

LEGITIMISING VIOLENCE OR EMBRACING TOLERANCE: PENTECOSTAL TEACHINGS AND PERSPECTIVES OF PEACE IN PLATEAU STATE ETHNO-RELIGIOUS CONFLICTS

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ABSTRACT

Nigeria has an established Pentecostal landscape; arguably the most dynamic in Africa, often with a significant missionary impulse and theological influence on other African Christians (Hackett 1998; Ukah 2005). Plateau State is one of its typical examples as Pentecostal presence has heavily influenced mainline churches and is presently taking new forms. In the past decade, the Pentecostal landscape in Plateau has come under threat through frequent attacks on members by religious extremists. Amidst this challenge is the religious rhetoric of tolerance by Pentecostals and other denominations alike, drawing inferences from Jesus' life example and scriptures such as Luke 6:29, and cautioning that those who live by the sword will die by the sword (Mathew 26: 52 & 53). Similarly, Revelation 2: 10 & Acts 13: 50 remind the church that believers have to endure persecution. Juxtaposing these texts and verses, suggest the legitimisation of suffering and the acceptance of violence as part of the Christian faith. Some of the questions that guided this inquiry include: Can tolerance be used as an alternative means to promoting and building peaceful coexistence in a conflict environment? How has the Pentecostal approach to tolerance impacted the approach to conflict in Plateau State? How can such an approach be utilised as a resource for conflict resolution? These and other questions were answered through interaction with Pentecostal leaders in front-line churches and some followers, bearing in mind Dali Lama's view that "If religious symbols and values can be (and are) manipulated for great effects as weapons of war, then they can-and-must-be used likewise for peace and reconciliation."

KEYWORDS: Legitimising Violence, Religious Teachings, Tolerance, Perspectives of Peace and Ethno-religious Conflicts

INTRODUCTION

This paper examines how members of Pentecostal churches in Jos perceive, understand and respond to the protracted crisis in Jos which lasted for over a decade. It

explores in particular ways in which Pentecostal religiosity symbolically configures and enacts tolerance and how the practice of tolerance contrasts with that of the wider society. The paper analyses the role played by Pentecostal churches, particularly those on the frontline of the conflicts in Jos, Plateau State, from 2001 to 2012. It explains how the churches have handled the conflict situations amid attacks on their worship places and members alike. Particularly, the paper analyses the narratives of its members about the conflicts as presented in sermons from the pulpit. It further shows how religion is a key factor in Nigerian polity and how it has played an important role in motivating people for war and peace.

To provide a better understanding of this paper and the issue at hand, the study focuses on Jos North Local Government Area of Plateau State. This is because the area is key to the understanding of conflicts in the State as it has been at the centre of the crisis in Jos since 2001. Starting from the 2001 conflicts in the State, Jos North has witnessed more uprisings in the conflicts than any other part of Jos. The recurrent conflicts in this area have led to segregated settlement patterns that are based on ethnicity and religion. Consequently, there are areas in Jos North Local Government referred to as “Go Areas” and “No Go Areas” for adherents of Christianity and Islam. Such areas include Angwan Rogo, Ali-Kazaure, Angwan Rukuba, Dilimi, Fillin Ball, Gada Biyu, and Rikkos amongst others. Such segregated settlement patterns have hitherto affected economic, religious and political activities in these areas and have come to threaten all forms of freedom and rights as enshrined in the 1999 Nigerian constitution Chapter IV Section 37-43. These restrictions have constituted a lot of challenges to the church, particularly the three Pentecostal churches discussed in this research.

Similarly, there is a growing presence of Pentecostal churches in these areas, due to the large presence of youths on the University of Jos campus and the School of Forestry along the Bauchi road of Jos North Local Government Area. Another interesting thing about the Jos North area is that it harbours most of the conflict flash points such as Bauchi Road, Congo Rusia Junction, Angwan Rimi, Angwan Rogo, Yan Shanu-Rikkos and filling Ball. However, amazingly, along these areas which form part of the ‘no-go areas,’ there is the visible presence of the headquarters of the two major Pentecostal churches namely the Oasis of Love Church and the Shekina Glory Assembly along the Bauchi Road axis. How have these churches been able to survive despite lingering crises? Why have they not relocated to other safe areas in Jos? What has been their approach to these conflicts? And to what extent have these churches promoted peace in Jos North, hence their continued existence is what this paper seeks to address.

To give context to this study, the statement by one of the guest speakers at a church occasion during the crises said “enjoin Christians never to contravene God’s injunction on peace even in the event of a quarrel between them and others, as God will always punish those who attack their neighbour or any other person.” Similarly, Mr John Tsok, who was the State Chairman of NUJ Plateau State, in an interview with Inter-gender on

September 14, 2005, advised for peace to reign when he observed that “we must promote a greater sense of reasoning by adherents of both religions and a disposition to respect and tolerate each other” (Iltavyar 10). To further buttress the statements above, Collins (21), recounts his experience in Nigeria, while speaking at the Old Mission Church Wusasa Zaria observes that “apart from Ishaya and all his relations and friends I was also delighted to see in the church quite a number of Muslims, Hindus, a Sikh, as well as Christians of most denominations.” Also, commenting on the post-World War II Northern Nigeria, Collins further stated that about 47% of the Old Northern Region was inhabited by the Muslim Fulani-Hausa and Kanuri combination. The remaining 53% of the other tribal areas had different forms of nature worship predominated, he explained that “on the whole, there was marked religious tolerance between the Christians, the Muslims and what is called the ‘pagans. There is even tolerance between the different sects of the different religions, a very rare finding anywhere in the world” (Collins 88). Though Pentecostalism has come to shape the way by which Christians interpret the scriptures, it has come to be the dominant form of Christianity in the postmodern world, and responses to violence and violent actions receives different approach. The generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate has become more subject to religious interpretation, especially for churches in the frontline in Jos, Plateau State.

METHODOLOGY

The paper is based on three main sources of data namely: Key informant interviews with Church leaders in the Pentecostal churches whose headquarters are located in Jos North Local Government Area and those considered to be located and operating in a conflict frontline and volatile environment. Similarly, random selections of members of these churches up to a sample of five each were interviewed under conditions of anonymity. A total of 15 church members from 3 churches were selected to discuss their views on the perspectives on religious teachings during the conflicts. The paper was able to identify the ‘Oasis of Love Church’ located right at the entrance of Filling Sokuwa, the ‘Shekinah Glory Church’ located on the hills along the Bauchi Road and the Assemblies of God Church located along Kwararafa. These three churches operating along the Bauchi Road axis have been used as prototypes for the understanding of violence, tolerance and the gospel for the promotion of peace in Jos North Local Government that can apply to the entire State and Nigeria at large.

Through an in-depth face-to-face interview with the leaders of these Pentecostal churches, insights into the various approaches to peace were gained. Interacting with the church members was also a way of triangulating to verify widely held beliefs and teachings about tolerance and its impact on peaceful coexistence. This provided a broader picture of the extent to which the teaching and opinions of members about tolerance and followership impacts everyday religious practice irrespective of the location. Other

sources include testimonies in publications by Inter Gender and other Non-Governmental Organisations that are of relevance to this study. In the process of gathering and analysing the data, it became clear that the youths are easily mobilised into gangsters, and militia and get involved in violent attacks. This paper strongly argues that the youths and other church members can also through the use of religious sermons be mobilised for the promotion of peace and tolerance within the context of Pentecostal teachings in Jos North Local Government, Plateau State and Nigeria at large instead of reacting negatively by attacking at every provocation.

REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

Since 7th September 2001, the religious dimension of conflict has been the focus of increasing attention (Gwamna & Dayil 2011). Pentecostal Churches in Jos operate in one of the most challenging environments in the country since crises erupted in 2001. The state has since then witnessed aggressive evangelism and the establishment of churches in almost every neighbourhood of the state. The incessant attacks on Christian minorities which started as ethnic hatred have transformed to not only the burning of worship places but the bombing of worship centres during worship sessions. While it is true that most of the perpetrators of these acts are youths of other faiths, the church also appears to have been playing a role in this, either by encouraging tolerance or vengeance. The democratic environment in Plateau State has no doubt contributed to this violence. Unprovoked attacks on individuals, communities and worship places and the struggle for political relevance by other ethnic groups have come to challenge the basic gospel of tolerance in the State. Plateau State has over the years become the target of religious extremists; the Islamic fundamentalist on the one hand and Pentecostal and charismatic Christians on the other hand. This has resulted in constant agitation as the later often accuses the former of seeking to bring the entire state under Sharia system of administration shadowed by a quest for political power and the control of resources while the later was busy preaching tolerance. Since the state is divided into majorly Christian and Muslim adherents, violent conflicts easily mobilise youths on either side of the divide, and the church has always come face to face with the hard decision of how to react in such situations. Pentecostal leaders just as leaders of other churches have a significant role to play in finding solutions to this monster that has come to threaten their faith.

How the church has been able to interpret the issue of tolerance in relation to persecution puts in perspective what is considered the appropriate reaction to the sort experience in the conflicts in Jos. In the literature on the conflict in Jos (Gwamna 2023), Christians have been urged to “embrace major values of tolerance. These include acceptance, love, friendship, respect, consideration, understanding, patience, and brotherhood; the promotion of justice and dignity of persons, which are the major hallmarks of major world religions. Similarly, Agang (33) noted that “religiosity in a people can immensely contribute to the economic development of their society,

particularly, when religion is repositioned and allowed to play its positive role of guaranteeing peace, love, justice, hard work, honesty, trust, confidence, hope, courage” and tolerance. On the contrary, religious intolerance can lead to the destruction of life and property, the breaking of long-lasting relationships, animosity, and hatred and can even hinder the growth and development of an economy.

In “*the Clash of Civilizations*, Huntington (1993) has identified the West in religious-cultural terms, as Christian with a dominant democratic culture emphasizing tolerance, moderation and consensus. That the persistence of conflict in Northern Ireland among the ‘White’ Protestant and Catholic Christians undermines this simplistic argument and demands a subtler understanding of the role of religion and fundamentalism in contemporary conflict. Modernization theory – which is echoed among some theorists of globalization – had predicted the declining importance of religion as the world became industrialized and increasingly interconnected. This is echoed by those who argue that the Northern Ireland conflict is ‘ethno-national’ and dismisses the role of religion. On the other hand, other writers such as Gwamna (2010) and Sha (2005), have claimed that in multi-religious and multi-ethnic societies, conflicts which are economic, political and social could easily mobilise religious and ethnic sentiments. Similarly, evidence from Northern Ireland of the complex and subtle ways in which religion impacts the conflict there is another case of relevance, giving the curious mind a broader perspective on understanding conflicts with religious dimensions.

In any study of this nature, it is important to first understand the complexity of religion which includes a willingness to recognize the adaptability of fundamentalisms to particular contexts. Second, engaging with fundamentalists and taking their grievances seriously opens up possibilities for conflict transformation. Third, governments and religious actors within civil society can play complementary roles in constructing alternative (religious) ideologies and structures as part of a process of transformation. In a world in which the impact of religion is persistent, engaging with the religious dimension is a vital part of a broader-based strategy for dealing with conflict. The churches in Nigeria, Plateau State and Jos North Local Government area can serve as the major sources of healing due to the level of patience and tolerance exhibited by churches in the face of these attacks. This level of tolerance has been related to the understanding of the gospel, its interpretation and the long-term practice and teaching of the Gospel of tolerance. The narratives coming out of the interviews reflected below have much to say on the level of tolerance and the churches’ ability to love in times of trouble. The interviews below are quite revealing as the acceptance of violence is accepted as sign of the end times- thus legitimising its occurrence and as such its usage.

Similarly, the doctrine of turning the other cheek and forgiving and forgetting has persisted in Christendom, to the extent that the offenders are normally forgiven and tolerated even to the hurting and pains of the abused. This can be seen in the way families handle those who are weak amongst them, how people relate in the work or market places

and the church's approach to the incessant killings and violent attacks in Jos. This approach by the churches to protect its followers does not negate the widely held beliefs that protection is from God and also to protect and equally to do that in a manner that does not endanger the people. Though some scholars such as Ityavia, Tyohia and Gundueds (81) observe that Bulus Dabit is of the view that 'conflict has left trails of pains and distrust, it became difficult to penetrate the war zones in Jos to draw people out for a discussion on the way out. He further emphasised that "it was necessary to address the issue of justice at both inter-personal and inter-group (inter-communal) levels in the society" (83) So, he argued that the idea of bringing Christian and Muslim religious leaders to speak on peace is praiseworthy. This he says helps to bridge the communication gap between the two religions, thereby engendering understanding, religious tolerance and peace in society. Similarly, Gwamna (44) argue that 'the use of ethnicity, religion, and politics should rather unite us as Nigerians to promote peace, harmonious peaceful coexistence and unity.' Gwamna (171) further observes that "religion is a major factor of Nigeria- it is very emotive, sensitive and is a public lifestyle of most Nigerians, even though some of the adherents of Christianity and Islam are not educated enough on religious interactions among people of other faiths. This has resulted in territorial behaviour among religions in that religious discussions easily create critical and sometimes controversial reactions and responses.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION: VIEWS, PERSPECTIVES AND RESPONSE TO THE CONFLICT IN JOS

The data presented below are from interviews with religious leaders and heads of churches in frontline churches in Jos and members of the churches selected through purposive sampling. The perspectives from the interviews conducted with clergymen in selected frontline churches in Jos reveal a common verse they hold tight and use as a guide in their teachings and approach as it relates to violence: "Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give [no] place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, says the Lord." (Romans 12:19). They equally made reference to scenes where Jesus was arrested and His response to the reaction of one of the disciples which were quite instructive:

And, behold, one of them which were with Jesus stretched out his hand, and drew his sword, and struck a servant of the high priest's, and smote off his ear. Then said Jesus unto him, 'put up again thy sword into his place: for all, they that take the sword shall perish with the sword. Thinkest thou that I cannot now pray to my Father, and he shall presently give me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then shall the scriptures be fulfilled, that thus it must be?' (Matthew 26:51-54).

This perception of vengeance quoting from the bible shows that Christians are expected to remain calm even in the face of unprovoked attacks and to leave everything in the hands

of a divine being who is just and can repay each according to his/her deeds. This theology points to a widely held belief that persecution of Christians is a prophecy on end times [Matthew 24:9- 'then shall they deliver you up to be afflicted, and shall kill you: and ye shall be hated of all nations for my name's sake']'.

Similarly, Clergymen on conflicts in Jos, responded that: "Good relationship exists between Christians and their Muslim neighbours in Bauchi Road in the past. That, there have never been attacks rather the Muslims play an active role in watching over the church. They normally give me a call to alert the church whenever there is perceived. They cited instances where programmes and outreach to students and the community were organised as part of the 'Church Community Efforts. According to one of the interviewees;

We organise programmes once every quarter. We make sure we reach out to the Muslims and assist them, we also patronise their businesses; my church members wash their cars from (sic) them and you can see the church is under construction, we buy our cement from them.

Similarly, another interviewee noted that:

In the 2008 November postelection crisis, the students who are our members and live in Angwan Sokuwa and some of the Muslim youths came together to protect the Church from being burnt by others who came from other areas around...they also have human feelings, because they say when the church is set on fire, we both loose.

The responses above reveal that the church enjoys good neighbourliness from the residents in areas surrounding it, but it may not necessarily be immune to attacks from surrounding communities. This they argue will require constant vigilance and prayer, although other responses seem to support a mix of prayer and defence. An interview with one of the respondents presented below is revealing of such a perspective:

...for the advocates of PRAYER ONLY, our women were slaughtered while at a night prayer meeting and only God knows the kind of harsh questions that have been thrown at HIM; for instance, "where was He when they killed these women". Perhaps they would be alive today if they had gone to Church with some young men keeping vigil. You may call us unbelievers, but when you go to bed every night not sure of who will fall victim, no one will need to encourage you to buy a gun or at least stand in the gap to pray and watch over the family. We must go beyond this talk of prayer and prayer. And don't get me wrong, there is no way we can stop praying, but sincerely there is a time to sell your piece of land to buy a sword. Wallahi (I swear) you will only kill or destroy my family and me after I have exhausted the energy and weapons at my disposal (which include Prayer).

The response above shows that protecting oneself and arming ourselves with prayer is needed in terms of crises. That even though God has the capacity to deliver supernaturally, without the use of violence, the congregation should be encouraged to

defend themselves from harm. Though 2Corinthians 10:4: Admonishes us that “For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for the pulling down of strongholds, we should use God’s mighty weapons, not worldly weapons, to knock down human reasoning and to destroy false arguments” because the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, and so we cannot use carnal means to handle the crisis. This point was emphasised in an interview with one of the clergies who asserts that:

In the book of Ephesians, we were told that we wrestle not with flesh and blood (Human Beings). If we are not wrestling against flesh and blood, then we do not need physical weapons, but we can only engage the spiritual weapon and put our trust in God as he will always defend us, our God is there no matter the casualty rate recorded in past crisis...if God cannot protect us, no knife will, no gun will, no one will.

Majority of the church members affirm the point raised above. To them, we are in the end times and the crisis is spiritual, because whatever manifestation of evil is spiritual, no matter what people say about the causes of the crisis being economic, political, or ethnic, just like corruption which is a manifestation of evil, the issue is purely a spiritual issue and as such should be handled spiritually. Furthermore, they believe we are all humans and the difference between us should be seen in our character and behaviour. The character and heart of Christ are pure and our hearts should be. Christians should not allow themselves to be pushed to extreme harm but should allow love to conquer.

A greater proportion of the respondents affirm that even though the crises have a deep impact on interactions, they still keep close contact with friends from other religions. One of the respondents recollects his experience with friends in Angwan Rogo thus:

...my friend lives behind the Motor Park. In fact, we are best of friends and he visits me all the time even as a Pastor. And I could recall when I was in Adamawa, he visits. Recently he gave me a call one early Sunday morning, I could not pick up because of Bible studies, so he decided to send me a text that his mother wants to see me and that she insisted they have to call me. After church by noon, he called again and asked me to come their mum desperately wants to see me. So, I took a bike and went to their house, just to meet their mum who has been sick and bedridden for two weeks. She cannot move or eat well. She asked if I could pray for her as they were already losing hope. I agreed and led them through the scriptures and I prayed for her and God healed her. The kids watched as I pray and said Amen as I ministered and prayed for her and to God be the Glory she was healed and even asked them to allow her walk me to the door.

Similar experiences abound even through the crisis period. In markets, economic ties were reinvented across ethnic, religious and settlement lines. Friends relied on each other for information and support through the trying times. In situations of normalcy, they were quick to visit and see each other physically. With the impact of the conflicts leading to the decentralisation of frontline churches, such experiences can serve as openings to

glean unto for the return of normalcy and to encourage the doctrine of tolerance. Also, if the security of this country is working properly, the protection of life, it can take advantage of such existing interpersonal ties and linkages to open up windows of communication that would promote lasting peace.

This equally means that religious institutions and teachers should be very careful when reacting to these issues and not presenting religion as an instrument of violence, but to be careful not to act on the feelings and sentiments of the people severing existing ties and bonds of friendship. Even though the conflict involves the burning of places of worship and killings, shaking the very purpose of the existence and advancement of Christianity, love and tolerance should never cease from the pulpit, no matter the situation. To support this position put forward above, one of the respondents said: “Let us note that the weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine powers to demolish strongholds (2 Corinthians 10:4). With God on our side, we will be victorious but that victory can only come when we obey Him and do what He wants.”

Furthermore, though most of the respondents stated that they do not believe in violence, the interviews reveal very interestingly the strong connection between retaliation and conflicts. It is in this light that Bakers’ (47-48) position becomes succinct as he notes that “Truly to understand the message of biblical texts, one must submit to the spirit who breathed the scriptures and indwells the reading process. A reading strategy that coheres with and is informed by Pentecostal spirituality is a treasure that Pentecostal scholars can offer the church Baker (47)”. As it is written, righteousness exalts a nation and equally, Love can be used in subverting hatred.

CONCLUSION

The impact of the conflicts has resulted in exclusive settlement patterns along religious lines. For instance, some frontline churches within the Jos North community have relocated to spaces they consider safe. Because of this, many of their member most of them youths have begun to generate divergent views on how the church should respond to the conflict. Though the general views from findings in this study shows that the methods of self-defence should be in line with biblical injunctions which are aimed at showing love to those who persecute rather than aim to kill people in defence. Responses also reveal that many hold onto the proverbial teachings that say; do unto others what you want them to do to you: since they do not want to be killed, some preventive measures should be taken. To these categories of persons, God will equally guide and direct Christians on how to go about defence. Further, the difference between believers and the attackers should not and is not on whether or not Christians should defend themselves, but on how to go about the defence. It involves the steps to be taken to put an end to the conflicts and to keep the light of God shining so that even the hardest of hearts will see and come to repentance.

Pentecostalism is at the centre stage of transforming conflicts by building love and tolerance as seen in the responses of Clergymen above. The continued significance of religion in conflict transformation is evident throughout the findings of this study. Accepting and showing love and tolerance in Jos is not legitimizing violence by allowing perpetrators to keep harming, but exemplifying the fellowship with Christ who loved even when he was hated. It shows that Christians understand Christ's love and why he chose to live and die on the cross for the worst sinners. Religion and a strong conviction in God's loving ability enables people to show love despite the challenges faced, for only through such great love can peace be attained. Furthermore, peace can be achieved not only through tolerance but by encouraging inter-religious cooperation and constant dialogue as presented in some cases above, even when the society is experiencing relative peace.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Reprisal attacks which have commonly been used as a means of self-defence are not advisable and are condemnable even by law enforcement agencies because it always leads to the escalation/endless cycle of violence. The following recommendations are made from the foregoing discussion.

1. The Church as a body of Christ should stop the issues of denominationalism and fashion out a collective/common strategy for Christian response to ethnic/religious conflicts in the country.
2. This should be done alongside massive advocacy campaigns through the media.
3. Sensitisation of Christians and Muslims on how to go about religious teachings in conflict times is central to achieving peace.
4. Christians/Muslims in positions of authority should be bold and courageous to take a stand against evil practices aimed at bridging peace, working in synergy with security agencies to achieve results.
5. Build back and re-settle churches and worship centres that have been displaced or relocated due to the conflict to build trust.

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