

TURNING THE OTHER CHEEK IN A VIOLENT AGE: A PHILOSOPHICAL, SOCIOLOGICAL, AND BIBLICAL CRITIQUE OF RETALIATORY CULTURE IN NIGERIAN SOCIO-POLITICAL CONFLICTS

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Abstract

This paper examines the culture of retaliation in Nigeria through an interdisciplinary lens that incorporates philosophical ethics, sociological analysis, and biblical teachings, with a particular focus on the New Testament ethics of non-retaliation. Drawing on moral theories from classical thinkers like Socrates and Kant, alongside African communitarian ethics such as Ubuntu, the study critiques Nigeria's normalization of vengeance in response to systemic violence, political failure, socio-political and ethno-religious grievances. Sociologically, it explores how patterns of retaliation are intensified by institutional breakdown, social identity formation, and the intergenerational transmission of conflict values. Theologically, the paper engages Jesus' teaching in Matthew 5:38–48 and Paul's exhortation in Romans 12:17–21 as countercultural responses to cycles of violence. Using comparative analysis and contextual case studies, including the Boko Haram insurgency, the Niger Delta crisis, and ethno-religious violence in Plateau and Kaduna, the paper argues that New Testament ethics, when interpreted alongside African moral thought and supported by robust institutions, can provide a transformative framework for peacebuilding. It concludes that a viable path to sustainable peace in Nigeria lies not just in theological affirmations but in the integration of ethical conviction, cultural reorientation, and structural reform.

Key words: Retaliation, Non-violence, Peacebuilding, Philosophy, Sociology, Nigeria.

Introduction

Violence has become an entrenched feature of Nigeria's socio-political landscape. From inter-ethnic clashes and herder-farmer crises to political assassinations and religious insurgencies, cycles of retaliation have continually undermined efforts toward national cohesion and sustainable peace. The tendency toward vengeance, whether at the personal, communal, or national level, has been amplified by cultural norms, failed justice systems, and escalating mistrust among Nigeria's diverse populations. These retaliatory patterns are not just reactive behaviours but are often based on socially accepted ideologies of justice and honour, especially in contexts where legal redress is either absent or ineffective (Igbafen, 2014). In the face of this socio-political instability, a moral and philosophical interrogation of Nigeria's retaliatory culture becomes an urgent necessity.

Philosophy and sociology provide critical frameworks for understanding and challenging these patterns. Classical philosophical ethics, such as the just war theory and Kantian deontology, offer perspectives on when and whether retaliation is morally justified (Fotion, 2007). Meanwhile, African ethical traditions, particularly the communitarian ethos of Ubuntu, prioritize reconciliation, forgiveness, and the restoration of social harmony over revenge (Gyekye, 1997). Sociologically, conflict theories have shown how systemic inequalities, identity politics, and historical grievances fuel cycles of violence, especially when communities perceive retaliation as a form of justice (Otitte & Albert, 2004). These lenses help to explain why even religious communities, who profess values of peace, often mirror the larger society's penchant for revenge when faced with threats to group survival or dignity.

In stark contrast to the retaliatory norm, the Bible presents a radical ethic of non-retaliation and love for enemy, especially as seen in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:38–48) and Paul's admonitions in Romans 12:17–21. These teachings, which urge believers to “overcome evil with good” and “turn the other cheek,” stand as both a moral vision and a socio-religious challenge to the Nigerian context. However, the practicality of applying these teachings in a country riddled with violence and insecurity raises important questions. Can the Christian ethic of non-retaliation serve as a viable strategy for peacebuilding in contemporary Nigeria? Or is it an unrealistic ideal in a society where injustice thrives and impunity reigns? This paper explores these questions by engaging philosophical reasoning, sociological analysis, and Biblical teachings to critique Nigeria's retaliatory culture and to consider alternative pathways toward lasting peace.

Socio-Political Conflicts in Nigeria: Patterns, Causes, and Case Studies

Conflict, in its simplest form, refers to a situation in which two or more parties pursue incompatible goals or interests, often leading to tension, hostility, or outright violence. It arises when expectations, values, or access to resources are contested, especially in environments where mechanisms for peaceful negotiation are weak or absent (Burton, 1990). Building on this, Peter, Olusakin, and Essien (2025) describe conflict as a state of opposition between two or more individuals or groups, emphasizing the relational and interactive nature of such struggles. Taken together, these perspectives bring to light the fact that conflict is both systemic and situational, often fueled by a mix of structural inequalities and immediate personal or group antagonisms. In the Nigerian context, socio-political conflict has become a defining feature of national life, frequently disrupting governance, economic progress, and social cohesion. These conflicts are not simply the product of individual grievances but are ingrained in historical, political, and socio-economic frameworks, including colonial legacies, ethnic nationalism, political exclusion, and widespread economic disparity.

A significant example of socio-political conflict in Nigeria is the protracted Niger Delta crisis. The region, rich in oil and gas, has suffered decades of environmental degradation, underdevelopment, and marginalization despite being the source of much of Nigeria's wealth (Ekanem, et al., 2025; Olusakin, 2019). As Okonta and Douglas (2003) observe, the failure of the state and multinational oil corporations to respond to the grievances of local communities gave rise to militant groups such as the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), which began attacking oil installations, kidnapping expatriates, and demanding resource control. Though a 2009 amnesty programme temporarily reduced hostilities, underlying issues such as poverty, corruption, and uneven resource distribution remain unresolved.

Another notable case is the Boko Haram insurgency in the Northeast, which began around 2009 as a religious and ideological uprising but quickly morphed into a violent campaign against the Nigerian state. According to Onuoha (2014), the group exploited weak state presence, widespread youth unemployment, and political grievances to recruit followers. Boko Haram's activities have led to the deaths of over 30,000 people and the displacement of more than two million, especially in Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa states (UNHCR, 2023). The conflict has not only strained Nigeria's security forces but also exposed deep fractures in governance, social welfare, and national unity.

Furthermore, ethno-religious violence in regions like Plateau and Kaduna states reveals how identity politics fuel recurrent conflict. These areas, often marked by delicate intergroup relations between Christians and Muslims, have witnessed repeated outbreaks of violence over issues such as land ownership, political representation, and religious dominance. Egwu (2001) contends that the politicization of ethnicity and religion in Nigeria has made many local disputes appear existential, thereby increasing their intensity and longevity. In line with this perspective, Essien and Edem (2024a) observe that political actors frequently exploit ethno-religious tensions and orchestrate violence as strategic tools to advance their political agendas, thereby deepening divisions and prolonging conflict in the country.

However, government responses to conflict have often been reactive, with security crackdowns that address symptoms without tackling root causes such as marginalization, exclusion, weak rule of law and instigation of conflicts by political actors. In all of these instances, a common thread runs through the narratives, which is a failure of institutions to mediate conflict fairly and efficiently, leaving individuals and communities with few options other than violence. The erosion of trust in law enforcement, the judiciary, and elected officials has deepened feelings of alienation, especially among young people. As Ibrahim and Igbuzor (2002) argue, sustainable peace in Nigeria will require addressing both the structural and perceptual causes of conflict, ensuring justice, equity, and inclusion in the national framework.

Philosophical Foundations of Retaliation and Non-Retaliation

Philosophical reflections on retaliation and non-retaliation span centuries of moral inquiry, beginning with the classical traditions of ancient Greece. In Plato's *Crito*, Socrates argues that returning injustice with injustice damages the soul and undermines the fabric of a just society (Plato, trans. 1997). For Socrates, justice is not transactional; it is a virtue to be pursued irrespective of personal injury. Similarly, Aristotle, while less pacifist in tone, advocates for measured responses based on rational deliberation and the virtue of moderation. For these thinkers, retaliation, especially when driven by anger or vengeance, is antithetical to the cultivation of moral character. Their teachings lay the groundwork for later ethical theories that grapple with whether and how one ought to respond to harm.

In the modern era, Immanuel Kant's deontological ethics further complicates the debate by grounding moral duty in universal rational principles. According to Kant, moral action must be guided by the categorical imperative: one should act only according to maxims that can be willed as universal laws (Ukpong, Peter & Oton, 2024). Retaliation, especially when based on emotional or situational factors, cannot meet this standard, as it privileges subjective retribution over rational justice. Kant's emphasis on human dignity also calls into question any act of vengeance that reduces the other to an object of punishment. On the other hand, utilitarian thinkers such as John Stuart Mill have attempted to justify certain forms of punitive retaliation if they serve the greater good by

detering future harm. However, even in utilitarian frameworks, indiscriminate vengeance is seen as morally problematic, especially when it escalates conflict rather than resolving it.

The African philosophical tradition adds another dimension to the conversation. Central to this is the principle of Ubuntu, which expresses a deeply relational view of personhood: "I am because we are." In this moral vision, retaliation is considered disruptive to communal harmony and the shared humanity of all members of society (Metz, 2007). African ethicists such as Kwasi Wiredu and Kwame Gyekye stress the value of reconciliation, dialogue, and forgiveness as essential to restoring balance after wrongdoing. In many traditional African societies, the goal of justice is not merely to punish the offender, but to restore the social fabric through rituals of atonement and communal reintegration (Gyekye, 1997). This relational understanding of justice resonates with contemporary efforts to find alternatives to retributive justice in conflict-prone societies like Nigeria.

Despite their differences, these philosophical traditions converge on the idea that retaliation (when left unchecked) undermines both individual moral integrity and the health of the community. While there may be contexts where resistance or defensive action is justified, especially to protect the vulnerable, the deliberate infliction of harm as revenge is seldom endorsed as a virtue. As Nigeria continues to grapple with cycles of violence rooted in ethnic, religious, and political tensions, these philosophical insights invite a re-evaluation of cultural norms that celebrate revenge. Rather than glorifying retaliation as strength, a return to principles of moral restraint, restorative justice, and the pursuit of peace offers a more sustainable path forward.

Sociological Perspectives on Retaliatory Culture in Nigeria

Sociology offers valuable insights into the formation and persistence of retaliatory behaviour in society. At the core of sociological inquiry into violence is the recognition that individual actions are often shaped by structural conditions, cultural narratives, and collective experiences. From the perspective of conflict theory, retaliation can be understood as a reaction to perceived injustices, systemic oppression, or marginalization. Karl Marx's notion of class struggle as a driver of societal conflict can be extended to ethno-religious and political hostilities in Nigeria, where historically disadvantaged groups often resort to retaliatory violence as a means of asserting agency or redressing grievances (Oti & Albert, 2004). In such contexts, vengeance is framed not simply as personal retribution but as a form of collective resistance, particularly when state mechanisms of justice are weak or absent.

Functionalist theories, such as those advanced by Émile Durkheim, also contribute to understanding retaliatory norms by examining the role of social cohesion and normative regulation. In societies where traditional systems of justice have eroded and formal institutions lack legitimacy, retaliation can become a means of enforcing social norms or restoring communal balance (Durkheim, 1984). In many rural parts of Nigeria, particularly in the Middle Belt and the North-East, communities often turn to vigilantism or communal reprisals in the face of insecurity and government inaction (Alemika & Chukwuma, 2005). These responses are embedded in a larger social logic where failing to avenge an injury is perceived as weakness and dishonour, particularly in patriarchal and militarized cultures.

Symbolic interactionism, which focuses on meaning-making at the micro-level, helps explain how individuals internalize revenge as a legitimate social script. Retaliation is often valorized in cultural expressions, through proverbs, songs, and local narratives, which celebrate acts of vengeance as heroic or honourable. For instance, the saying “an eye for an eye” has transcended religious contexts to become a popular justification for retributive behaviour in everyday discourse. Within this symbolic framework, social identity is constructed in opposition to perceived enemies, and retaliatory actions serve to reinforce group loyalty and self-worth (Goffman, 1967). This has serious implications for intergroup relations in Nigeria, where identity-based divisions, ethnic, religious, or regional, are frequently exploited by political actors to sustain cycles of conflict.

Moreover, empirical sociological studies in Nigeria have demonstrated that retaliation is often cyclical and generational. Young people, particularly in conflict-prone areas, are socialized into a culture of vengeance, either through direct participation in violence or vicarious identification with past injustices. As Ibrahim and Omeiza (2014) note, many youth militias in northern Nigeria, the Niger Delta, and the South-East view retaliation as both a duty and a rite of passage. When violence becomes a normative pathway to recognition or justice, peacebuilding efforts must go beyond surface-level interventions and address the deeper social meanings attached to vengeance. This requires a multidimensional approach that combines justice reform, education, community engagement, and alternative narratives of strength based on reconciliation rather than revenge.

Biblical Teachings on Retaliation and Peace

Building on the sociological understanding of retaliation as a culturally integrated response to injustice, the Bible, particularly, the New Testament provides a radically different paradigm, one that seeks to transform not only behaviour but also the underlying values that justify violence. In stark contrast to the normalization of revenge in many societies, including Nigeria, Jesus' teachings in the Sermon on the Mount call for a revolutionary ethic of non-retaliation and love for enemies. In Matthew 5:38–39, Jesus challenges the *lex talionis* (“an eye for an eye”) by instructing his followers: “Do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also” (NIV). This response is not one of passive submission but an act of moral resistance, rejecting the spiral of violence by disarming the logic of retribution (Wright, 2004).

New Testament scholars have noted that Jesus' teaching is not about abandoning justice, but about redefining it in terms of reconciliation, mercy, and human dignity. Wink (1992) interprets the instruction to “turn the other cheek” as a strategy of active nonviolence, a deliberate refusal to mirror the oppressor's aggression while maintaining one's moral agency. Similarly, Wright (2010) argues that Jesus' ethic is anchored on the kingdom of God, where power is exercised not through coercion but through sacrificial love. This love is not sentimental but transformative; it invites the enemy into a new relationship that defies the expectation of violence. In a context like Nigeria, where social honour often demands violent retaliation, the New Testament ethic presents a direct confrontation to the cultural assumptions that equate revenge with strength.

Paul's epistles continue this ethic, especially in Romans 12:17–21, where believers are instructed not to repay evil for evil but to “leave room for God's wrath,” quoting Deuteronomy 32:35: “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” Paul's counsel to “overcome evil with good” presents a theology of moral victory through peace, echoing the life and death of Christ himself, who endured violence without retaliation (Philippians 2:5–11). This theological vision places the responsibility of peacemaking on the believer, not as an act of weakness, but as participation in the

redemptive work of God. In the Nigerian context, where faith communities are often drawn into political and ethnic conflicts, Paul's teachings demand a radical reevaluation of how Christians understand justice, vengeance, and social responsibility.

However, the application of these teachings raises critical questions in settings marked by insecurity and injustice. Can turning the other cheek be practiced in regions plagued by terrorism, state violence, and systemic corruption? Critics argue that New Testament non-retaliation, if misunderstood, may lead to passivity or neglect of social justice (Yoder, 1994). Yet, a holistic reading of the New Testament reveals a commitment not to passivity but to redemptive resistance, a way of confronting evil without reproducing its methods. This ethic is not meant to replace legal or social mechanisms for justice but to inform them with a spirit of mercy and a vision of reconciliation. For Nigeria, a country caught in cycles of violence and retaliation, the New Testament offers not only a critique of vengeance but also a moral framework for building a culture of peace rooted in forgiveness, active compassion, and trust in divine justice.

Practical Challenges and Theological Critiques

While the New Testament vision of non-retaliation presents a compelling moral ideal, its practical application in contemporary Nigeria, as noted above, faces significant challenges. The pervasive insecurity in many parts of the country, ranging from Boko Haram insurgency in the North-East to communal violence in the Middle Belt and secessionist unrest in the South-East, creates conditions in which the call to “turn the other cheek” appears unrealistic or even dangerous. Communities repeatedly subjected to violent attacks, in the absence of effective state protection or justice, often view retaliation as a necessary form of defense or deterrence. In such scenarios, the biblical ethic of non-retaliation may be dismissed as naïve or impractical. As Ibrahim and Tukur (2017) argue, the failure of legal and political institutions to uphold justice frequently leaves communities with little choice but to seek redress through counter-violence.

This tension between theological ideals and socio-political realities has prompted significant debate within Christian ethics. Some theologians argue for a contextual approach to New Testament teachings. These scholars suggest that absolute non-retaliation must be balanced with a concern for justice and the protection of the vulnerable (Stassen & Gushee, 2003). In this view, Jesus' command to love enemies should not be misconstrued as a call to suffer abuse in silence but an invitation to respond creatively and courageously to evil without perpetuating it. Theologians like Niebuhr (1932) have criticized pacifism as potentially complicit in the face of injustice, arguing instead for a “responsible use of power” to prevent greater harm. This perspective, while affirming the value of peace, acknowledges that moral action may, at times, involve coercive measures to restrain violence.

In Nigeria's religious landscape, where Christians are often minorities in volatile areas, theological questions of self-defense and communal protection are particularly acute. Pastors, church leaders, and Christian youth frequently struggle with reconciling their faith commitments with the need to safeguard their communities. Reports of Christian villages forming vigilante groups in Plateau, Kaduna, and Benue states signifies the moral dilemma: how can believers adhere to Christ's teachings while ensuring their survival? The tension is further complicated by the rhetoric of some Pentecostal movements that interpret spiritual warfare in militaristic terms, blurring the lines between moral resistance and violent retaliation (Marshall, 2009). This raises important questions about the theological education being offered and the frameworks through

which biblical texts are interpreted in conflict zones.

Nevertheless, the New Testament does not advocate for pacifism at the expense of justice. Rather, it reorients justice toward restoration and moral transformation. The challenge lies in reimagining what it means to resist evil without becoming its mirror. As Yoder (1994) argues, Jesus' ethic is neither escapist nor utopian, but founded on a vision of redemptive engagement with the world. For Nigeria, this means that non-retaliation must be paired with the strengthening of institutions, the promotion of dialogue, and the cultivation of moral courage within faith communities. It also demands a critical theological education that helps Christians traverse the tensions between faith, justice, and survival in contexts marked by systemic violence. The New Testament's call to peacemaking is not an escape from reality, it is a bold, countercultural act that challenges the logic of revenge and invites a new way of being in the world.

Building a Culture of Peace: A Holistic Approach

The moral and theological tensions surrounding non-retaliation in Nigeria do not negate the urgency of cultivating a peace-oriented culture. Rather, they establish the need for a pluralistic approach that integrates ethical principles, sociological realities, and spiritual commitments. As highlighted in the previous section, New Testament ethics challenges the retaliatory impulse by proposing a redemptive alternative rooted in enemy-love and forgiveness. However, for these teachings to become actionable in the Nigerian context, they must be complemented by structural and philosophical frameworks that enable communities to resist violence without perpetuating it. Peace, in this sense, must be both a personal discipline and a collective pursuit.

From a philosophical standpoint, the concept of restorative justice gives a useful foundation for rethinking conflict response. Unlike retributive models that focus on punishment, restorative justice seeks to repair broken relationships through truth-telling, accountability, and reconciliation (Essien, 2020a). This is in congruence with African communitarian ethics, particularly the Ubuntu ideal, which lay emphasis on harmony, mutual respect, and the reintegration of wrongdoers into the moral fabric of the community (Metz, 2007). In regions of Nigeria where retaliatory violence has become normalized, reintroducing indigenous mechanisms of conflict resolution, such as family councils, age-grade mediations, or traditional oath-taking rituals, may provide culturally relevant tools for healing (Edem&Udom, 2024; Essien, 2020b; Ekanem, Essien, &Okon, 2022). These practices, when ethically refined and supported by legal protections, can serve as bridges between traditional and modern systems of justice.

Sociologically, peacebuilding demands interventions that address both the material and symbolic dimensions of violence. Education systems must be reformed to include civic and moral instruction that displaces the glorification of vengeance with narratives of empathy, cooperation, and critical thinking. Religious institutions, especially churches and mosques, can play transformative roles by reorienting their messages from spiritual conquest and political triumphalism to reconciliation and community building (Olusakin, Sampson & Mpigi, 2025). As Ejizu (2011) argues, religious bodies in Nigeria are among the most trusted institutions and therefore possess significant potential to reshape public attitudes toward conflict. Through interfaith dialogue, peace clubs, trauma healing programmes, and the theological re-framing of vengeance, religious communities can model what it means to "seek peace and pursue it" (1 Peter 3:11 c.f. Olusakin, 2020a; Olusakin, 2020b).

Finally, a culture of peace cannot thrive without credible institutions. Government agencies must demonstrate an unambiguous commitment to justice, security, and the rule of law. Impunity for violence, corruption in the judiciary, and political manipulation of identity grievances all undermine efforts at reconciliation. The theological imperative to "leave vengeance to God" (Rom. 12:19) is best supported when earthly justice systems are trusted to deliver fair outcomes. In this regard, the church has a prophetic role, which is to speak truth to power, advocate for the oppressed, and hold governing authorities accountable (Essien&Edem, 2024b:203). The convergence of New Testament ethics, African philosophy, and sociological insight points toward a peacebuilding model that is not abstractly idealistic, but grounded in Nigeria's historical realities and moral resources. It is within this integrative framework that the retaliatory culture may be dismantled, and a new ethos of justice and reconciliation established.

Conclusion

The persistence of retaliatory practices in Nigeria is an indication of a breakdown in formal systems of justice and also a deeper moral and cultural challenge. As explored in this study, the inclination to repay violence with violence is often rooted in historical pain, socio-political marginalization, and a perceived absence of institutional recourse. Yet, while these factors are real and pressing, they do not represent an insurmountable destiny. Philosophical traditions, sociological perspectives, and the ethical vision of the New Testament all converge to suggest that a different way is possible, one that chooses reconciliation over revenge, and the restoration of relationships over the perpetuation of conflict. Importantly, the teachings of Jesus and the early Christian community do not advocate passive acceptance of injustice, but rather a proactive, morally grounded response to violence. When read in conversation with African communitarian ethics and supported by functional civic institutions, the New Testament's ethic of non-retaliation offers not a naïve ideal, but a powerful framework for social healing. For Nigeria, building a culture of peace will require more than theological affirmation or policy reform; it demands a collective reimagining of justice, one that honours human dignity, values forgiveness without forgetting, and seeks a future where peace is not the exception, but the norm.

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