



Religious Conflicts and the Future of African Development

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ABSTRACT

Research Problem: Africa's vast cultural diversity—comprising more than 2,000 languages and over 3,000 ethnic groups—has produced a complex environment where religion often intersects with politics, ethnicity, and economics. This intersection has led to recurring religious conflicts that continue to obstruct development, peace, and social cohesion across the continent. Despite numerous peace initiatives, the persistence of violence indicates that the structural causes of religious conflict, including inequality, institutional weakness, and historical divisions, remain inadequately addressed. Understanding how these underlying factors contribute to instability is crucial for fostering sustainable development in Africa.

Research Purposes: This study aims to examine the relationship between religious conflicts and African development through the lens of Structural Conflict Theory. Specifically, it seeks to: (1) identify the structural and socio-economic factors that drive religious violence; (2) analyze the historical and cultural dimensions that sustain conflict; and (3) propose viable strategies for promoting peace, inclusive governance, and socio-economic stability.

Research Methods: The research employs a qualitative methodology, integrating insights from historical, sociological, and political analyses. Data are derived from academic literature, policy reports, and documented case studies of major religious conflicts across different African regions. Structural Conflict Theory provides the theoretical framework for understanding how institutional inequalities, power imbalances, and resource competition shape the dynamics of religious confrontation.

Results and Discussion: The findings reveal a **multilayered relationship** between religion and development in Africa. Religious conflict often emerges from **deep-rooted structural disparities**—such as poverty, ethnic marginalization, and political manipulation of faith identities. Historical legacies of colonialism and uneven resource distribution further exacerbate these tensions. The study demonstrates that the consequences of these conflicts extend beyond spiritual divisions, directly impeding economic growth, education, and governance. However, it also identifies positive trends: interfaith collaboration, grassroots peacebuilding, and regional integration efforts show potential for fostering mutual understanding and stability.

Research Implications and Contributions: This study contributes to the expanding scholarship on religion and development in Africa by offering a holistic framework that links structural inequality, conflict, and governance. It underscores the need for inclusive institutions, interfaith harmony, and equitable resource distribution as pathways to sustainable peace. The research recommends strengthening representative governance, mitigating socio-economic disparities, and fostering pan-African and global solidarity to transform religion from a source of division into a catalyst for unity and progress. Ultimately, this study provides valuable insights for policymakers, scholars, and civil society actors seeking to build a peaceful and prosperous Africa grounded in justice, tolerance, and shared development.

Keywords: Religion, Conflict, Religious Conflict, Development, African Development.

INTRODUCTION

Africa's rich cultural tapestry is intricately woven with its diverse religious landscape, comprising over 2,000 languages and 3,000 ethnic groups (Mbiti, 1969). With a staggering 89% of Africans identifying with a particular faith, Christianity and Islam dominate the continental religious sphere (Pew Research Center, 2010). In many African cultures, traditional practices and cultural heritage are inextricably linked with religious beliefs. For instance, Ghana's Akan community places great importance on ancestor worship and communal rituals (Opoku, 1978). Similarly, Nigeria's Yoruba people adhere to the intricate Ifá tradition, which guides decision-making through divination and spirituality.

Nana (2019) observes that the profound impact of religious conflict on African societies and cultures is undeniable. Throughout the continent, spirituality is intricately intertwined with daily life, with each community possessing a unique belief system and practices. This intrinsic link renders religion an integral part of African society, making it impossible to separate from other cultural and societal elements. Consequently, examining these religious systems provides a nuanced understanding of the complexities and diversity of African cultures, both traditional and modern. Across linguistic and ethnic divides, from north to south, African cultures and societies exhibit a deep-seated religiosity that permeates every aspect of life.

Historically, missionary activities have intertwined religion and development, laying the groundwork for a complex relationship. However, Western scholars have long overlooked the significance of religion in development theory and practice. A notable gap in literature exists between the 1980s and 1990s, but the new millennium marked a shift. Research has increasingly explored the intersection of religion and development (Deneulin & Rakodi, 2011), acknowledging religion's value in shaping identity and development (Swart & Nell, 2016; Jones & Petersen, 2011). Nevertheless, debate persists regarding religion's role in development, with scholars offering diverse perspectives (Tyndale, 2006; Berger, 2010; Kaag & Saint-Lary, 2011).

The impact of religion on social norms and values in Africa is profound. In Ethiopia, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church has significantly influenced family and marriage dynamics (Adeboye, 2017). Similarly, in South Africa, Christianity has shaped attitudes towards HIV/AIDS and sexuality, highlighting the complex interplay between religion and societal values (Addo, 2013). Furthermore, religion has served as a catalyst for social change, as exemplified by the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa, where churches played a pivotal role in mobilizing resistance against oppression (Goba, 2013). Interfaith dialogue and conflict resolution initiatives in Nigeria, led by Muslim and Christian leaders, demonstrate the transformative power of religion in promoting peace and stability (Kwame, 2017). Ultimately, understanding the intricate relationships between religion, culture, and society is essential for fostering peace, stability, and development in Africa.

Recent research by Werner (2019) underscores the vital role of spirituality in shaping Africa's development trajectory. At its core, development is value-driven, and in Africa, religion serves as the foundation of these values, informing moral principles and decision-making processes. A study by Elias Kiptoo Ngetich further highlights the significance of religious worldviews in shaping critical life choices among African individuals and communities. Recognizing the profound influence of religion is crucial for any empowerment initiative aiming to drive meaningful change. Moreover, the growing significance of religious affiliations in Africa, particularly the rise of Pentecostal Christianity, suggests that spiritual values will continue to profoundly impact African societies in the foreseeable future (Ng'etich, 2024).

Africa's immense cultural diversity—spanning over 2,000 languages and 3,000 ethnic groups—represents both a source of pride and a challenge (Mbiti, 1969). While this diversity has produced a rich tapestry of traditions, values, and faiths, it has also fueled deep-seated tensions and violent conflicts between religious communities. The devastating consequences of

such conflicts are evident in Nigeria's sectarian violence, the Democratic Republic of Congo's prolonged instability, and Ethiopia's ethnic-religious tensions, all of which have significantly hindered socio-economic development and national progress (International Crisis Group, 2013; UNDP, 2015). The human and economic costs of these conflicts are staggering, with the United Nations Development Programme estimating that Africa has lost over \$300 billion since 1990 due to conflict-related destruction and recovery efforts (UNDP, 2015). These realities highlight the need to move beyond simplistic narratives that attribute conflict solely to religion and instead examine how poverty, inequality, marginalization, and political manipulation intersect with faith to perpetuate violence. Equally important is the recognition of the vital role that religious leaders and institutions can play in fostering peace, interfaith dialogue, and social development. The novelty of this study lies in its application of Structural Conflict Theory to reinterpret religious conflict in Africa as a manifestation of deeper socio-economic and political disparities, offering an integrative framework that links faith, governance, and development within the broader discourse on African transformation.

This study employed a qualitative research methodology to explore the intricate relationship between religious conflict and African development. The research relied primarily on secondary data sources, including peer-reviewed journals, scholarly books, policy reports, and publications from international organizations, NGOs, and government agencies. Grey literature such as working papers, policy briefs, and conference proceedings, alongside online materials like news articles and documentaries, further enriched the analysis. A descriptive analytical approach was used to identify recurring patterns, themes, and relationships among the factors influencing religious conflict and development outcomes. This interdisciplinary approach—drawing from historical, sociological, and political perspectives—enabled a nuanced understanding of how structural inequalities, religious identities, and governance practices interact to shape Africa's development trajectory. By synthesizing existing literature and applying a structural theoretical lens, the research offers a comprehensive and original contribution to the ongoing discourse on religion, conflict, and sustainable development in Africa.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Conceptual Review

The Concept of Religion

The concept of religion has long been a subject of intense debate among scholars, who have struggled to provide a definitive explanation. A major obstacle in this endeavor is the absence of a unified framework, as religion is inextricably linked to diverse socio-economic and political worldviews. Furthermore, scholars have often overlooked the profound impact of religion on the social fabric of the communities being studied.

Despite the semantic ambiguity and definitional pluralism surrounding the concept of religion, various scholars have proposed definitions that highlight its core elements. For instance, Omeregbe (as cited in Okoroafor & Okereke, 2019) defines religion as a sacred relationship characterized by a dual dynamic between individuals and a divine entity. Similarly, Bouquet (as cited in Omeregbe, 1993) views religion as a steadfast connection between human consciousness and a supernatural force, often referred to as the sacred or God.

While definitions of religion may vary, most religions share common elements, including: (1) belief in sacred objects, (2) rituals, and (3) spiritual experiences. These elements form the foundation of religious practices and beliefs, shaping the lives of individuals and communities worldwide.

The Concept of Conflict

Conflict is an inherent aspect of human interaction, necessitating effective management (Aliede, 2004). Conflict can be defined as a clash between individuals arising out of a difference in thought

process, attitudes, understanding, interests, requirements and even sometimes perceptions (Coser, 1956; Schelling, 1960). The dynamics of conflict are complex, with each interaction yielding unique outcomes that can be either beneficial or detrimental to the parties involved (Afolabi, 2018).

Interpersonal tensions arise from discrepancies in desired outcomes (Shehu, 2021). Incompatibility of actions between individuals can spark friction (Amakiri, 2007). Misunderstandings between parties can escalate into conflict (Fodang & Mmegwa, 2016). Conflicts can have varied consequences, depending on their nature, affecting all parties involved (Afolabi, 2018). In Nigeria, for example, conflicts fuelled by religious differences are prevalent, as religion can be a unifying force or a tool for exploitation, leading to social unrest (Ogbeide, 2012).

The Concept of Religious Conflict

Religious conflict arises from the volatile intersections of faith, power, and identity, often escalating into violent clashes between individuals or groups with disparate beliefs, values, and practices (Ogbeide, 2012). When powerful individuals exploit religion to further their interests, it can lead to oppressive dynamics and social unrest (Coser, 1956). Africa has borne the brunt of such conflicts, with various nations ravaged by power struggles and exploitation of religious ideologies.

Africa is beset by myriad socio-political tensions, with Nigeria exhibiting a pronounced propensity for faith-driven discord. The dynamics of religious strife in Nigeria are multifaceted, encompassing both inter- and intra-faith clashes, which can be driven by a desire for proselytization, assertions of dominance, or the pursuit of ethnic and political agendas (Ukpe & Ogenyi, 2022). Nigeria's experience with Boko Haram's extremist agenda and tensions between the Islamic Movement of Nigeria and the government exemplify this volatile mix of religion, power, and secular authority. Across the continent, faith-driven conflicts have surged, with devastating consequences. Countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Egypt, Ethiopia, Mali, and Sudan have witnessed brutal clashes, sectarian violence, and interfaith conflicts, resulting in widespread destruction, displacement, and loss of life (International Crisis Group, 2018; El-Hennawy, 2017; United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2020; Bouega, 2019; Amnesty International, 2017).

Paradoxically, religious affiliations can foster cohesion among adherents while simultaneously sowing discord and hostility towards those of differing faiths, ultimately culminating in widespread instability and economic stagnation. Furthermore, Nigeria's experiences have underscored the significant role that religion plays in exacerbating and perpetuating violence (Oduma-Aboh, 2017). Powerful individuals continue to manipulate religious ideologies to oppress marginalized groups, perpetuating a cycle of violence and instability. Addressing these complex conflicts requires a nuanced understanding of the intricate relationships between religion, power, and identity.

The Concept of Development

The notion of "development" lacks a unified and globally recognized definition. As an intangible concept, it poses a greater challenge to define than concrete objects. Soliciting definitions from multiple individuals would likely yield diverse and disparate responses, underscoring the complexity and subjectivity surround this term (Frankema, 2023). This paper examines development through a multifaceted lens, encompassing social, economic, spiritual, and educational progress, and its impact on nations and their citizens. Building on Iheanacho and Ughaerumba's (2016) assertion, development is viewed as a transformative process that spans various dimensions, including economic, social, cultural, and environmental spheres. This process affects all aspects of national life, necessitating a harmonious relationship between faith, effective time management, diligence, scientific inquiry, and technological innovation to attain balanced human and societal well-being.

The concept of development has been defined in various ways by international organizations.

For example, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2020) states that development is about creating an environment that enables people to realize their full potential and lead productive, creative lives. World Bank (2020) sees development as a process of economic and social transformation aimed at improving the well-being of people, particularly the poor and vulnerable.

In another instances, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2019, p. 15) defines development as “a long-term process that seeks to improve population well-being through economic growth, social progress, and environmental sustainability. International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD, 2020) defines development from the standpoint of rural development, as development that “aims to enhance the livelihoods and well-being of rural people through sustainable and equitable management of natural resources.

The Concept of African Development

African development is inherently linked to self-improvement, as seen in Marcus Garvey's philosophy (Green, 2018). Historically, Africans have continually sought to improve their lives and opportunities, much like other societies. The concept of "African perspectives" on development is multifaceted, comprising three key aspects. These include:

- Alternative development models proposed by Marxist-inspired African leaders in the 1960s, which challenged international norms.
- Postcolonial scholars' arguments that European exploitation of Africa's resources led to the continent's underdevelopment.
- Recent efforts by development agencies to integrate African knowledge and perspectives into development strategies.
- Understanding the evolution of these dimensions requires situating them within the broader context of development theory and practice (Vokes, 2018).

Ake (1981, p. 6), in explaining development from an African perspective, states that “The primary principle of development strategy in Africa is that the people have to be agents, the means and the end of development. This principle is the underpinning of all development policies.” Adebayo Adedeji, the former executive secretary of Economic Commission for Africa, observes that African development must be “human-centred and dedicated to ensuring the overall well-being of the people through the equitable distribution of the fruits of development” (Ake, 1996, p. 145). In this vein, Nwoye (2000) argues that African development must not marginalize Africans in their development process. They must be more involved in policy-making. Africans must be strengthened to have the capacity to determine their own values and organize themselves to act on their development efforts.

Theoretical Framework: Structural Conflict Theory

Social structures and institutions are inherently prone to generating conflict, as posited by the Structural Conflict Theory (Galtung, 1969). This paradigm suggests that the underlying frameworks of society, including economic, political and religious systems, create an environment conducive to intergroup conflict (Marx & Engels, 1848). Galtung (1969) introduces the concept of structural violence, which refers to the ways in which institutions and systems systematically deny individuals their fundamental rights and needs. This phenomenon can manifest as repression, exploitation, or alienation, as exemplified by the historical instances of slavery and colonialism (Galtung, 1969).

The theoretical underpinnings of Structural Conflict Theory are rooted in Marxist thought, which highlights the pivotal role of economic structures in shaping social relationships and conflict (Marx & Engels, 1848). Additionally, the work of Max Weber informs this theory, as he argued that social structures and institutions can either facilitate or hinder social change and conflict (Weber, 1922). Johan Galtung's scholarly contributions have further refined the concept of structural violence, elucidating its implications for conflict and peace (Galtung, 1969).

A deeper look at the underlying systems and power dynamics can reveal why religious conflicts erupt and persist in Africa. This perspective shows how unequal access to resources, influence, and social standing can create an environment where tensions simmer and sometimes boil over into violence. It also highlights how leaders often exploit existing social divisions, such as ethnic and religious differences, to further their own agendas and maintain control. To break this cycle, it's essential to address the fundamental inequalities and social imbalances that drive conflict. By doing so, African nations can build more just, peaceful, and inclusive societies where everyone has a stake and a voice.

Empirical Review

Case Studies of Religious Conflict in Africa

Africa is grappling with widespread religious tensions, which have escalated into violence in several countries. This underscores the need for increased international cooperation to address the underlying causes of religious conflict in Africa.

Nigeria: Nigeria's complex religious landscape has been marred by escalating tensions between Muslims and Christians. The sectarian clashes between Muslims and Christians in Nigeria have been intensified, claiming thousands of lives and displacing millions (Harnischfeger, 2014). The emergency of the Boko Haram insurgency in 2009, has wreaked havoc, targeting both Christians and moderate Muslims. The devastating consequences are blunt: over 20,000 lives lost and millions displaced (International Crisis Group, 2019; Harnischfeger, 2014). A United Nations report reveals that the conflict has resulted in over 20,000 fatalities and 2.5 million displacements (United Nations, 2020).

Ethiopia: Ethiopia's fragile religious harmony was shattered in 2019, as a wave of violence swept through the country. Dozens of lives were lost, and numerous churches and mosques were destroyed (Human Rights Watch, 2020). The spark that ignited this violence was a dispute over a mosque in Jawi, exposing deep-seated tensions between Muslims and Christians (BBC News, 2019). Ethiopia's complex ethnic and religious landscape has fueled tensions, with the Ethiopian Orthodox Church facing challenges from evangelical Christian groups and Muslim communities (Abbink, 2014). A wave of violence in 2019 resulted in dozens of deaths and widespread destruction of churches and mosques (Human Rights Watch, 2020). There are deep-seated tensions between religious groups in Ethiopia, emphasizing the need for greater dialogue.

Democratic Republic of Congo: The Democratic Republic of Congo's eastern region has been plagued by religious conflict, fueled by the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), a rebel group with ties to Islamist extremism. The ADF has waged a campaign of terror against civilians, targeting both Christians and moderate Muslims (United Nations, 2020). The human toll is staggering: thousands killed and hundreds of thousands displaced, according to the Congo Research Group (2020).

Outside Nigeria, Ethiopia, and Democratic Republic of Congo, the list of countries across Africa that have been plagued by religious crises, at one time or the other, are endless. Some of these religious conflicts have lasted for over a decade, and have not helped Africa and Africans, to achieve the much-desired development. Some of these African countries include but not limited to:

1. Central African Republic: 2012 - The conflict between Muslims and Christians began after the Seleka rebel coalition, which was predominantly Muslim, overthrew the government, leading to a backlash from Christian militias (Human Rights Watch, 2023).
2. South Sudan: 2013 - The conflict between the predominantly Christian government and the Muslim-led opposition began after President Salva Kiir, a Christian, accused his deputy, Riek Machar, a Muslim, of plotting a coup (International Crisis Group, 2023).
3. Mali: 2012 - The conflict between the government and Islamist extremist groups began after a Tuareg rebellion in the north led to the takeover of key cities by Islamist groups, including al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) (BBC News, 2023).
4. Burkina Faso: 2015 - The conflict between the government and Islamist extremist groups began after a series of attacks by AQIM and other groups, which led to a declaration of war by the government (Amnesty International, 2023).
5. Cameroon: 2014 - The conflict between the government and Islamist extremist groups began after Boko Haram, a Nigerian-based group, began launching attacks in northern Cameroon (Human Rights Watch, 2023).
6. Sudan: 1983 - The conflict between the government and rebel groups began after the government, led by President Gaafar Nimeiry, imposed Sharia law, leading to a rebellion by non-Muslim groups in the south (International Crisis Group, 2023).
7. Eritrea: 1993 - The conflict between the government and Islamist extremist groups began after the government, led by President Isaias Afwerki, cracked down on Muslim groups, leading to a rebellion by Islamist groups (Amnesty International, 2023).
8. Somalia: 2006 - The conflict between the government and Islamist extremist groups began after the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) seized control of Mogadishu, leading to a conflict with the government and Ethiopian forces (BBC News, 2023).

9. Chad: 2005 - The conflict between the government and Islamist extremist groups began after the government, led by President Idriss Deby, faced a rebellion by Islamist groups, including the United Front for Democratic Change (FUCD) (Human Rights Watch, 2023).
10. Ghana: 2011 - The conflict between Muslims and Christians has led to tensions and occasional violence, particularly in the northern region, where there have been clashes between Muslim and Christian communities (BBC News, 2023).

Traditional Religion and Civil Wars in Africa

Just as traditional religion played a significant role in anti-colonial and liberation movements, it has also had a profound impact on the dynamics of internal conflicts, particularly in West and Central Africa, where these conflicts are often characterized by extreme brutality (Møller, 2006). For example, Stephen Ellis's study on the Liberian civil war, combatants from rival factions often incorporated indigenous religious rituals into their warfare, including disturbing practices like cannibalism (Ellis, 1999). Additionally, secret societies such as the Poro and Leopard societies played a crucial role in fostering unity and cohesion within the warring groups.

The civil war in Sierra Leone shared some similarities with the phenomena observed in neighboring countries. This led to a brutal civil war in the 1990s, characterized by the Revolutionary United Front's (RUF) systematic terrorization of civilians, including violence, atrocities, amputations, rapes, and looting, which appeared to have some religious backing (Abraham, 2001; Gberie, 2005; Rashid, 1997). In response, the government employed "traditional" hunters, known as the Kamajores, as auxiliaries. Initially, these local hunters, mainly from the Mende ethnic group, were organized around the "secret" Poro initiation societies. Their traditional role was to provide food and protection to their tribes, but they were reorganized as a militia, trained by tribal chiefs and the international private military company, Executive Outcomes.

Notably, the Kamajores were reported to have behaved better than both the regular troops and the RUF, possibly due to their protective ethos, which aligned with humanitarian laws of war, especially when deployed in their home areas. However, as the Kamajores became part of the more amorphous Civil Defence Forces (CDF) and incorporated RUF defectors, their original core was diluted. After the war, some former Kamajores joined the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) in neighboring Liberia (Ferme, 2004; Leach, 2004; Muna, 1997; Zack-Williams, 1997).

The Mai-Mai militias in the Democratic Republic of Congo have historically been influenced by traditional totemist beliefs (Wild, 1998; Van Acker & Koen, 2001; Vlassenroot, 2003). These militias are currently aligned with the remnants of Rwanda's former armed forces and the Interahamwe militia, both of which are part of the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR). The FDLR was formed in 2000 through a merger of various groups, including the Army for the Liberation of Rwanda (ALIR). The Mai-Mai militias have a complex history, with roots dating back to the 1990s as an armed rebellion against the central government (International Crisis Group, 2005). Over time, they have evolved into community-based militias organized along ethnic lines, with a focus on protecting their communities and interests.

Islamic Religion and Civil Wars in Africa

Islam has been a complex factor in armed conflicts, sometimes being used to proclaim "holy war" or jihad against opponents, as seen in several instances in Sudan. However, more often, Islam is just one element in conflicts that are primarily driven by other factors, such as political grievances or ethnic tensions. These conflicts often involve the fusion of ethnicity and religion or the use of religious language to express political demands. This phenomenon is not limited to East Africa, but is also prevalent in West Africa, where indigenous religions, Islam, and Christianity intersect. In West Africa, particularly in the Sahel region, Islamist groups like Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Ansar Dine have been involved in conflicts, often using religion to justify their actions.

For example, in West Africa, a notable Islamic presence has been observed in the civil wars of Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Côte d'Ivoire, where it intersected with ethnic, occupational, and geographical divisions (International Crisis Group, 2003; Richards et al., 2005; Richards, Bah & James, 2004). However, in these cases, the conflicts were not primarily driven by religious factors. In contrast, Nigeria,

Africa's most populous country, harbours a potentially volatile religious divide between its predominantly Muslim north and Christian south (Møller, 2006). This divide, which was managed through British colonial rule, appears increasingly fragile due to the waning influence of three key stabilizing factors.

Christian Religion and Civil Wars in Africa

The intersection of faith and violence is exemplified in Uganda's prolonged conflict, where a unique blend of Christian beliefs has been co-opted by the Lord's Resistance Army, formerly known as the Holy Spirit Movement. A more egregious illustration of Christianity's exploitation to justify brutality is the devastating 1994 Rwandan genocide, which stands as a stark testament to the dangers of manipulating faith for destructive purposes (Møller, 2006).

The Catholic Church, including influential historian Alexis Kagame, perpetuated the "Hamitic myth," which originated from the Old Testament's "lost tribe of Israel" narrative. This myth has been exploited throughout history to justify the superiority or inferiority of various ethnic groups, often based on their supposed descent from Ham or the Israelites.

The myth has been manipulated to defend anti-Semitic ideologies in Germany, justify slavery in America, and is currently present in extreme right-wing groups in the United States that promote white supremacy and anti-Semitism (Sanders, 1969; Spöttel, 1998; Haynes, 2002; Barkun, 1989; Whitsel, 1995).

In Rwanda, Hutu extremists utilized the myth to portray the Tutsi as foreign conquerors from Ethiopia, with Léon Mugesere's 1992 speech advocating for their removal (Eltringham, 2004; Gatwa, 2000; Bjørnlund et al., 2004; Taylor, 1999). The Catholic Church played a significant role in exacerbating ethnic tensions in Rwanda, initially favoring the Tutsi minority and later shifting its support to the Hutu majority (Prunier, 1999; Steed, 2000). This preferential treatment lent a veneer of moral legitimacy to the racist attitudes prevalent among the Hutu population.

Furthermore, members of the Catholic clergy, including high-ranking officials and ordinary priests and nuns, were actively involved in the planning, orchestration, and execution of the genocide (Kakwenzire & Dixon, 2000; Bizimana, 2001; Newbury & David, 1999). Some of the most heinous atrocities occurred within the confines of churches themselves. The international Catholic Church's response to the genocide was marked by a troubling lack of acknowledgment and inaction, despite the escalating violence (Prunier, 1999; Eltringham, 2004; Gatwa, 2000).

The Impact of Religious Conflict on African Development

Africa is grappling with widespread religious tensions that have escalated into violence, hindering development and stability (Harnischfeger, 2014). A complex interplay of socio-economic, political, and external forces fuels these conflicts. Underlying drivers include economic disenfranchisement, governance deficits, and unequal resource distribution. The manipulation of ethnic and religious identities, along with external interventions, exacerbates tensions. To break the cycle of violence, it's imperative to tackle root causes through inclusive governance, equitable development, and social cohesion. The devastating consequences of these conflicts are evident in many African countries as can be seen below.

Nigeria

Nigeria's development has been severely hindered by recurrent religious crises, which have far-reaching consequences on communities, individuals, and the economy (Apuwabi, 2018). In Nigeria, Umar (2009) and Onabanjo (2011) argue that crises have significantly impeded Nigeria's economic growth and national unity, raising concerns about the country's cohesion over 50 years post-independence. The persistent religious conflicts have hindered progress, economic prosperity, peaceful coexistence, and overall socio-economic development, primarily due to their destructive nature.

The violence has disrupted agricultural activities, forced artisans to abandon their trades, and crippled economic growth, ultimately perpetuating poverty, unemployment, and inadequate infrastructure. Furthermore, these crises have tarnished Nigeria's international reputation, portraying its leaders as ineffective and self-serving (Onwumah, 2014). The lack of strong, selfless leadership has prevented the country from harnessing its diversity and complexity to drive national development. As a result, foreign investors are deterred from investing in Nigeria due to the prevailing communal, religious, and ethnic tensions (Ayinla, 2003). The country's reputation has suffered significantly, with many nations

viewing Nigeria as a hub for terrorism, thereby affecting its business relationships globally (Onwumah, 2014).

Ethiopia

Ethiopia's history is marked by a dual narrative of peaceful coexistence and recurring episodes of religious strife (Ahmed, 2006). This complex dynamic has been largely overlooked, limiting our understanding of the country's contemporary religious landscape. Religious tensions often escalate into violent conflict, catching observers off guard (Østebø, 2023). Ethiopia has witnessed a surge in sectarian violence, including incidents in Jijiga (2018) and Gondar (2022), which targeted churches, clergy, and Muslims (Østebø et al., 2021).

These incidents are symptomatic of a broader trend of interfaith violence, prompting concerns about the erosion of peaceful coexistence (Østebø, 2023). The government has adopted a multifaceted approach to combat extremism, prioritizing strategies that promote diversity, tolerance, and social cohesion (Belay, 2022).

These efforts include de-radicalization, poverty reduction, development, secularism, human rights protection, and interfaith collaboration. Despite these efforts, religious extremism continues to undermine peace, justice, and human rights in Ethiopia, contributing to the rise of terrorism. The government's efforts to combat extremism are crucial in addressing the root causes of religious violence and promoting sustainable peace and development.

Democratic Republic of Congo

The Democratic Republic of the Congo remains plagued by instability and insecurity, defying expectations of improvement despite a peace agreement (Coghlan et al., 2004; Prunier, 1995, Roberts & Muganda, 2008). The country's struggles with conflict resolution were highlighted in the 2013 UN Secretary-General's report, which noted a decline in stability alongside two other African nations (UN General Assembly, 2013).

Today, the humanitarian situation continues to deteriorate, exacerbated by intensifying inter-communal violence in eastern Congo. This has resulted in staggering displacement figures, with 2.2 million people forcibly displaced and over 451,000 refugees and asylum-seekers in 2016 (United Nations General Assembly, 1998; Report of the UN Secretary-General on the United Nations Organization Mission of Stabilization in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, 2017).

The country's socioeconomic situation has also taken a hit, with a decline in macroeconomic trends and a depreciation of the Congolese franc by over 30% since January 2016. This downturn has fueled widespread frustration among the population, further complicating the already tense political environment. Unfortunately, conflict and war have become entrenched features of Congo's history, with no clear end in sight.

Somalia

The Somali civil war's trajectory has been influenced by the rising prominence of militant Islamist groups, such as the Islamic Courts Union and Al-Shabaab (Herrington, 2011). This trend has sparked concerns among analysts that Somalia's instability could be exploited by transnational terrorist organizations like Al-Qaeda.

Research has shown that conflicts rooted in religious differences tend to have more severe consequences than their non-religious counterparts. These conflicts typically result in higher casualty rates, last longer, and recur more frequently (Toft, Philpott & Shah, 2011). Furthermore, the proportion of civil wars driven by religious factors has increased significantly over the past century.

The intersection of globalization and religious identity has created an environment in which transnational communities can mobilize around shared beliefs, leading to conflicts with localized and globalized dimensions (Toft, Philpott & Shah, 2011). This phenomenon is consistent with Huntington's assertion that religion serves as a primary distinguishing factor between civilizations (Huntington, 1993).

In the post-Cold War era, the erosion of national identities and the weakening of nation-states have created a void that religious identity can fill (Aslan, 2009). As individuals possess multiple identity markers, the decline of one marker can lead to the ascendance of another, such as religion.

Rwanda

Scholars have extensively examined the complex dynamics of the Rwanda conflict, highlighting the multifaceted role of religion (Banyanga & Björkqvist, 2017). Research shows that religious affiliations, particularly within the Catholic Church, significantly influenced the genocide. However, Mamdani (2001) emphasizes that the genocide was not solely driven by ethnic or religious tensions, but by a complex interplay of factors, including politics, economics, and social inequality. The 1994 Rwanda genocide resulted in over 1 million deaths and 2 million displacements (Prunier, 1995).

The conflict had devastating economic consequences, including a decline in GDP per capita (World Bank, 1995). Timothy Longman examines the complex relationship between Christianity and the Rwandan genocide, arguing that the legacy of Christian missionary activity and the Catholic Church's role contributed significantly to the violence. Longman contends that the Church's alliance with the ruling Hutu elite and failure to condemn ethnic hatred created an environment in which genocide became possible. In the aftermath, the Rwandan government implemented policies promoting national unity and reconciliation, contributing to impressive economic growth (IMF, 2006). However, the legacy of the genocide continues to impact Rwanda's development, highlighting the need for ongoing efforts to address social and economic inequalities.

CONCLUSION

Religious conflicts in Africa have profoundly undermined the continent's development by destabilizing governance systems, discouraging investment, and diverting resources from productive sectors to crisis management. The resulting humanitarian crises—marked by displacement, human rights abuses, and infrastructural collapse—have perpetuated poverty and widened social inequality. Addressing these issues requires a multidimensional strategy that targets the structural roots of conflict, including economic marginalization, weak institutions, and political manipulation of religion. Strengthening inclusive governance, ensuring equitable resource distribution, and fostering interfaith collaboration are essential to reversing these destructive trends. Through coordinated efforts between African governments, civil society, and international partners, religious diversity can be transformed from a source of division into a driver of peace, social innovation, and sustainable development across the continent.

Several key recommendations are proposed to address the challenges posed by religious conflicts in Africa and to promote sustainable development across the continent. First, it is essential to strengthen representative institutions by implementing governance frameworks that amplify marginalized voices and ensure equitable resource distribution through constitutional, electoral, and institutional reforms. Second, cultivating interfaith harmony is vital; this can be achieved through initiatives that promote empathy, dialogue, and collaboration among religious groups, including joint community projects and inclusive education programs. Third, mitigating socio-economic disparities remains crucial, requiring policies that reduce poverty and inequality through social protection measures, economic empowerment programs, and infrastructure development targeted at vulnerable communities. Finally, fostering pan-African and global solidarity is imperative to building collective resilience, encouraging cooperation among African governments, regional organizations, and international partners through shared expertise, technical assistance, and peacebuilding platforms. Together, these strategies offer a holistic framework for transforming Africa's religious diversity from a source of division into a foundation for unity, peace, and inclusive progress.

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