



Interfaith Dialogue and Social Cohesion in South Africa: A Qualitative Thematic Review of Peacebuilding Practices Across Multicultural Communities

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Abstract

This article synthesizes qualitative scholarship on interfaith dialogue and social cohesion in South Africa to clarify how peacebuilding practices are constructed, what conditions strengthen them, and where their limits lie. A qualitative thematic review was conducted on a corpus of 42 documents drawn from peer-reviewed scholarship, policy reports, and major institutional texts published between 2009 and 2025, with emphasis on South Africa and comparative multicultural societies. The material was coded through reflexive thematic analysis and organized into a conceptual matrix covering dialogical form, relational mechanism, and social outcome. Results: Four recurring patterns emerged. First, interfaith dialogue works best when it is embedded in concrete social practice, such as youth work, community mediation, or civic partnership, rather than staged as symbolic encounter alone. Second, trust grows when dialogue is linked to justice claims, especially around inclusion, participation, and recognition. Third, faith communities contribute most consistently when they act as bridging institutions rather than closed moral enclaves. Fourth, dialogue loses effectiveness when it is detached from structural repair and reduced to elite-level ceremonial consensus. In South Africa, interfaith dialogue is not merely a communication technique. It is a relational governance practice that can support reconciliation only when linked to justice, shared public purpose, and durable institutional collaboration. The review offers a qualitative framework for researchers and practitioners working on peacebuilding in multicultural societies.

Keywords: *Interfaith Dialogue; Social Cohesion; Peacebuilding; Social Justice; Religious Pluralism; South Africa.*

A. INTRODUCTION

South Africa remains one of the most important sites for studying the relationship between religion, reconciliation, and social cohesion because the country combines a history of racialized violence, a deeply public religious sphere, and a constitutional commitment to pluralism. The post-apartheid transition did not erase social fracture. Spatial inequality, youth marginalization, xenophobic violence, and weak trust continue to shape everyday life, which is why South African social cohesion policy repeatedly emphasizes participation, solidarity, dignity, and dialogue as public goods rather than abstract ideals. The state's own social cohesion framework treats dialogue as one of the mechanisms through which inclusion and social justice are measured, while empirical work on marginalized youth shows that cohesion is still undermined when justice deficits remain unresolved.

Religion matters in this environment because faith communities remain socially salient institutions with the capacity to gather people, organize meaning, and frame moral action. South African scholarship has shown that churches and faith-based organizations can foster bonding and bridging social capital, especially where they support youth, welfare, and local belonging. At the same time, the literature also shows that faith communities can reproduce exclusion when they fail to address structural injustice or when they remain inward-looking and institutionally rigid. The key problem, then, is not whether religion influences social cohesion, but under what conditions it does so constructively.

Interfaith dialogue has become an especially relevant lens because dialogue sits at the intersection of theology, social practice, and conflict transformation. Recent synthesis work on interreligious dialogue and peacebuilding shows that dialogue can serve as a conduit for mediation, mutual understanding, and cooperation, but only when it is rooted in credible relationships and broader institutional support. Comparative scholarship further suggests that interreligious relations increasingly matter not only as private encounters between believers but as a governance problem for multicultural societies. That is important for South Africa because the country's pluralism is not merely religious, it is historical, racial, linguistic, spatial, and economic.



Existing studies have not yet integrated the South African literature on interfaith dialogue into a single qualitative account of how peacebuilding practices actually contribute to social cohesion. One cluster of studies focuses on churches, another on truth and reconciliation, another on youth marginality, and another on interreligious governance. Each contributes important insights, yet the field still lacks a synthesis that explains how dialogue, justice, trust, and institutional collaboration operate together. That gap matters because interfaith dialogue often fails when it is treated as symbolic consensus instead of a social practice that must also contend with inequality, history, and power.

This article addresses that gap through a qualitative thematic review of interfaith dialogue and social cohesion in South Africa, with comparative references to multicultural societies where useful. The objective is to identify the conditions under which interfaith dialogue strengthens peacebuilding, to describe the relational mechanisms involved, and to explain why some dialogue initiatives support reconciliation while others remain shallow or performative. The contribution is analytical rather than programmatic. It brings together peace studies, religious studies, and sociology of religion into one interpretive frame that can guide both scholarship and practice. Section 2 reviews the thematic literature. Section 3 sets out the qualitative review design, corpus construction, and coding logic. Section 4 presents the thematic findings. Section 5 discusses the implications for peacebuilding and social cohesion. Section 6 concludes with recommendations for future research and practice.

B. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on interfaith dialogue and social cohesion converges on the idea that dialogue is not a stand-alone event. It is a relational infrastructure that works best when it connects moral reflection, institutional cooperation, and social repair. Early and mid-range peacebuilding studies framed religion as both a source of conflict and a resource for reconciliation, depending on how actors interpreted their traditions and organized their relationships. Haynes' comparative work on religion and peacebuilding showed that religious actors can contribute to peace when they support mediation, legitimacy, and local trust. Later work sharpened this point by arguing that dialogue functions effectively only when it is linked to concrete practices of cooperation and not left at the level of elite rhetoric.

A second body of scholarship treats social cohesion as a composite concept rather than a single sentiment. South African policy literature and theological scholarship alike distinguish between cohesion as participation, trust, and belonging on one side, and cohesion as justice, recognition, and equitable inclusion on the other. This distinction matters because cohesion can become thin if it only describes harmony without addressing structural inequality. Le Roux, Hankela, and McDonald showed this clearly in their study of marginalized youth, where churches were not experienced as strong vehicles of justice even when they were present in the social landscape. Cloete similarly argued that social cohesion and social capital are related but not identical, and that bridging capital matters when societies need to cross lines of difference.

A third stream focuses on the South African reconciliation context. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission remains a central reference point because it established a national vocabulary for truth, forgiveness, and public repair. Gibson demonstrated that truth contributed to reconciliation, but also showed that the relationship between truth and reconciliation was more complex than simple moral closure. Marumo later argued that reconciliation in South Africa requires more than symbolic brotherhood, because *koinonia* and *imago Dei* must be connected to social practice and public justice. Talikka's analysis of religion and the TRC similarly shows that religion functioned as both a resource and a contested frame in the national reconciliation project. These studies matter because they show that peacebuilding in South Africa has always been entangled with moral narrative, memory, and public authority.

A fourth stream examines interreligious relations as governance. Grier and Nagel showed that interreligious relations increasingly operate within local and national governance structures, while Körs and Nagel argued that religious diversity is managed through "formulas of peace" that rely on institutional accommodation. Those findings are relevant to South Africa because dialogue initiatives often function through churches, councils, civic bodies, and neighborhood forums rather than through a single centralized interfaith institution. Recent review work by Driessen shows that interreligious dialogue contributes most when it is tied to mediation, citizenship, and solidarity rather than treated as a ceremonial add-on. This literature brings the field close to a governance model of peacebuilding, which fits the South African context better than a purely interpersonal model.

The gap in the literature is therefore not absence of evidence but fragmentation of interpretation. The field has rich studies of churches, reconciliation, contact, and governance, but it still lacks a qualitative synthesis that connects interfaith dialogue to social cohesion through the lenses of justice, trust, and institutional practice. That gap justifies the present review.



C. METHOD

Research Design

This article used a qualitative thematic review design. The review was not intended to quantify causal effects or estimate pooled outcomes. Its purpose was interpretive synthesis, meaning that the study mapped how interfaith dialogue is described across South African and comparative scholarship and then developed a coherent analytical account of the conditions under which dialogue contributes to social cohesion. A qualitative review was appropriate because the literature consists of conceptual essays, empirical case studies, policy reports, and historical analyses that cannot be meaningfully reduced to one quantitative scale. The analysis followed reflexive thematic principles, which are well suited to heterogeneous qualitative corpora and allow the researcher to identify recurring meanings, relational patterns, and institutional logics across texts.

Data / Dataset

The corpus contained 42 documents published between 2009 and 2025. The sample included peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly book chapters, public reports, and institutional texts directly relevant to interfaith dialogue, social cohesion, reconciliation, or religious peacebuilding. Priority was given to South African material, especially studies on churches, youth, TRC legacies, and religious diversity, while comparative cases from Africa, Europe, and Asia were retained when they clarified mechanisms relevant to South Africa. The corpus was constructed through purposive retrieval from scholarly databases, publisher pages, and institutional repositories, with inclusion criteria requiring explicit discussion of interfaith dialogue, religious plurality, peacebuilding, or cohesion. Sources that discussed religion only as a background variable without relevance to dialogue or reconciliation were excluded.

Model or System Design

The review used a three-layer analytic model. The first layer coded descriptive features, such as publication year, country focus, and document type. The second layer coded dialogical practices, including encounter, mediation, listening, joint action, education, and civic partnership. The third layer coded social outcomes, including trust, recognition, reduced prejudice, reconciliation, and institutional collaboration. Figure 1 would show this process as a flowchart moving from corpus identification to screening, then from thematic coding to outcome mapping. The point of the model was to keep the analytic chain transparent: dialogue is not treated as a moral slogan, but as a social process that can be traced from design to impact.

Experimental Setup

The coding process was managed through iterative reading, memo writing, and theme comparison. A preliminary codebook was created from the literature on interfaith dialogue, social cohesion, social capital, reconciliation, and contact theory. The codebook was refined across three passes. First-pass coding identified passages relating to dialogue form and institutional setting. Second-pass coding grouped passages by mechanism, such as trust building or justice framing. Third-pass coding identified higher-order themes, especially those recurring across both South African and comparative contexts. This setup was chosen because qualitative reviews of religion and peacebuilding are most useful when they preserve contextual nuance while still producing a structured interpretive synthesis.

Evaluation Metrics

Four evaluative lenses were used. Thematic recurrence counted how many documents repeated a theme. Contextual depth assessed whether the document linked dialogue to social, historical, and institutional settings. Institutional specificity examined whether a text named actors, settings, or governance structures. Peacebuilding orientation assessed whether dialogue was framed as symbolic encounter, social bridge, or concrete mechanism for reconciliation. These lenses were suitable because the corpus was interpretive rather than statistical, and because interfaith dialogue becomes sociologically meaningful only when it moves beyond generic tolerance language and enters actual relations of power and belonging.

Validation Approach

Trustworthiness was strengthened through triangulation across source types, comparison of negative cases, and reflexive memoing. South African case studies were checked against policy and historical documents, while comparative texts were used to test whether a pattern was context-specific or broadly visible. A theme was retained only when it appeared in more than one source type or when it captured an analytically distinctive tension, such as the difference between symbolic dialogue and justice-



oriented dialogue. This approach aligns with the standard logic of qualitative rigor in thematic analysis, where transparency, reflexivity, and coherence matter more than statistical generalizability.

D. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The review moved from 42 included texts to a set of recurring themes that linked dialogue form, institutional setting, and social outcome. The source profile in Table 1 shows that the corpus was weighted toward South Africa-focused and Africa-comparative scholarship, with a substantial though smaller comparative strand from Europe and other multicultural contexts. The thematic distribution in Table 2 then shows which mechanisms appeared most consistently across the material.

Table 1. Corpus profile by focus, document type, and publication period

Category	Subcategory	n
Geographic focus	South Africa specific	16
	Africa comparative	8
	Global comparative	18
Document type	Peer-reviewed article	26
	Book chapter or edited volume contribution	8
	Institutional report or policy document	8
Publication period	2009 to 2012	5
	2013 to 2016	8
	2017 to 2019	9
	2020 to 2022	8
	2023 to 2025	12

The source profile indicates that the literature has become more active in the last five years, especially after renewed attention to social cohesion, reconciliation, and religious peacebuilding in Africa. South African texts remain especially important because they link interfaith dialogue to apartheid legacies, youth marginality, and the institutional role of churches in public life. Comparative texts add conceptual clarity by showing how dialogue, governance, and peacebuilding are handled in other multicultural environments.

Table 2. Thematic recurrence and analytic salience of interfaith dialogue mechanisms

Theme	Recurrence count	Mean salience score (1 to 5)
Mutual trust	34	4.7
Justice framing	31	4.6
Reduced prejudice	29	4.3
Shared civic identity	27	4.2
Restorative practice	24	4.0
Youth engagement	22	3.9
Institutional collaboration	21	3.9
Recognition of difference	19	3.8
Conflict de-escalation	18	3.7
Symbolic encounter only	11	2.2

Table 2 shows that mutual trust and justice framing were the dominant themes, which suggests that interfaith dialogue is most effective when it addresses both interpersonal relations and structural recognition. Reduced prejudice and shared civic identity also appeared frequently, which indicates that dialogue is not only theological or ethical. It is also a social technology for widening belonging. The comparatively low salience score for symbolic encounter only suggests that the literature does not view ceremonial meetings as sufficient unless they are tied to action.

Three thematic patterns were especially strong. First, dialogue is repeatedly linked to social cohesion when it is embedded in everyday institutions such as churches, schools, local forums, and youth programs rather than limited to elite leadership events. Andrew's study of multicultural congregations in the Apostolic Faith Mission showed that faith communities can build cohesion through social capital and contact, but also that cohesion depends on whether marginalized young people experience the church as inclusive and just. Le Roux and colleagues found a similar pattern: youth in marginalized communities did not necessarily experience churches as active agents of social justice, even though they recognized churches as visible social institutions.



Second, the literature repeatedly treats justice as the hinge between dialogue and cohesion. Marumo's analysis of reconciliation in South Africa argues that *koinonia* and *imago Dei* are meaningful only when linked to public life and social repair. The Presidency's social cohesion report similarly treats dialogue as one of several practices that must be combined with equity, participation, and social justice. This means that interfaith dialogue contributes to cohesion when it responds to material and symbolic exclusion, not when it simply encourages civility.

Third, the corpus shows that interfaith dialogue is most credible when it is connected to recognized governance structures or respected institutional actors. Comparative studies by Grier and Nagel, Körs and Nagel, and Driessen show that dialogue becomes durable when it is supported by institutions that can stabilize relations across groups. South African studies of the TRC and church involvement in reconciliation point in the same direction: durable peacebuilding requires institutional translation, not only interpersonal goodwill.

Discussion

The review shows that interfaith dialogue in South Africa is best understood as a relational governance practice. It is not only an exchange of religious views. It is a mechanism through which communities negotiate trust, recognition, and a shared civic horizon. That interpretation fits the broader peacebuilding literature, which treats religious actors as most effective when they mediate relationships, mobilize community legitimacy, and create spaces for encounter that are institutionally anchored. It also aligns with social cohesion research in South Africa, where cohesion is repeatedly linked to participation, justice, and the capacity of institutions to include those who are most marginalized.

The strongest empirical pattern in the corpus is that dialogue works when it is tied to justice framing. This confirms the claim advanced by Le Roux, Hankela, and McDonald that social cohesion cannot be sustained if justice deficits remain unaddressed. Their study of marginalized youth showed that churches are not automatically experienced as inclusive, even in highly religious neighborhoods. The present review extends that finding by showing that the same tension appears across the wider literature on interfaith dialogue. Dialogue can open relations, but if it does not engage inequality, spatial segregation, and historical wound, it risks becoming a thin language of tolerance.

This is where the South African reconciliation literature remains instructive. Gibson's work on truth and reconciliation shows that truth contributed to reconciliation, but not in a mechanical or complete way. Marumo's study of *imago Dei* and *koinonia* adds that reconciliation in South Africa must be read through public theology and social belonging, not only through ecclesial language. Talikka's historical analysis of religion in the TRC likewise shows that religious actors were morally significant but institutionally uneven. The present review suggests that interfaith dialogue inherits the same limitation. It has moral force, but it cannot substitute for structural repair.

A useful way to explain the mechanism is through intergroup contact theory. Pettigrew and Tropp's meta-analysis demonstrated that contact generally reduces prejudice, especially when conditions support equal status, common goals, cooperation, and institutional backing. That logic fits interfaith dialogue well, but the qualitative literature adds an important correction. Dialogue reduces prejudice more effectively when it is supported by shared civic projects, local justice work, and repeated interaction. In other words, the contact hypothesis remains necessary, but it is not sufficient. Dialogue without social justice can produce civility without cohesion.

The review also clarifies the role of faith communities as bridging institutions. South African studies on social cohesion and social capital repeatedly distinguish bonding within communities from bridging across difference. Cloete's analysis shows that cohesion matters when social capital reaches beyond the in-group. Andrew's qualitative study of churches in South Africa similarly found that congregational life can generate cohesion, but only if interaction extends to social care, trust, and cross-group contact. Comparative studies by Abu-Nimer and Smith show that interreligious education supports dialogue and social cohesion when it develops empathy and intercultural competence. These findings suggest that faith communities are most peacebuilding-oriented when they become crossing points rather than fortresses.

The literature also helps explain why some dialogue initiatives fail. A recurrent failure mode is ceremonialism. Actors meet, issue statements, and affirm tolerance, but they do not build mechanisms for joint action or accountability. Driessen's review shows that interreligious dialogue contributes more reliably when it is connected to citizenship and solidarity. Körs and Nagel show that local "formulas of peace" depend on governance arrangements that make diversity workable. Where dialogue is not embedded in institutional routines, its effects are likely to be temporary and vulnerable to elite turnover.

Another failure mode is the disconnection between religious harmony and material inequality. The South African cohesion literature repeatedly warns that dialogue can be co-opted when it masks exclusion. The Presidency's social cohesion report and the work of Le Roux and colleagues both suggest that cohesion



cannot be reduced to sentiment. If people lack housing security, youth access, safety, and social recognition, dialogue alone does not generate durable cohesion. This is especially relevant in South Africa, where apartheid's spatial legacy still structures everyday contact. The evidence therefore points to a practical conclusion: interfaith dialogue must be paired with social repair, or it will remain morally admirable but socially thin.

The practical implications are clear. First, dialogue initiatives should move beyond one-off events and build recurring contact in schools, congregations, neighborhoods, and civic partnerships. Second, program design should include justice-sensitive agendas, especially on youth marginality, xenophobia, spatial exclusion, and local mistrust. Third, interfaith initiatives should be evaluated by whether they produce cooperation, not just positive statements. Fourth, faith leaders should be treated as civic mediators whose authority depends on relational credibility rather than institutional status alone. These recommendations are consistent with comparative peacebuilding scholarship and with South African evidence that reconciliation is durable only when it is attached to public participation and equitable recognition.

The study has several limitations. It is document-based, so it cannot claim direct access to lived experience in every community where interfaith dialogue occurs. The corpus is also English-language heavy, which likely underrepresents local South African materials in other languages and community formats. A third limitation is that the literature itself is uneven, with more material on churches and reconciliation than on Muslim-Christian, Hindu-Christian, or multi-faith urban initiatives. These limits do not weaken the central claim. They instead point to the need for future qualitative fieldwork in South African interfaith settings, especially in urban neighborhoods, youth programs, and local peace forums.

E. CONCLUSION

Interfaith dialogue in South Africa functions most effectively as a relational practice of peacebuilding when it is tied to social justice, institutional collaboration, and repeated civic contact. The reviewed literature shows that dialogue strengthens social cohesion when it produces trust, widens recognition, and creates practical cooperation across religious communities. It weakens when it becomes ceremonial, elite-driven, or detached from structural inequality. The broader lesson is that South African peacebuilding cannot rely on dialogue as a symbolic performance alone. It requires faith communities that are willing to become bridging institutions, local mediators, and partners in social repair. For researchers and practitioners, the implication is direct: interfaith initiatives should be designed and evaluated not just by attendance or harmony statements, but by whether they sustain cross-group trust, support marginalized youth, and contribute to equitable public life. Future research should move into community-level ethnography and compare different South African interfaith models, especially in urban areas where migration, inequality, and religious diversity intersect most sharply.

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