The Role of Religion in Peace Initiatives amid an Ethno-Religious Conflict:

A Case Study of Plateau State, Nigeria

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the role of religion – both Christianity and Islam – in peacebuilding efforts in Plateau State. Specifically, this study examined the role of religion in motivating individuals to become involved in peacebuilding and in peacebuilding activities. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight local peacebuilders, half Christian and half Muslim. Seven of the eight participants reported non-religious motivations for becoming involved in peacebuilding while all participants reported religious motivations. All participants reported activities where religion is useful in peacebuilding, including religious teachings related to peace themes and using religious organizations to support the peacebuilding process. Therefore, religion plays a significant role both in motivating individuals to become peacebuilders and in the peacebuilding process in Plateau State.

Introduction

Plateau State, Nigeria suffers from widespread inter-communal violence. In the past ten years, over 3,800 people are estimated to have been killed (Human Rights Watch, 2011). Violent outbursts occurred in 2001, 2004, 2008 and 2010, during which thousands were displaced from their homes; hundreds were killed; and countless churches, mosques, businesses, and homes were destroyed through fire and looting. Most recently, several bombs exploded on Christmas Eve 2010, killing at least 80 individuals. Since the bombings, tit-for-tat revenge violence has continued to date with over 200 victims in the month of January 2011 (Human Rights Watch, 2011). The ongoing inter-religious and inter-ethnic conflict between the indigenous Christian tribes and the Hausa Muslims has resulted in a growing segregation of the society, deepening the walls of mistrust and suspicion.

Plateau State is in the heart of Nigeria's Middle Belt, the region where the predominantly Muslim North meets the predominantly Christian South and is currently the main site of ethno-religious violence in Nigeria (Higazi, 2011). The factors underlying the conflict are multifaceted and complex, including elements of ethnicity, politics, and religion. The ethnic component of the conflict is rooted in the concept of indigeneship in the federal constitution of Nigeria whereby *indigenous* tribes are allowed special rights within each state that the *settlers* do not receive (Higazi, 2011). In Plateau State, a large number of Hausa/Fulani individuals have resided in Plateau State for many generations, but they are still classified as *settler* according to the federal constitution. Therefore, many of the settlers view the crisis as primarily over injustice because of the limited rights they have within the state (Korb, 2011). The ethnic fights over indigene/settler rights are complicated by the fact that the indigenous tribes are predominantly Christian whereas the settler tribes are predominantly Muslim (Ostien, 2009).

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However, most of the local discussion of the conflict centers around the religious component of the conflict. Many Muslims fear being excluded from politics based on their religion and ethnicity. On the other hand, Christians tend to fear religious domination by the Muslims (Higazi, 2011). Most of the indigenous Christians tend classify the conflict as primarily religious (Korb, 2011), believing that Muslims are engaging in *jihad* in the state in order to Islamize Nigeria.[1] This belief of a religiously-based conflict, combined with prejudicial attitudes of the "other" religion, results in considerable fear and plays a major role in the ongoing conflict (Higazi, 2011).

Given the widespread perception among the grassroots that the conflict in Plateau State is largely religious in nature, is there a place for religion in peacebuilding? Indeed, religion plays a significant role in the lives and identities of most Nigerians (Gaiya, 2011; Turaki, 1997). Religious beliefs infuse every aspect of Nigerian life, from fundamental greetings ("We thank God") to the name of businesses (*God's Favor Restaurant*). Religion plays an important role in major occasions, such as baby dedications, house dedications, and weddings. Religion also plays an important role in everyday decisions that are often qualified with the statement, "Lord Willing" or *Inshallah,* as well as everyday routines, exemplified by the practice of starting most meetings, even in public institutions, with prayer. Therefore, this paper will examine whether religion can also play a role in the peacebuilding process.

Numerous individuals and organizations have been engaged in peacebuilding in Plateau State since the first violent crisis in 2001. Many of these organizations are sponsored by religious organizations, including the Mennonite Central Committee and Justice Development & Peace/Caritas that is sponsored by the local Catholic Diocese. Moreover, an informal survey

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[1] Despite the widespread belief of *jihad* amongst Christians in Plateau, researchers believe that this belief is unfounded (Higazi, 2011).

showed that 88% of active peacebuilding organizations in Plateau State take a faith-based perspective on the peacebuilding process (Korb, 2010). Therefore, preliminary evidence shows that religion plays an important role in peacebuilding in Plateau State at the general level.

However, the specific role that religion plays in peacebuilding remains unknown. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the role of religion – both Christianity and Islam – in the local peacebuilding efforts in Plateau State. Specifically, this research study will answer three questions.

1. *What role, if any, does religion play in influencing individuals to be involved in peacebuilding?* The purpose of this research question will be to determine the key values that motivate individuals to be involved in peacebuilding efforts and whether these key values are rooted in religious principles.

2. *What role, if any, does religion play in the strategies that are used to foster peace?* Different individuals take different approaches to peacebuilding. The purpose of this research question will be to identify how religion is used in the various strategies that are currently being used to promote peace throughout the state.

3. *Is the role of religion in peacebuilding efforts similar between Christians and Muslims?* For this research question, a comparison will be made between Christian and Muslim peacebuilders in terms of the role that religion plays in motivating individuals to be involved in peacebuilding as well as also how religion is being used to foster peace.

This study has both theoretical and practical import. Theoretically, this study will provide more information about the role of religion in peacebuilding, an important topic in

modern conflicts (Gopin, 2005). Practically, this study will provide more information on why individuals on both sides of the conflict chose to become involved in peacebuilding despite the prevailing atmosphere that calls for violence. This information can then be used to develop more effective strategies for engaging additional peacebuilders within both the Muslim and Christian communities.

Methods

Participants

Eight local peacebuilders in Plateau State were interviewed, half of whom were Christian and half of whom were Muslim. These individuals were purposely selected by indentifying the most active peacebuilding organizations within Jos, and then selecting key individuals within those NGOs. Two of the eight peacebuilders were female. These individuals have been involved in peacebuilding in Plateau State anywhere from 3 to 16 years (average of 9 years). Three of the participants founded and currently direct Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) that engage in peacebuilding, three work for peacebuilding NGOs, and two are volunteers with peacebuilding NGOs. Six NGOs were represented by the participants, five of which take a faith-based perspective to the peacebuilding process: two are sponsored by Christian organizations and three are inter-faith NGOs.

Procedure

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to answer the research questions. Each participant was interviewed separately over the span of six weeks in late April and May 2011. During the interview, participants were asked questions about their involvement in peace efforts, what influenced them to become involved in peacebuilding, and whether they use religion in their peacebuilding strategies. Each interview lasted about 30 minutes and was audio recorded.

Once the interviews were transcribed, then they were analyzed to identify statements related to motivations to be involved in peacebuilding and how religion is used in the peacebuilding process. Once these statements were compiled, then they were coded. Statements related to participants' motivation for becoming involved in the peacebuilding process were coded as either religious or non-religious. The statements were coded as religious if they were related to belief, a Holy Book, or a religious principle. The statements were categorized as non-religious if they were related to the societal consequences of violence and/or peaceful living. Once the motivations were coded as religious or non-religious, then they were analyzed to identify themes within each category.

In response to whether religion is used in the peacebuilding process, participants' responses were sorted into three categories: activities in which religion is used in peacebuilding, reasons why religion should be used in peacebuilding, and reasons for using caution when applying religion to peacebuilding. Again, the responses within each of these categories were analyzed to identify themes.

Results

Role of Religion in Motivating Peacebuilders

The first research question asked: What role, if any, does religion play in influencing individuals to be involved in peacebuilding? In their interviews, each participant gave an average of six factors that motivated them to become involved in peacebuilding (range from three to nine).

Seven of the eight participants reported non-religious reasons for becoming involved in peacebuilding (average of two reasons apiece). The most common reason (N=4; 2 Christian and 2 Muslim) focused on the negative impact of violence on society. For example, a Muslim said, "I

think the first thing that drew my attention is the level of destruction and the negative impact that the conflict is having on young people in terms of death, injury, drug abuse, criminality, and all sorts of things. I discovered that something needs to be done." A Christian said, "I knew that if not quickly nipped in the bud, [crisis] was going to affect the state negatively, particularly economic-wise because if we do not nip the fighting in the bud and with the political situation on ground, we were going to have a lot of problems and then it might fall into economic backwardness for the state, social disintegration for the state, and that motivated me to see what I can do to stop it immediately so that we do not build too much hate in ourselves."

However, the rest of the non-religious factors that motivated these individuals to become involved in were very diverse. They ranged from wanting to promote development in the country to the feeling that they must do something as a "reasonable citizen" of Nigeria. Two people, both Muslims, were motivated to become involved in the peacebuilding process by training in conflict resolution.

All eight participants gave religious reasons that motivated them to become involved in the peacebuilding process, with an average of 4.25 religious reasons per participant. Therefore, participants gave more religious motivations for being involved in peacebuilding than non-religious reasons. The religious reasons fell more clearly into clean categories than the non-religious motivations for becoming involved in peacebuilding.

The most common religious reason for becoming involved in peacebuilding included a peaceful value is taught within their religious tradition (N=12; 8 Muslim, 4 Christian). These values included peace, reconciliation, forgiveness, love, cooperation, and nonviolence. For example, a Christian stated, "I know that the issue of love and forgiveness were hammered seriously into our brains. For a Catholic child…there is no way you can lift your hand and hurt

another person because…you should not hurt anybody deliberately. Even if by mistake it so happens [that you hurt a person] you are encouraged to meet the person to seek for reconciliation because by the Christian doctrine, you are showing the life of Christ." A Muslim said, "As a Muslim, many people have the impression that Islam is about violence, but I know as a Muslim, an enlightened Muslim, that Islam is for peace."

The next highest religious motivation for becoming involved in peacebuilding was from the Holy Book (N=8; 5 Christian, 3 Muslim). In this category, participants either explicitly mentioned the Bible or Koran or a passage from one of their Holy Books. A Muslim said, "The Koran said, 'Ye are the best creature among man because you enjoin what is good and forbid what is wrong and you believe in God'…Killing each other or fighting or destruction in community is part of what is sinful and wrong so when you forbid it, you are fulfilling that injunction. When you enjoin to live in peace, you are calling to the good." A Christian response was, "Even in the Lord's prayer that talk about 'Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth...' What is the will of God? What is the kingdom of God? It is not about crisis, destruction, killing, loss of life and properties. For me, I feel the kingdom of God is about peace and the peace of mind that we promote in the minds of other people."

Participants also indicated that the example of their revered Prophet motivated them to become involved in peacebuilding (N=5; 3 Muslim, 2 Christian). A Muslim told a story about a non-Muslim who threw garbage into the Prophet Mohammed's house every day. Every day as the Prophet walked to Mosque, he had to pass by a fresh pile of trash. On his way to Mosque one day, the Prophet noticed that the pile of trash was missing. He queried his followers, and they said that the man who always threw the trash was sick in bed. After going to Mosque, the Prophet visited the sick man who formerly mistreated him. The participant finished the story by

saying, "You see, that goes a long way in teaching us how to respond to our conflict situation – that we don't need to respond to our conflict situation violently." A Christian told the story of Peter cutting off the ear of a soldier who came to arrest Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane. The participant then said, "It could have been an issue that Jesus would say, 'That's alright. You deserve it. Why did you come here to arrest me?' But Jesus rebuked Peter and said: 'Satan, you get behind me.' The rebuke alone was something for us to learn that Jesus was a man of peace. He has to rebuke his followers. Not just that, he pick the ear and fix it back. Jesus was after peace, to restore peace."

Three participants indicated that their involvement in the peacebuilding process was a calling (2 Christians, 1 Muslim). "I feel that as a Christian, Jesus is the Prince of Peace and I am a follower of Jesus Christ. I take after that and I take very seriously the peace theology initiative of our Lord Jesus Christ. Also, in 2 Corinthians 5, it talk about we have been given the ministry of reconciliation and I feel that I have a responsibility to work in the field of reconciliation, to provide reconciliation in a broken world…So for me, it is all of that and as I do this work, I feel I am fulfilling the mission and the ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ." A Muslim said, "It's like, there are very, very few people that are really rising up to bring out [the resources for peace in Islam] and to address this concern. So that is one thing that motivated me, that look, I must go on this path. So it is like a kind of calling."

Finally, three participants, all Christian, indicated that peacebuilding is necessary for evangelism. For example, "Another very strong Christian value that motivates me is the fact that you cannot evangelize with hatred in your heart. I cannot evangelize to he who is already a Christian, who has accepted Christ. I have to evangelize to him who does not know Christ. So how I do that with hatred for that person?" It is important to point out that the participants did

not report that the peacebuilding process itself was an evangelistic tool, but that a peaceful environment was a necessary foundation for evangelism.

The remaining three religious reasons were diverse. One participant saw how religion was used for violence and is determined to confront that with the resources for peace. He said, "I look at religion as being the major instrument that those who want to perpetrate violence are using because of how sensitive it is to people because of how easy it can be used to mobilized people to do things out of even their senses…Why can't people use the peace resources that are in this religion to promote peaceful coexistence, to make the world a better place? So I said, ok, I think this should be my job to also bring out this religious perspective that serve as resources for peace rather than for violence."

Another participant was motivated to become a peacemaker when he saw how difficult the violence was making his job as a pastor. "I want to see the gospel of Jesus being preached. I want to see the kingdom of God, the churches, prosper, both spiritually and physically. But in the environment, it's kind of being covered with crisis. I as a preacher would not be able to preach. Sometimes I find it difficult to see members in the church because they have the fear of 'I am going to be killed.' So it is my duty to now work for peace."

The final religious motivation for becoming involved in peacebuilding related to the joy of doing something where one's abilities align with their religious beliefs. "How wonderful the joy I find myself doing [peacebuilding] and then it conforms to our beliefs."

Therefore, religion plays a key role in motivating individuals to become peacebuilders, along with a practical realization of the impact of the violence and the desire to promote peaceful development in society. One participant highlighted this sentiment well, "So this is a scriptural thing, a scriptural directive, as well as a passion [for peace]."

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Role of Religion in Peacebuilding Strategies

The second research question asked: What role, if any, does religion play in the strategies that are used to foster peace? Seven reasons were given for why religion is necessary to the peacebuilding process in Plateau State. Two of the reasons related to the fact that Nigeria is a very religious country. "But as to whether religion plays a very strong part in deescalating conflict, it does, particularly in the Nigerian situation where we are very religious."

Two other reasons related to the fact that religion leads to deep commitment by individuals. "One other important aspect of religion is the fact that it deals with the heart of the person. It is not about head knowledge, it is not about knowing and cramming, but it is your heart. And if it is your heart, it is a total commitment of yourself. Once your heart is arrested, then you are likely to give your whole, you surrender your whole to it. And that is the power that religion has, is that it has the power to arrest the mind of the person."

Two more reasons stated that religion is part of the problem, so it must also be part of the solution. "I feel that religion has been a machine or it has been a vehicle that is being used to convey this message of crisis, violence, and all the rest. It may not be the main issue people are fighting on…but religion is being used so if religion is used, we also have to involve religion in solving the problem."

The final reason related to the significant peacebuilding resources within religion: "Some of the key elements of the work we do has to do with healing, reconciliation, forgiveness. In all the faiths, in all the religious teachings, there are a lot of resources that promote healing, forgiveness, and reconciliation…both on issues of responding to the conflict and then the issues of forgiveness, issues of reconciliation, and the rest of them, religion is played out."

Only one participant gave a caution about using religion in peacebuilding.[2] This participant said, "Because if you start off at the level when people are angry, they are unhappy, it is not as if they do not know the Christian doctrine. Everybody knows it. The Muslims know it. But when you see tempers have risen so high and other things and you have gone into violent conflict, it's not the best time to start off with preaching. It's better you start off on the level of the social issues that are involved until you get to a point where parties are really in the know of the situation on ground and are accepted that something has gone wrong and that something good can come out of it that you now bring in the issue of religion."

In terms of how religion is used in the peacebuilding process, the most common activity mentioned was using religious teachings to promote the peacebuilding process (N=8; 5 Muslim, 3 Christian). A Christian participant said, "Sometimes I use the value of religion without using any verses. You discover the values of religion in Christianity has similar values that you can find in other religions as well. The peacebuilding values are major connectors that you can find in most other religious groups and so they serve as a major connector…When you talk of love, almost all of the religions will talk of love. But in our training, we push the bullet a little bit to see that the love that will bring about reconciliation has to go beyond the boundary of our paradigm. Because we sometime talk about love, is the love of your neighbor, the love of your family, your wife, and your friends. I used to mention the fact that the authenticity of our faith is determined not by how it treats people inside of the fence, but how it treats people outside of the fence. That's how we test the religion, whether it is a religion that can embrace others."

In regards to using religious teachings in peacebuilding, a Muslim said, "So many a times, particularly in our transformational workshops, we bring in the elements of this religious teachings…on this issues and then I use them to brainstorm and interact so that it help people to

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[2] This same participant also gave one reason why religion is necessary in peacebuilding.

challenge their conscious and to also challenge their thinking and action even as they cling to the fighting in the name of religion, to really find out what this religions are saying. We really bring in religious perspective in many instances, both on issues of responding to the conflict and then the issues of forgiveness, issues of reconciliation, and the rest of them, religion is played out."

Most often, participants mentioned using religious teachings at trainings conducted by the peacebuilders. However, religious teachings about peace were used in diverse ways as well. For example, one participant said that she shared religious teachings related to peace at traditional celebrations (e.g., weddings and baby naming ceremonies). Participants also mentioned supporting Pastors and Imams in teaching religious principles related to peace as well as developing bible study notes about peace.

The second most common way that religion is used in peacebuilding was using religious organizations to bring people together across the conflict divide (N=4; 2 Christian, 2 Muslim). One participant said, "One of our major approach in peace work is inter-faith approach. We try as much as possible to involve people from across faith, create space for them to interact, to learn from one another, to clear their stereotypes, to clear their suspicion, to clear their doubts about each other, and to get to understand each other."

Three participants mentioned advocacy to solicit the support of religious leaders in their peacebuilding programs. "With the religious leaders and community leaders, most of the things we do is advocacy programs. We go to them, we tell them our mission, our vision, and what project we are into, what we are doing with their people. Mostly what we want from them is support so that they will support our project and also encourage those youth and women that we are working [with] because they are under their leadership."

Two participants (one Muslim, one Christian) mentioned prayer as an important component of the peacebuilding process. "We cannot rely on our own efforts for peacebuilding. We must pray."

Role of Religion in Peacebuilding between Christians and Muslims

The third research question asked: Is the role of religion in peacebuilding efforts similar between Christians and Muslims? In terms of peacebuilding activities, Christians and Muslims were almost exactly identical in how religion is used in the peacebuilding process. Equal numbers of Christians and Muslims reported using religion to bring individuals together and for prayer, and there were only slight differences in the other categories (e.g., slightly more Muslims reported using religious teaching than Christians; $N = 5$ and 3, respectively). Therefore, both Muslims and Christians reported using religion similarly in the peacebuilding process.

However, the religious motivations for being involved in peacemaking did differ between the two religions. Muslims reported religious values as being important motivators twice as frequently as Christians ($N = 8$ and 4, respectively). Christians reported motivations straight from their Holy Book slightly more frequently than Muslims ($N = 5$ and 3, respectively). Most significantly, though, three Christians reported peacebuilding as an evangelistic tool while virtually no Muslims suggested likewise. Therefore, the religious motivations for becoming involved in peacebuilding may differ between individuals of the two faiths.

<div align="center">Conclusion</div>

In conclusion, this research study found that religion has a key role to play in the peacebuilding process in Plateau State. The participants involved in this study became involved in peacebuilding for both religious and practical reasons. They saw the need for peace in their community, and they had religious beliefs to support this need. Motivations came from religious

values, the Holy Books, examples of their Prophets, a religious calling, and evangelism. Likewise, all of the participants saw the value for religion in the peacebuilding process, including using religious teachings in educating people about peace, using religious organizations to support the peacebuilding process, bringing together people of both faiths, and prayer.

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