

# THE CROSS OR THE GUN? THEOLOGICAL CONTESTATION OVER WAR AND THE PRIMACY OF PEACE IN AFRICAN CHRISTIAN THOUGHT FROM DECOLONIZATION TO BOKO HARAM

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## ABSTRACT

*In African Christian theology, the image of the Cross represents the fundamental primacy of peace, agape, reconciliation, and shalom through the suffering of Christ without resorting to violence against His oppressors and enemies. However, the question of whether the "Gun" (resistance movements, defense forces, and collaborations with political power) is an unavoidable necessity has remained unresolved throughout the history of Africa's struggles from decolonization to Boko Haram. The paper considers the issue of theological debate regarding African, especially Nigerian, Christianity throughout its history. Analyzing biblical traditions, African concepts such as ubuntu, and empirical research of the church's response to violence, it proves the significance of peace as the primacy in African Christian ethics yet acknowledges some complex arguments about pacifism and spirituality. This paper used methodological approach is employed in this research: Textual analysis of the biblical and theological texts Contextual theology using African inculturation methodologies. Qualitative analysis of empirical studies of Boko Haram It is guided by the inculturation theory and decolonial hermeneutic approaches, which recognize the validity of the African categories within theological discourse (Tarus, 2016). Ubuntu provides the theoretical perspective through which this study seeks to examine the issues surrounding Boko Haram (Gathogo, 2022; Lowery, 2025). By consulting African theologians such as Mbiti, Bediako, and Oduyoye, as well as current scholarship on Boko Haram, the study proves that the African church has focused on peace-building, forgiveness, and missional proclamation even when persecuted, while rejecting the theological justification of violence. The study concludes that the Cross, not the gun, is the true Christian calling in Africa*

## INTRODUCTION

Among the burning issues currently plaguing modern African theology in relation to its Christian heritage is the conflict between the peaceful nature of the Cross on one hand and the actuality of violence, persecution, and political unrest on the other. At the core of the controversy is the dilemma posed by the following question: Is it possible to reconcile the "Gun," which represents military self-protection, militarism, or submission to oppressive governments with the absolute peace of the Cross? Indeed, from the period of decolonization through the Nigerian Civil War to the recent Boko Haram crisis, the African Christian community has been threatened with extinction, making the concept of pacifism too simplistic a solution. This applies to the Christian church of northeastern Nigeria, which has encountered violence, displacement, and insecurity (Alawode, 2025; Kpughe, 2017).

### **Theological Contestation of the Gun and the Cross**

The gun-cross dynamic in Christian theology does not merely point to a conflict between violence and peace but rather to an ongoing and enduring confrontation over the proper relationship between faith and power, justice, and brokenness. "Cross" refers to sacrificial love, nonviolence, and giving up one's life for others in the manner exemplified by Jesus, whereas "gun" pertains to political power, coercion, and the necessity of violence.

Central to this theological discussion is the case of Jesus Christ, who set a precedent of redemptive suffering rather than aggressive resistance through His crucifixion. Early church fathers, like Tertullian and Origen, saw discipleship in terms of absolute non-violence. To these theologians, the cross served as an ethical imperative, compelling Christians to reject killing and demonstrate love towards enemies, even going to extremes in suffering like their Savior. This perspective is further supported by scholars, including Adolf Harnack, who see pre-Constantinian Christians as being predominantly committed to pacifism.

The problem was that Christians' association with the "cross" underwent drastic changes once their faith gained significant sociopolitical power. Faced with the challenge of living in political communities that maintained law and order through force, Augustine of Hippo provided an answer in *The City of God*. According to him, although the cross is still the highest ethical principle, circumstances might require Christians in charge of governing to use violence. Consequently, the "gun" became something unavoidable but painful, used only to restore peace.

Thus, Augustinian theology initiates the idea of making sense of the relationship between the cross and politics.

The next attempt to achieve reconciliation is undertaken by Thomas Aquinas, who creates Just War theory. Instead of giving up the ethic of the cross, Thomas tries to make the gun ethical using criteria such as the necessity for a good cause, legitimate power, and proportionality (*Summa Theologica*). So, the cross is a means of limiting violence; it makes it morally constrained with the

aim of avoiding unjust violence. Nonetheless, there seems to be some inconsistency here; is it possible for violence to be consistent with the ethic of the cross?

In modern theology, Reinhold Niebuhr presents his idea of Christian realism. He criticizes both absolute pacifism and utopian moral idealism. According to his view, due to sin that corrupts the whole of society, sometimes coercive action, that is, the "gun," cannot be avoided. Nevertheless, he stresses the point that such actions should not be regarded as the redemptive work of the cross; otherwise, the power will lose its accountability. Niebuhr believes that the cross makes it clear that any political effort by political authorities is sinful.

Modern theologians, including Stanley Hauerwas and John Howard Yoder, have attempted to refocus the debate around the importance of the cross. John Howard Yoder, for instance, insists that Jesus' death and life exemplify a peaceful ethic that the Church should emulate without any attempts to legitimize violence. Likewise, Stanley Hauerwas maintains that the Church needs to be a unique community formed around the story of the cross and not the power of the state.

From a theological perspective, the conflict between the gun and the cross is essentially a theological issue that centers around the problem of the relationship between divine sovereignty and political authority. According to Christian theology, God's kingdom is manifested in the cross and functions with love, humility, and peace. On the other hand, human society is characterized by sin and, therefore, depends on force to maintain order. As a result, there is an ongoing struggle between ultimate allegiance to God and involvement in politics.

### **Historical Contexts**

Analyzing biblical traditions, African concepts such as ubuntu, and empirical research of the church's response to violence.

By studying various biblical traditions, the African philosophical concepts of ubuntu, and empirical data on the way the Church reacted to acts of violence, the theological dimension of the relationship between the cross and the gun can be further developed in relation to practical experiences, including those in Africa.

First of all, in biblical tradition, the tension between these two ideas is built into the text from the start. While the Old Testament includes stories in which violence was legitimized for the protection of Israel, it also holds ideals of peace such as depicted in the Book of Isaiah (Isaiah 2:4), where swords are beaten into ploughs. The New Testament, on its part, through Jesus' life and doctrine, establishes the importance of ethics of the cross—of loving one's enemies, of forgiving, of non-violence (for example, Matthew 5:38-48). However, the text of Romans 13 indicates that in the Christian tradition there is recognition of the importance of governing authority in order to maintain peace, which allows some limited use of the gun in God's will.

In African philosophy, the idea of ubuntu provides an essential ethical perspective. As captured by the phrase "I am because we are," ubuntu places emphasis on community harmony, justice, and

the interrelatedness of humanity. Whereas retribution is a significant concern in other ethical perspectives, the concept of ubuntu emphasizes reconciliation more than punishment and is therefore closely related to the theology of the cross. Various researchers like Desmond Tutu have shown how ubuntu influenced the post-apartheid period, especially the work done through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, in which reconciliation and forgiveness are preferred to revenge. In this case, the cross does not represent suffering; it represents the restoration of broken relationships.

In terms of the practical application of the teachings of the Church on violence in African settings characterized by political turmoil and insurgent movements, a more complicated and ambiguous picture emerges. Indeed, during the events associated with the Nigerian Civil War and other situations, such as those connected with the actions of groups like Boko Haram, the reaction of Christian churches varied widely. While some churches demonstrate the spirit of the cross through peace building, humanitarian work, dialogue between different religions, and trauma healing, others advocate and justify violent acts as part of self-defense and/or national security strategy.

According to such scholars as Emmanuel Katongole, African Christianity needs to develop its own theological conception of peace, based on the principles of the cross; similarly, according to John de Gruchy, Christians should focus on the idea of reconciliation while living in a violent society. On the other hand, many empirical research studies emphasize that churches function in a very unstable political setting.

Together, the traditions of the Bible, ubuntu ethics, and church practice indicate that the conflict between the cross and the gun is very real and context-specific. On one hand, the cross demands an ethic of peace and forgiveness; on the other hand, the gun reflects the ongoing issues of insecurity, which often leads to a desire to use force. This conflict becomes especially relevant within the context of African Christianity.

### **Theology and Peace Ethics**

African theology has long resisted the dominance of Western categories in articulating Christian ethics. Scholars such as Mbiti (1990) emphasize that African worldviews are inherently communal, framing peace not as absence of conflict but as relational harmony. Similarly, Bediako (1995) argues that African Christianity represents a renewal of non-Western theological expression, grounded in indigenous categories.

Oduyoye (1986, 1995) expands this framework by highlighting the ethical implications of violence, particularly against marginalized groups, and calling for a theology of justice grounded in compassion and dignity.

Moreover, contemporary research supports the argument that the response of the African Christians towards violence is characterized by reconciliation and non-violent approaches. For instance, Alawode (2025) notes that prayer, friendship evangelism, and humanitarian care

constitute the core response to Boko Haram, while Kpughe (2017) mentions interfaith dialogue and peacebuilding among the responses in conflict areas.

### **Scripture and Theology from an African Perspective**

In African Christianity, the interpretation of the Scriptures is based on communal ethics and restorative justice. Even if the Old Testament speaks of war, its ideal remains shalom. African readers see the violent acts described in these narratives as the result of the disruption of relationships, not God's will (Mbiti, 1990). As for the New Testament, it reveals the shift in ethical orientation. Jesus taught about love of one's enemies and forgiveness, thus making nonviolence a fundamental characteristic of discipleship.

### **Decolonization and Early Controversy (1950s-1970s)**

In the process of decolonization, the African churches struggled to uphold the cause of freedom within the confines of Christ's peacefulness.

The conflict in Nigeria was characterized by theological controversy. Whereas one faction of Christianity found justification for rebellion to protect those at risk, others advocated for humanitarianism and reconciliation after the war. It was during this time that there developed a contextual peace theology that defined peace as reconstruction as opposed to passivity.

### **Peace Takes Center Stage After Independence**

Further decades characterized by military governance, religious conflicts, and ethnic violence have tested the ethics of African Christianity.

African Initiated Churches emphasized spiritual warfare, while mainline churches promoted dialogue and reconciliation. Pentecostal movements often framed violence in spiritual terms, emphasizing prayer and deliverance.

Despite these differences, a consistent pattern emerges: violence is acknowledged but rarely legitimized. The primacy of peace remains central.

### **The Boko Haram Era: Intensified Contestation (2009–Present)**

The Boko Haram insurgency represents a critical test of African Christian theology. Churches have faced targeted attacks, raising urgent questions about self-defense and state responsibility.

Empirical studies show that churches have responded through:

Prayer and spiritual resilience

Humanitarian assistance

Forgiveness and reconciliation

Interfaith dialogue

### Advocacy for justice

(Alawode, 2025; Je' Adayibe, 2018; Kpughe, 2017)

Church bodies such as the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria and the Christian Association of Nigeria have consistently condemned violence while calling for justice and restraint (CBCN, 2025; CAN, 2025).

While some voices cautiously explore limited self-defense, the dominant theological orientation remains centered on the Cross.

### Conclusion

Regardless of the period, from decolonization efforts up to the Boko Haram terrorist attacks, African Christianity has been continuously dealing with the dilemma posed by the Cross versus the Gun.

Though there is no lack of disputes, the fundamental message of this theology never changes: Peace is not only the goal but also the commandment for every Christian.

The Church in Africa is to go beyond the mere survival in the face of violent conflicts and instead bring transformation into them through peacebuilding.

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