From Ethical Consensus to Peace Practice: An Integrative Framework of the Golden Rule, Faith Building and Spiritual Transformation

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Abstract
The Golden Rule—to treat others as one wishes to be treated—appears in nearly every major religious and philosophical tradition and is often invoked as a basis for global ethical consensus. Comparative ethics has documented this convergence but has said little about how a shared norm becomes a sustained practice of peace. This conceptual paper addresses that gap. Drawing on comparative studies of the Golden Rule, faith development theory and the psychology of spirituality and religiosity, it proposes a four-level framework—ethical principle, faith building, spiritual transformation and peace action. In this framework, faith building (the deliberate cultivation of trust, belief and belonging) and spiritual transformation (the cultivation of imagination, motivation and resilience through practice) operate as mediating mechanisms between moral agreement and peacebuilding conduct. The framework is examined through a structured comparison of two post-conflict cases drawn from secondary sources: Cambodia, where Buddhist ritual and pilgrimage led by Maha Ghosananda exemplify a transformation-led pathway, and Nigeria, where the Muslim–Christian partnership of Imam Muhammad Nurayn Ashafa and Pastor James Movel Wuye exemplifies an institutionalised, trust-led pathway. In both cases, shared reciprocity teachings alone did not produce peace; peace followed where they were joined to trust-building and spiritual practice. The paper contributes to ethics, practical theology, spirituality studies and peace studies, advances four propositions for empirical testing, and draws implications for policymakers and religious leaders.
Keywords: Golden Rule; ethic of reciprocity; faith building; spiritual transformation; religious peacebuilding; comparative religious ethics; Cambodia; Nigeria

1. Introduction

Religion occupies an ambivalent position in contemporary conflict. It is invoked to legitimate violence, yet it also supplies the moral language, institutions and personal courage on which many peace processes depend [1]. The duality is visible in sectarian violence in northern Nigeria, Buddhist peace initiatives in post-war Cambodia, interfaith encounters in post-conflict Bosnia and interreligious mediation led by women in Sierra Leone. Scholarship increasingly recognises this ambivalence, but the mechanisms by which religious resources pass from conviction to peacebuilding conduct remain under-theorised.

One resource frequently cited as common ground is the Golden Rule, or ethic of reciprocity. Versions of it appear in Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Confucianism, and the 1993 Declaration Toward a Global Ethic of the Parliament of the World's Religions named it an irrevocable and unconditional norm [2]. Comparative studies have documented the convergence in detail [3, 4]. The Christian tradition states it as "Do to others whatever you would like them to do to you"; Islam as "None of you truly believes until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself"; Hinduism as "Do not do to others what would cause you pain if done to you"; and Buddhism as "Do not treat others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful."

Agreement on a norm, however, is not its enactment. Comparative ethics has largely treated the Golden Rule as a proposition to be analysed and compared; it has less often asked what converts it into sustained action amid fear, grievance and mistrust. This paper argues that two mediating processes—faith building and spiritual transformation—explain how a shared moral principle becomes peace practice. Three questions guide the analysis: (1) How is the Golden Rule formulated across traditions, and what do the formulations share and not share? (2) Which mechanisms connect ethical agreement to sustained peacebuilding conduct? (3) How do these mechanisms operate in post-conflict Cambodia and Nigeria?

Section 2 outlines the conceptual approach. Sections 3 to 5 develop the ethical, relational and spiritual components, Section 6 integrates them into a four-level framework, Section 7 analyses the two cases, Section 8 presents the findings comparatively, and Section 9 concludes.

2. Conceptual Approach

This is a conceptual, theory-building paper. It integrates scholarship from comparative religious ethics, faith development theory, the psychology of religion and spirituality, and peace studies, and then probes the resulting framework against two post-conflict cases. The cases are drawn principally from a 2025 comparative study of religion, democracy and post-conflict

reconstruction in Cambodia and Nigeria [5], supplemented by the literature cited. Cambodia and Nigeria were selected because they differ in religious tradition (Theravada Buddhist; Muslim–Christian) and in dominant peacebuilding pathway (ritual and pilgrimage; mediation and institutionalised dialogue), allowing the framework to be examined under contrasting conditions. Each case was read against the four levels of the framework (Section 6), recording evidence of the ethical resource, faith building, spiritual transformation and peace action.

Because the cases rest on secondary sources and a small number of observations, the analysis is illustrative rather than confirmatory. It assesses the plausibility of the framework and generates propositions (Section 8) for later empirical testing.

3. The Golden Rule: Shared Ethical Core and Its Limits

3.1 Formulations across traditions

Scholars widely accept that the Golden Rule is among the most broadly attested moral principles [3, 4]. Table 1 summarises representative formulations. Merawi's comparison of Confucian, Christian and Hatata traditions finds that, despite different foundations, the rule affirms the worth and dignity of every person and encourages conduct that sustains social order; the shared logic is reversibility—treating others as one would wish to be treated because of a common humanity [6].

Table 1

Representative Formulations of the Golden Rule across Traditions

Tradition	Formulation (paraphrased or quoted)	Source	Form and anchoring
Judaism	What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow; love your neighbour as yourself	Talmud, Shabbat 31a; Leviticus 19:18	Negative and positive; covenantal duty
Christianity	Do to others whatever you would like them to do to you	Matthew 7:12; Luke 6:31	Positive; love commandment
Islam	None of you truly believes until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself	Sahih al-Bukhari 13; Sahih Muslim 45	Positive; criterion of faith
Hinduism	Do not do to others what would cause you pain if done to you	Mahabharata, Anushasana Parva 113.8	Negative; dharma and shared suffering
Buddhism	Do not treat others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful	Udanavarga 5.18	Negative; compassion and non-harm
Confucianism	What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others	Analects 15.24 (shu)	Negative; reciprocity within benevolence (ren)

Note. Scriptural references are given in standard citation form; translations vary, and wordings here are close renderings rather than a single authoritative translation.

The table also shows that the traditions differ. Formulations are positive (prescribing benefit) or negative (proscribing harm), and they are anchored differently. The Christian formulation is tied to the love commandment (Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 22:39); the Islamic formulation makes reciprocal love a criterion of faith itself; the Hindu and Buddhist formulations rest on recognition that others, like oneself, suffer; and in the

Analects reciprocity (shu) is practised within the wider virtue of benevolence (ren) as part of lifelong moral cultivation. The Golden Rule is therefore less a single idea than a family of related norms embedded in distinct theological and philosophical worlds.

3.2 The gap between ethical cognition and ethical action

Comparative scholarship has demonstrated agreement at the level of ideas, but it generally treats ethics as a body of propositions to be studied and compared. A recent commentary describes a gap between the Golden Rule as ideal and the uncertain reality of its application, observing that carrying human empathy into the disorder of actual social life remains an unresolved problem [7].

The difficulty is not only conceptual. Knowing what is good does not entail doing it. The Golden Rule specifies what one ought to do; acting on it requires motivation, skill and sustained commitment. The rule also presupposes that the other is recognised as a moral equal whose position can be imaginatively occupied, and in conflict that presupposition is precisely what erodes, as adversaries come to be portrayed as threats or as less than fully human. The pertinent question is therefore what enables individuals and groups to retain the rule under pressure—a question comparative ethics has rarely posed.

4. Faith Building: From Ethical Consensus to Relational Trust

4.1 Faith as meaning-making

Fowler distinguishes faith from belief and from religion: faith is a comprehensive dimension of human meaning-making, the deep structure through which persons relate to themselves, to others and to the world [8]. Understood in this way, faith is not assent to propositions but a way of living that engages thought, feeling and action. This paper uses faith building to denote the deliberate, communal effort to shape such meaning-making by cultivating trust, belief and belonging, rather than merely transmitting doctrine. Parks, extending Fowler, argues that mature adult faith is necessary for participation in communities that examine themselves honestly and act as responsible citizens [9]. Faith building thus bears on public conduct as well as inner life.

4.2 Faith building as a mediator between ethics and action

The mediating role of faith building lies in trust. The Golden Rule asks that “the other” be treated as one would wish to be treated, yet conflict erodes the trust on which this depends: the other is perceived as a danger, an enemy or less than human, and knowledge of the rule does not dissolve that distrust. Peacebuilding scholarship has long held that

sustainable reconciliation depends on rebuilt relationships rather than on agreements alone [10].

Faith building offers settings in which trust can be formed and repaired, at two levels. Within a tradition, shared ritual, narrative and moral formation create mutual obligation and accountability, a form of bonding social capital. Across traditions, collaboration toward shared moral aims builds relationships that cross group boundaries, a form of bridging social capital [11]. The cases in Section 7 illustrate both.

Trust converts the Golden Rule from an idea into a commitment. The statement "I should treat the other as I wish to be treated" remains a thought. When it is accompanied by shared stories of commitment, struggle and healing within a faith community, the other becomes a particular person rather than an abstraction, and the speaker becomes answerable for that person's wellbeing. This answerability supplies a reason for ethical action. The paper therefore proposes:

P1. The extent to which the Golden Rule guides conduct toward out-groups increases with the relational trust produced by faith-building processes.

5. Spirituality: Motivation and Imagination for Ethical Action

5.1 Spirituality and religiosity

If faith building provides the relational base, spirituality provides the motivational base. Psychology distinguishes the two constructs. Pargament defines spirituality as the search for the sacred, and religion as the search for significance in ways related to the sacred, pursued within institutional contexts designed to facilitate spirituality [12]. Spirituality thus concerns a person's relationship to the transcendent; religion is the organised means by which that relationship is expressed and sustained. Empirical work supports the distinction: in a study of 234 participants, spirituality was understood chiefly as part of personal identity and an experience of transcendence—whether of God, a Higher Power or a wider sense of unity or mystery—while religiosity was understood as the external structures through which people pursue spirituality and their connection to the sacred [13].

5.2 How spiritual practices transform ethical capacity

If spirituality is a search, then meditation, prayer, pilgrimage, fasting and ritual are its methods. Three functions link these practices to the Golden Rule.

Imagination. The rule requires that one imagine oneself in another's position, a capacity that is cultivated rather than automatic. Contemplative practices—Buddhist loving-kindness (metta) meditation, Christian imaginative prayer and Islamic dhikr—train attention and widen empathy so that the other enters the field of moral concern.

Motivation. Acting ethically often requires overcoming self-interest, fear and fatigue, and reasoning alone seldom supplies the necessary energy. Practices that evoke experiences of transcendence can generate a sense of calling that ties ethical commitment to a purpose beyond personal gain. Scholarship on peace and spirituality likewise suggests that meditation or prayer alone will not bring world peace, yet inner, outer and world peace cannot be pursued without a perspective that extends beyond instrumental reasoning [14].

Resilience. Peacebuilding is prolonged and repetitive work. Disciplined habits transmitted by traditions help practitioners sustain commitment under adversity. Resilience in this sense is less an act of will than a disposition formed through regular practice.

P2. The extent to which the Golden Rule is sustained under pressure increases with spiritual practices that cultivate imagination, motivation and resilience.

6. Integrative Framework: Ethics–Faith–Spirituality–Peace Action

Building on the preceding sections, the paper proposes a four-level framework explaining how religious ethics become peace work (Table 2). The levels are analytically distinct but not strictly sequential; in practice they reinforce one another, as when communal spiritual practice also builds trust.

Table 2

The Four-Level Integrative Framework

Level	Function	Mechanism	Primary outcome	Illustrative forms
1.Ethical principle	Specifies what ought to be done	Shared norm of reciprocity	Moral agreement on what is right	Scriptural formulations ; global ethic declarations
2Faith building	Converts the norm into mutual commitment	Shared ritual, narrative and moral formation; mutual accountability; interfaith collaboration	Relational trust	Congregations; interfaith councils; joint projects
3.Spiritual transformation	Supplies inner capacity for sustained action	Practices that cultivate imagination, motivation and resilience	Sense of calling; durable commitment	Meditation; prayer; pilgrimage; fasting; ritual
4.Peace action	Applies the norm in conflict situations	Reconciliation, mediation, interfaith cooperation, advocacy for social justice	Reduced violence; restored relationships	Truth and peace pilgrimages; mediation platforms

Note. Levels 2 and 3 are the proposed mediating mechanisms between Level 1 and Level 4.

At Level 1, the Golden Rule is the shared centre that states the norm. It shows that people can agree on what is right but does not make them act. At Level 2, trust-building, shared stories and mutual accountability within faith communities turn the norm into a real promise between people; the principal outcome is trust toward the other, which provides social support for ethical action. At Level 3, spiritual practices develop imagination, motivation and resilience, producing an inner drive and sense of calling that gives a deep reason for acting ethically. At Level 4, supported by the preceding levels, the Golden Rule is applied in real conflict through reconciliation, mediation, interfaith cooperation and action for social justice.

The central claim is that ethical principles alone do not generate peace action; faith building and spiritual transformation are the links that convert moral thinking into commitments to others and into inner motivation. The paper therefore proposes:

P3. Sustained peace action is most likely where faith building and spiritual transformation are both present and mutually reinforcing; ethical consensus alone is insufficient.

7. Comparative Case Analysis: Post-Conflict Peacebuilding in Cambodia and Nigeria

The framework is examined through two post-conflict cases. As noted in Section 2, the cases are read through secondary sources, principally a 2025 comparative study of how the two countries rebuilt democracy and sought peace after religious conflict [5].

7.1 Cambodia: a transformation-led pathway

Cambodia's recovery followed civil war and the Khmer Rouge period (1975–79), which severely damaged the country's religious and social fabric. The Buddhist monk Maha Ghosananda initiated the Dhammayietra, a pilgrimage walk for peace and reconciliation, in 1992. According to the comparative study, the pilgrimage rebuilt trust and values through healing ritual, helped heal conflict-affected communities and laid a spiritual foundation for democratic reconstruction [5].

Within the framework, this case exemplifies Level 3. The pilgrimage was neither negotiation nor institution-building but a spiritual practice that tied healing and reconciliation to ritual and teaching. Participants experienced more than a gesture of peace: trauma was named, mourned and woven into a larger spiritual narrative. This transformation achieved a reconciliation that political processes alone could scarcely reach. Faith building was also present, since collective walking, shared ritual and monastic leadership created common trust (Level 2), and the Buddhist ethic of compassion and non-harm furnished the ethical resource (Level 1).

7.2 Nigeria: a trust-led, institutionalised pathway

In northern Nigeria, recurrent Christian–Muslim violence prompted a different response. Imam Muhammad Nurayn Ashafa and Pastor James Movel Wuye, once adversaries, pursued reconciliation through mediation and interfaith dialogue. The comparative study reports that this approach reduced violence and polarisation and supported democratic consolidation [5].

This case exemplifies Level 2. Ashafa and Wuye's personal change became a symbol and catalyst for interfaith trust. Its institutionalisation—through dialogue platforms, mediation tools and joint projects—converted relational trust into structural social capital, with political outcomes in

reduced violence and more deliberative democratic practice. Spiritual transformation is also visible in the leaders' own movement from enmity to partnership, and Muslim and Christian reciprocity teachings supplied the shared ethical resource (Level 1); the distinctive contribution, however, was institutional.

7.3 Comparative insights

The comparative study concludes that religious peacebuilding is most effective when fitted to context, since social and political conditions shape the strategies available [5]. The present analysis adds that, despite divergent pathways, both cases depended on mediating mechanisms. Cambodia suggests that political settlement cannot by itself heal deep trauma without inner transformation; Nigeria suggests that spiritual ideals do not become social change without trust-building and institutional channels. In neither case did reciprocity teachings alone bring peace: the Buddhist ethic of Cambodia and the Islamic and Christian reciprocity teachings of Nigeria became effective when activated through spiritual practice and trust-building.

8. Findings and Discussion

8.1 Comparative findings

Table 3 applies the framework to the two cases, and Table 4 summarises the resulting findings and the propositions they support.

Table 3

Application of the Framework to Cambodia and Nigeria

Dimension	Cambodia	Nigeria
Conflict context	Civil war and Khmer Rouge-era devastation	Recurrent Christian–Muslim violence in northern Nigeria
Principal tradition(s)	Theravada Buddhism	Islam and Christianity
Key actor(s)	Maha Ghosananda, Buddhist monk	Imam Muhammad Nurayn Ashafa and Pastor James Movel Wuye
Level 1: Ethical resource	Buddhist ethic of compassion and non-harm	Islamic and Christian reciprocity teachings
Level 2: Faith building	Collective ritual and shared pilgrimage rebuilding trust within communities	Mediation, interfaith dialogue and joint projects institutionalised as platforms
Level 3: Spiritual transformation	Pilgrimage and healing ritual; trauma named, mourned and integrated into a spiritual narrative	Leaders' personal change from enmity to partnership as symbol and catalyst
Level 4: Peace action	Community healing and reconciliation; foundation for democratic reconstruction	Reduced violence and polarisation; more deliberative democracy
Dominant pathway	Transformation-led (Level 3 emphasis)	Trust-led and institutionalised (Level 2 emphasis)

Note. Based on the comparative study [5] and the author's analysis. "Dominant pathway" denotes emphasis, not exclusivity; both mechanisms appear in both cases.

Table 4

Summary of Findings and Associated Propositions

No.	Finding	Evidence from the cases	Proposition
F1	Shared ethical teachings were present but not sufficient for peace	Reciprocity teachings existed in Buddhist (Cambodia) and Islamic and Christian (Nigeria) contexts; peace followed their activation through practice and trust-building	P3: ethical consensus alone is insufficient
F2	Faith building generated the relational trust on which reconciliation depended	Nigeria's dialogue platforms and joint projects; Cambodia's shared ritual and pilgrimage	P1: trust mediates between norm and conduct
F3	Spiritual transformation supplied the capacity to face trauma and sustain commitment	Cambodia's healing pilgrimage; the personal change of Ashafa and Wuye	P2: spiritual practice sustains the norm under pressure
F4	Pathways differed by context, yet both mediating mechanisms were present	Transformation-led emphasis in Cambodia; trust-led emphasis in Nigeria	P4: the weight of each mechanism varies with context

Note. Findings are interpretive and illustrative; they are not tests of hypotheses.

P4. The relative weight of faith building and spiritual transformation varies with the conflict context, but peace action is least likely where neither mechanism is present.

8.2 Discussion

The findings carry theoretical significance. First, they locate the contribution of religion to peace less in the content of shared ethical teaching than in the processes that enact it, which answers the ambivalence noted by Appleby [1] with an account of the conditions under which religious resources move toward peace. Second, they refine comparative ethics by

shifting attention from the agreement of principles to the mediation of principles into practice. Third, they link faith development theory and the psychology of spirituality to peace studies by specifying relational trust and inner transformation as distinct but complementary mechanisms.

The findings also have practical implications for different actors (Table 5).

Table 5

Practical Implications by Stakeholder

Stakeholder	Implication	Recommended action
Policymakers	Shared ethical declarations are necessary but insufficient	Support interfaith trust-building platforms and protect spaces for religious practice and ritual
Religious leaders	Teaching reciprocity must be joined to practice and relationship	Develop shared ritual, joint service and sustained dialogue; foster contemplative and pilgrimage practices
Peacebuilding practitioners	Effective approaches fit the context	Diagnose whether trauma-healing or trust-institutionalisation is the binding constraint, and design accordingly
Researchers	The mediating mechanisms remain to be tested	Operationalise trust and spiritual practice; use comparative qualitative designs across further cases

Note. Implications derive from the framework and the two cases and should be adapted to local conditions.

9. Conclusion

9.1 Contributions

This paper has proposed a framework showing how religious ethics become peace action through faith building and spiritual transformation. Its central claim is that the Golden Rule, a shared principle, moves from private rule to public peace practice only when faith communities build relational trust and spiritual practices bring inner change. The contribution is threefold. Theoretically, it integrates ethics, faith development theory, spirituality studies and peace studies in a single model. Analytically, the Cambodian and Nigerian cases indicate that different pathways depend on mediating

mechanisms. Practically, it suggests that religious peacebuilding should invest in shared faith spaces and support spiritual practice rather than seek only ethical agreement or institution-building.

For policymakers and religious leaders, the central point is that shared ethical rules are necessary but not sufficient. Peace requires trust and spirituality together; interfaith trust projects and protected spaces for practice follow from recognising that religion contributes to peace not only through ethical teaching but also through the transformation that arises from communal life and spiritual discipline.

9.2 Limitations and future research

Several limitations qualify these conclusions. The analysis is conceptual and relies on secondary sources and two cases, both of which are generally regarded as examples of constructive religious engagement; cases of failure or of religion fuelling conflict would test the framework more severely. The same mechanisms may also operate in less benign directions: trust built within a group can harden its boundaries if bridging relationships do not accompany bonding ones, and spiritual practice can reinforce exclusive identities as readily as inclusive ones [1]. Propositions P1 to P4 are offered for testing, not as established findings.

Future research should examine how particular practices in different spiritual traditions shape the kind and depth of peace action, and when faith building and spiritual transformation work together and when they conflict. Comparative qualitative designs, including process tracing and interviews with peacebuilders and participants, would allow the mediating mechanisms to be examined directly, and extension to further traditions and to cases of unsuccessful peacebuilding would strengthen the framework's explanatory scope.

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