



PENTECOSTALISM, ARMED CONFLICT AND VIOLENCE IN AFRICA

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Abstract

This article critically examines the relationship between Pentecostalism, violence, and armed conflict in Africa. Pentecostal Christianity has often been associated with spiritual renewal, moral transformation, and socio-economic empowerment. Despite growing scholarly interest in religion and conflict in Africa, much of the existing literature has focused on extremist movements, ethnic violence or interreligious clashes, often overlooking the nuanced roles of Pentecostal actors and ideologies. This polarized framing creates a significant gap in understanding how Pentecostal beliefs and practices may both mitigate and exacerbate violence within contexts of armed conflict. Therefore, this study seeks to address this gap and provide a more balanced and contextualized grounded analysis of its roles and implications. It explores how certain theological emphases, such as spiritual warfare, prosperity teachings, and apocalyptic rhetoric, may inadvertently reinforce polarizing identities. Employing a critical interdisciplinary framework that integrates religious studies, political theology, and conflict theory, the article argues that Pentecostalism in Africa cannot be simplistically categorized as either a driver of violence or an agent of peace. Rather, its role is contingent upon socio-political context, leadership structures, media usage, and state-church relations. The study concludes by proposing a nuanced paradigm for understanding the ambivalent public role of Pentecostalism in conflict-prone African societies.

Keywords: Conflict, Pentecostal, Prosperity, Spiritual warfare, Violence,

Introduction

Pentecostalism has emerged as one of the most dynamic and rapidly expanding expressions of Christianity in contemporary Africa. Over the past five decades, the movement has reshaped religious landscapes across countries such as Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, and South Africa, profoundly influencing social values, political engagement, and public discourse. Characterized by emphases on spiritual gifts, divine healing, prosperity teachings and experiential worship, Pentecostalism has attracted millions of adherents across diverse socio-economic and cultural contexts. However, its rapid growth has coincided with persistent patterns of violence and armed conflict in several African regions, raising critical questions about the intersections between religion, politics, and insecurity. Africa's postcolonial history has been marked by civic wars, insurgencies, ethno-religious tensions, and governance crises. In contexts such as the Boko Haram insurgency in northeastern Nigeria and electoral violence in parts of East and Central Africa, religious identities have sometimes intersected with political grievances and socio-economic marginalization. While Pentecostal churches often promote messages of peace, moral regeneration, and spiritual warfare against perceived evil forces, critics argue that certain theological narratives—particularly those framing conflicts in cosmic or demonological terms may unintentionally reinforce polarizing worldviews.

This study critically examines the complex relationship between Pentecostalism, violence, and armed conflict in Africa. Rather than assuming a direct causal link, it explores how Pentecostal



theology, rhetoric, media presence, and political engagement may either mitigate or exacerbate conflict dynamics. By situating Pentecostalism within broader socio-political and historical contexts, this inquiry seeks to contribute to scholarly debates on religious and conflict in Africa, offering a nuanced understanding of both the peacebuilding potential and the contentious implications of contemporary Pentecostal movements.

Violence

Violence is a multidimensional concept that extends beyond the mere infliction of physical harm. The World Health Organization (2002) defines violence as the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or a group or community, that resulting in-injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation. This definition highlights both physical and structural dimensions of harm. A foundational contribution to violence studies is offered by Johan Galtung (1969), who distinguishes among direct violence (physical harm), structural violence (systemic inequalities embedded in social structures), cultural violence (belief systems that legitimize or normalize harm). Galtung's framework broadens the understanding of violence to include institutional and symbolic forms that perpetuate injustice without overt physical force.

From a sociological perspective, Pierre Bourdieu (1991) introduces the concept of symbolic violence, referring to the subtle and often unconscious imposition of dominant cultural norms that legitimize inequality. In political theory, Hannah Arendt (1970) differentiates between power and violence, arguing that violence emerges when power-grounded in collective legitimacy-begins to erode. Contemporary scholarship also examines interpersonal, collective and state-sponsored violence, recognizing its varied motivations, including economic competition, identity-based exclusion, ideological extremism and political domination. Thus, violence can be understood as a socially constructed and context-dependent phenomenon, manifesting at individual levels. Its analysis requires interdisciplinary engagement across sociology, political science, psychology and peace studies.

Conflict

Conflict is a pervasive feature of social life, emerging whenever individuals or groups perceive incompatible goals, scarce resources, or threats to identity and values. In classical sociological thought, conflict is not merely pathological but constitutive of social structure and transformation. Karl Marx conceptualized conflict as rooted in material inequalities and class struggle, arguing that historical development is driven by tensions between opposing economic interests (Marx & Engels, 1848/1978). Similarly, Max Weber extended the analysis beyond class to include status and power as multidimensional sources of social conflict (Weber, 1922/ 1978). In practical science and peace studies, conflict is often defined as a situation in which two or more actors pursue incompatible objectives (Wallenstein, 2015). Lewis A. Coser (1956) emphasized the functional dimensions of social conflict, suggesting that it can reinforce group boundaries and foster internal cohesion. Conversely, Johan Galtung (1969) distinguished between direct, structural and cultural violence, broadening the analytical scope of conflict beyond overt physical confrontation.

Contemporary conflict theory integrates structural, psychological, and cultural perspectives. John Paul Lederach (1997) highlights the importance of reconciliation and relationship-building in transforming protracted conflicts, especially within deeply divided societies. In this sense, conflict may be destructive when expressed through violence, but it may



also be constructive when managed through dialogue, negotiation, and institutional reform. Thus, conflict can be defined as a dynamic process of perceived incompatibility between actors-individual or collective-manifested through attitudes, behaviors, and restructuring conditions. Its outcomes depend largely on context, power distribution, institutional frameworks, and mechanisms of resolution.

Armed Conflict

Armed Conflict refers to a contested incompatibility between organized actors that involves the sustained use of armed force, resulting in battle-related deaths. In contemporary conflict studies, the term is commonly defined by the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) as a disagreement between two parties-at least one being a government-that results in a minimum threshold of battle-related fatalities within a given year (Pettersson & Oberg, 2020). This operational definition allows scholars to distinguish armed conflict from nonviolent disputes or low-intensity unrest. Armed conflicts are typically categorized as interstate (between a state), and internationalized intrastate conflicts (Gleditsch et al., 2002). Stathis N. Kalyvas (2006) argues that civil wars are often shaped by local dynamics and selective violence rather than purely ideological or ethnic cleavages. Similarly, Mary Kaldor (2012) introduces the concept of “new wars”, emphasizing identity politics, fragmented authority, and the blurring of distinctions between combatants and civilians in post-Cold War conflicts. From a structural perspective, Paul Collier and Hoeffler (2004) highlight economic factors-such as resource dependence and weak state institutions-as significant predictors of civil war onset. In contrast, grievance-based theories emphasize inequality, marginalization, and identity-based exclusion as drivers of armed violence. Armed conflict, therefore, can be understood as an escalated and institutionalized form of violent confrontation between organized actors, rooted in political, economic, or socio-cultural incompatibilities. Its study requires integrating structural, agency-centered, and international dimensions to grasp both causes and consequences.

Pentecostalism and Violence

Pentecostalism is one of the fastest-growing forms of Christianity globally, particularly in Africa and the Global South. While the movement is often associated with spiritual renewal, healing, and socio-economic empowerment, scholarly debates increasingly interrogate its complex relationship with different forms of violence-symbolic, structural, and physical. Violence in this context does not necessarily imply that Pentecostalism inherently promotes violence, but rather that certain theological interpretations, practices, and socio-political engagements may intersect with violent outcomes. Violence can be understood in multiple dimensions:

- A. Direct violence:** Direct violence refers to physical or overt forms of harm intentionally inflicted by an identifiable actor upon another individual or group. It is often visible, immediate and measurable, distinguishing it from structural or cultural violence, which may be indirect or embedded within social systems. The concept is most prominently associated with the work of Johan Galtung, who categorized violence into direct, structural and cultural forms. According to Galtung (1969), direct violence involves deliberate actions such as killing, assault, torture, rape and other forms of physical aggression. These acts are typically characterized by a clear perpetrator-victim relationship, making them easier to identify and condemn compared to more subtle forms of violence. Direct violence is often the most visible manifestation of conflict, frequently occurring during wars, riots, domestic abuse and criminal activities. Scholars argue that direct violence is not only



physical but can also include psychological harm when inflicted intentionally and immediately, such as threats, intimidation, and verbal abuse (Galtung, 1990). This broadens the understanding of direct violence beyond bodily harm to include actions that directly impair an individual's mental well-being. In this regard, direct violence can be both physical and psychological, as long as there is a clear actor and intent. In conflict studies, direct violence is often viewed as the "tip of the iceberg", with underlying structural and cultural conditions fueling its occurrence. For example, inequality, marginalization and systematic injustice (structural violence) may create conditions that escalate into overt physical confrontation (Farmer, 2004). Thus, while direct violence is immediate and visible, it is often rooted in deeper societal dynamics. Moreover, direct violence has significant consequences for individuals and societies. It leads to loss of life, displacement, trauma, and the breakdown of social cohesion. In religions experiencing armed conflict, such as parts of Africa, direct violence often manifests through insurgencies, ethnic clashes, and state repression (Kalyvas, 2006). These forms of violence disrupt development and perpetuate cycles of instability. From a theoretical perspective, direct violence is central to peace and conflict studies because its reduction is often the primary goal of peacebuilding initiatives. However, scholars emphasize that eliminating direct violence alone is insufficient without addressing structural and cultural violence, which sustain the conditions for its recurrence (Galtung, 1996).

- B. Structural violence:** Structural violence refers to a form of harm embedded within social, political and economic systems that systematically disadvantage certain groups while privileging others. Unlike direct violence, structural violence is indirect, often invisible and lacks a clearly identifiable perpetrator. The concept was first articulated by Johan Galtung, who emphasized that social structures can themselves produce violence by preventing individuals from meeting their basic needs (Galtung, 1969). Galtung (1969) defines structural violence as the avoidable impairment of fundamental human needs such as survival, well-being, identity, and freedom. In this sense, violence is present when social arrangements cause unequal access to resources, opportunities, and rights. For example, poverty, political exclusion, racism, gender inequality, and lack of access to healthcare or education can all be manifestations of structural violence because they systematically limit life chances. One of the defining characteristics of structural violence is its normalization within society. Because it is embedded in institutions and everyday practices, it is often perceived as natural or inevitable rather than as a form of violence (Galtung, 1990). This invisibility makes structural violence particularly dangerous, as it can persist over long periods without significant resistance or recognition. Scholars such as Paul Farmer have further developed the concept by linking structural violence to global inequalities and health disparities. Farmer (2024) argues that structural violence is evident in the unequal distribution of disease, suffering and morality across different populations. For instance, marginalized communities often experience higher rates of illness and lower life expectancy due to systematic neglect and lack of access to healthcare services. Structural violence is closely related to institutional arrangements, including laws, policies, and economic systems that perpetuate inequality. It operates through mechanisms such as discrimination, exploitation, and marginalization. For example, colonial legacies in wealth distribution and governance, which continue to shape contemporary patterns of conflict and underdevelopment (Rodney, 1972). In conflict studies, structural violence is often seen



as a root cause of direct violence. When individuals or groups experience or prolonged deprivation and injustice, tensions may escalate into overt conflict, including riots, insurgencies, or civil wars (Stewart, 2008). Thus, structural violence provides the underlying conditions that make direct violence more likely. Furthermore, structural violence has profound consequences for human development. It restricts access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities, thereby perpetuating cycles of poverty and inequality. It also undermines social cohesion and contributes to feelings of alienation and resentment among marginalized populations. From a peacebuilding perspective, addressing structural violence requires long-term systematic change. This includes promoting social justice, equitable resource distribution, inclusive governance, and access to basic services. As Galtung (1996) argues, sustainable peace cannot be achieved without dismantling the structural inequalities that give rise to violence in the first place.

- C. Symbolic violence:** Symbolic violence refers to a subtle, often invisible form of domination exercised through cultural meanings, language, norms and symbolic systems, whereby individuals or groups internalize and accept their own subordination. The concept is most closely associated with Pierre Bourdieu, who developed it to explain how power relations are reproduced without the use of physical force (Bourdieu, 1991). According to Bourdieu (1991), symbolic violence operates through processes of misrecognition (*meconnaissance*), in which dominated groups perceive existing social hierarchies as natural, legitimate, or inevitable. This form of violence is not experienced as coercion but as a normal state of affairs, making it particularly effective and enduring. It is embedded in everyday practices, language, education systems, religion, and media, which subtly reinforce social inequalities. A key mechanism of symbolic violence is the imposition of dominant cultural values and meanings upon subordinate groups. For example, linguistic dominance—such as privileging certain accents, dialects, or languages over others—can marginalize individuals and reinforce social hierarchies (Bourdieu, 1991). Similarly, educational systems may valorize the culture of dominant classes while devaluing local or indigenous knowledge, thereby reproducing inequality. Symbolic violence is closely linked to the concept of *habitus*, which refers to the internalized dispositions, attitudes and perceptions shaped by one's social environment. Through *habitus*, individuals unconsciously reproduce the very structures that constrain them, thereby perpetuating domination without overt resistance (Bourdieu, 1977). In this way, symbolic violence becomes self-reinforcing and deeply embedded within social life. Scholars have extended Bourdieu's framework to analyze various forms of inequality, including gender, race and religion. For instance, Loic Wacquant emphasizes how symbolic power works alongside social institutions to sustain marginalization, particularly in urban and racialized contexts (Wacquant, 2004). In religious contexts, symbolic violence may manifest through doctrines, rituals or teachings that legitimize authority structures or normalize inequality. Symbolic violence is also evident in media representations, where dominant narratives shape perceptions of identity and social reality. The portrayal of certain groups as inferior, deviant, or less capable can influence public attitudes and reinforce discriminatory practices (Thompson, 1995). Such representations contribute to the internalization of stigma and the perpetuation of social exclusion. Importantly, symbolic violence is interconnected with other forms of violence. It often underpins structural violence by legitimizing unequal systems and can also precede direct violence by shaping attitudes that

justify physical harm or dehumanize certain groups may pave the way for overt acts of violence against them. From a critical perspective, addressing symbolic violence requires challenging dominant discourses, promoting cultural recognition, and fostering critical awareness. Education, media reform, and inclusive policies are essential tools in exposing and dismantling the subtle mechanism through which symbolic domination operates (Bourdieu, 1991; Wacquant, 2004). Pentecostalism often engages in what scholars describe as “spiritual warfare”, framing reality as a battleground between divine and demonic forces. This worldview can shape believers’ attitudes toward perceived enemies, including other religions, cultural practices, or marginalized individuals.

Pentecostalism and Religious Violence

In pluralistic societies, Pentecostal rhetoric sometimes contributes to interreligious tensions. In Nigeria, for instance, Pentecostal discourse has been noted to demonize Islam, contributing to a broader climate of religious competition and conflict (Kalu, 2008). Such rhetoric may reinforce what scholars call a “clash of fundamentalism”, where both Christian and Muslim groups adopt exclusivist and militant identities. This dynamic has been observed in recurring ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria, where religious identity becomes intertwined with political and economic struggles. Scholarly debates have increasingly examined Pentecostalism complex relationship with religious violence, particularly in contexts marked by social tension, political instability and interreligious competition. While Pentecostalism is not inherently violent, certain theological interpretations, practices and socio-political engagements may intersect with dynamics that contribute to conflict.

Historically, Pentecostalism emphasizes spiritual warfare, a worldview that interprets reality as a battleground between divine and demonic framework can, in some contexts, foster exclusionary attitudes toward perceived “others”, including adherents of other religions or traditional belief systems (Marshall, 2009). In African contexts, for instance, Pentecostal rhetoric sometimes portrays indigenous religions or Islam as spiritual adversaries, which may heighten tensions and contribute to religious polarization (Gifford, 2004). According to Ruth Marshall, Pentecostalism in Africa is deeply intertwined with politics and public life, often shaping moral discourses and national identity. In Nigeria, Pentecostal movements have played influential roles in socio-political debates, sometimes reinforcing divisions along religious lines (Marshall, 2009). This influence can be both constructive and conflictual, depending on how religious narratives are mobilized.

Similarly, Paul Gifford argues that Pentecostalism’s emphasis on prosperity, moral purity and spiritual power can create sharp distinctions between “saved” and “unsaved”, potentially fostering intolerance. In highly pluralistic societies, such distinctions may contribute to religious competition and, in extreme cases, incite hostility or violence (Gifford, 2004). It is important, however, to distinguish between theological rhetoric and actual acts of violence. Most Pentecostal communities advocate peace, personal transformation and social reforms. Yet, the language of spiritual warfare and demonization can sometimes be interpreted in ways that legitimize aggression, particularly when combined with existing socio-economic grievances or political manipulation (Kalu, 2008). The work of Ogbu Kalu highlights that African Pentecostalism is highly adaptive and context-sensitive. While it can contribute to social cohesion and empowerment, it may also reflect and amplify underlying societal conflicts, including ethnic and religious tensions (Kalu, 2008). For example, in religion experiencing Christian-Muslim conflict, Pentecostal preaching may adopt confrontational tones that mirror broader societal divisions.



Furthermore, Pentecostal media-such as sermons, television broadcasts, and social media plays a significant role in shaping religious perceptions. The dissemination of messages that emphasize exclusivism or demonize other groups can reinforce stereotypes and deepen divisions (Hackett, 1998). In Nigeria, where religious identity is closely tied to politics and ethnicity, such messages can have far-reaching implications for peace and stability. From a theoretical perspective, the relationship between Pentecostalism and religious violence can be understood through the frameworks of symbolic and structural violence. Pentecostal discourse may contribute to symbolic violence by delegitimizing alternative belief systems, while structural inequalities-such as poverty and political marginalization-create conditions in which religious tensions may escalate into direct violence (Galtung, 1990; Farmer, 2004). Nevertheless, it is crucial to emphasize that Pentecostalism also has significant potential for peacebuilding. Many Pentecostal leaders and organizations actively promote reconciliation, social justice and interfaith dialogue. The movement's emphasis on moral transformation and community support can serve as a powerful resource for conflict resolution when directed toward inclusive and peaceful ends.

Pentecostalism and Gender-Based Violence

Another critical area of concern is the relationship between Pentecostal practices and gender-based violence. Some Neo-Pentecostal teachings emphasize submission to spiritual authority and patriarchal family structures, which may indirectly sustain abusive environments. Research in South Africa shows that Neo-Pentecostal movements sometimes promote obedience to "men of God", which can lead to exploitation and reinforce unequal power relations (Shingange, 2023). Similarly, studies highlight cases where religious authority has been used to justify sexual exploitation or silence victims, particularly women and girls (Kaunda, 2020). Scholars have increasingly interrogated Pentecostalism relationship with gender relations and gender-based violence (GBV). Gender-based violence refers to harmful acts directed at individuals based on their gender, including domestic violence, sexual abuse, emotional abuse and harmful cultural practices (Heise, 1998). Within Pentecostal contexts, the interplay between theology, culture and power relations can either mitigate or reinforce such violence. One of the central issues in the discourse is the role of gender ideology within Pentecostal teachings. Many Pentecostal traditions emphasize patriarchal family structures, often promoting male headship and female submission as divinely ordained. Scholars argue that such interpretations can, in some contexts, legitimize unequal power relations within households, thereby creating conditions that may enable or normalize domestic violence (Ruth Marshall, 2009). When submission is emphasized without adequate attention to mutual respect and accountability, it may discourage women from resisting abusive relationships. Similarly, Paul Gifford (2004) notes that Pentecostal teachings on morality and family life often reinforce traditional gender norms. In many African societies, these norms are already shaped by patriarchal cultural systems and Pentecostalism may inadvertently reinforce them by framing them in religious terms. This sacralization of gender hierarchy can make it difficult to challenge abusive practices, as they may be perceived as divinely sanctioned.

At the same time, Pentecostalism also contains elements that can challenge gender-based violence. The movement's emphasis on personal transformation, moral discipline and the rejection of sinful behaviors can discourage practices such as alcohol abuse and infidelity, which are often associated with domestic violence (Ogbu Kalu, 2008). In this regard, Pentecostalism can contribute to the reduction of certain forms of GBV by promoting ethical conduct and family stability. However, tensions arise in the ways Pentecostal communities respond to cases of abuse. In some instances, church leaders may prioritize marital preservation over the safety of victims,



encouraging women to remain in abusive relationships while seeking spiritual solutions such as prayer and fasting (Phiri & Nadar, 2006). This approach can inadvertently perpetuate cycles of violence by discouraging victims from seeking legal or social intervention. The concept of symbolic violence, as developed by Pierre Bourdieu, is also useful in analyzing gender dynamics within Pentecostalism. Symbolic violence occurs when systems of meaning and representation legitimize domination. In this context, religious teachings that normalize female submission or portray male authority as unquestionable can be seen as forms of symbolic violence that reinforce gender inequality (Bourdieu, 1991). These symbolic structures often operate alongside structural violence, such as economic dependency and limited access to education, which further constrain women's agency (Farmer, 2004). Moreover, Pentecostal media and preaching play a significant role in shaping gender norms. Messages disseminated through sermons, television and social media can either challenge or reinforce harmful stereotypes. When teachings emphasize male dominance or stigmatize divorced or separated women, they may contribute to an environment in which GBV is underreported and inadequately addressed (Hackett, 1998). Despite these challenges, there is growing evidence of transformative initiatives within Pentecostalism aimed at addressing GBV. Some churches and faith-based organizations actively promote gender equality, advocate for women's rights and provide support services for survivors of violence. These efforts demonstrate the potential of Pentecostalism as a resource for social change when interpreted through more egalitarian and justice-oriented theological frameworks (Phiri & Nadar, 2006).

Spiritual Warfare, Witchcraft Beliefs and Violence

The concepts of spiritual warfare and witchcraft beliefs are central to many African religious worldviews, including Pentecostal Christianity. While these belief systems often provide explanatory frameworks for misfortune and suffering, they can also intersect with dynamics of violence, particularly when spiritual causality is linked to human agents accused of witchcraft. Scholars have therefore examined how these religious ideas may contribute to both symbolic and direct forms of violence within specific socio-cultural contexts. Spiritual warfare, a prominent theme in Pentecostal theology, frames reality as a cosmic struggle between divine and demonic forces. This worldview, widely discussed by Ogbu Kalu (2008), emphasizes the active role of believers in combating evil through prayer, deliverance and exorcism. While this framework can empower individuals by offering a sense of control over life's challenges, it may also externalize blame for misfortune, attributing illness, poverty, or failure to malevolent spiritual agents.

Closely related to this is the persistence of witchcraft beliefs in many African societies. Witchcraft is often understood as the use of supernatural powers to harm others and accusations frequently arise in contexts of social tension, economic hardship, or unexplained suffering (Peter Geschiere, 1997). These beliefs are not limited to traditional religions but are often reinterpreted within Pentecostal frameworks, where witches are seen as agents of demonic forces. The intersection of spiritual warfare and witchcraft beliefs can contribute to various forms of violence. At the symbolic level, individuals accused of witchcraft may be stigmatized, excluded or dehumanized. Drawing on the concept of symbolic violence developed by Pierre Bourdieu, such accusations can legitimize social hierarchies and marginalization by framing victims as morally or spiritually corrupt (Bourdieu, 1991). This stigmatization often precedes more overt forms of harm. In some cases, accusations of witchcraft escalate into direct violence, including physical abuse, forced confessions or even killings. Adam Ashforth (2005) documents how fear of witchcraft in African communities can lead to vigilantism and communal violence, particularly when state institutions are perceived as weak or ineffective. Children, elderly women, and socially vulnerable



individuals are often the most affected by such accusations. Pentecostal deliverance practices have also been scrutinized in this context. While intended to liberate individuals from perceived spiritual oppression, some forms of exorcism or “deliverance” may involve coercive or harmful practices, especially when individuals—such as children—are labeled as witches (Ruth Marshall, 2009). These practices can blur the line between spiritual care and abuse, raising ethical and human rights concerns.

Moreover, socio-economic and structural factors play a critical role in the persistence of witchcraft-related violence. Poverty, unemployment, and social inequality can intensify suspicious and accusations, as individuals seek explanations for hardship (Farmer, 2004). In this sense, structural violence creates conditions in which spiritual interpretations of misfortune become more compelling and, at times, dangerous. Media representations and religious broadcasting further amplify these dynamics. Pentecostal sermons, films and testimonies often depict dramatic narratives of spiritual warfare, which can reinforce beliefs in the reality and immediacy of witchcraft threats (Hackett, 1998). While such media can strengthen faith and community identity, they may also contribute to moral panic and legitimize aggressive responses to perceived spiritual enemies. However, it is important to recognize that Pentecostalism is not uniformly associated with violence. Many Pentecostal leaders and organizations actively condemn witchcraft-related abuse and advocate for the protection of vulnerable individuals. Increasingly, there are efforts to reinterpret spiritual warfare in non-violent ways, emphasizing prayer, compassion and social support rather than confrontation or exclusion.

Pentecostalism as a Force against Violence

Pentecostalism, despite criticisms regarding its potential links to social tension, has also been widely recognized as a significant force for peacebuilding and violence reduction in many societies. One of the primary ways Pentecostalism functions as a force against violence is through its emphasis on individual moral generation. Conversion experiences often involve a rejection of behaviors associated with violence, such as substance abuse, criminality, and domestic aggression. According to Ogbu Kalu (2008), Pentecostal teachings promote disciplined lifestyles, self-control, and ethical conduct, which can reduce tendencies toward interpersonal violence and social disorder. Similarly, Ruth Marshall (2009) argues that Pentecostalism foster new forms of subjectivity centered on responsibility, and moral renewal. In Nigeria and other African societies, Pentecostal communities often provide alternative moral frameworks that discourage violent behavior and encourage peaceful coexistence. These transformations are particularly evident among youth and marginalized populations who find new identity and purpose within Pentecostal movements.

Pentecostalism also contributes to violence reduction through its strong community networks and social support systems. Churches often function as spaces of belonging, mutual aid, and conflict mediation. Members are encouraged to resolve disputes through dialogue, prayer, and reconciliation rather than confrontation. This communal ethos aligns with broader peacebuilding principles that emphasize social cohesion and restorative justice (Galtung, 1996). Another important dimension is Pentecostalism’s engagement in peace advocacy and social intervention. Many Pentecostal leaders and organizations actively participate in initiatives aimed at promoting interfaith dialogue, national unity and conflict resolution. In contexts such as Nigeria, where religious and ethnic tensions are prevalent, Pentecostal actors have sometimes played mediating roles in fostering understanding between Christian and Muslim communities (Gifford, 2004). Theologically, Pentecostalism’s emphasis on love, forgiveness and reconciliation can serve as a



counter-narrative to violence. Biblical teachings on peace, such as loving one's neighbor and forgiving enemies, are frequently emphasized in sermons and teachings. These values can shape attitudes and behaviors in ways that discourage retaliation and promote nonviolent responses to conflict. Furthermore, Pentecostalism can address structural violence by empowering individuals economically and socially. The prosperity message-though controversial-often encourages entrepreneurship, hard work and self-improvement, which can help alleviate poverty and reduce the socio-economic conditions that contribute to violence (Paul Gifford, 2004). In this sense, Pentecostalism may indirectly reduce violence by addressing some of its root causes. From a sociological perspective, Pentecostalism can also challenge symbolic violence by affirming the dignity and worth of marginalized individuals. Through testimonies, healing practices and inclusive worship, participants are often encouraged to see themselves as valued and empowered, countering narratives of inferiority or exclusion (Bourdieu, 1991). This reconfiguration of identity can reduce feelings of resentment and alienation that sometimes fuel violent behavior. However, it is important to maintain a critical perspective. The peacebuilding potential of Pentecostalism is not automatic and depends largely on how its teachings are interpreted and practiced. While many communities promote peace, others may adopt exclusivist or confrontational approaches that undermine these efforts. Thus, the role of leadership, theological orientation and socio-political context is crucial in determining whether Pentecostalism acts as a force for peace or conflict.

Recommendations

In light of the intersections between Pentecostalism, violence and armed conflict in Africa, the following scholarly directions should be pursued: Scholars should undertake systematic comparative studies across diverse African contexts such as Nigeria, Kenya, Democratic Republic of Congo and South Africa in order to clarify how differing political systems, colonial legacies and socio-economic structures mediate Pentecostal engagement with conflict dynamics. There is a need for in-depth ethnographic research within local Pentecostal congregations situated in conflict-prone regions. Finally, there is a need for more empirical, data-driven research that integrates quantitative surveys with qualitative insights, such methodological triangulation would strengthen causal analysis and move beyond anecdotal or polemical claims about Pentecostalism's role in African conflicts. Collectively, these research directions would deepen scholarly understanding of Pentecostalism's multifaceted role in contexts of violence and armed conflict, while also contributing to broader debates on religion, politics and security in contemporary Africa.

Conclusion

The forgoing analysis has demonstrated that the relationship between Pentecostalism, violence, and armed conflict in Africa is neither linear nor monolithic. While Pentecostalism has expanded rapidly across the continent-particularly in contexts such as Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, and South Africa-its engagement with conflict dynamics varies significantly according to historical, political and socio-economic conditions. Pentecostal communities have often functioned as agents of social transformation, promoting moral reform, humanitarian intervention, reconciliation initiatives, and grassroots peacebuilding efforts in fragile environments. Their emphasis on conversion, ethical renewal, and community solidarity has, in many instances, contributed to social stability and post-conflict recovery. At the same time, the study has highlighted that certain theological motifs-such as spiritual warfare, apocalyptic rhetoric and demonization of perceived enemies-may, under particular conditions, reinforce exclusionary identities and intensify existing



social cleavages. When intertwined with partisan politics, ethics mobilization, or state power struggles, religious language can inadvertently legitimize antagonistic narratives. Thus Pentecostalism should be understood not as an inherent driver of violence, but as a religious movement embedded within broader structural realities of governance failure, inequality, youth unemployment, and contested national identities. Pentecostalism in Africa embodies both peacebuilding potential and conflict-amplifying risks. A nuanced, context-sensitive approach is therefore essential—one that recognizes the agency of religious actors while situating them within the complex socio-political ecosystems that shape contemporary African conflicts.

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