion), as well as representatives of newer or minority religious movements (e.g., Bahá'í Faith, Hare Krishna, Seventh-Day Adventists). Questions were designed to elicit both factual data and evaluative responses, such as:

- *How do you understand religious tolerance?*
- *Have you experienced interfaith conflict or cooperation?*
- *What theological or moral principles guide your engagement with other faiths?*

This qualitative approach was complemented by quantitative tracking of response rates and distributions to assess the breadth and depth of religious engagement with pluralism.

The responses were subjected to thematic analysis, guided by philosophical categories:

- Epistemological Attitudes: Are religious beliefs held with exclusivist, inclusivist, or pluralist assumptions?
- Moral Orientation: Do participants articulate an ethic of coexistence, and if so, is it utilitarian, deontological, or communitarian?
- Theological Openness: Is dialogue seen as dilution or enrichment of religious identity?

These themes were then interpreted through the lenses of African communitarian ethics, Habermasian discourse theory, and Rawlsian political liberalism, drawing connections between lived experience and normative theory.

A core methodological challenge lies in the tension between philosophical abstraction and empirical specificity. While generalization is limited by the contextual focus on Sierra Leone, the study embraces this limitation by treating Sierra Leone as a philosophical case study—a concrete instance that illuminates broader questions about religious tolerance in postcolonial, pluralist societies. Furthermore, in line with hermeneutic philosophy, the researcher acknowledges his own positionality. The goal is not to offer a neutral or detached viewpoint but to enter into dialogue with the voices of the participants, interpreting their commitments and practices with philosophical charity and critical rigor.

In traditional philosophy of religion, attention often focuses on metaphysical, epistemological, and theological analysis. However, in recent decades, a growing movement within applied and contextual philosophy of religion—especially in African contexts—has emphasized the need to ground philosophical reflection in lived religious experience. As such, this paper adopts a philosophical-empirical hybrid methodology, grounded in the view that lived religious pluralism cannot be fully understood without attending to the social and political realities in which it operates. This approach draws support from scholars such as Kwasi Wiredu, who advocated for the “conceptual decolonisation” of philosophy by engaging African vernacular epistemologies and political realities. Similarly, John Mbiti's integration of Christian theology with African traditional worldviews serves as precedent for blending descriptive analysis with conceptual evaluation. Furthermore, Jürgen Habermas's notion of “post-secular societies” and the importance of intersubjective dialogue justifies the inclusion of empirical realities in philosophical reflection. Hence, this methodology is not a deviation from philosophy but an expansion of its tools and sources—where dialogue, narrative, and data become philosophical resources for exploring the ethics of coexistence and pluralism.

This study utilised a qualitative-dominant, mixed-methods approach, appropriate for examining attitudes, values, and interpretations concerning religious tolerance in a pluralistic society. Data was gathered via structured questionnaires and semi-structured interviews targeting:

- Inter-religious Council members
- Denominational and inter-denominational leaders
- Faith-based community leaders and adherents
- Minor religious groups (e.g., Bahá'í Faith, Hare Krishna, Pentecostal sects)

The data collection focused on five major cities in Sierra Leone—Freetown, Bo, Kenema, Makeni, and Moyamba—to capture geographic and denominational diversity. The respondents were selected purposively, reflecting their religious leadership roles and influence in shaping interfaith discourse.

Data was analysed using thematic content analysis, guided by key philosophical categories:

- Tolerance (as conceptualised in Rawlsian liberalism and African communal ethics)
- Pluralism (as understood in Charles Taylor's deep diversity)
- Epistemic humility and moral respect
- Syncretism vs. doctrinal exclusivity

Each response was read as an expression of not just personal belief, but as a contribution to a lived philosophy of religion, revealing the moral imagination and social reasoning of individuals navigating complex religious environments. For instance, statements reflecting interfaith respect were analysed in terms of Habermasian communicative rationality, while expressions of discomfort with minority faiths were discussed through the lens of Rawlsian “burdens of judgment”—where moral disagreement is inevitable but should not preclude mutual respect.

This methodology bridges a key gap in contemporary philosophy of religion—especially in Africa—by recognising that pluralism is not only a theoretical ideal but a lived negotiation of meaning, identity, and power. In this sense, empirical inputs are essential for any ethically responsible philosophical account of religious coexistence.

Ultimately, this methodological orientation enables the research to:

- Examine not only *what* people believe, but *why* and *how* they justify those beliefs in pluralistic settings;
- Illuminate the moral grammar of interreligious engagement in Sierra Leone;
- Translate these findings into a broader philosophical discourse on pluralism, toleration, and identity.

The empirical component of this study involved the distribution of questionnaires and informal interviews with religious leaders and adherents in five major cities across Sierra Leone. Participants were informed of the research objectives, assured of confidentiality, and participated voluntarily. Written or verbal consent was obtained in each case, and no coercive or deceptive practices were used. No personal or identifying information is disclosed in this publication.

Findings and Discussion

The empirical portion of this study drew upon survey data collected from 80 religious leaders and adherents across five major cities in Sierra Leone, achieving an overall response rate of 87%. Participants represented a spectrum of religious traditions: Christianity, Islam, African Traditional Religions (ATR), and minority groups such as the Bahá'í Faith and the Hare Krishna movement. The results provided a rich qualitative insight into how religious pluralism is experienced and practiced in Sierra Leone. Yet, beyond documenting coexistence, this

section develops a philosophical interpretation of these findings in light of theories of pluralism, dialogue, and tolerance.

A clear theme emerging from the responses was the pragmatic nature of religious tolerance. Respondents often cited peaceful coexistence as a product of shared social life: intermarriage, communal events, and collective national trauma (e.g., the civil war). While this social cohesion is commendable, it often lacks deeper epistemic or ethical reflection on religious difference. Tolerance, in this context, appears as a functional necessity rather than a principled commitment. From a philosophical standpoint, this raises the question: Is tolerance sustainable when based only on pragmatism? According to John Rawls [1993: xx], an “overlapping consensus” on political values (such as peace and order) can stabilize diverse societies. Yet, without moral reasoning or deliberative justification, such consensus may erode under stress. In Sierra Leone, the strength of pragmatic coexistence must be reinforced by philosophical pluralism—the view that difference can be acknowledged and respected as inherently valuable.

The data also revealed a widespread belief in community values that echo African philosophical traditions, particularly the concept of Ubuntu: “*A person is a person through other persons.*” Several respondents affirmed that mutual respect and communal living were more important than doctrinal conformity. For instance, one religious leader in Bo remarked: “*Even if we don’t believe the same, we are still brothers.*” This ethos resonates with Kwasi Wiredu’s consensual democracy, which prioritizes dialogue and communal deliberation over adversarial debate [Wiredu 1996: 187]. In Sierra Leone’s context, pluralism is not merely tolerated—it is integrated into social ontology. Religious diversity is not an anomaly but part of a normative social fabric. Moreover, the emphasis on *communal values* offers an ethical grounding for tolerance that differs from liberal individualism. In African communitarianism, the self is defined relationally, which invites a moral imperative to preserve harmony. Thus, interfaith dialogue is not only possible—it is necessary for personal and communal identity.

Despite the apparent harmony, philosophical tensions persist. When participants were asked about the truth of other religions, responses varied. Some embraced a relativistic outlook, asserting that all religions lead to the same divine source. Others were more exclusive, affirming the supremacy of their faith but stopping short of condemning others. This ambivalence reflects a key issue in religious epistemology: can conflicting truth claims coexist peacefully without undermining each other? Alvin Plantinga [2000: xx] argues that religious belief can be rational and warranted even without universal justification. Yet, this leads to a pluralistic paradox: how can multiple, incompatible truth claims be respected in the public sphere? Charles Taylor’s “deep diversity” offers one solution: each tradition must articulate its own rationale for accepting pluralism, without requiring full doctrinal agreement [Taylor 1994: 61]. In Sierra Leone, this is often achieved through syncretism. Christian and Muslim leaders privately acknowledge the role of ancestral traditions; ATR adherents incorporate Islamic or Christian elements. This theological fluidity provides space for coexistence—but it also risks diluting doctrinal integrity.

Another major finding was the positive role of interfaith institutions, particularly the Inter-Religious Council of Sierra Leone (IRCSL). Respondents credited the council with reducing tensions during the civil war and promoting post-conflict reconciliation. Activities included joint public statements, community dialogues, and collaborative humanitarian work. From a theoretical perspective, the IRCSL embodies elements of Jürgen Habermas’s discourse ethics, which emphasize inclusive, rational dialogue as the basis for legitimacy [Habermas 1996: 302]. However, unlike Habermas’s secular public sphere, Sierra Leone’s interfaith dialogue is deeply embedded in religious narratives. This challenges liberal secularism’s assumption that religion must be bracketed in public reasoning. Instead, what emerges is a plural public sphere, where religious reasons are not excluded but translated into mutually intelligible ethical language. The IRCSL serves as a model of “*African deliberative pluralism*”, where theology and politics are not rigidly separated but inform one another.

Finally, the data reveal the fragility of pluralism when confronted with minority exclusion. Smaller groups such as the Bahá'í and Hare Krishna adherents reported marginalisation—not necessarily hostility, but lack of recognition. Their experiences highlight the limits of consensus-based tolerance: when pluralism is too comfortable, it may resist challenging or unfamiliar perspectives. This supports Taylor's critique of "soft pluralism", which avoids deep disagreement in favour of harmony. A robust philosophical pluralism must therefore embrace agonism—the idea that conflict, when properly managed, can be a source of moral and epistemic growth. The philosophical interpretation of the data reveals that Sierra Leone's pluralism is at once profound and precarious. It is nourished by indigenous ethical traditions, supported by interfaith institutions, and sustained by pragmatic coexistence. Yet without deeper philosophical engagement—especially concerning truth claims, identity, and minority inclusion—it risks remaining morally thin. Therefore, this study calls for a renewed philosophical reflection on religious diversity in Africa—not as an abstract problem, but as a lived, ethical challenge that must be met with both local wisdom and global thought.

Conclusion

The exploration of Sierra Leone's religious atmosphere has revealed a society where religious diversity is deeply embedded in its cultural and historical fabric. Yet, the central concern of this paper has not been merely to document the coexistence of different faith traditions, but to reflect critically on the philosophical underpinnings—and potential fragility—of that coexistence. In doing so, this study positions religious pluralism not simply as a social reality, but as a site of philosophical contestation: a dynamic interplay of epistemological claims, ethical imperatives, and political configurations. The analysis shows that Sierra Leone's pluralism is often sustained by pragmatic factors: familial interfaith ties, shared cultural values, and the legacy of mutual survival amid civil conflict. However, these pragmatic arrangements, while valuable, cannot substitute for a deeper philosophical engagement with religious difference. Without such reflection, tolerance risks becoming an uncritical habit rather than a reasoned ethical stance. As John Rawls has argued, a "mere *modus vivendi*" lacks the moral robustness needed to weather serious strain.

Philosophically, this paper has demonstrated that African communitarian thought—especially the works of Wiredu and Mbiti—offers a unique normative foundation for pluralism. It rejects individualist isolation in favour of relational ontology, one in which identity is constituted through shared existence. In this view, toleration is not passive endurance, but active solidarity: a commitment to maintain community across difference. When combined with global theories of deliberative democracy and discourse ethics, this African foundation invites us to reconceive pluralism as a shared moral enterprise. Yet, the findings also highlight the limits of tolerance. While mainstream religious groups cooperate through institutions like the Inter-Religious Council, minority traditions often remain marginalised. Furthermore, the presence of latent exclusivist theologies poses a threat to the durability of pluralist practice. Philosophical pluralism, then, must confront these tensions directly. It must ask: *How can sincere truth claims coexist without coercion? How do we distinguish between healthy conviction and harmful dogmatism?*

These questions are not merely theoretical. In an era of rising religious extremism, social fragmentation, and global political instability, the Sierra Leonean model of pluralism offers both inspiration and caution. It demonstrates that peaceful coexistence is possible, but only when anchored in mutual recognition, ethical commitment, and a willingness to engage the other in good faith. Ultimately, the role of philosophy in this context is to provide clarity, critique, and constructive pathways forward. It allows us to interrogate the assumptions beneath our tolerance, to articulate the values that sustain it, and to resist both relativism and authoritarianism. As Sierra Leone continues to navigate its pluralistic identity, the insights from this inquiry can contribute to a more reflective, resilient, and ethically grounded model of religious coexistence—not just for Sierra Leone, but for plural societies around the world.

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