

Strengthening the Moral Force of International Humanitarian Law Through Faith-based Advocacy

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Executive Summary

Rates of violations against international humanitarian law (IHL) are rising worldwide. While a conceptual link between IHL norms and religion is well-established, empirical evidence regarding the effectiveness of religious appeals for IHL is lacking. This report evaluates how and under what conditions the explicit use of religious framing in appeals influences the behavior of armed actors regarding IHL compliance, and seeks to extract lessons from previous experiences of religiously framed advocacy. Focusing on Christianity, the research triangulates a qualitative content analysis (QCA) of public written appeals, semi-structured interviews, and primary and secondary sources. The findings are drawn from three primary case studies heavily impacted by armed conflict: Colombia, Nigeria, and the Philippines.

1. **Public Appeals and "Strategic Avoidance":** The analysis of public written appeals reveals a remarkably low prevalence of explicit Christian language coinciding with explicit IHL framing, as actors frequently engage in "strategic avoidance" depending on their local context. The perception and language of IHL varies across the three case studies:
 - Nigeria: Formal IHL terminology is often avoided, which may be related to the widespread negative association with Western imperialism and distrust in state institutions.
 - The Philippines: IHL language is deliberately claimed, functioning as an instrument of legitimacy and a legal basis for negotiation between the government and armed actors, such as the New People's Army. Religious actors frequently cite agreements like CARHRIHL in their appeals, calling on both parties to uphold it.
 - Colombia: Strategic avoidance manifests differently; religious institutions deliberately avoid ecclesiastical discourse when issuing joint appeals with secular or indigenous non-governmental organizations. They prioritize humanitarian alliances over doctrinal, what we describe as a type of "strategic avoidance"
2. **The Primacy of Actors and Sources of Legitimacy:** The research concludes that the causal chain from public written appeals to behavioral change in armed actors is difficult to establish, as the most significant faith-based interventions occur behind closed doors in negotiations and mediations that leave little written trace. The efficacy of an appeal rests less on the theological discourse itself and more on the local trust and legitimacy of the religious

actor serving as the interpreter. Religious actors secure their legitimacy to influence armed groups through three main avenues:

- Filling a legitimacy vacuum: Government absence or inaction creates a legitimacy vacuum that local religious actors fill, a dynamic heavily pronounced in Nigeria.
- Sustained physical presence: By maintaining a protective presence and sharing the suffering of the civilian population over a long period, religious actors earn authority that distant state institutions lack, as demonstrated effectively in Colombia and the Philippines.
- Perceived neutrality: Maintaining a reputation as a genuine advocate for civilians rather than a political instrument allows the Church to be trusted simultaneously by opposing parties. In the Philippines, this deep institutional embeddedness enabled the mere presence of Pope Francis to produce a ceasefire that years of formal negotiations had failed to achieve.

3. **Contextual Influences and Interfaith Engagement:** Socioeconomic and political realities deeply impact the success of religious appeals.

- Socioeconomic Factors: In Nigeria, debilitating poverty, a lack of consistent education, and security concerns fuel radicalization and inhibit IHL compliance. Religious appeals must be accompanied by humanitarian action addressing physical needs to be effective.
- Political Factors: In the Philippines, the efficacy of religious peacebuilding is heavily dependent on the political will of the executive administration. The openness of the Ramos administration created space for Church involvement, whereas the hostility and "red-tagging" of the Duterte and Marcos Jr. administrations severely curtailed peacebuilding efforts.
- Interfaith/Inter-spiritual Collaboration: Inclusive collaboration is an essential prerequisite for building mutual trust. This is vital in Nigeria to bridge deep divides between Christian and Muslim communities, and in Colombia, where inclusive inter-spiritual collaboration between Christian and indigenous actors has served as a foundational step for building trust during peace dialogues.

Structural Disconnections and Recommendations: The structural disconnect between the secular international humanitarian system and local faith-based actors remains a critical barrier to effective IHL compliance. Secular institutions often view religious identity as a threat to neutrality and impartiality, leading to the stigmatization of religious actors and a failure to leverage their vast grassroots networks, deep local legitimacy, and capacity to remain in conflict zones when external actors cannot.

To optimize the efficacy of IHL appeals, the report provides the following key recommendations:

- For Faith-Based Organizations (FBOs): Facilitate linkages between local grassroots networks and international actors; assist in the "vernacularization" of IHL norms to prevent them from feeling like an external imposition; ensure that immediate socioeconomic needs are addressed alongside religious services; and prioritize interfaith peacebuilding in contexts of inter-religious violence.
- For Secular Humanitarian Actors: Recognize local FBOs as equal, strategic partners rather than passive conduits for a secular agenda; engage with religious ideas respectfully, moving away from superficial scriptural references towards meaningful dialogue; and utilize the established networks of trust that moderate religious leaders maintain to access conservative or militant groups that are otherwise difficult to reach.

Introduction

The contemporary era is witnessing an increase in violations against international humanitarian law by actors across the globe. In 2024, there were 41,370 grave violations against children in armed conflict, a 25% increase from the year prior (Becker, 2025), and 3,600 attacks on healthcare workers in conflict zones, a 62% increase since 2022 (ICN, 2025). The United Nations (2024) has called the dramatic increase in civilian deaths “an alarming lack of compliance with international humanitarian law.” The role of faith-based organisations and religious actors could prove to be instrumental in countering this erosion of IHL compliance, given their unique moral authority and presence in areas of conflict. However, while a conceptual link between IHL norms and religion is well-established, empirical evidence for the effectiveness of faith-based appeals for IHL is lacking. This research will evaluate the efficacy of religious framing in IHL appeals and extrapolate lessons from effective appeals for broader application.¹

The German Institute of Global and Area Studies has found that “overlaps of religious and ethnic identities and religious dominance are conflict-prone” and in some cases, religious polarisation is conflict-prone as well (Basedau et al., 2011). In a world where religion has been connected to violence, we ask how religious devotion might be mobilised to promote restraint or humanitarian protection in conflict instead. Indeed, there is a conceptual link between religion and international humanitarian law, as discussed in the literature review below. If religious appeals to adhere to the norms of international humanitarian law can succeed, then it stands to reason to investigate how and under what circumstances. To this end, this research will undertake to answer the following research questions:

1. How and under what conditions does the explicit use of religious framing in appeals for respect for IHL principles influence the behavior of state and non-state armed actors, including both compliance with and resistance to IHL principles?
2. Secondly, what lessons can be drawn from previous experiences of religiously framed advocacy, and how can they be adapted or expanded for wider global relevance across different contexts?

¹ For the purposes of this paper, efficacy and effectiveness will be used interchangeably throughout.

This research focuses on Christianity, which has played a complex role in the history of both humanitarian norms and armed conflict, and continues to influence both in contemporary contexts. While Christianity draws adherents from across the globe, for the purposes of this study, our team has selected three case studies for further analysis. For these locations, we seek to determine whether religious appeals increased IHL compliance and to identify lessons that may apply more broadly. The case study countries are Colombia, Nigeria, and the Philippines. Throughout the analysis, the three case studies are presented in a variable order determined by the logic and relative weight of each case within a given argument.

Literature Review

Origin of International Humanitarian Law

International Humanitarian Law (IHL), also known as the law of armed conflict or *jus in bello*, is a body of rules that seeks to limit the effects of armed conflict by protecting persons not taking part in hostilities and by restricting the means and methods of warfare (ICRC, 2014). Rooted in both treaty law and customary international law, IHL is legally binding on all parties to armed conflict, regardless of their motivation or status, and violations can amount to war crimes. At its core, it is founded on the balance between two overarching principles: military necessity, which recognizes that certain measures are unavoidable during wartime, and humanity, which prohibits the infliction of unnecessary suffering (Melzer, 2016).

Although traditions of restraint in war are longstanding, the formal codification of IHL began in the 19th century in response to the unprecedented human suffering caused by the rise of industrialized warfare. The turning point is widely attributed to Henry Dunant, whose humanitarian vision was shaped by his Christian faith and early involvement in charitable initiatives. As a young adult, he played a key role in founding the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) in Geneva in 1852 and in convening the first YMCA World Conference in Paris in 1855. After witnessing firsthand the extent of the suffering at the Battle of Solferino in 1859, Dunant documented his experience and began advocating for the establishment of a neutral organization to provide care for the wounded on the battlefield. His efforts led to the creation of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in 1863 and the adoption of the first Geneva Convention in 1864, which introduced protections for wounded and sick soldiers on the battlefield. Although Dunant was profoundly influenced by

his faith, both the Red Cross and the Geneva Conventions were deliberately framed as secular, non-confessional and universal (ICRC, 2021).

Another major development came with the Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907, which formed what became known as “Hague law” and set limits on the means and methods of warfare. Over time, IHL has continued to evolve in response to emerging humanitarian needs, and the earlier separation between “Geneva law” and “Hague law” has become less relevant, as both strands have converged into a unified body of rules governing armed conflict (Melzer, 2016). Today, the modern legal framework of IHL is grounded primarily in the four Geneva Conventions of 1949 and their Additional Protocols of 1977 and 2005, which together form one of the most widely ratified bodies of international law. It is further complemented by a range of legal instruments that regulate specific aspects of warfare, such as the humanitarian disarmament treaties prohibiting the use of certain types of weapons (Sassòli & Tarasevich, 2024). In addition to treaty law, IHL is also shaped by customary international law, which is formed through consistent state practice accepted as legally binding. Customary IHL is particularly significant because it applies to all parties to a conflict, including non-state armed groups, regardless of whether they have ratified specific treaties (ICRC, 2015).

In practical terms, IHL sets out detailed protections for a number of groups, including civilians, wounded and sick combatants, humanitarian and medical personnel, and prisoners of war. It prohibits torture and ill-treatment, requires humane treatment in all circumstances, ensures care for the wounded, and provides basic guarantees for detention and judicial processes (ICRC, 2014). Alongside these protections, IHL is underpinned by a set of core principles governing the conduct of hostilities. The principle of distinction requires parties to differentiate at all times between civilians and combatants and to direct attacks only against military objectives. The principle of proportionality prohibits operations in which the expected civilian harm would be “excessive in relation to the concrete and direct military advantage anticipated ” (Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions, 1977, Article 51). In addition, the principle of precaution demands that all parties must take constant measures to avoid or minimize any incidental civilian harm (Melzer, 2016).

Religion in the Foundations of IHL

The ideas behind IHL trace back far earlier than its formal codification in the nineteenth century (Evans, 2005). Across Abrahamic and Dharmic traditions, as well as other cultures

around the world, discussions on respect during warfare and the moral grounds for going to war have existed for centuries. In Christian tradition, the concept of a just war is traced back to Augustine's *The City of God* and *Contra Faustum Manichaeum* in the fifth century, which formulated principles such as just cause and legitimate authority that survive into conversations regarding just war theory today. Furthermore, various religious and philosophical systems from around the globe contain echoes of *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello* principles, dating back long before the Geneva Conventions.

In Islamic law, the Siyar outlines norms of warfare that reflect later humanitarian principles (Bartles-Smith, 2022). Sharia law includes guidance on the treatment of prisoners, similar to what would later appear in Article 9 of the Geneva Convention on Prisoners of War. Abu Bakr's address to the first Syrian expedition urged his followers not to kill women, children, or the elderly, and not to destroy palm trees or burn fruitful ones – principles that can even be read as early forms of environmental protection (Evans, 2005). Judaism also provides ethical frameworks on warfare; for example, Nahmanides states one of the Halachah (Jewish prescripts) purposes is to establish rules of restraint and mercy toward enemies (Evans, 2005). Furthermore, Deuteronomy includes instruction for reciprocity and compassion, stating that before attacking a city, the army is to offer peace; if accepted, no harm should be done to men, women, or children, reflecting an early attempt to soften war brutality (Evans, 2005). Dharmic religions have also influenced IHL norms. Buddhism takes a distinctive stance not directly aligning with IHL, as its doctrine focuses on ending suffering and thus rejecting violence altogether, but its principles resonate with the modern idea of peace preservation reflected in Article 4(2) of the UN Charter (Kruk, 2021). In Hinduism, the concepts of Dharma Yuddha (righteous war) and Adharma Yuddha (unjust war) parallel *jus ad bellum* (Kruk, 2021). For instance, the Manusmriti sets rules limiting the use of certain weapons – poisoned, barbed, or fire-blazing – and protects non-combatants such as travelers or Brahmins uninvolved in battle. Sikhism likewise places limits on conflict. Fighting cannot be used to seize land or property, nor can it destroy places of worship, echoing principles later reflected in the Geneva Conventions. The story of Bhai Ghanaiya, who aided wounded soldiers from both sides during battle, mirrors Henry Dunant's humanitarian actions in Solferino (Kruk, 2021).

Additionally, Christian theology emphasizes a universal moral order, which identifies basic human goods such as life, dignity, and well-being, and prescribes rules for defending and

promoting them (Biggar, 2019). The Catechism of the Catholic Church, for instance, reflects these principles with its mandate on the humane treatment of non-combatants, prisoners, and wounded soldiers, and condemnation of crimes such as genocide or indiscriminate destruction of cities and their inhabitants (Evans, 2005). Theologically, the concept of *Imago Dei* – that humankind is created in the image of God – is directly relevant to human rights and humanitarian law, as it connotes the inherent dignity of each “image-bearer” of God. For a Christian to harm another human being is to harm someone God himself formed according to his own likeness. Recent literature has also connected *Imago Dei* with human rights concerns such as cases of stateless and trafficked women, the rights of children, and ecological preservation and sustainability (Hikes, 2023; Lala, 2025; Yoon, 2022).²

Christian theology also continues to inform scholarship and debates on IHL concepts such as humanitarian intervention, lethal autonomous weapons (LAWS), and drone usage. For instance, Araya (2025) examines LAWS through Catholic and Eastern Orthodox ethical frameworks and finds widespread concern over the delegation of life-and-death decisions to machines, which risks undermining human moral agency and depersonalizing targets, thereby violating the inherent dignity of human life. Similarly, Lushenko and Carter (2025) show that U.S. Army chaplains’ perceptions of drone strikes are shaped not only by compliance with international law but also by moral and ethical considerations, with factors such as combat experience influencing how legality and morality are weighed. Vorster (2015) further argues that targeted killings conducted via unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) often contravene Christian-informed virtues such as prudence, proportionality, mercy, and respect for human life, particularly in cases where strikes are preventive, non-transparent, or outside declared areas of conflict. These studies demonstrate that Christian ethical reflection continues to offer a vital moral framework for assessing contemporary military practices, ensuring that human dignity, moral accountability, and ethical responsibility remain prevalent, even as technological advancements challenge traditional frameworks of warfare.

These examples show that the legal and moral principles underlying IHL are rooted in broader cosmopolitan and universal ethical reasoning. As Judge Weeramantry notes, “Humanitarian laws of war are not a recent invention, nor the product of a single civilization; they are deeply rooted in many — Hindu, Buddhist, Chinese, Christian, Islamic, and

² For a comprehensive overview of IHL norms in Christian scriptures, see the expansion of this section in the Appendices.

traditional African” (Evans, 2005). This long historical and cultural lineage reveals that while modern IHL appears to have emerged from nineteenth-century Europe, its ethical foundations existed across societies worldwide long before. The notion of protecting human dignity in war is not new; it is a natural moral principle that has guided humanity for centuries. If these norms have always been part of our shared conscience, then even in times when adherence to IHL appears fragile, there must still be ways to restore and strengthen the commitment to them.

Religion has also played a significant role in the development and advancement of international legal and human rights norms. As John Witte Jr. argues, religion and human rights are not opposing forces but “indispensable allies” (Witte & Green, 2012). Notably, the 1925 Universal Christian Conference on Life and Work brought together different Christian denominations for the promotion of international peace, contributing to the emergence of the modern ecumenical movement (Slotte, 2015). In addition, faith-based actors contributed to the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), and were actively involved in advocacy and lobbying efforts surrounding key humanitarian disarmament instruments, such as the Ottawa Convention on anti-personnel mines in 1997, the Arms Trade Treaty in 2013, and the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons in 2017 (Kollontai & Lohmann, 2023; ICAN, 2016).

Alongside the substantial body of literature highlighting the role of religion in shaping the ethical and normative foundations of IHL, there are also a number of studies that point out the ways in which religious influence can be used to undermine humanitarian norms. A key articulation of this is offered by Evans (2005), who conceptualizes religion as a “double-edged sword,” that can be used to motivate both compliance and non-compliance with international law. For example, the Lord’s Resistance Army in Uganda has used religious rhetoric to justify extreme brutality and violations of human rights. Despite these risks, Evans argues against excluding religion from humanitarian engagement, instead emphasizing the need for strategic and context-sensitive approaches (Evans, 2005). Baderin (2009) similarly highlights that the impact of religion depends on both interpretation and the quality of engagement between religious actors and legal institutions, stressing the importance of cooperation grounded in open dialogue, good faith and mutual respect.

Literature Review Conclusion

Overall, the scholarship demonstrates the significant role religion has played in the formation of international humanitarian law, which has drawn on a variety of religious traditions and was particularly shaped by Henry Dunant's religiously inspired humanitarian efforts. Religious influence can serve as a powerful moral and social force in armed conflict, but it is capable of either reinforcing or undermining IHL norms. Religion has both inspired restraint and humanitarianism and, when mobilized differently, legitimized calls for violence. What remains largely unanswered in scholarship and constitutes the core research gap is whether explicitly religious appeals to IHL actually change the behavior of armed actors, and under what conditions they do so. Addressing this gap is essential for understanding how faith-based advocacy can meaningfully strengthen respect for IHL in contemporary conflict settings.

Methodology

This paper triangulates semi-structured interviews, primary and secondary sources, and a qualitative content analysis (QCA). To answer the research question, we analysed appeals for IHL issued by religious leaders and institutions in Colombia, Nigeria, and the Philippines. Specifically, for Colombia, we analysed appeals within the department of Chocó, selected as a case study given that it is one of the regions most severely affected by armed actors and for which primary data is available. For the Philippines, appeals from Christian institutions working on peacebuilding in conflict-affected towns were selected for similar reasons. In Nigeria, we coded appeals from Christian and interfaith organizations influentially involved in peacebuilding efforts, and leaders from these organizations were sought out for interviews.

The QCA allows for an understanding of how religious institutions appeal for respect for IHL in their public interventions. The coding frame³ was developed deductively, based on biblical references and the literature review conducted prior to the analysis, and organised around three main categories: explicit IHL appeals with non-religious framing, Christian references for implicit IHL appeals, and Christian references for explicit IHL appeals.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with religious and non-religious leaders working in peacebuilding in our selected case studies, as well as scholars and academics working at

³ The complete coding frame can be found in the Appendix.

the intersection of IHL and religion, such as Ioana Cismas and Andrew Bartles-Smith. The interviews guided our research but were also used to confirm or challenge the findings emerging from the documentary analysis, allowing us to corroborate and deepen what the documents alone could not fully explain. The interviews became particularly important given that for reasons we investigate in this report, in the majority of cases, public appeals have no direct effect on the behaviour of armed actors. Thus, understanding how closed-door appeals operate was crucial to the analysis. Interviews are referenced in the report by country for local experts and civil society members (e.g., “First Colombia Interview” as Interview C.1, “Second Nigeria Interview” as Interview N.2, etc.). Academic experts and humanitarian practitioners are coded as G for “General” (e.g. Interview G.1).

Finally, in this research, the order in which our case studies are presented varies intentionally. Rather than following a fixed sequence, we arranged each country's analysis based on what best served the logic of the argument and the relative weight of each case within a given theme. Where a country is absent from the discussion of a particular factor, this reflects the absence of evidence encountered during the research process, though this should not be read as the factor being inapplicable to that context. A factor that is central to understanding one country may be less determining in another, and the analysis reflects those differences rather than imposing a uniform framework across all three cases.

The main limitations of this study relate to both generalizability and causation. First, the focus on a specific region and timeframe means the findings cannot be directly transposed to other contexts. Case inclusion also depended on access to sufficient documentation and local contacts, limiting the availability of comparable data. Second, establishing causal links between specific faith-based appeals and concrete actions or restraint by armed actors remains difficult, particularly because many of the most significant faith-based interventions occur through private negotiations and mediations that leave little written trace. Systematically identifying these processes would have required substantially more interviews, time, and resources. Furthermore, the limited number of case studies does not allow for comprehensive comparative analysis of the impact of specific Christian traditions, which may affect results. The religious demography of Colombia and the Philippines is overwhelmingly Catholic, whereas Nigeria is majority Protestant with a moderate Catholic presence. These differences may underlie the more institutionalized nature of religious appeals and authority observed in the Catholic-majority case studies.

The paper will first briefly present the contexts for each of our case study locations, and then the analysis will proceed in four parts. Firstly, we analyze the public written appeals for IHL and address how local perception of IHL and religion influences the language of the text. Secondly, we analyze religious actors as sources of legitimacy of IHL appeals, as that personal legitimacy tended to carry more weight in appeals than religious discourse alone. Thirdly, we examine contextual influences that inhibit the efficacy of religious appeals, such as socioeconomic concerns and interfaith conflict. Lastly, we address disconnections in humanitarian systems that likewise impede effective appeals. The case study locations will be examined individually in each of the four parts.

Introduction to Case Studies

Nigeria

Nigeria is Africa's most populous country, with over 230 million people, and is characterized by significant ethnic, religious, and regional diversity (World Bank Open Data, 2024). With the population split almost evenly between a Muslim-majority north and a Christian-majority south, religious identities play an important role in shaping both social and political dynamics, as well as patterns of conflict across the country (DFAT, 2020). Since gaining independence in 1960, the country has experienced recurring political instability and violence, much of which can be traced to colonial legacies that reinforced ethno-religious divisions and contributed to uneven development (Herbert & Husaini, 2018). Today, Nigeria faces several, overlapping security crises. For the past two decades, the most prominent conflict has been the Boko Haram insurgency in the northeast, which has caused over 43,000 deaths since 2011 and displaced approximately 3.7 million people, particularly in Borno State (Gavin, 2023; GRID, 2025). At the same time, the country is affected by herder-farmer clashes in the Middle Belt, separatist Biafra agitations in the southeast, and longstanding militancy in the Niger Delta (BBC Monitoring, 2023; International Crisis Group, 2026).

Colombia

Since 1958, the Colombian conflict has caused a large number of deaths. Projects such as the Truth Clarification Commission and the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP), together with the Human Rights Data Analysis Group, account for 450,664 deaths, with a total that could approach 800,000 homicides. The figures reflect a massive pattern of killings,

disappearances, kidnappings, recruitment, displacement, and around 32,000 acts of sexual violence (Comisión de la Verdad, 2022). In a country where almost 80% of Colombians identify themselves with Christianity (Garzón Vallejo, 2024, p. 366), religion has had a considerable role in the conflict in diverse ways.⁴ The Church was also an important victim of the conflict, as many priests, politicians, and intellectuals openly rejected any Catholic interpretation that justified armed warfare, considering any violent means as an unacceptable blend of religion and politics, denouncing violence and protecting communities (Garzón Vallejo, 2024, p. 358). Religion in Colombia has also, in more recent decades, become a peacebuilding, mediation, and human rights actor, transitioning from a sectarian actor to a moral facilitator, by de-sectarianizing political discourse and mediating between armed groups (Garzón Vallejo, 2024, p. 366).

Philippines

The Philippines has been afflicted with one of the world's longest-running communist insurgencies, dating back to the 1960s, led by the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and its armed wing, the New People's Army (NPA) (Buenaventura, 2023). This is an ongoing armed conflict between communist forces and the Philippine state, and its roots can be traced to rural poverty, landlessness, concentrated land ownership among elite families dating back to the Spanish and American colonial eras, weak welfare services in rural areas, and failed agrarian reform which eventually manifested into deep socioeconomic grievances among peasant farmers and marginalised communities (Abinales & Amoroso, 2005). This conflict has ebbed and flowed over the decades and has resulted in the deaths of thousands, internal displacement, and cycles of violence concentrated in rural areas (Engelbrecht, 2024). Formal peace talks collapsed in 2019, and the government has shifted toward a predominantly military counterinsurgency approach. Operations have included intensified ground offensives

⁴ During La Violencia, the Catholic Church closely aligned itself with the Conservative Party, framing the political struggle against communists and liberals as a holy war (Bailey, 1967, p. 564; Dailey, 1973, p. 394). After *La Violencia*, some parts of the clergy interpreted the Gospel as a revolutionary mandate. Some priests such as Camilo Torres, Manuel Pérez, Domingo Laín, and Juan Antonio Jiménez joined the ELN to practice “effective love” for the poor, bringing a theological interpretation to provide a moral justification for insurgent violence (Garzón Vallejo, 2024 ; Ochoa & Mejía, 2022). No causal relationship between Catholicism and violence in Colombia can be asserted, but it is suggestible that it has not disincentivised it in some conditions, and failed to foster a pacifist civic culture (Garzón Vallejo, 2024, pp. 362–364). On the other hand, some religious practices have been instrumental in organising social movements, particularly peaceful ones such as the 2017 civic strike in Buenaventura. The Catholic diocese played a crucial role, utilising its pastoral authority to support the political struggle for basic rights and channel unrest into peaceful resistance, calling people to counteract vandalism (Manrique, 2019, pp. 64-65).

and aerial bombardments in rural areas suspected of harbouring insurgents (International Crisis Group, 2025; Meniano, 2019; Virola, 2026).

Analysis

Part I: Public Appeals Analysis

a) Coding Frame Results

Analyzing public written appeals with the coding frame revealed the primary insight that while there are some variations across case studies, in all three countries there was very low prevalence of explicit Christian language coinciding with explicit IHL framing. In some instances, such as when collaborating with secular or indigenous, this may reflect intentional strategic avoidance.

Colombia

Three main categories were used: explicit IHL appeals with non-religious framing, Christian references for implicit IHL appeals, and Christian references for explicit IHL appeals. A total of 48 sentences were analyzed. Because the unit of analysis is the sentence, the third category appears relatively infrequently, since many documents alternate between Christian discourse and IHL discourse across different sentences rather than combining them within a single sentence. Although a single document may contain both IHL and religious (Christian) vocabulary, the two rarely appear within the same sentence. The arguments used to defend explicit IHL norms are rarely explicitly grounded in religious reasoning.

Another pattern emerges when comparing documents authored solely by Church actors with those co-signed by religious and non-religious organizations, including indigenous and ethnic-territorial groups. In documents signed only by religious institutions, every document contains some form of explicitly Christian framing alongside IHL-related appeals. By contrast, in documents where Church actors speak jointly with non-religious organizations, the core appeals to the state and armed groups are almost entirely formulated in secular IHL and human rights language. This seems to be a form of strategic avoidance, in which religious groups refrain from using religious discourse when collaborating with non-religious

local groups, often indigenous ones, who have had difficult historical experiences with Christian institutions.

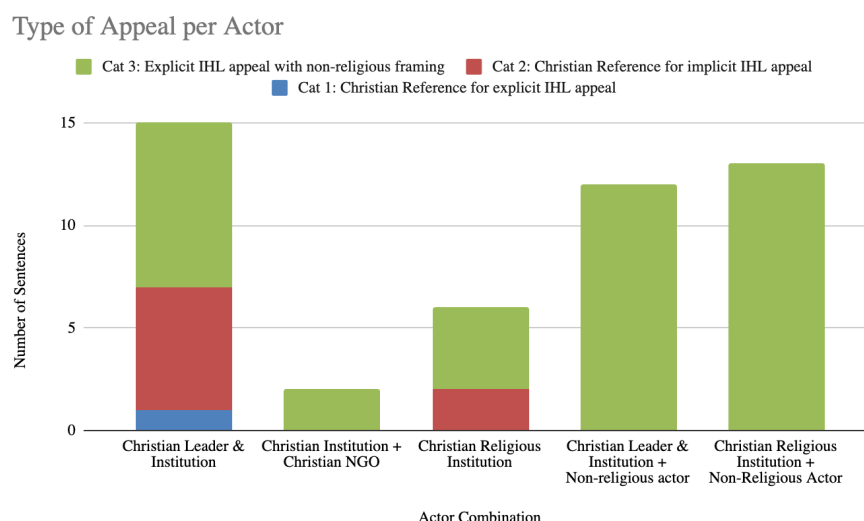


Table 1. Religious framing and IHL appeals by actor combination in Chocó

There is only one partial exception. In the Alto Baudó humanitarian mission communiqué, a coalition text including dioceses and non-religious organizations, the closing paragraph reads: "We implore the God of life for the resilience necessary to resist and the light of the Spirit to find the longed-for paths of social inclusion and fraternity". This is a religious invocation, but it functions as a brief and broadly theistic closing rather than as an explicitly Christian justification structuring the substantive IHL demands of the document. The language used is broadly religious rather than strictly Christian, which is probably why it is present in a coalition text, as it could be a framing applicable to different religious traditions.

Philippines

Across the documents analysed, Christian actors consistently employed what this study categorises as Category 3 appeals, which are explicit IHL-relevant appeals with non-religious framing, when publicly calling for respect for humanitarian norms in the context of armed conflict. Category 1 appeals, which combine explicit Christian reference with explicit IHL principles, were absent entirely. The content of the appeals reflects the nature of the conflict situations they are responding to. All documents analysed were produced in response to

active armed conflict, such as aerial bombardments, ongoing hostilities, or stalled peace negotiations, and the primary demand across documents was consistently for de-escalation, cessation of attacks, or a return to the negotiating table. Restraint in hostilities (Category 3.2) was the most prevalent appeal, followed by protection of civilians (Category 3.1). The urgency of the situation shaped the vocabulary of the response, and it is understandable that what mattered more was communicating an actionable demand to the parties and not necessarily articulating a theological position.

Nigeria

The coding frame analysis of appeals in Nigeria revealed similar results to the other cases in the low prevalence of explicit Christian references to explicit IHL principles. A notable exception is Category 1.1: appeals for the protection of civilians were occasionally framed with explicit Christian language. The most prevalent framing across all the Nigerian appeals analyzed were Categories 2.3 and 3.1, explicit Christian calls for humane treatment and non-religious calls for the protection of civilian lives. Appeals for protection of civilian life and property (Categories X.1 and X.5) were often grouped together. The actors issuing published appeals were most commonly religious organizations or regional religious leaders in Nigeria including bishops and archbishops. International organizations also issued religiously framed appeals with a moderate frequency. While key informant interviews verified that the majority of appeals occur at a local level among faith communities, these appeals are most often verbal and thus not published. Content analysis beyond the scope of the coding frame showed a strong focus on victims and affected communities. Many appeals acknowledge the suffering of innocent civilians and include prayers and expressions of solidarity. Almost every appeal called for government action, while it was uncommon for appeals to be directed to the insurgent and banditry groups.

b) Local Perceptions of IHL and Religion

Analysis of the discourse of appeals also revealed two contrasting perspectives on IHL. In the Philippines, appeals deliberately claimed the language of IHL for legitimacy, while in Nigeria, IHL references were consciously avoided because of a negative connotation associated with Western imperialism. This conscious avoidance of explicit IHL references has been described as a type of “strategic avoidance” (Cismas et al., 2023). In contrast, in Colombia, this strategic avoidance was witnessed in regard to religious discourse, as

faith-based organizations tended to eschew ecclesiastical language when collaborating with secular NGOs.

Philippines

In the Philippines, IHL has functioned as an instrument of legitimacy for armed actors rather than purely as a normative constraint or a “moral force”. The Comprehensive Agreement on Respect for Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law (CARHRIHL), signed in 1998 between the GRP and the NDFP and advocated for by multiple religious actors, is the clearest example. The NPA uses CARHRIHL provisions as a basis for claiming “prisoner of war” status for its captives and as a political and legal basis under international law for their release (Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace, Reconciliation and Unity, 2016). For the NDFP, signing CARHRIHL enabled them to acquire international legal standing. For the government, it served as evidence of institutional good faith toward international partners and observers. Both parties have therefore instrumentalised IHL for strategic ends.

Religious actors are aware of this and they work within this dynamic. For instance, the release of soldiers who were captured by the NPA is a key mechanism through which CARHRIHL was operationalised, and these transactions frequently relied on religious actors as mediators. Religious organisations advocating peace talks also frequently cite this agreement in their appeals, calling on both parties to uphold it (International Coalition for Human Rights in the Philippines, 2024; Philippine Ecumenical Peace Platform, 2011). This indicates that IHL in the Philippine conflict is perceived not only as a humanitarian norm, but also as an instrument tied to legitimacy and negotiation between armed actors. Religious actors, therefore, have to engage with IHL not only as a moral framework, but also as part of the conflict’s broader political dynamic.

Nigeria

In Nigeria, the perception of IHL and other international legal frameworks is shaped by postcolonial dynamics. While the principles underlying IHL are not inherently rejected, its association with Western institutions often leads it to be viewed with skepticism by the local population. As one interviewee noted, the legacy of colonial rule – which dismantled pre-existing political systems, including the Islamic Sokoto Caliphate, and exacerbated ethnic and religious divisions – continues to shape narratives in the country. This is particularly

evident in northern Nigeria, where there is a commonly held belief that this transition has brought “nothing but poverty, corruption and underdevelopment.” (Interview N.2, 2026) As a result, IHL is often seen as part of the same externally imposed system.

This predisposition is reinforced by widespread distrust in state institutions. As repeatedly highlighted in the interviews, government inaction, corruption and inconsistent law enforcement have led to very low levels of public confidence. Consequently, formal legal frameworks carry less influence within Nigerian society, with moral authority more strongly located in religious and local leaders. This aligns with existing literature suggesting that the effectiveness of IHL appeals may be limited when framed in purely secular, legalistic language without adaptation to specific contexts (Cismas et al., 2023; Bartles-Smith, 2022). In some cases these limitations are so pronounced that religious leaders may engage in “strategic avoidance”, deliberately avoiding formal IHL terminology due to its popular rejection (Cismas et al., 2023). Instead, actors may engage in what has been described as “vernacularization”, whereby humanitarian norms are translated into religious concepts that are more accessible and meaningful to local communities (Cismas et al., 2023).

Another important factor is the perceived disconnect between international standards and the lived realities of those affected on the ground. IHL and other international human rights frameworks are often seen as “too liberal and too tolerant,” particularly in contexts where the primary concern is survival and immediate security. For example, interviewees pointed to the frustration with human rights-oriented approaches that ensure food, education and other amenities for violent criminals in detention, while victims often remain displaced or face severe deprivation, lacking access to basic resources and support. As a result, these systems may appear to prioritize the rights of perpetrators over the needs of victims, undermining their legitimacy. In this context, there is often a preference for forms of justice that are seen as more immediate and visible, in contrast to the slow and bureaucratic Western legal processes, which are disconnected from local expectations of accountability (Interview N.2, 2026).

In order to bridge this gap between IHL and local understandings of justice, appeals should shift more focus toward the care and support of victims, an area of clear common ground that many feel has been neglected.

Colombia

A notable finding from the QCA was that when publishing public statements against violence criticizing armed actors, religious institutions tend to avoid religious discourse when collaborating with non-religious organizations such as indigenous organizations, local non-religious organizations, and other humanitarian organizations. Probably the best example of this is the proposal of the "Acuerdo Humanitario ¡YA! en el Chocó", calling on the government and armed groups to halt violence. It was primarily signed by dozens of community councils and interethnic forums, with the formal accompaniment of the Church and the Quibdó diocese, and was mentioned in many of the diocese's public appeals. The Church here demonstrates its sustained physical presence while placing humanitarian principles above religious ones. The avoidance of religious discourse in joint statements could itself be considered a form of strategic avoidance, this time not of IHL language but of religious language, prioritizing humanitarian alliances over doctrinal framing. Religious actors prioritize putting forward humanitarian alliances rather than religious discourse, as secular NGOs can feel uncomfortable engaging with religious norms. Indeed, this strategic avoidance also exists during negotiations; religious actors often do not act as evangelizers but instead appeal to humanism, as these terms bring opposing armed parties together much more effectively than strictly religious or directly political discourse (Interview C.1, 2026).

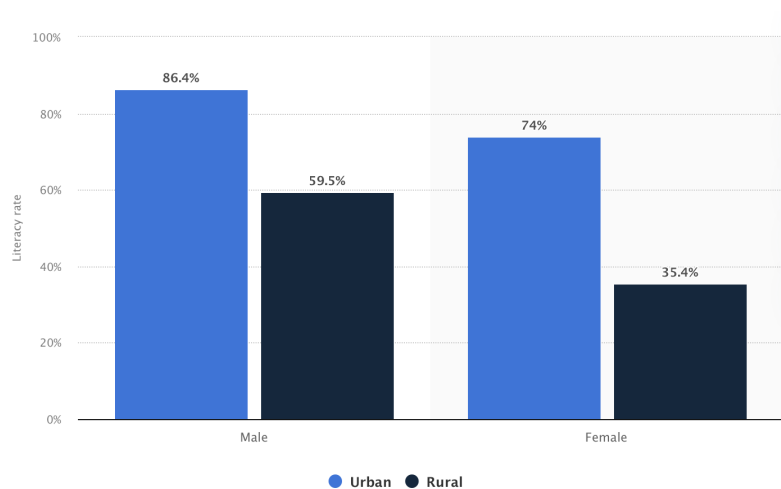
Part II: Actors Analysis

a) Difficulties with QCA alone

A primary difficulty with relying on QCA alone, particularly notable in Colombia and the Philippines, was that Christian institutions often avoid religious discourse in public appeals when acting together with non-Christian groups. Furthermore, the interviews revealed that the most significant faith-based interventions occur not through publicly written faith-based appeals but behind closed doors, in negotiations and mediations that leave little written trace. A case in point for this, as detailed by one of the interviewees (Interview P.1, 2026), is the release of soldiers captured by the NPA, facilitated by a bishop, in which the military employed a stand-down order specifically to create the conditions under which the NPA could release the captives. Both sides trusted the bishop's presence as a guarantee of good faith, and therefore, his role as a mediator made the exchange possible. This kind of

intervention is invisible in any analysis of public appeals, yet it represents precisely the medium through which religious actors exercise their most meaningful influence.

Furthermore, in Nigeria, evaluating the written appeals for IHL compliance quickly encounters problems with the literacy rate and language barriers in rural areas. Roughly 30% of all adults in Nigeria are illiterate, with higher rates of illiteracy among rural communities and women (World Bank Data, 2026). In states such as Bauchi, Sokoto, Yobe, Zamfara, Jigawa, Kebbi, and Niger fewer than 3 out of 10 women are literate (UNICEF, 2021). Furthermore, written appeals for IHL compliance are most commonly issued in English, an official language of the country used in the government, business, and formal education. However, Nigeria is linguistically diverse, with 520 languages spoken, and while estimates of proficiency vary, English is only spoken by around 105 million out of Nigeria's overall population of 239 million people (Aboh & Chigbu, 2026). Written appeals cannot have an impact in communities that cannot read them or do not speak the language in which they are written.



Another difficulty with religious framing in Nigeria is the nature of religious affiliation, which is intertwined with ethnic and cultural identity. The violence is said to be “ethno-religious,” and it is difficult to distinguish the efficacy of religious framing in an appeal from the efficacy of other identity-based rhetoric (Jatau & Maza, 2023). However, the centrality of religion to group identity has another facet: religious leaders thus hold a position of great influence within their identity groups. While it is a well-documented trend internationally that religious leaders can possess the institutional legitimacy and mobilization

networks to serve as powerful advocates within their community, in Nigeria the significance of this influence cannot be overstated (Ter Haar, 2005). Religious actors serve as “one of the strongest, most influential, and easiest tools to use or to assess when it comes to getting to the people... to the masses” (Interview N.3, 2026). Anecdotally, people have been known to go to religious leaders for healing prayer before going to a hospital, and there have been instances of Christian combatants dropping their weapons in the street upon seeing their religious leader unarmed among them calling for cessation of hostilities (Interview N.3, 2026). Therefore, beyond the difficulties of religious framing in written appeals for IHL compliance, there is strong potential for effective verbal or embodied appeals when issued by religious leaders under the right conditions.

b) Methodological implications

These findings carry important methodological implications: the causal chain from public religious appeal to behavioural change among armed actors is extremely difficult to establish, and may be the wrong chain to look for. The impact of religious appeals on armed actors operates less through public statements and more through religious actors themselves. Public appeals do matter, but primarily as signals to communities, international observers, and the parties themselves that the Church is present, engaged, and watching.

The actual work of generating compliance for humanitarian norms happens in conversations that do not appear in any QCA dataset; thus, there seems to be more value in moving beyond the content of written religious appeals and examining instead the conditions that make religious actors effective and influential. This move from religious discourse to actors has been highly influenced by one of the first conclusions of our research: religion alone cannot be understood without taking into consideration the context in which it is used and the actor who uses it.

Religious actors have a central role as interpreters of religion; it is through that interpretation that they generate influence (Cismas, 2014, pp.1-3). Religious texts tend to be contradictory and dynamic, not "static, unitary blocs", but containing a wide variety of reflections that can complement or contradict each other depending on the context. This contradiction can be illustrated by two examples (Cismas, 2014, pp.1-3). Firstly, the death penalty: literal passages in the Bible such as Exodus 21:12 and Leviticus 24:17 mandate the death penalty and have

been used to justify violence, crusades, and inquisitions, while on the other hand Pope John Paul II and other religious actors have interpreted Catholic teaching to oppose it. In another example, Lubna Hussein, a journalist and human rights defender, was prosecuted and found guilty in Sudan for wearing trousers. She said, "If any Muslim in the world says Islamic law or sharia law flogs women for their clothes, let them show me what the Qur'an or Prophet Muhammad said on that issue. There is nothing. It is not about religion, it is about men treating women badly." The same religious tradition can be interpreted in very different ways to either violate or defend human rights. Thus, focusing on religious discourse in isolation from its sociocultural context is unproductive since it carries little meaning independent from the actors who interpret and mobilize it. The focus, therefore, needs to be on understanding those actors, and the context and agency that shapes how they operationalize religious ideas in their constituent communities.

A similar point has been argued by Jean-François Bayart's "Violence and Religion in Africa" (2018), wherein he discusses the supposed correlation between religion and violence. Bayart contends that conceptually, "religion" is neither innately coherent nor homogeneous and is always contextually situated. Men make God say everything and the opposite of everything; if the religious factor is polysemic it is because it is of an enunciative order, existing only through how it is received and how it is expressed and remaining inseparable from other social and political factors (Bayart, 2018). He notes that each act of enunciation depends on a particular epistemic situation, one that is both diachronic and synchronic. While Bayart develops this argument in relation to the mobilizing force of religion in enforcing violence, dismantling the thesis that a direct relationship exists between religion and violence within African societies, the logic applies equally to the making of peace. Religion does not produce outcomes on its own, what matters is the actors who use it, the context in which they do so, and the meaning that is given to it by those who receive it. This was shown through many examples during the interviews we conducted for this research. As an interviewee explained, sometimes religious leaders are called upon simply because armed actors trust them and because they are legitimized in society and in a specific territory in which religion operates as a symbolic marker of trust and not necessarily as a doctrinal argument (Interview, C.1).

c) What makes religious actors legitimate?

Our shift from analyzing religious discourse to religious actors brought us to understand that legitimacy-building by local religious actors is a crucial factor in pushing armed actors to respect IHL principles. Three factors emerged consistently across our case studies. The first is that government absence or inaction creates a legitimacy vacuum that local religious actors fill, directly bringing us to the second factor: institutional standing in a conflict setting. Since the government is comparatively absent and the local churches are not, their sustained presence in conflict-affected areas grants them an authority that distant state institutions lack. Because local religious actors share the same risks as the affected communities, they are listened to far more than state actors and international figures, who are perceived as outsiders. Interestingly, however, when external actors do enter conflict zones directly, there have been reported cases of ceasefires and other significant outcomes. The third factor is perceived neutrality, a religious institution may carry a reputation as an actor genuinely not pursuing political or economic goals, which allows it to be trusted simultaneously by opposing parties. The analysis below examines these three factors across our case studies. We present findings country by country within each factor so that contextual differences remain visible, while also drawing out the patterns that suggest some degree of generalizability across cases.

Nigeria

To strengthen the efficacy of appeals for IHL compliance, it is imperative that the appeal come from a trusted actor in the local community. In Nigeria, the appearance of an appeal as politicized or linked to government corruption cripples its effect on compliance. There is a widespread notion that the government should take stronger action to end the political violence and economic instability. Each interviewee lamented either government inaction or corruption as a core hindrance to IHL compliance, and almost every religious appeal called on the government to intervene. While the Nigerian government has pursued military and counter-insurgency strategies, they have resulted in “limited success and significant humanitarian costs,” sometimes exacerbating tensions by provoking retaliatory attacks on civilians (Sakupapa & Adehanloye, 2025). On one hand, the government’s failure to adequately stem the violence has been blamed as enabling further attacks – “what the people are doing is a symptom of complete lack of governance,” one interviewee claimed (Interview N.2, 2026). On the other hand, it has also created deep distrust toward appeals connected to the government (Interview N.1; N.4, 2026). The suspicion of political doublespeak can hinder

an appeal if the actor is viewed as politicized rather than a trusted community member. This phenomenon is particularly salient during election periods if religious actors align with political parties (Agantem & Ekaya 2025). Furthermore, the urban/rural divide in Nigeria exacerbates the issue of politicization, as actors promoting the values of IHL are often based in the cities with greater access to resources and security. Consequently, their appeals hold less weight in the countryside, which suffers disproportionate harm from the insurgent attacks, kidnapping, and banditry (Interview N.1, 2026).

However, this study also revealed ways that an actor can generate trust at a local level even if he or she is an outsider to the community. One interviewee reported that Cardinal John Onaiyekan has become a household name in Nigeria for unwavering resolve in confronting the Nigerian government (Interview N.4, 2026). His record of honest confrontation of corruption despite personal risk has earned him trust even beyond his immediate locale.

Furthermore, international and national appeals for IHL compliance had a tendency to be viewed as politicized and disconnected from the reality of the rural communities struggling against violence. A religious leader in Kaduna explained that combatants in the countryside may not know who the Pope is, let alone respect his appeals, but the Christian combatants know the Reverend Father of their village and the Muslims know their local imam. It also must be taken into account that the experience of conflict has strengthened identity group boundaries; studies of ethnoreligious violence in Nigeria have shown that violent conflict has significantly raised outgroup hostility among affected Christians and strengthened ingroup cohesion (Tuki, 2025). While these findings demonstrate an increased risk for outgroup retaliation, they also reveal the importance of appeals from ingroup actors. That is to say that an appeal for forgiveness from a religious leader who has suffered in the same attacks as the community is significantly more effective than an appeal from an outgroup member or a distant foreign entity.

Nonetheless, it is still possible for outgroup actors to gain the requisite trust in a local community for an effective appeal. The leader from Kaduna recalled an incident in Yelwata in Benue State where a Swiss national came directly to a conflict zone to appeal personally for non-retaliation following a massacre and for the rebuilding of schools. This appeal was successful, as the community was impacted by the lengths to which a foreign citizen had gone by entering into a dangerous conflict zone (Interview N.3, 2026). Empathy from a

distance – or an appeal for non-retaliation from an actor in a nation at peace – does not carry the same weight as voices that have a personal risk in the conflict. It is a real stake in the local community that can generate trust.

Significantly, however, if seeking to gain the trust of a local community, it is necessary to understand and respect the local culture. For example, elders hold a central role of respect across Nigeria, and interviewees reported that young preachers advocating for peace have been suspended or permanently banned from preaching if their efforts contradicted or troubled the elder religious leaders (Omobowale, 2014). While this is not always the case, it is important to bear in mind to avoid an extraneous factor such as age limiting the efficacy of an appeal.

Colombia

The sources analyzed provide an understanding of the different sources of legitimacy that the Church constructs in order to become a legitimate actor capable of influencing the behaviour of armed actors. While the “Generating Respect Project” report⁵ (Cismas et al., 2023) and Parisi and Ibarra Padilla's (2025) article on the Colombian Church's pursuit of legitimacy fully cover many of these factors, and our research and interviews have allowed us to corroborate and add to their findings.

The first legitimacy source is the sustained physical presence and the sharing of suffering. Legitimacy is built from the bottom up, by the mere presence of the Church over a long period of time, through providing protective presence and sharing the suffering of the civilian population (Parisi & Ibarra Padilla, 2025; Interview C.1, 2026). This was explained across different interviews, noting that religious actors were called to mediate the conflict precisely because they are, in the first place, a social actor whose experience is communal (Interview C.1, 2026). The second source, closely tied to the first, is the neutrality, consistency and moral standing of religious actors. The “Generating Respect Project” documents this in depth with examples of the FARC trusting priests precisely because they were neither military informants nor engaged in coca trade (Cismas et al., 2023). Parisi and Ibarra Padilla (2025) document the Church prioritizing civilian life over political alignment. The trust this

⁵ The Report specifically functions as an existing policy tool that maps how religious actors exert influence through mechanisms of persuasive power and legitimate control

generates is exemplified by our interview findings, which note that they are invited to the table because both opposing parties trust them equally (Interview C.1, 2026). Furthermore, some of the legitimacy built through shared experience comes from the fact that some religious leaders share the ethnic, cultural, or social background of the communities they serve, and in some reported cases even went to the same school as members of armed groups (Cismas et al., 2023; Interview G.1, 2026).

How religious framing influenced compliance: Catholic priests actively used "vernacularisation" to translate IHL norms into accessible religious language. For example, they argued for the protection of life by stating, "you cannot kill that person because that person is like [Jesus] Christ". This was found to be much more effective than referencing IHL directly, especially with newer armed actors who are less knowledgeable or interested in formal legal arguments.

Concrete behavioural change: Religious influence yielded tangible results; between May 2021 and February 2022, the ELN freed detainees on ten separate occasions, each time with the Catholic Church either requesting or supporting the release.

Conditions enabling compliance: The Church's influence was facilitated by several key factors: shared values and ideology through liberation theology in the case of the ELN, the Church's perceived neutrality and independence, its sustained physical presence in conflict territories, and favourable conflict dynamics, such as periods of peace negotiations or ceasefires.

Limitations: The operational guidance notes that religious influence is not universally effective; for instance, evidence does not show it reliably works on profit-driven paramilitary groups, with whom the Church's relationship remains equivocal. Additionally, the project could not gather sufficient empirical data to assess the influence of religious leaders on State armed forces.

Generating Respect Project tool Box: Considerations and Guidance on the Humanitarian Engagement with Religious Leaders

Because they have built that presence and community over years of filling gaps left by an absent state, religious actors have acquired a special legitimacy. Moreover, that legitimacy is then anchored in charisma, faith and long-standing tradition, since they are spiritual leaders of certain communities, making the Church viewed as a sacred institution (Cismas et al., 2023; Parisi & Ibarra Padilla, 2025). Religious identity provides a symbolic framework of trust that is easier to accept than political discourse (Interview C.1, 2026). Their legitimacy is not built through religious speech, but through their presence in spaces where the actors themselves are religious, a presence that allows them to draw on their standing as community leaders and to be heard and followed.

Philippines

Christian actors have played a significant role in the various attempts of peace and reconciliation processes in the conflict. Historically, Christian actors have been involved in efforts to promote peace or mediate between the Philippine government and communist rebels (Gomes, 2020; Philippine Ecumenical Peace Platform, 2025). Given that the Philippines is one of the largest predominantly Catholic countries in the world, with about 78% of the population identifying as Roman Catholic (roughly 10% as Protestants and other Christian denominations, and about 7% as Muslim) (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2024), religious actors have indeed leveraged their moral authority to facilitate dialogue and peace in NIACs. Religious actors serve not only as moral authorities but also as intermediaries in mediating, negotiating, and peacebuilding between the belligerents. This is possible because religious actors have been able to build a strong legitimacy over time, through two important factors: their institutional standing within the community, and their perceived neutrality

The legitimacy that Christian actors draw upon in the Philippines is rooted in the Church's deep and historically demonstrated embeddedness in the country's social and political life. This standing has been earned through its sustained presence across the most consequential moments of Philippine public life. As one interviewee (Interview P.3, 2026) put it, it has more to do with the "long history of trying to bridge the concerns of the people or the communities to the corridors of power." "They have the capacity to speak truth to power," they said. It is through accumulated social capital, rather than any specifically religious appeal, that makes someone a trusted actor in conflict. The most formative of these moments was the People Power Revolution of 1986. Catholic leaders became more united in opposition to Marcos as human rights abuses under his regime worsened, and Jaime Sin, the Archbishop of Manila, mobilised millions of Filipinos to peacefully protest against the Marcos dictatorship, which effectively restored democracy in the country (Hermida, 2015). The Church's willingness to mobilise its institutional weight on behalf of the Filipino people by calling congregations into the streets and framing the removal of a dictator in terms of human dignity rather than partisan politics established a precedent that has defined its public role ever since. The networks of clergy actors formed during that period remain active today and have since extended beyond mass mobilisation, actively engaging in legislative debates and public policy, particularly on contentious issues such as reproductive rights laws and marriage and family laws (De Guzman, 2026). Such examples demonstrate how deeply embedded the Church is in the country's sociopolitical fabric. The institutional memory of

principled opposition to state violence continues to inform how both the state and armed actors perceive the Church.

This institutional embeddedness extends beyond domestic figures. Pope Francis' 2015 visit to the Philippines is another example of the extent to which the Church's moral authority can shape the behaviour of armed actors. During the visit, both the NPA and the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) observed a ceasefire. This is a rare moment of mutual restraint in a conflict that had by then persisted for over four decades (Fernandez, 2015). The symbolic weight of the papal visit, the mere presence of the Pope, was sufficient to produce a behavioural outcome that years of formal negotiations had failed to achieve. More concretely, a government official explicitly credited Pope Francis with influencing the government's peace policy agenda, and the Document on Human Fraternity, signed by Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, was subsequently institutionalised into the Office of the Presidential Adviser on Peace, Reconciliation and Unity's (OPAPRU) national peace agenda (Galvez, 2025). This is a remarkable example of how the authority of a religious figure can translate into formal policy influence, not through theological argument but through the moral weight that the institution carries in the eyes of the actors involved in the conflict.

Closely tied to the Church's institutional standing is its perceived neutrality: As an interviewee (Interview P.1 and P.2, 2026) noted, they have a reputation for being a genuine advocate for the civilian population rather than an instrument of either the state or the armed opposition. For instance, when Filipino bishops were chosen to act as mediators between the government and the rebels, CPP founder Jose Maria Sison expressed a preference for negotiating with clergymen rather than government officials (Gomes, 2020). An army commander similarly noted, "Church leaders are considered neutral people. They are wise and intelligent enough to understand whether the guerrillas are sincere" (Gomes, 2020). That a military commander and a communist leader arrived at the same assessment of the bishops' trustworthiness captures how the Church's perceived neutrality functions in practice: it is a product of institutional conduct over time, and it operates across ideological lines precisely because it cannot be reduced to any one of them.

Part III: Contextual Influences

a) Socioeconomic and political context

The literature and interviews reveal that there are two main contextual factors that should be acknowledged when analysing the efficacy of a religious actor's appeal: the socioeconomic context and the political context. In Nigeria, poverty fuels insurgent recruitment, and low educational attainment increases vulnerability to radicalisation. In the Philippines, meanwhile, the effectiveness of religious actors is largely determined by political will: the Ramos administration's peace agenda created genuine space for Church involvement in negotiations, whereas the Duterte administration's branding of Church leaders as communist sympathisers severely curtailed their peacebuilding efforts, a pattern that has continued under Marcos Jr.

Nigeria

Socioeconomic factors in Nigeria inhibit the efficacy of appeals for IHL compliance, including debilitating poverty, lack of education, and security concerns. The Nigerian government reports that 63% of the population lives in multidimensional poverty, with higher rates of poverty concentrated in the northern states (Nigeria National Bureau of Statistics, 2022). Moreover, 88.4 million people are classified as experiencing extreme poverty – a figure which accounts for 12.9% of the global population of persons in extreme poverty (Dierks, 2026). While economic deprivation is not alone to blame for the violence, it nonetheless fuels instability by inflaming the indignation harnessed by insurgent groups and the material necessity driving the banditry gangs. Furthermore, poor economic conditions exacerbate the notion that democracy and IHL are Western impositions, as non-state groups maintain that Western civilization brought poverty with democracy (Interview N.2, 2026).

Lack of consistent education across the country likewise weakens IHL compliance, as higher rates of completed schooling are correlated with lower chances of radicalization (Sas et al., 2020). The national rate of primary school completion was only 59% for boys and 51% for girls with lower rates for secondary and tertiary education (UNESCO, 2024). Primary school completion is higher in the cities than in rural areas and in the north. While nationwide educational standards exist, there are substantial structural difficulties to compliance, particularly in regions with poor funding. Reportedly, religious extremism has been taught in schools in the northern states (Interview N.2, 2026).

Finally, security concerns and risk of reprisal remain a strong deterrent to religious appeals for IHL. Advocacy for moderate interpretations of Islam have led to kidnappings and killings

in the northern states, and both imams and pastors who have condemned the violence propagated by Boko Haram and the Fulani militias have been assassinated and forced into hiding (Agantum & Ekaya, 51). While leaders who continue their advocacy regardless garner respect among their constituents, they incur considerable personal risk.

These contextual factors weaken the cogency and reduce the frequency of religious appeals for IHL compliance and thus need to be addressed – a Christian religious appeal in this regard might invoke the value of James 2:15-16, “Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,’ but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it?” Religious appeals need to be accompanied by beneficial action. In the Nigerian context, there is potential for an embodied religious appeal to be effective, relying on both the centrality of trusted religious actors and the importance of interfaith peacebuilding. If Christian and Muslim leaders publicly work together on projects for which their values align to address these socioeconomic concerns facing both groups, it could set a powerful example to their communities while also mitigating some of the primary causes of radicalization.

Philippines

Many times, the effectiveness of religious actors and the discourse used depends on the political disposition of the government. As one interviewee (Interview P.2, 2026) explained, church groups in the Philippines are deliberately “careful” about their language precisely because of their identity as a religious institution. The concern is not to be seen as issuing condemnations of the government or the military, but rather to be seen as urging a return to dialogue and negotiation.

The Ramos administration (1992–1998) represents the period of greatest political openness to both peace negotiations and Church involvement therein. President Ramos’ flagship development strategy, *Philippines 2000*, was premised on the logic that political stability was necessary for economic prosperity and foreign investment. Therefore, this alignment of economic and peace agendas created an incentive for peace talks, and the Church was included in the National Unification Commission alongside other civil society actors (Ferrer, 2002; Sarmiento, 2005). The Ramos period thus illustrates a broader principle: when state

actors have convergent interests in achieving stability, religious actors can exercise their mediating capacity to the fullest.

The Duterte administration (2016–2022) represents the opposite pole. Formal peace talks with the NDFP collapsed definitively in 2019, and the administration's preferred instrument for addressing the insurgency was the NTF-ELCAC, which institutionalised the practice of “red-tagging”: the labelling of civil society actors, including Church leaders, as NPA supporters or terrorist sympathisers (Lawton, 2023; Saludes, 2021). As one interviewee noted (Interview G.2, 2026), religion often serves as a check on state power in some countries. Such is the case for the Philippines, and this has resulted in a number of red-tagging attacks towards priests and nuns advocating for the cessation of state violence, as the government resorted to violent and highly militarised counterinsurgency operations to solve the conflict. As one interviewee (Interview P.3, 2026) revealed, the attacks on church workers severely constrained their humanitarian and peacebuilding functions even as it paradoxically reinforced their moral credibility with the communities experiencing that same state violence.

This openness under Ramos and hostility under Duterte and Marcos Jr. demonstrate that in the Philippines, the effectiveness of religious actors is also dependent on the political will at the executive level.

b) Interfaith conflict and appeals

Interfaith engagement emerged in both the literature and interviews as a potentially important factor in strengthening the efficacy of religious appeals, though its role varied depending on the context. In Nigeria, where religious divisions are deeply embedded in conflict dynamics, interfaith engagement plays a key role in fostering dialogue and trust between Muslim and Christian communities, as well as in strengthening the credibility and reach of humanitarian appeals. In Colombia, inclusive approaches to inter-spiritual collaboration between Christian and indigenous actors have contributed to peacebuilding efforts. In contrast, in the Philippines, interfaith engagement has had less direct influence, functioning mainly as a networking tool for humanitarian actors.

Nigeria

Given Nigeria's high degree of religiosity and the deeply rooted tensions between the Christians and the Muslims, which make up roughly equal proportions of the population, interfaith engagement is essential for both effective humanitarian communication and peaceful coexistence (Nwachukwu, 2024). Across the interviews, the interfaith dimension was consistently identified as a key factor in conflict mediation and peacebuilding in Nigeria. Its main role lies in creating spaces for dialogue and the exchange of perspectives, which in turn foster reconciliation and religious tolerance (Omotosho, 2015). In many cases, these interfaith initiatives represent the first opportunity for individuals from different religious backgrounds to engage in peaceful, face-to-face interaction (Interview N3, 2026). This helps break down entrenched prejudices, thereby facilitating mutual understanding and respect (Interview 5) (Agantem & Ekaya, 2025). The Nigerian Inter-Religious Council (NIREC), co-chaired by the Sultan of Sokoto and the President of the Christian Association of Nigeria serves as an established institutional model for interfaith dialogue and mediation. Another valuable example is the International Centre for Interfaith Peace and Harmony (ICIPH) in Kaduna, co-initiated by the WCC and its local partners, Jama'atu Nasril Islam, the Society for the Support of Islam and the Christian Council of Nigeria, which employs a 50/50 representation model of Christians and Muslims. Furthermore, capacity-building initiatives like the Fellowship Program run by the Cardinal Onaiyekan Foundation for Peace (COFP) focus on building common ground and peaceful coexistence (Interview N.4, 2026).

Oftentimes, interfaith platforms function as initial entry points for humanitarian actors into the religious landscape. As highlighted in one interview, they are particularly valuable for mapping religious networks and facilitating access to more influential actors. Their reputation as open and approachable, yet relatively marginal figures, makes them effective intermediaries for reaching more conservative or reluctant actors who hold greater authority within religious communities (Interview G.2, 2026).

One other important aspect in Nigeria that should not be overlooked is the role of intra-faith dynamics. Internal divisions within both Islam and Christianity can "weaken leadership authority and impede collective action," thereby undermining interfaith engagement (Agantem & Ekaya, 2025). Concurrent efforts to address these intra-faith tensions can therefore strengthen the impact of joint interfaith initiatives and improve harmony among participating actors. (Interview N.1, 2026). Other challenges faced by interfaith engagement include politicization and security risks for religious leaders, who may face serious threats for

publicly condemning extremist violence or promoting more moderate interpretations of religious teachings (Interview N.3, 2026).

Colombia

In a country with a majority Christian population, the Church has always been an important actor and has been able to construct its legitimacy through different factors. However, other indigenous spiritualities exist and are often caught in the midst of conflict (Ritualising Protection Project⁶). The relationship between indigenous spiritualities and Christian churches has historically been problematic, since indigenous communities have often had detrimental experiences due to the severe stigmatization and marginalization suffered at European hands during the colonial period (Parisi & Ibarra Padilla, 2025). However, there are clear instances of mutual collaboration, which could be one of the explanations for why Christian organizations avoid using religious discourse when engaging with indigenous organizations.

Indeed, some of the analyzed public statements from Chocó were made jointly with indigenous religious groups. The Acuerdo Humanitario ¡YA! was built from many local organizations and civil society groups but also indigenous groups such as the Regional Indigenous Council of Chocó (CRICH) and the Indigenous Organization of Chocó (OICH), accompanied by the Catholic Diocese of Quibdó. Other sources denouncing armed violence were publicly signed by the Greater Community Council of the Integral Peasant Association of the Atrato (COCOMACIA), the Dialogue and Consensus Table of the Indigenous Peoples of Chocó, the Inter-Ethnic Solidarity Forum of Chocó, the Diocese of Quibdó, Pacipaz, and the Regional Coordination of the Colombian Pacific, showing a clear humanitarian collaboration between parties. As stated earlier, when these statements are issued publicly, they tend to avoid any type of religious discourse.

One of the interviewed leaders explained the importance of inclusive peace dialogues and trust building through inter-spiritual collaboration (Interview C.1, 2026). He explained that during peace talks, if indigenous representatives are present, it is considered crucial to invite

⁶ <https://www.ritualisingprotection.org/> | The Ritualizing Protection Project is an ongoing project seeking to understand how ancestral spiritual and cultural practices protect indigenous communities in the midst of armed conflict and what coordination mechanisms could be put in place to ensure that these practices are effectively supported by the state.

them to participate using their own ancestral spirituality. This inclusive act serves as a foundational step for building mutual trust among the parties, with those parties often becoming interested in each other's practices after negotiations take place (Interview C.1, 2026). There is no evangelizing or religious framing within the negotiations themselves; rather, it is precisely the non-religious discourse adopted by religious groups that enables interfaith engagement, ensuring no one is left behind (Interview C.1, 2026)

Part IV: Structural Disconnections

Across the case studies and according to our interviews with practitioners in the field, the foremost barrier to the efficacy of appeals is the disconnect between international and national efforts to increase IHL compliance and the local actors on the ground. Despite the important humanitarian support provided by religious organizations, a disconnect remains between the secular humanitarian world and faith-based actors, largely rooted in the secular system's interpretation of humanitarian principles, which tends to view religious identity as a threat to neutrality and impartiality (Wilkinson & Tomalin, 2023). While certain humanitarian spheres are beginning to recognize the necessity of engaging with faith identities directly, stigmatization of religious actors remains present (The Lutheran World Federation & Islamic Relief Worldwide, 2018). In fact, the Lutheran World Federation and Islamic Relief Worldwide (2018) developed a faith-sensitive approach in humanitarian response, aiming to integrate local faith perspectives into mental health and psychosocial programming without compromising humanitarian principles.

Nevertheless, religious groups have a long history of providing relief and protection that predates the modern secular humanitarian system, and remain important actors in places where others are not present (Ferris, 2005). Given the international community's growing commitment to localizing humanitarian assistance, local faith communities are particularly well positioned to ensure humanitarian assistance reaches the local level effectively, given their vast grassroots networks, high levels of legitimacy, and their capacity to remain in conflict zones when no other actor is present (Ferris, 2005; The Lutheran World Federation & Islamic Relief Worldwide, 2018; Wilkinson & Tomalin, 2023).

This is particularly important in respect to IHL. As shown in our literature review, IHL has significant linkages with religious principles; humanitarian norms share common ground with religious teachings, and religious actors often draw on those Christian principles to advocate for civilian protection.

Colombia

The Colombian case illustrates this dynamic well. The Church has played a central mediating role between the state and Non-State Armed Groups (NSAGs), building mutual trust between both parties (Parisi & Ibarra Padilla, 2025). Given the well-developed linkages between IHL principles and religious ones, and the Church's sustained advocacy for the protection of civilian life, engaging with faith-based actors is not only legitimate but necessary for effective humanitarian response (Cismas et al., 2023). Strengthening these relationships between local religious actors and international NGOs is therefore essential to improving the broader humanitarian system (Ferris, 2005). This is perhaps best captured by a recent case of kidnapping by the ELN. On September 3rd, the ELN kidnapped a group of six people; following a communiqué issued by the Diócesis de Quibdó, Istmina-Tadó y Apartadó, the six were freed on the 12th of the same month and handed over to a humanitarian commission comprised of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the local ombudsman (Defensoría del Pueblo), and the Catholic Church. This case demonstrates that collaboration between religious and secular humanitarian actors is not only possible but effective in practice.

The Philippines

An interviewee (Interview G.2, 2026) notes that a religious actor's capacity to remain in conflict-affected communities and maintain networks and relationships with all parties is precisely its comparative advantage over external actors who enter and exit on project cycles with high turnover rates. Indeed, throughout this paper, we have shown that the Church's institutional embeddedness in communities and the country as a whole is the very source of its effectiveness. Despite that, there remains a persistent gap between the local capacities of faith-based actors and international humanitarian responses to it. The red-tagging of faith-based actors especially made this disconnect visible. When Church workers engaged in humanitarian and peacebuilding activities in conflict-affected communities are publicly labelled as terrorists, their capacity to operate is directly compromised. Religious actors have reaffirmed their commitment to defending the dignity of every person and raising alarm over

alleged IHL violations, but international humanitarian organisations are often insufficiently positioned to provide the institutional backing or, at the very least, some form of solidarity, that would mitigate the risks that religious actors face on the ground, especially in this context where they are facing against state actors and state apparatuses. After all, there is a precedent suggesting that international scrutiny can shape the behaviour of state actors or increase awareness on the issue. An interviewee (Interview P.1, 2026) recalls that before the Duterte administration, the military would often relent to foreign church missionaries conducting fact-finding or humanitarian missions in conflict-affected areas. Another case is the National Council of Churches in the Philippines (NCCP)'s 2007 "Let the Stones Cry Out" report (a reference to Luke 19:40) that extensively documented alleged human rights violations. The report was brought to the US Congress and the UN Human Rights Council by a religious delegation, and then prompted an unprecedented US Senate hearing (Global Ministries, 2014; National Council of Churches in the Philippines, 2007; National Council of Churches in the Philippines, 2008).

Nigeria

The structural disconnect between national programs and local actors is one of the key constraints on the efficacy of appeals for IHL in the Nigerian context. While both levels of engagement offer distinct advantages, their impact remains limited in the absence of effective linkage. National and international actors typically possess greater resources and institutional capacity, whereas the local religious leaders hold valuable contextual knowledge and social legitimacy within their communities. However, due to the lack of coordination between the two, their efforts remain fragmented, and they achieve far less than they could by acting together. High-level initiatives tend to be disconnected from on-the ground realities, and local actors lack the support, training and coordination needed to maximize their influence.

One of the interviewees identified the lack of funding as one of the most significant barriers to local humanitarian efforts. Despite there being plenty of ideas and motivation, particularly among younger people, many projects fail in the early stages due to insufficient resources. This highlights the imbalance in current approaches, where considerable resources are directed toward high-level frameworks that often have limited practical impact, rather than toward local initiatives where even modest support could produce tangible and immediate benefits (Interview N.4, 2026). Interviewees also highlighted the prevalence of big

international conferences which generate a lot of discussion and visibility but frequently fail to translate into meaningful change (Interview N.4, 2026).

In order to strengthen linkage, it is recommended that the international humanitarian sector work directly with credible local actors and organizations, rather than establishing city-based offices and recruiting for their own internal structures (Interview N.4, 2026). In addition, engagement must shift from a top-down model toward a “two-way kind of dialogue” that incorporates continuous feedback on what is effective in practice (Interview N.3, 2026).

The disconnect can further be addressed by more intentional linkage between international and national efforts and grassroots movements at the community level that already have local legitimacy. Existing structures such as the International Center for Interfaith, Peace and Harmony (ICIPH)’s Peace Ambassadors program and the Cardinal Onaiyekan Foundation for Peace Fellowship (COFP) Program demonstrate the potential success of linking national efforts to local actors, and should be further studied for possible broader application.

Conclusions

In final analysis, while religious appeals for IHL compliance have not been consistently effective, this research has identified methods to optimize the potential efficacy. Significantly, the appeal must be issued by an actor who has trust and legitimacy within the target community. In locations with high measures of religiosity, or where religious affiliation is a key component of cultural identity, religious leaders command the respect and trust of their constituents, situating them in a position to potentially issue effective appeals. In such cases, the identity and action of a religious leader can serve as an effective religious appeal even if their dialogue does not use specifically religious language. Furthermore, their legitimacy is heightened by the institutional presence that other actors do not have in conflict-affected settings. Moreover, contextual factors and the imperialistic connotations of IHL in some regions need to be addressed to reduce external barriers on an appeal’s efficacy. Finally, in contexts of inter-religious violence, it is imperative for religious appeals to encourage interfaith exchanges and peacebuilding to counter the use of religious discourse to further inflame inter-religious conflicts and promote outgroup violence.

A critical disconnect remains in the manner in which secular humanitarian organizations have engaged with religious actors and attempted religious appeals. Superficial appeals made

without proper understanding of the religion or consideration for its adherents are not effective. High turnover and the primacy of secularism in international organizations has led to comparatively few humanitarian actors investing the time to conduct sufficient research on a religion to attain credibility in the eyes of religious actors. One interviewee remarked that after floundering attempts by IO and UN actors to engage with religious leaders, “the reply I would get from religious leaders all the time was: ‘you’re not from one of these human rights groups, are you?’” (Interview G.2, 2026). Notably, in contexts of religious violence, armed groups tend to incorporate the more conservative elements of a religion, and are thus further unlikely to be persuaded by secular actors using uninformed or seemingly disingenuous references to scriptural verses or other religious appeals.

Instead, humanitarian actors need to establish credibility by demonstrating a more comprehensive understanding of the religion and by approaching conversations with a posture of dialogue and learning rather than a firm external agenda. With this credibility, humanitarian organizations can engage with the networks religious leaders already have among their communities and with religious armed groups. For example, in the Philippines the ICRC was able to engage with armed groups by establishing networks among local religious leaders, who could facilitate access to the leaders of militant groups. Religious leaders are thus pivotal for establishing the linkage between international efforts and effective local appeals. Secular humanitarian organisations should, therefore, actively recognise the legitimacy and capacities of religious actors as genuine, strategic partners with an irreplaceable presence within the communities and not as mediums delivering externally designed IHL programmes.

Moreover, the coding frame analysis revealed that there is rarely a clear linkage between explicit religious appeals and explicit IHL appeals, and while humanitarian organizations have tried to bridge this gap, they have often done so with limited religious knowledge. The same is true in the other direction: IHL knowledge among local religious leaders is often scant. One interview illustrates this clearly, describing a religious community whose members disappeared and were found dead and tortured in a mass grave. The Church acknowledged having no prior knowledge of human rights, and when eight of their leaders were killed, they did not know how to denounce it formally (Interview C.2, 2026). Linking humanitarian actors with religious leaders could bring together legitimacy and religious expertise on one side, and the IHL knowledge on the other, to bridge this gap effectively.

Therefore, by mitigating superficiality of religious appeals, accounting for contextual factors, and working alongside religious leaders who have trust and legitimacy in their communities, international actors can raise the likelihood of appeals for IHL respect, proving effective and increasing compliance for international humanitarian law.

Final Recommendations

For Faith-Based Organizations

1. Facilitate linkage between local grassroots networks and national and international actors, connecting resources at the international level with actors with local legitimacy in conflict-affected areas.
2. Where IHL principles have resonance with local religious or cultural beliefs, assist in vernacularization, grounding IHL norms in existing beliefs and thus combating the notion that IHL norms constitute an external imposition.
3. In contexts of conflict or mass poverty, a focus on addressing immediate needs such as security, nutrition, and access to clean water must coexist with and not be completely subordinated to purely religious services, as socio-economic factors have strong potential to negatively inhibit appeals for IHL compliance.
4. In contexts of inter-religious violence, interfaith peacebuilding should be prioritized to minimize outgroup hostility.

For Secular Humanitarian Actors

1. Recognize FBOs as equal partners with unique legitimacy in local contexts, not passive conduits of a secular IHL agenda. This partnership must entail understanding that the faith represented in FBOs is not an incidental factor alongside humanitarian effort but an essential motivation behind it.
2. If issuing any appeal to religious ideas, the appeal should reflect engagement with and respectful understanding of the religion, rather than superficial or poorly understood scriptural references. If there is not time or personnel with sufficient grasp of the local faith, religious appeals should be coordinated with religious actors already bearing local legitimacy and thorough comprehension of local beliefs.
3. Engage with and utilize existing networks of trust that FBOs maintain in conflict zones where other actors are present. Notably, moderate religious actors can often facilitate access to conservative religious actors in militant groups who are otherwise difficult to reach.
4. Vernacularization alongside local actors such as FBOs is essential, as appeals to grand international principles like human rights may appear foreign, inapplicable, or out of touch when not vernacularized to the local context and culture.

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Appendices

AI Disclosure Statement

During the preparation of this work, the authors used the generative AI tools ChatGPT and Notebooklm to assist in formatting some citations in APA style and to improve overall grammar and syntax. All sources, content, and final verification were completed by the authors.

Methodology

Main Category	Subcategory (IHL Principle)	Definition	Example (Christian Framing)	Coding Rule
1. Explicit Christian Reference to explicit IHL Principles	1.1 Protection of Civilians	Religious language directly tied to preserving civilian life in IHL language		IHL principle is named or clearly stated
	1.2 Restraint in Hostilities / No Retaliation	Religious appeal directing calling for de-escalation or non-retaliation directly mentioning IHL		Religious element + explicit restraint
	1.3 Humane Treatment (Wounded / Captives)	Clear call for humane treatment linked to Christian teaching directly mentioning IHL		Must mention treatment + Christian anchor
	1.4 Humanitarian Access / Assistance	Calls for allowing aid framed through Christian duty directly mentioning IHL		Access must be explicit

	1.5 Protection of Objects / Places	Christian justification for protecting churches/hospitals/schools directly mentioning IHL		Object + Christian justification explicitly linked
2. Explicit Christian Reference to implicit IHL Principles	2.1 Protection of Civilians (Implied via Imago Dei)	Christian idea suggests civilian protection but does not name IHL	“Every person bears God’s image.”	No IHL term; coder maps concept to PoC
	2.2 Restraint (Implied via Forgiveness / Enemy Love)	Christian virtue implies restraint without naming IHL	“Forgive those who harm you.”	No IHL term; meaning implies no retaliation
	2.3 Humane Treatment (Implied via Mercy / Healing)	Christian mercy/care implicitly suggests humane treatment without naming IHL	“Christ calls us to care for the wounded.”	Implied humane treatment
	2.4 Access (Implied via Care for Stranger / Hungry)	Scripture implies allowing support to vulnerable people without naming IHL	“Welcome the stranger; feed the hungry.”	Implies access/provision of aid
	2.5 Protection of Objects (Implied via Stewardship)	Christian stewardship implies safeguarding creation/places without naming IHL	“Do not destroy what God has made.”	Implies care for protected objects

3. Explicit IHL-relevant appeal non-religious framing	3.1 Protection of civilians	A religious leader appeals for civilian protection without religious language	“Our community must not harm unarmed people. It brings disorder to society.”	Speaker must be religious leader; language not religious
	3.2 Restraint in hostilities	A religious leader discourages revenge or encourages moderation without invoking faith	“Retaliation will only cause more suffering. Stop the cycle.”	No religious justification
	3.3 Humane treatment	A religious actor calls for humane treatment without linking to doctrine	“Treat detainees with care. They are still human beings.”	No mention of Christ, scripture, or theology
	3.4 Humanitarian access	A religious actor urges allowing aid for practical, social, or communal reasons	Let the medical teams enter. People will die without supplies.”	Must be framed in social, practical, or communal terms
	3.5 Protection of objects	A religious actor calls for safeguarding places or property without religious reasoning	Do not destroy the school. Children need it.”	Objective wording without theological claim

TABLE 1. Main Coding Frame – Meaning Dimension

Actor Code	Actor Type	Definition	Examples
D1	Local religious leader	Clergy with influence at community level	Parish priest, catechist, pastor, local elder
D2	Regional religious leader	Religious leaders overseeing multiple communities	Bishop, diocesan leader, provincial Christian council
D3	National religious leader	Religious figures with country-wide authority	Archbishop, national church spokesperson
D4	International religious leader	Religious authority beyond national borders	Pope, Vatican official, WCC leader
D5	Christian religious institution	Collective institutional actor	Bishops' Conference, Caritas, ACT Alliance
D6	Local non-religious actor	Local official or community leader referring to religious messaging	Village chief, civil society leader
D7	National/government actor	Government ministry or national institution referencing religious appeals	Ministry of Information, national military spokesperson

D8	International NGO/UN actor	Humanitarian or global actor reporting on religious discourse	UNHCR, ICRC report, CSIS, Amnesty
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TABLE 2. Actor Dimension

Actor Combination	Religious Framing
Religious_framing: FALSE	Count: 6
D2 + D5 + D6	FALSE
D2 + D5 + D6	FALSE
D5 + D6	FALSE
D5 + D6	FALSE
D5 + D6	FALSE
D5 + D6	FALSE
Religious_framing: TRUE	Count: 6
D3 + D8 (International Christian NGO)	TRUE
D2 + D5	TRUE
D2 + D5	TRUE
D5	TRUE
D2 + D5	TRUE
D5	TRUE

TABLE 3. Religious Framing in IHL Appeals by Actor Composition in Colombia

IHL Norms in Christian Scriptures

Christian Scriptures contain a wide array of concepts and stories that could be used to bolster support for international humanitarian law. One such concept is the Imago Dei, or “Image of God,” derived from the creation story in the first chapter of Genesis. After creating all else, God declares he will create human beings “according to our likeness” — the likeness of God (Gen. 1:26). The following verse states in the form of a tripartite poem, “So God created humans in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” Entire books have been written on what it means to be created in the Imago Dei, most all agreeing that it confers infinite dignity onto the human being. While generally also connected to ideas of being created with intelligence, creativity, and other such traits, it is the dignity of being an “image-bearer” of God that is directly relevant to human rights and humanitarian law. For a Christian to harm another human being is to harm someone God himself formed according to his own likeness. The verse is frequently cited in biblical feminism, and while some translations use purely masculine pronouns in the first two lines, the text still undeniably asserts that both “male and female” are created in the image of God. Recent literature has also connected Imago Dei with the human rights concerns in the cases of stateless and trafficked women, the rights of children, and ecological preservation and sustainability (Hikes, 2023; Lala, 2025; Yoon, 2022).

This same identification of the divine with humanity can be seen in the life and teaching of Jesus. The parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25:31-46 most poignantly illustrates this concept. It foreshadows a great judgment of all nations at the end of time, with God separating those bound for Heaven to his right and Hell to his left, “as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats” (25:32). To those on his right he says, “Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world, for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me” (25:34-36). They react in surprise, asking when they ever found God in such circumstances and provided food or clothing or care. He responds, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me” (25:40). In the same way, God accuses those on his left of leaving him hungry and unclothed, sick and in prison without visit. As they protest they never did such a thing to God himself, he commands them, “depart from me,” for “just as you did

not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me” (25:42,45). This passage has far-reaching implications for humanitarianism, suggesting that whenever we leave a fellow human being suffering without aid, it is as if we are abandoning God himself in that situation. Injustices done to each other are injustices done to God — but, charity extended to one another is charity extended to God.

In his ministry as recorded in the New Testament, Jesus further extended this necessity of goodwill to specifically include one’s enemies — even those actively inflicting harm — teaching to “love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matt. 5:44). The Gospel of Matthew records Jesus teaching, “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you: Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also, and if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, give your coat as well” (Matt. 5:38-40). The Gospels depict Jesus living out this teaching at his own arrest and crucifixion, with the Gospel of John recounting the tale of Jesus’ disciple Peter drawing a sword and striking off the ear of one of the men who came to arrest Jesus. Jesus commands him to “Put your sword back into its sheath” (18:11). A slightly different version of the account in the Gospel of Luke shows Jesus exclaiming, “No more of this!” and healing the ear of the man Peter struck. In the excruciating scenes of torture and crucifixion that follow, Jesus does not resist his captors but exemplifies his teaching, praying, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34).

While there is a long tradition of just war theory in Christian history, verses such as these are also used in defense of Christian pacifism. If a Christian is to be like Christ, it is difficult to justify attacking one’s enemy when scriptures show Jesus healing the very men who came to kill him. For this project, we can consider whether appeals to uphold international humanitarian law may be strengthened in Christian communities by referencing stories such as these.

However, it must be noted that Christian scriptures and their resultant theology can also be used against international humanitarian law and could also be invoked to inflame armed conflicts and rally support for a particular side. Old Testament scriptures are mixed in their utility for IHL appeals. One on hand, there are over a hundred passages insisting on justice for vulnerable groups of widows, orphans, and foreigners. On the other, there are graphic depictions of violence, and imagery of God fighting with Israel against its enemies. An

emblematic verse of the duality of justice and violence in the Old Testament is Exodus 22:22-24, “You shall not abuse any widow or orphan. If you do abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry; my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children orphans.” The call for justice for the vulnerable is accompanied by a grave premonition of violence should Israel disobey. The threat of violence from divine wrath is directed at both Israel for disobedience and, at other times, the nations surrounding Israel on Israel’s behalf. In the New Testament, threats against the perceived enemies of God or his people are far more spiritualized, and they rest more in the dichotomy of the saved people of God promised eternal life and the wicked or unrepentant resigned to destruction in some sort of afterlife judgment. While the New Testament does not call for retribution against the “wicked,” the distinct dichotomy between saved and unsaved, believer and unbeliever, could still be used against IHL. The created categories “others” non-Christian populations and could be used in conflict to brand enemies of a given Christian population as the wicked or unrepentant who are divinely pledged to destruction.