Faith at Frontlines of Preventing and Resolving Conflicts: Christianity and Islam in Sub-Saharan Africa

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Abstract

In Africa, religion is a powerful touchstone in restoring peace, reconciliation, and social cohesion. Among the major religions, Christianity and Islam are becoming centers of conflict resolution and sources of exaggerated violence. This paper aims to investigate the role of religion in sub-Saharan Africa as a method for conflict resolution while shedding light on the difficulties religious actors encounter in modern conflict prevention. On one hand, religious beliefs and institutions offer significant opportunities for conflict resolution by promoting shared values of truth, forgiveness, and reconciliation. They often serve as mediators, leveraging their moral authority to facilitate dialogue and understanding among conflicting parties. Their teachings and sacred materials can inspire forgiveness, helping heal divisions and foster long-term peace. On the other hand, their peaceful involvement in current events is "less visible but equally important" because of persistent capacity gaps in modern conflict prevention mechanisms and strategies. Besides this, they are not fully and officially supported by existing institutions in the area, which makes their efforts fragmented and self-motivated. Another common challenge is that most conflict prevention initiatives need more resources for long-term and sustainable engagements. This study utilizes a methodology that draws on various documents and case studies in sub-Saharan Africa. The findings underscore the importance of interfaith collaboration, promoting religious peacebuilding at the center, and supporting religious peacebuilders who voice their desire to mitigate conflict and promote enduring peace.

Role of religious leaders in sub-Saharan Africa

In the year 2020, the Afrobarometer survey stated that in Africa more than 95% of the people identify with one or another way with religion or belief.[1] The study finds a statistical proportion among the continent's population more than 56% are Christian and 34% are Muslim which is geographically distributed predominantly in the south and north of the continent respectively. Regardless of whether they are Muslim or Christian, sub-Saharan Africa has almost twice as many Christians as Muslims. However, the two faiths are roughly balanced in countries such as Ethiopia, Nigeria, and other middle-path countries, with the great meeting place in the middle of the sub-Sahara.

In recent decades, the world's two largest religions, Christianity and Islam are mainly known for standout as a source of hope including peacebuilding and conflict resolution in the continent.[2] In the same vein, the inter-faith peacebuilding initiatives have significantly multiplied and gained recognition for supporting the efforts of religious actors in conflict transformation and peacebuilding. These faith-based organizations operate locally, nationally, and internationally. Notable continental-level organizations include the African Council of Religious Leaders - Religions for Peace (ACRL-RfP), Africa Union – Interfaith Dialogue Forum (AU-IDF), Programme for Christian-Muslim Relations in Africa (PROCMURA), Inter-Faith Action for Peace in Africa (IFAPA), and quite a few institutions. These multi-faith associations help neutralize community divisions, change negative perceptions through inter-faith dialogue, and engage in actions to transform social injustices.[3]

In the sub-Saharan, religion and its leaders are seen as a powerful force capable of indispensable roles in elections and post-election due to their moral authority and trust from broad constituencies. A study on Nigeria highlights religious leaders' significant role in promoting peace during the 2015 elections, particularly in the South East.[4] Christian and Muslim leaders in various states, such as Borno, Kaduna, and Rivers, urged to prevent electoral violence and peaceful conduct among their followers, especially impoverished youth, through sermons and media outreach. However, some religious leaders in Abia State were criticized for bias, while others maintained neutrality and emphasized democracy and reconciliation.

Moreover, there have been numerous forms of insecurity and escalating conflict where religious leaders have been positively involved in electoral and political conflicts. In countries

such as Kenya, they have made positive contributions to election violence and conflict management.[5] After the 2013 election violence, they contributed significantly to social stability, helped communities promote reconciliation, and encouraged peaceful resolutions by supporting interfaith and interethnic dialogue on a grassroots and national level.[6] In addition, they worked along with civil society organizations to document abuses and pressure the international community to intervene, preventing further violence. Therefore, through shared religious values, practices, and service provision, interfaith initiatives are more likely to positively contribute to minimizing inter-group mistrust and social fragmentation at the national level.

In addition, religion played a crucial role in enforcing the *Truth and Reconciliation Council* in countries such as South Africa, Mozambique, and Nigeria. Jeffrey stated that such initiatives became law to investigate alleged atrocities, grant amnesty, and deliberately use religious sentiments to promote reconciliation between enemies through truth-telling in the case of Mozambique, and Nigeria.[7] Despite these best examples, some critics blame the *Truth and Reconciliation Council* leadership for adopting "a religious-redemptive view of its mission and mandate" in the context of South Africa.[8]

Furthermore, conflict is not exclusive to a specific religion in a certain country, but rather a shared burden that both religions and others must address. In light of the widespread reality of conflicts and war-affected communities, both Christianity and Islam play a beneficial role in providing spiritual and emotional support to civil society. As Githiraro elaborated the various activities of peacebuilding conducted by the religious institutions in Africa included psychosocial support and trauma healing for those affected by violence and internally displaced communities.[9] Consequently, their unique contribution is recognized for providing humanitarian aid amid ongoing conflicts and post-conflict situations including psychological support and spiritual guidance.

Despite the extreme religious views, African religious organizations play a remarkable role in preventing, managing, and transforming conflicts. In addition to this, their institutions serve as safe spaces and community hubs, facilitating discussions and activities that promote social harmony.[10] For instance, following civil wars in Liberia, Guinea, and Sierra Leone, interreligious councils formed by representatives of Christian and Muslim networks provided conflict resolution leadership to maintain requisites for peace-building initiatives across national and regional

boundaries.[11] Therefore, these two major religions have a long-established history in conflict resolution and prevention, as demonstrated by their interreligious engagements and networks in sub-Saharan Africa.

Opportunities for resolving conflicts

Religion has emerged as both a foundational social identity marker and belief system. It provides an important pathway in conflict situations because of their shared and respected values, their roles as spiritual guides, and their deep understanding of local contexts. Moreover, given the current contributions and potential, religious leaders' involvement in their communities, possess well-established moral and spiritual authority essential to promote peace and social cohesion.[12] They can inspire changes in attitudes and actions by interpreting religious texts to denounce violence. As a result, their voices resonate and their messages have the potential to spread widely. Due to their local presence and legitimacy, they can address and resolve conflicts at multiple levels.

Relatedly, the faith community has a unique advantage over other actors in effective Interfaith conflict-preventive mechanisms and conflict-resolving initiatives in different parts of the region. For instance, their experiences are illustrated by case studies in many countries in sub-Saharan Africa, including Cote d'Ivoire.[13] For more than two decades, Cote d'Ivoire has experienced political crises, with religion being used both to justify violence and resolve conflicts. Furthermore, religious leaders intervened promptly to resolve the ambiguity of religion by preventing a political conflict from becoming religious. These two majority religions, therefore, continue to play a significant role in conflict resolution and will continue to influence society.

In addition to religious identity, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and reputation are not the only characteristics that influence how groups contribute to armed conflict. Furthermore, the rise of armed community mobilization has weakened traditional authorities and religious dispute-resolution mechanisms, disrupting social norms and hierarchies. However, religious leaders have responded effectively by addressing armed group recruitment and supporting processes like disengagement, disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration.

In countries like Mali, Nigeria, Cameron, Somalia, and other parts of sub-Saharan countries, religious actors have engaged in debates with members of rebellion and extremist

groups.[14] As mediators and communication links between opposing parties, they can help resolve conflict situations. In particular, religious engagement acts as a preventive force, slowing recruitment rates, while greater religious diversity reduces the likelihood of recruitment and withdrawal from armed groups through amnesty or surrender. As a result, they often serve as mediators in conflicts, leveraging their influence to foster dialogue and reconciliation.[15]

According to the United Nations Development Program report published in 2023, religion in Africa supports and amplifies the voices of religious teachers and scholars who preach tolerance and interfaith cohesion, challenge misinterpretations of true beliefs, counter harmful narratives, and promote alternative messaging.[16] By spreading religious education and teaching among at-risk communities, this capitalizes on the role of religious leaders in resolving conflicts. They possess a rich heritage of conflict resolution and peacebuilding resources, including the Holy Scriptures, sacred teaching, cultural practices, and years of experience. Against this backdrop of the surge in conflict resolution in sub-Saharan Africa, investing in community-led governance systems that promote transparent and accountable leadership in religious affairs is one of the major opportunities for resolving conflicts.

Challenges for preventing conflicts

The complex religious landscape in sub-Saharan countries impacts conflict prevention efforts. According to Daba, there are gaps among spiritual leaders in their engagement in peacebuilding and conflict resolution in Ethiopia.[17] The study has identified significant capacity gaps and the need for more professionally trained actors in preventing conflicts and promoting social cohesion. The study also indicates a need for more effectiveness in conflict prevention and peacebuilding among individuals and organizations, with their involvement in addressing violent conflict threats needing to be revised. Therefore, there is a need for more sufficient knowledge and skills in conflict prevention, management, and strategies for sustainable peace. This gap in training leaves a void in effective mediation and resolution strategies.

In the continent, religion has been included in its public role; it often turns to religion for conflict prevention and peace restoration resources. However, in many cases, religious actors lack the skills necessary to diagnose problems correctly, as a result, it is difficult to distinguish between

tensions and violence caused by political, ethnic, or religious factors.[18] To prevent conflicts, they emphasize religious aspects rather than professionalism in using modern peacebuilding mechanisms. Further, the study stated that direct and sustained engagement in peacebuilding and social cohesion activities needs to be improved, which is crucial for empowering these actors to seek justice and reconciliation.

Trusted religious leaders are often more effective in conflict prevention and mediation than secular authorities, as they can draw on a deep reservoir of trust within their communities.[19] However, the contributions of trusted, committed, and unbiased religious leaders to conflict resolution still need to be officially supported by existing institutions in the area, making their efforts fragmented and self-motivated.[20] Consequently, much of their work needs to be recognized. The study identified challenges such as scattered, uncoordinated initiatives isolated from other socio-political dynamics in the area.

Correspondingly, religious peacebuilding initiatives require a higher allocation of financial resources for long-term and sustainable engagements, unlike the support received by local government institutions and civil society organizations. As a result, religious actors may need to spend considerable time competing for limited funding instead of focusing on regional peace efforts. Furthermore, most peacebuilding programs involving religious actors are often the first to be cut when donor priorities change.[21] Most peacebuilding deliverables and conflict prevention efforts are therefore focused on short-term solutions.

In most sub-Saharan complex conflicts, various issues, such as resource availability and basic human needs, are often interconnected. According to Harrison, substantive conflict issues can involve contested objects like wealth, power, and prestige, along with their conditions of availability.[22] Conflicts between different religious groups can complicate efforts by religious actors to act as neutral peacebuilders, particularly in areas with a history of inter-religious violence. Historical grievances and sectarian divides further complicate the role of religion in preempting conflicts.

In such complex environments, religious actors may become less informed about the needs of their followers, leading to unintentional favoritism toward certain religious sects or groups. This can result in unequal access to resources and privileges, which poses significant challenges for maintaining interfaith peacebuilding initiatives. The competition for scarce resources like land,

water, and employment opportunities can intensify tensions between religious communities. When one group perceives that another is receiving preferential treatment, it can lead to resentment and conflict, ultimately undermining the leverage and effectiveness of religious leaders in preventing and resolving disputes within these communities.

Last but not least, the challenge is that youth and women are not a monolithic group; age, location, ethnicity, and religious beliefs shape their diverse opinions and associations with ongoing conflicts.[23] For instance, in the case of Burkina Faso and Mali, these factors significantly influence their perspectives. Conflict-sensitive approaches have not been explored adequately despite the importance of addressing these groups' needs, addressing their behaviors, and promoting positive change. In Ethiopia's inter-religious council context, youth and women have limited participation in peacebuilding initiatives, which men predominantly lead in a patriarchal structure.[24] In particular, as young people are prone to being recruited into conflicts, they should actively participate in the peacebuilding process. More research is needed to explore how these groups can be important in preventing and resolving conflict in sub-Saharan Africa.

Key recommendations

In sub-Saharan Africa, religious peacebuilding is growing and emphasizes the central role of religious identity in pruned and prolonged conflicts. It stresses the importance of interfaith prevention mechanisms and dialogue to address these conflicts. The article recommends that various stakeholders take a series of measures.

1. ***Foster Interfaith Collaboration***: Pronominally, interfaith institutions should prioritize addressing attitudinal intolerance and support alliances that bring together their leaders from different faiths. By seeking common moral and theological ground, these leaders can collaboratively address conflicts and promote a message of peace and coexistence. Ludovic advocates for promoting inter-religious socialization and leadership for peace, including establishing coordinated regional and national offices for interfaith efforts.[25] Therefore, this helps both Christian and Muslim peacebuilders and inter-faith efforts need to be coordinated and networked in a more preventive approach to promote peaceful coexistence and tolerance. Further, by including traditional and emerging religious leaders, the

Christian and Muslim interfaith collaboration can be strengthened and exert greater influence over conflict prevention in sub-Saharan Africa.

2. ***Give More Support to Religious Peacebuilders:*** Civil society and international non-governmental organizations should support religious peacebuilding efforts in sub-Saharan Africa to prevent and respond to conflicts. Abu-Nimer and Kadayifci-Orellana argue for engaging and strengthening religious actors focused on religious conflict resolution traditions.[26] Likewise, Ludovic further suggests that religious peacebuilders should receive more training in conflict resolution to enhance their effectiveness in local communities.[27] They can contribute by providing financial resources, capacity-building programs, and technical expertise to religious actors. Moreover, NGOs can help amplify the voices of religious actors by connecting them with broader networks and advocacy platforms, both locally and internationally. Such support should include strategies for preventing and resolving conflict, equipping leaders with the necessary skills to address these challenges effectively. Therefore, to be able to diagnose violence's incitements that have religious, ethnic, or political roots, or a combination thereof, it is equally important to educate and empower religious peacebuilders. Besides this, conflict resolution and management should be included in the curricula of religious educational centers to equip future religious peacebuilders.

3. ***Make Religious Peacebuilding Efforts at the Center***: Policymakers and local governments should prioritize integrating inter-religious efforts into peacebuilding structures and decision-making processes. They may offer official recognition and support for religious peace initiatives, facilitating access to communities and creating a legal framework that allows religious actors to operate freely. They can also collaborate with religious leaders to mediate conflicts and implement peace agreements, leveraging the moral authority that religious leaders hold within their communities. The state should support and encourage religious diplomatic engagement as an instrument to prevent, solve, and manage conflicts. Related to this, it is essential to allocate budgets and ad hoc funds for religious institutions and leaders to address peaceful conflict transformation early on. Additionally, it's important to create platforms where religious actors engage in direct face-to-face dialogues between community members to bridge divides and promote understanding. Consequently, these platforms allow and support spiritual leaders to rebuild contact, trust, and confidence

among community members. In light of this, engaging youth and women peacebuilders play a key role in spreading messages of peace, thus fostering a culture of harmony from the ground up. Accordingly, designing, implementing, and monitoring national and subnational strategies in collaboration with this demographic majority of faith peacebuilders is vital to preventing and resolving conflicts.

Conclusion

Conflict usually involves differences in values and power disparities, with misperceptions and miscommunications playing important roles in the evolution of adversarial relationships. On the contrary, religion often plays a vital effort in affected populations by helping to prevent conflict and strengthen conflict resolution efforts. Furthermore, Christianity and Islam in Sub-Saharan Africa have significant potential for resolving disputes and preventing their occurrence. They share respected values in Africa, such as forgiveness and reconciliation, which can help bridge conflict divides. Most importantly, local communities typically perceive religious leaders and institutions as trustworthy and credible due to their reliance on sacred texts, teachings, and their established roles among followers. This unique influence motivates the two major religions to fundamentally change attitudes and actions, thus strengthening support for peace initiatives. Despite encountering challenges, both major religions have significantly contributed to preventing and resolving conflicts in sub-Saharan countries. As a result of leveraging the principles of interfaith dialogue and cooperation, including shared values, direct conflict in the region can be addressed while

promoting long-term national cohesion and stability in communities. In conclusion, there has been a noticeable change in perspectives regarding preventing and resolving violent conflicts, and a growing interest among religious practitioners in conflict management and other non-violent techniques, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa and beyond.

Notes

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