

Interfaith Foundations of Peace Accords in Sierra Leone

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Abstract

Under what conditions can faith leaders influence peace in civil wars? Ongoing conflict in Congo, Syria, and Yemen indicate that faith leaders can fuel sectarian divide, but also intervene on the side of peace. Drawing on experiences in Sierra Leone's civil war, this paper highlights the role of faith leaders as moral guarantors of peace processes, with respondent former rebels indicating that without interfaith delegations personally bringing the peace accord to their camps in remote jungles, they would not have trusted the UN led process. Through ethnographic analysis and over 60 field interviews with former combatants and religious leaders, the paper presents a model for answering why faith leaders were so central in terminating this conflict. Rebel's personal experience with a diverse mixture of Christian, Traditional, and Islamic leaders contributed to high confidence in peace accords, with interfaith practices deeply embedded within culture. The paper outlines the dispositions, rituals, and interfaith practices that provided the cultural foundations for successful interfaith intervention. The paper concludes with recommendations for interfaith groups seeking to intervene in extant conflict as well as direction for future research.

Introduction

Despite growing literature on the subject in recent years, there remains an undetermined relationship between religion and conflict with a multi-directionality of signs and wide ranging coefficients. Fearon and Laitin (Fearon and Laitin 2003), and (Collier and Hoeffler 2004) have not found a significant link between religious affiliation and conflict outbreak. Others such as Toft (2006), Svensson (2007), Hassner (2009), and Horowitz (2010) have found religious affiliation to be a crucial explanation of conflict dynamics. Other scholars have identified ways in which religion can contribute to peaceful mediation of conflict (Appleby 2000; Gopin 2012; Smock 2002; Peace, Rose, and Mobley US) First Printing edition (March 20, 2012; Hayward and Marshall 2015; Sandal 2017), though very little systematic data exists identifying the mechanisms of religion as a peace excelerant. With notable exceptions (Gopin 2012; Haynes 2009), extant explanations of the nexus of religion, violence, and peacebuilding tend to abstract what religious actors actually do in everyday life, perhaps missing the connections between everyday rituals and practices and outcomes in conflict. In this way, the field has largely neglected the deeper cultural and praxeological foundations necessary for religious interventions to spur peacebuilding and reconciliation.

This article seeks to better understand why religion, in the case of the Sierra Leone civil war (1991-2002), was a tremendous force for peace. Through ethnographic analysis and interviews with former combatants and religious leaders, the paper presents a model for answering why faith leaders were so central in terminating this conflict. The article offers not only a case study of the Inter-Religious Council of Sierra Leone (IRCSL) as a peacebuilding force, but traces the cultural practices that constituted culture in such a manner as to allow for the IRCSL's work to make an impact. The paper thus answers a novel and foundational puzzle under-examined by the field: What

social preconditions are necessary for interfaith intervention in conflict to accelerate peace?

I argue below that religious rituals and everyday practices of religious people had a substantial role in producing social conditions conducive for the interfaith intervention, mediation, and resolution by the IRCSL. Sierra Leone's interfaith conciliation was a framework of everyday life, a cultural foundation that everyone, on all sides of the conflict worked from dispositionally. The expectation of interfaith inclusivity in everyday life activities such as sacred space, prayer, afterlife rituals and rites of passage, translated to an interfaith culture being the most natural frame for peacebuilding. I show how everyday practices indeed produced an expectation of a particular sort of peace processes, and, without that foundation, it is unlikely that peace accords would have worked in the same way.

After a brief discussion of methods and data collection, I organize the article to answer two questions. First, *how* did the interfaith intervention work in Sierra Leone? This section establishes the empirical claims about the importance of interfaith intervention in the case of Sierra Leone. I outline three strategies and tactics employed by the IRCSL during the war, which ultimately succeeded at ushering in peace. Second, *why* did the interfaith intervention work in Sierra Leone? This section makes the case for how cultural practices constructed pathways for peace - the avenues of cultural practice that enabled the *how* of the IRCSL to make sense.

Utilizing locally established causality in the case of Sierra Leone, the article culminates in discussion of analytically generalizable insights for interreligious interventions writ large. The result is a three-part theoretical proposition for how extant cultural dispositions link religious interventions to successful peacebuilding. First, interfaith interventions in conflict are successful when religious rituals and rites are shared and non-exclusive, fostering multiple understandings of identity. When religious culture is open and tolerant, legitimacy of a peacebuilding intervention is bolstered by the interfaith nature of the intervention. Second, interfaith interventions in conflict are successful when their coalition partners mirror the expectations of culture. If conflicting parties have a broad understanding of religious tolerance, the intervening coalition should reflect that constituency because it creates a comprehensive platform for negotiation with multiple avenues, actors, and approaches possible. Third, interfaith interventions are successful when people expect them to solve immediate, tangible problems, as opposed to preaching salvific messages of eternity or lengthened time horizons.

The article ends with a brief consideration of alternative explanations for *why* the interfaith process was successful. I consider whether political or economic factors, rather than religious practice, can explain the IRCSL success, but ultimately find little to support these alternative explanations.

Method & Data

To understand the social preconditions necessary for interfaith interventions in conflict to accelerate peace, I illuminate two sets of practices in the case of Sierra Leone. First, I outline the strategies and tactics of the Inter-Religious Council and established the case for their success. This frames the empirical "how" peace was achieved with the unique intervention by the IRCSL. Second, answering the theoretical "why" puzzle, I seek to understand the ways in which deeper cultural practices enabled those strategies and tactics to succeed at their aims of peace. In this manner, rituals, symbols, and

practices are analyzed not simply by their meaning, but their production of expectations and demarcations, social power relations, and understanding of community.

A natural tool for such an enterprise is Practice Tracing, a strategy pioneered by Vincent Pouliot (2014), which treats the everyday of social life as the object of reference and then orders, dissects, and organizes them in a way that constructs those practices as units of analysis within an analytical narrative (Pouliot 2014, 250). This approach joins a chorus of other work on practice in conflict analysis (Autesserre 2014; Pouliot 2010) and religion (Dupret et al. 2013; Seligman et al. 2008; Day 2015; Whitehouse and Lanman 2014). As an interpretive sub-genre of process-tracing, practice-tracing is aimed at systematically organizing data to reveal social connections between social phenomena. Like process-tracing, tracing practices involves using evidence from within a case to make inferences about causal explanations within that case (Pouliot 2014, 4). And while process-tracing (Bennet and Checkel 2014) identifies a theoretically informed causal chain “between an independent variable (or variables) and the outcome of the dependent variable” practice-tracing is interested in how bundles of activities construct actors in particular ways (Pouliot 2014, 6). This is an entirely appropriate approach for analyzing religion, whose impact on conflict is constitutive, rather than causal, since “religion principally shapes the identity of the actors and how they conceive of war, its meaning and content” (Hassner and Horowitz 2010, 203).

To understand the practices of the IRCSL and the deeper cultures of religion at work, I employed several methodological tactics. First, I conducted over 60 interviews April - June 2014. The interviews were conducted using a snowball sample, and were collected in person and over the telephone. The interviews were a mixture of elites (tribal elders, members of government, religious clergy) and former combatants. The variation in network affiliation counteracted the lack of randomness in snowball sampling, which aims to increase reproducibility and reliability. Geographical variation among respondents provides a certain robustness check as well: I interviewed religious leaders in towns like Bo, Makeni, Freetown, Kambia, Port Loko, Lunsar, Kenema, Koidu, and met with former combatants from all 12 districts.

The content of interviews, as Pouliot instructs, posed situational questions respondents (e.g. When the war came to your town, how did the religious council act? Describe your marriage ceremony.) The rich levels of description go beyond propositional ideas and concentrated data on rituals and practice that I was not able to observe first-hand, though I also engaged in hundreds of hours of participant observation in religious rites of passage, religious services, meetings of the Inter-Religious Council, and informal gatherings of religious leaders. Participants were asked both about the IRCSL during the war, their role within the IRCSL or their role in combat during the war and why the Council worked, as well as a series of questions about their everyday rituals and religious practice, including prayer rituals, rites of passage, access to sacred space, and relationship with other faith communities. Subjects were assigned a pseudonym unless 1) they granted permission and 2) they held a public role in the war or the peace process. When all of these tactics employed formed a cohesive narrative, I was satisfied at the veracity of the narrative and the role that practices played within it.

How the IRCSL Worked: The Function of Interfaith Interventions as a Conflict Resolution Lynchpin

A small but powerful literature points to the role that the IRCSL had in Sierra Leone's civil war. These are principally first-hand accounts of the author's role in the peace process and their relationship with the IRCSL (Penfold 2005; Conteh 2011; Turay 2000), valuable, but less than systematic. And while robust new literature explores the pathways religious actors create towards peace (Sandal 2017), applications to Sierra Leone are inferential at best. There is a generally shared understanding of the importance of the inter-religious council - scholars like Diana Szanto (2016), ?, and Vandy Kayako(2016) mention the high levels of social capital enjoyed by the council during and after the war, but neither rely on qualitative evidence to articulate the contribution the IRCSL made to the peace process.

Interviews with both religious actors and former combatants indicates that there are three principal pathways in which the IRCSL intervened in the civil war, which most attribute to the eventual cessation of hostilities. First, the IRCSL provided for Basic needs, humanizing combatants and refused to isolate fighters from their congregations. Second, the council played a convening role for peace talks, offering good offices and publically pushed leaders towards talks. Finally, the IRCSL acted as a moral guarantor for the Lome Peace Accord process, at times physically taking the accords into the bush to rebel camps.

IRCSL leadership to steps to provide for the survival strategies of all combatants, humanizing all sides of the conflict, while still denouncing acts of violence and degradation of the country. Imams and pastors would preach together while bringing food and water to town centers- "we would tell them, hey, you are not doing God's work, or Allah's work, you are just a fraud!" said a Sheik from Kenema about the rebels. According to Joe Turay, a Catholic priest in Makeni, "So the inter religious council made a series of gestures to the RUF... They began with liberation of the children and they could bring them food, talk to the government (on the rebel behalf)." Turay himself took part in the "kindness campaign" to be supportive of rebel "spiritual needs" so they would, in the words of Turay, "think twice before harming civilians." The result of providing this basic support in fact prevented all sides of the conflict from demonizing opponents. A leading voice in this effort was Usman Fornah, a Wesleyan leader in the IRCSL: "We built a very strong community among the rebels here and it took the support of the inter-religious people to be genuine - we were not condemning them, we try to encourage them and console them, and convince them that they should lay down their arms and give peace a chance, so that they themselves can live in the community and live with the people."

To this day, Sierra Leoneans will refer to rebels as "our neighbors who went into the bush" (Millar 2012). The pivotal model provided by the IRCSL cannot be understated. Over a dozen combatants told me of the kindness shown to them by leaders of the group. Some went to far as to say that the reason their families accepted them back into the village was because Usman Fornah advocated on their behalf and Mrs. Simihafu Kassim, IRCSL treasurer and UMC pastor, "talked to the rebels as a mother." And according for Fornah, "I was playing that role among the rebels. You know, where they had violence among themselves, I was there. When they were captured and sentenced to execution, I would go and appeal on their behalf. I would say, you know, 'these are not rebels - these are not bad guys in the community.' If they (rebels) then want to set the town on fire, I would go to them and tell them, no this is not right. We conducted prayer sessions and they came to our prayer meetings, you

know of course, I suffered along the road, but for me, I am thankful I live to tell the story today (because) If it were not for the intervention, this war would not have ended.”

The council’s persistent engagement seems to have actually reduced the levels of intensity and abuses against civilians without turning the civilians to armaments against the rebels. I met a man in Koidu Town, who, though a lay leader, marched Christian school-children over 50 miles to escape the rebels in 2001. On one occasion a small band of rebels came across the group and the man said to them, “hey, these are God’s children. You need to let us go, or the Council will just come and free them and you will be in great trouble!” The rebels let the entire group go. Thus, providing nurture and guidance to rebels humanized their plight without legitimizing it. This provided two important outcomes for the conflict. First, it prevented retribution narratives from taking hold in the community - nobody was able to otherize rebels as evil. Second, the rebels reduced violent attacks because the IRCSL provided for some survival strategies.

The IRCSL also played a convening, good offices role for peace talks. Bishop Biguzzi, the Roman Catholic Bishop of the Makeni Diocese, played a key role in founding the IRCSL, was keenly interested in bringing together religious leaders to put pressure on all sides to engage in peace talks. Lutheran Bishop Tom Barnett of Aberdeen himself engaged in several missions with Biguzi, Fornah, and many Imams into the bush to speak with the rebels and negotiate peace. According to the Bishop, “we knew that we were the only ones that they could trust. So Biguzi, myself, and several Imams all took ourselves into the bush. We sat on the ground, brought food, cared for their sick, and then we talked to the leaders.” It was this interfaith nature of the IRCSL that swayed leaders from all sides to trust them as guarantors of the peace process. According to the pries Joe Turay, “so we get together, Christians and Muslims, and they knew they were mutual in the sense that I mean, they could talk on behalf of their people, their constituency. Both sides of the story, both the RUF and the government forces trust them. That they have no interest... their interest is the common good.” Turay continued, “And as morela guarantors to the peace process, their role was crucial to bring both sides to dialogue and talk about issues. And that is exactly what they did.”

These talks proved so effective that the RUF invited the IRCSL to it preliminary meetings before the formal Loma negotiations. The group met directly with junta leader Johnny Paul Koroma to urge him against targeting civilians and to negotiate - even while he refused to meet with any other civil or international organization. The group also met with RUF leader Foday Sankoh throughout 1999 in order to convince him of the legitimacy of UN-led talks, and urged him to cooperate fully with peace negotiations. Many report that Sankoh’s May 1999 ceasefire directive was a direct result of interventions by the IRCSL. Then, as formal talks got underway, after the ceasefire the council’s main strategy was to remain neutral and to act as facilitator. Their goal was to build confidence and trust between talking parties. In moments when the parties failed to see eye to eye on certain issues, such as power sharing and withdrawal of the ECOMOG, the Council members turned to public prayer and preaching (Penfold 2005). Barnett told me of how, when the RUF was about to walk away from the talks he stood up, and just began preaching to them, saying “blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall inherit the Kingdom of Heaven. Not Salone, Heaven!” Dozens of such accounts manifest in interviews - the IRCSL defaulted to preaching, praying, and exhorting to prevent hard-line spoilers from gaining legitimacy, whilst simultaneously preventing Sankoh and Koroma from leaving the negotiating table. Throughout the six weeks of negotiations, from May to July 1999, Sankoh and the

RUF refused to meet with other parties unless the IRCSL was present, according to three leaders of the group who were present at the negotiations.

Finally, the IRCSL's broad constituency - tribal elders, imams, pastors representing every aspect of the country - positioned the IRCSL to actually have the only remaining infrastructure to deliver aid and assist in Lome Accord implementation. After the Lome Accords, the IRCSL "organized the free distribution of thousands of copies of the agreement to civil society groups and local and international NGOs. It also continued to reach out to the civil populace and the rebels, primarily through biweekly 'experience-sharing' sessions on various themes of the agreement" (Turay 2000). These civic-engagement sessions provided a robust forum for discussing implementation issues. Several formal rebels confirmed in interviews that the IRCSL forums created the trust necessary to implement demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration of the RUF because they explained what the accords formally entailed and provided a safe space for everyone to share their experiences.

Why the IRCSL Worked: Cultural Practices and Constructed Pathways of Peace

The work of the Interreligious Council certainly inspired peace. But upon what basis did this arise? Why was an interfaith intervention a necessary component to achieve an accord? Just as the field could stand for a more systematic treatment of identity and ideology as a variable (Abdelal et al. 2010; Sanín and Wood 2014), understanding of religious culture as a constitutive force for peace remains understudied. Focusing on underlying religio-cultural rites, rituals, and practices directs the research objective to understanding what subjects think *from* rather than what they think *about* (Pouliot 2010), or, as Searle claims, the site of practice gives "the set of non-intentional or pre-intentional capacities that enable intentional states to function" (Searle 1995).¹ This orientation allows a researcher reflect on the constitutive fabrics of peace and why one form of intervention, as opposed to others, "clicked" with a population in conflict. Below, I identify two sets of social practices that conditioned actors in such a way as to be receptive to interfaith peace initiatives, attempting to answer the puzzle of *why* the IRCSL so successfully engaged in peacebuilding.

On my third day in Sierra Leone a friend and I hopped on the back of a motorcycle taxi and sped across town. Muhammad, the young bike driver picked us up, and, as we sped through the Freetown suburb of Aberdeen, I heard the call for Islamic prayers ring out from a mosque. My friend shouted over the hum of the motorcycle: "Muhammad, why you drive now? Shouldn't you be at prayers?" He responded: "Oh, my mother was a Muslim, so I'm Muhammad. But my father – he was a Christian." I followed up: "And what does that make you?" He laughed: "Well... Both."

¹ Some might argue further that mental states and propositional goal-seeking, such as being receptive to a peacebuilding intervention, are inherently contingent upon practice, since practice is the site of social competence and judgement-building. As Schatzki summarizes, "connections and orders among mental conditions, consequently, are laid down in practices" such that the structure of mental being is established not by intrinsic substance, but by social practices. Furthermore, bodies are the places where these conditions are played out and therefore mental states "and their interrelations and patterning" should be conceived of as "socially instituted," via social practice (Schatzki 1996, 2). Furthermore, Bourdieu's notion of habitus is a process where an actor taps into a "stock of unspoken know-how, learned in and through practice, and from which deliberation and intentional action become possible" (Adler and Pouliot 2011, 16).

Sierra Leone presents a case where many people indeed not only believe, but practice, a mixture of Islam, Christianity and Traditional African Religion. “Despite their spiritual differences, the two faiths have coexisted in a spirit of tolerance and harmony to a degree rarely seen elsewhere and setting an example for other countries to follow.”(Penfold 2005, 54).² Two areas of tolerance and mutual, non-exclusive practice became apparent through fieldwork: first, the extent to which sacred spaces were shared and co-habitated by a mixture of religious traditions, and second, the co-mingling of ritual rites of passage. Sierra Leonean incorporation of Traditional African Religion, Christianity, and Islam established a social expectation or baseline for how one is to behave competently as a person of faith. My argument is that the strategies discussed above within the IRCSL were received precisely because of this extant social practice.

Sacred Space.

Sierra Leone culture has no clear demarcations of sacred space between Christian, Muslim, or TAR boundaries. Leaders within the IRC regularly invite congregants of alternative religions to practice within the halls of their own churches. For example, when I visited the town of Port Loko, one man told me that the local Church was burnt down in the war and the Imam then hosted weekly Christian services in the mosque every week. Leaders from the IRC – Archbishop, pastor, Imam and Shiek alike – all told me that they regularly open their houses of worship to one another. I came to Bambuna with a local educational supervisor, asking the Paramount Chief about school population. This particular Chief was incorporated into the IRC's peace process and we discussed at length how religion is practiced in the remote area. “You have both Christian and Islamic schools,” he said. “We all go to each school – Islam and Christian, Anglican, Catholic. We all get along because we all worship the same God. God is God, who is different in different paces. Shia in some, Baptist in other. But we say, be as you are.” The Chief then told a story: His father, the former Paramount Chief was a devout Muslim, but he allowed the Baptists to build their church and allowed locals to go to church. “When I became Chief,” he smiled and pointed across the street from his house, “I built a Mosque, but I am a Christian – I went to school at the Baptist church that my father let be built.” The same leaders who promote and encourage interfaith sharing of space – even co-practicing in the same buildings – are the exact leaders in the IRC who played a crucial role in stemming the conflict dynamics of civil war. Dozens and dozens of respondents indicated to me that one of the most proud aspects of Sierra Leone national identity is the radical sharing of sacred space.

In a recent visit to Salone, United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion, Heiner Bielefeldt, recalled how he was amazed at the level of shared prayer and public tolerance. He noted in awe that a Christian person, when their church is overcrowded he might well decide to go to a mosque to pray. “Such a statement, which in many countries would be fairly unusual or even unthinkable, seems rather indicative of the tolerant situation in Sierra Leone,” he stated. “Likewise, Muslims told me they have no difficulty to pray in a Christian church.”(News 2013) Regarding the IRC, leaders embrace and promote the practice of shared prayer. I noted in their meetings that Muslim leaders would bow their heads during Christian invocations. So, during the focus group I conducted, I asked

² Official estimates put the Muslim population at 77 percent and 21 percent Christian and yet even the US State Department notes that “many persons combine Islam or Christianity with indigenous religious beliefs.”(“Sierra Leone 2013 International Religious Freedom Report” 2013)

the Sheiks from around the country whether they were actually praying or just showing respect. Of the 10 Muslim leaders in the group, nine indicated they were praying following the Christian's lead, while one said he was just being respectful. Joe Turay, a Catholic priest confirmed this trend in mainstream religious circles: "Well I would say that even now, we even see that at Christmas, during festivities, our Muslim neighbors will come and pray with us in our church. And then during their own festivals, during month of Ramadan, will will come pray with them." You will go pray in the Mosque? I asked. Laughing, he exclaimed, "Yeah!"

I also found evidence that parishioners also practice a liberal faith, following their IRC leadership. According to a catholic congregant: "even if you are six in a community if you believe a particular denomination, you are free to go about your worship. Nobody questions you. Even if you are six, if there is a program that you want the majority, the Muslims or the Christians denominations, and you want them to join you in a prayer, in a worship, in a ceremony, they will join you! You will pray together. And when you are praying they will go to their different churches or different mosques."

Rituals and Rites of Passage.

At some point between the thirteenth and nineteenth centuries, clerics, traders, pastors and armed conquerors brought Islamic practices to the West African coastal subregion, and my respondents in Temne and Limba tribes in Northern Salone indicated that their oral tradition quickly incorporated the new faith into a range of local religions and tribal rituals, especially those relating to the afterlife, the spiritual role of ancestors, death and witchcraft. Similar phenomenon occurred with the Krio people appropriating Christian doctrine within extant TAR. According to a Makeni Catholic priest, his own mother would both pray on Sunday and see witches and tribal faith healers:

"The Christian faith and the traditional African Religion, the dynamics between the two, we see it playing out in our own lives in our own families. My own brother (laughs) he had sickle cell anemia. My mother, would go to the Ju Ju man, and ask him to pray for my brother, and he would use the African incantation, and I mean, combine everything. And at that age, I was frowning at my other, saying "how can you, you are a Christian." - and then I learn to be sympathetic to my mother. She is bringing her own worldview to Christianity and who am I to condemn?"

Thus, in afterlife practice, traditional beliefs are broadly tied together with Christian Mainline denominational practice, in addition to widespread TAR infusion with Muslim practices of death and divination. In every community I visited, respondents within the Churches and Mosques led by IRC-affiliated pastors and Shieks, would tell me that "debuls" or jinn, explain windfalls or failures of both the individual and community. There is the widespread practice of honoring ancestors, who are the owners of the village, not the living. It is thus common to see people paying homage to dead relatives no matter their faith: they leave rice at the door for an ancestor to show respect. And this is seen as entirely consistent with the major religions. Within this context, I asked a young man (who attends a church whose pastor is in IRC leadership) whether his church taught about judgment of non-believers:

"The problem is that both books talk about judgment. Both books talk about resurrection. You go to the Muslim faith and they tell you that judgment after. The only difference seems to be the traditionalists they don't believe in these things. When somebody dies, that's it.

They are dead. But for these two religions: the Christian religion, the Muslim religion, for sure. They will tell you about resurrection and they will tell you about judgment...”

Here the practice of inclusion within the area of afterlife is apparent even as the respondent talks about social “beliefs.” The respondent's own beliefs are framed within a socio-cultural practice of inclusion, which impacts how one competently talks about personal beliefs. In further conversation with almost 20 pastors and Sheikhs from around Salone who each participated in the IRC during the war, not a single one told me that they believed a member of the other religious tradition would go to hell or was an infidel. The closest that one Wesleyan member of the IRC came to this was to remark, off the cuff, that Christians should not participate in TAR, but when I pressed him on which practices should be avoided, he just smiled and said, “Yes, God does work in mysterious ways.”

Important moments in life – holidays, baptisms, births and burials, are all shared by the community regardless of one's particular faith. As a pastor told me,

“before the war, Christians and Muslims were together, living together. Living in common. When it's time for Christmas, you see the Muslims patronizing, you see them (Christians) cook, prepare food to give to their neighbors who are Muslim And the feast of fasting, of Ramadan, the Muslims will also cook and give to the Christians This culture is common, practiced almost every year. At Easter, you see Muslims going to the beach, together with Christians, to celebrate together. The same thing happens at the end of the fasting period, where there is occasion for Muslims to invite the Christians. It happens even for marriages. When it comes to marry(ing) you see a Muslim – they come to church.”

Catholic Priest, Joe Turay, like all IRC pastors, will preside over the weddings of Muslim and Christian couples. “So the priests who come from Muslim parents, though people will criticize and say its our own type of Muslim-Christian religion, that we are not strict, that is what people will say. But I would, yeah, say, it is our own brand of religion. Our own brand of Christianity and Islam. And it is a tolerant Christianity.”¹⁶ Other rites, like baptism, are incredibly fluid. “Early on, before the war, there was a real problem with religious groups forcing conversion. In order to attend school, children had to convert.” This posed quite a problem, since the closest school might be more than a day's walk away. A Christian teenager thus living, eating, sleeping, bathing, talking, being in a Muslim community, away from one's support network and family was hardly a christian for long. The daily practices and rituals of religious school provided social incentive of conversion. Yet, once the rainy season ended, and school-kids were expected back in the farming commune, they might very easily still practice the local traditional faith or Christianity. This was neither a secretive or forbidden process, it was pragmatic.

As schools became more prevalent, especially in the West, the choice was less about travel time, and more about which nearby school's fee structures were most cost effective. Often school-children converted back and forth from Islam to Christianity from academic year to academic year. Local boy Fasluku might come home “Andrew” and continue living a double life: Fasluku to Muslims and Andrew to Christians. Such was the case with my own gate-keeper at my house – to me he spoke as “Lawrence,” but to the local neighbors in the flat below me, he was “Abado.” The fluidity of religious rites of passage, like conversion, indicates an incredibly inclusive set of social practices. Throughout the 2014 meeting of the IRC and in my focus groups, pastors and imams both kept referring back to the high levels of intermarriage between their two faiths. Over and over, respondents would say that

violence can be prevented by the practice of intermarriage – indicating that the practice of intermarriage is at the very core of the Inter-Religious Council Sierra Leone.

Reflection of Deeper Culture by the IRCSL.

It was based on this goodwill and friendship, leaders from around the country came together in the first meeting of Islamic and Christian leaders in the fall of 1989. As the story goes, the meeting opened with both a Christian invocation and a Muslim prayer, and then alternated speakers. This meeting was so widely hailed as a success, leaders promised one another that follow-on meetings would follow this convention. Such was the practice throughout the last several decades of the group's existence, even when it formalized itself into the Inter-Religious Council of Sierra Leone in 1997. Built into the fabric of the organization was thus a pluralistic emphasis on deference and respect to the other, with absolutely no privilege paid to one group over another. I witnessed the interfaith movement first-hand, when I attended a formal conference of the IRC in Makeni in 2014. Seated in a sticky-hot gymnasium, about halfway through the conference, an elder Catholic priest marched up to the podium, and before his speech to his peers, ordered all to stand up and stretch.

For 15 minutes, I exercised with the top Islamic and Christian leaders in the country, altogether doing arm 'windmills,' jumping jacks, and side-lunges. After we all sat down, the priest began a lecture: "Muslim friends, A salam alaikum! [Alaikum a salam]. Christian friends, may the peace of the Lord be with you! [And also with you]. We must not take it [pluralism] for granted, we must build on it." The message continued around the theme: "there is no compulsion in religion"³ which the priest continued by talking about how God, "created man into nations and tribes so you can better understand [God]...we know God better by knowing each other. The Universal Ummah, and the Body of Christ are hallmarks of universal welcome. Because religion is a religious prerogative, we must watch out for each other's freedom. We should be each other's keeper. We should inspire people to show love and reject discrimination." After breaking into applause, the priest led the audience in a series of songs – to which each group knew the words of the other's. First, he began with an Islamic incantation (which he led), the Christian anthem, which each of the Muslim leaders also knew by heart. Afterward, I assembled an hour-long focus group totaling about 15 leaders from differing denominations. I asked about the types of groups that would be allowed into the IRC, and almost all laughed or giggled at me, saying that all Buddhists, Bahai, and "even Jews" would be welcome, "even if there were only one." The group expressed a general welcome for all types of traditions, as illustrated by a one group leader, using 'God' and 'Allah' interchangeably in the focus group, "God has as many faces as there are people in the world... we see Allah through the conscious of our own hearts. If we cannot accept our differences, then we hate God who created us."

In over a dozen separate interviews with IRC leadership, I was told how a majority of people in Salone interpret scripture in a way that gives credence to both traditions. Indeed, I found some evidence that the Koran is read as a legitimate liturgical source in Christian services. This radical overlap in scriptural practice between Muslim and Christian groups is evidenced by the general ways in which educated locals talk about central elements of their faith: "The two faiths, the two books. The Koran and the Bible share so much in common. There are very, very, few, few differences, it is almost the same. The

³ The reference is Islamic, coming from Surat al-Baqarah 2:256: "There shall be no compulsion in [acceptance of] the religion. The right course has become clear from the wrong. So whoever disbelieves in Taghut and believes in Allah has grasped the most trustworthy handhold with no break in it. And Allah is Hearing and Knowing."

Old Testament and the Koran. It is only the New Testament that is different, 'cause you know, the New Testament is all about Christ. And the Apostles. And for the Old Testament, it talks all about the Prophet. And it is the same that you find in the Koran.”

I approached a local Christian priest to ask about this phenomenon, who responded with an even deeper layer of syncretism. I asked, “How do you think that happened? How come there is such a strong inter-religious, special nature of Sierra Leone?” “That is a good question. Maybe I will say the dynamics of how we have integrated traditional African religion into the mainline religions.” “Can you give me an example?” “Yes. You have people who are Christians, but they are not afraid to go to the witch doctor. (laughs). They will go to the Mass on Sunday, then they will go to the Ju Ju man, and the Ju Ju man will pray for them, and they will see nothing wrong in that. Then they will go back to their church and they will pray and give thanks to God. To put it crudely, whatever works for them and their god. I mean, polygamy in terms of Islam, has woven itself firmly into Islam as far as traditions. So you go to weddings, Islamic marriages, you think of Islam, but it is traditional religion, woven into Islam. I mean, they have been able to integrate that.[...]”

“Do you think that there is truth in the Koran, too?” I asked to see the priest's reaction and willingness to incorporate other texts into his worldview. He didn't pause: “Yes definitely. It's about God's reign. Which I presume, even in the Koran, is a reign of peace. It's a reign of Justice. It is the reign of God. But again, it depends on how people interpret the reign of God. We can impose that and give people our own kingdom instead of the word of God.”¹⁰ Perhaps unsurprisingly, this same Catholic priest was the convener and host of the IRC's 2014 annual meeting in Makeni. The priest then explained to me how being a part of the IRC made him think about how to preach, teach and “how to behave a Christian in Salone.” Thus, we see that the liberal, non-exclusive interpretation of scripture that predominates among the people is accepted and taught by leaders of the IRC, who were the principal institutional architects of mutual tolerance and respect dating back before the war.

Theory-building: How Religious Cultural Dispositions Matter In Conflict

Rich descriptions of religio-cultural practice provide a locally established social causality. Practice based methodology instructs that this local causality can then be leveraged with the aim of producing generalizable insights (Pouliot 2014). In this case, I aim to build a theory for how cultural dispositions matter in conflict, leveraging the data outlined above, for why and how the IRCSL worked. To do so, I make three straightforward arguments. First, that the social bridging and multiple points of shared identity in Sierra Leone produce a resilience to the cosmic binding that might occur in religious conflicts. Second, that broad coalitions of the IRCSL, building on shared social dispositions of inclusion, create a maximal platform for negotiation. Third, that shared inclusive frameworks about the afterlife largely meant that leaders were able to focus on immediate concerns, rather than elongating their time horizons into the cosmic realm. Together, these dispositions culminated in a functioning IRCSL and may provide important pathways for other interfaith peace movements to build upon.

Social bridging between religious groups, through shared sacred space and rites of passage, provided a means for the community to have multiple points of identity. This multiplicity of religious identity, as displayed in practice, creates means for living everyday life without us/them othering. As Amartya Sen argues, the nexus between identity and violence is particularly sharp when communities live lives

insulated from experiencing others, allowing for religious bonds to be constructed around one-dimensional cleavages (Sen 2006). Shared practices prohibit the ritual intragroup binding that occurs in exclusive groups. The fact that the IRC is made up of over a dozen sects and denominations meant that the core organizing principle was not around group sameness, but around tolerance and diversity. Binding – the process where groups see those fitting within their worldview as inherently set apart – could not take hold since the practice of inclusion radically prohibited it. In this manner, one might conclude that the mechanism as work was one of bridging, rather than binding.

My interview with Catholic Archbishop Tamba-Charles succinctly captures the connection between inclusive practice and the bridging mechanism, leading to reduced intensity:

“it made a big difference when the religious leaders came from different backgrounds. The Muslim leaders made a greater impact when... a greater impact when the religious leaders come from different backgrounds. [...] we respect one another. We exchange feast days, on Muslim feast days, on Christian feast days. On some occasions Muslims accompany Christians to church. On their feast days and celebrations like weddings and, uh, some of us have Muslim relatives. So maybe that is the background, the root of our religious tolerance - because there are people whose family members are different religions. And when their family meets, they have Muslim prayers and Christian prayers. Its not just in official meetings, it is embedded in our life and that makes a big difference.”

Multiple religious identity practices indicate a real resilience to a theory presented by Whitehouse, who maintains that everyday ritual “fuse” actors to their community so that group members are not perceived as mere cooperators; they are psychological kin (Whitehouse and Lanman 2014). Once a conflict sets on, religious communities with indivisible dispositions are more likely to feel that an attack on one of their own is an attack on the ontological basis of the meaning of life itself – what some scholars have called frames of “cosmic war” (Juergensmeyer 2003).

The bridging social practices in Sierra Leone however show the opposite phenomenon: ritual fusion in this case actually occurs between members of outside groups, such that religious practice affirms pluralistic and non exclusionary frames. For this reason, appropriating “cosmic war” frameworks to the civil war was simply anathema to all parties and it provided a key foundation for the interfaith peacebuilding of the IRCSL.

Next, it is possible that these shared practices and broad coalitions created more extensive platforms for negotiation via the IRCSL. While exclusive practices create limited menus of actor behavior, broad and inclusive everyday practice may promote cultures of open debate, confrontation, and compromise, forged quite literally with shared alters, shared prayers, shared faith. Though conflict may break out for a variety of reasons (resource predation in this case), communities like those in Sierra Leone are able to imagine pathways for concession, because everyday rituals shun

intransigence and forge acceptance. As Denny and Walter argue on the one hand, ideological forces restrict the bargaining menu and actors thus have “less elasticity” by which to come to a settlement, Sierra Leone experienced the opposite because of wide bargaining menus forged by shared religious practice (Denny and Walter 2014). The IRCSL was keen to highlight shared experiences as they built their coalition. The IRCSL became the largest religious organization in the country by combining dozens of local congregations, mosques, and traditional chiefs together under one umbrella. Original members of the organization indicated that this organizational feature mirrored the reality on the ground - religious tolerance was a feature of society, and thus had to be a feature of the IRCSL.

Finally, while many religious conflicts are fueled by actors elongating time horizons from the immediate to the eternal, the opposite seems to be true in Sierra Leone (Toft 2006). In a wide-ranging discussion among Islamic and Christian leaders that I witnessed at Makeni University in the Bombali District, an elderly priest, well-respected in the Sierra Leonean Catholic Church opined on the roots of religious conflict in Nigeria. “People say they have 'absolute truth'” said the priest with a tone of scorn. He slowly began again, “...absolute truth is God. And we are not God. It is not possible for us to have this absolute truth. So they say, 'I am right, everyone else is wrong: we know heaven, we know how to pray,' No! There must be a [religious] educational community that teaches humility. This will de-escalate tensions.”

Speaking from his experience, the same priest told me in a focus group that if people were convinced of “absolute truth” during the war, “it would have been much, much harder to make peace [...] because then they fight for that idea, not for peace.” While we expect that exclusive practice results in the causal mechanism of elongating time-frames, the practices of inclusion I traced in afterlife, scriptural interpretation, and prayer rituals all illustrated how radical inclusion mitigate the notion of eternal reward. Ultimate inclusion in time frames effectively nullifies any power those time-frames might have as a mechanism to inspire actors to fight longer in a losing battle. For example, the practice of ancestral worship may lengthen one's time horizons, but since the practice includes all actors – not just one's insular group - the time horizon is lengthened for all participants, canceling out any eternal benefit one might receive in fighting longer and harder in the present. This allowed for the IRCSL to set aside questions about afterlife rewards, and instead negotiate for the here and now, for peace in the immediate time frame, rather than fighters being directed to cosmic time frames.

Conclusion

This study examined the conditions that allow faith leaders influence peace in civil wars, finding that the foundations of successful interfaith intervention in conflict seem to be rooted in cultural practice. Drawing on experiences in Sierra Leone's civil war, this study highlights the role of faith leaders as moral guarantors of peace processes, with respondent former rebels indicating that without interfaith delegations personally bringing the peace accord to their camps in remote jungles, they would not have trusted the UN led process.

The study applied ethnographic analysis and over 60 field interviews with former combatants and religious leaders, showing a clear methodological application of practice theory in religious studies. I demonstrate that practice tracing, as method, can be a vital tool to understand how religious culture can be a peace accelerant.

I found that rebel's personal experience with a diverse mixture of Christian, Traditional, and Islamic leaders contributed to high confidence in peace accords, with interfaith practices deeply embedded within culture. The IRCSL provided survival strategies, served a convening role, and that of a moral guarantor for the peace process. But on a deeper level, this paper outlines the dispositions, rituals, and interfaith practices that provided the cultural foundations for successful interfaith intervention. Here we discover that shared sacred space and rites of passage create a common identity across religious boundaries that give a foundation for the work of the IRCSL.

The generalizable insights include a theoretical model that emphasizes the importance of cross-cutting identity practices, the building of broad coalitions, and focusing on immediate rather than cosmic time horizons. For interfaith peace organizations seeking to build peace in a religious environment, the implications of this research include highlighting points of shared religious culture, fashioning the movement along these cross-cutting cleavages, perhaps downplaying sectarian nature of intervention. Finally, the IRCSL's focus on immediate services and alleviating present suffering should be a model for others, perhaps setting aside rhetoric about eternal reward or punishment and instead focusing parties on issues with immediate time frames. After aligning these strategic anchors, organizations can set about pursuing tactics such as convening, service provision, and providing good offices and moral guarantees.

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