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The Role of the Church in Africa in Helping to Avert National Conflicts from Escalating into Violence

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Abstract

Since the 20th century, churches have significantly influenced national reconciliation following catastrophic events. Religious leaders, activists, theologians, and scholars have historically initiated and facilitated reconciliation efforts, including national truth and reconciliation commissions. However, there has been limited focus on proactive measures to prevent conflicts from escalating into catastrophes. Through a thematic analysis of qualitative documents, the article highlights that churches in Africa have frequently played a limited role in preventing socio-economic and political tensions from escalating into devastating crises. This article aims to evaluate the Church's role in helping to prevent national conflicts from worsening. By integrating, analysing and interpreting findings from an extant body of literature with a view to show evidence at a meta-level, this article contributes to discourse on the Church and Peacebuilding and will serve as a useful resource for future national case studies on the role of the Church in helping to avert national conflicts from escalating into a catastrophe.

Keywords: Church; Conflicts; Conflict Resolution; Catastrophe; Peace; Peacemaking; National Reconciliation

Introduction

Drawing on a review of existing literature, this article critically examines how the Church in Africa contributes to preventing national conflicts from escalating into full-blown crises. National socio-economic and political conflicts, such as those in Burkina Faso, Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Chad, Ethiopia, Libya, Mali, Mozambique, Niger, Nigeria, South Sudan and other countries, have the potential to escalate into catastrophic events, causing immense human suffering and destabilising societies. Throughout history, the world has witnessed numerous national conflicts that have escalated into catastrophes. In such tumultuous times, the role of the Church emerges as a significant factor in helping to mitigate conflicts and promote peace. However, facilitating national reconciliation after a catastrophic event is a costly, complicated, and lengthy process with far-reaching consequences. As societies continue to grapple with ethnic, socio-economic, and politically driven national conflicts, the Church, with its moral authority and influence over a considerable portion of the population in a number of countries, holds a significant position. Therefore, it is imperative to examine the role of the Church in helping to avert national conflicts from escalating into catastrophes and, instead, foster peace.

In this article, the category "Church" is used as a sociological description of Christian churches without necessarily engaging in the deeper and diverse theological construal of being church. With a substantial global following, the Church has the ability to mobilise communities and involve them in peaceful initiatives. Furthermore, the Church has significant potential for mobilising religious social capital with positive implications for peace-building through its national, regional and international networks (Sakupapa 2023:2). Yet, its role as a peacemaker in Africa is not without challenges. Political sensitivities, resource constraints, and the intricate nature of conflict environments can significantly limit its impact. This article undertakes a literature review to critically examine existing scholarship on the Church's involvement in preventing national conflicts from escalating into full-scale crises. In this regard, the literature review serves as the methodological tool.

Accordingly, this article explores two key questions: How has the Church in Africa exercised its prophetic role in national reconciliation to help prevent ethnic, socio-economic, and political conflicts from escalating into catastrophes? And how has it responded to the challenges encountered in this endeavour? By examining the Church's historical involvement in conflict resolution, its role as a moral authority and mediator, and its capacity to mobilise communities, the study assesses its potential contribution to peacebuilding. Drawing on case studies from Algeria, Angola, Burundi, the Central African Republic, Chad, Ethiopia, Liberia, Libya, Mozambique, Nigeria, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, South Africa, and Zimbabwe, the article highlights the Church's ambivalent role – ranging from complicity to active engagement – in various peace initiatives.

Historical Context

Algeria

The case of the Algerian civil war (1991–2002), also known as the "Black Decade," reveals the Church's constrained role in conflict prevention and reconciliation, shaped by colonial legacies, state repression, and institutional fragmentation. Despite its humanitarian and peacebuilding efforts, the Church's historical association with French

colonialism (1830–1962) entrenched mistrust among Algeria's Muslim majority, who often viewed Catholic missions as instruments of foreign domination (Ruedy 2005:67). Post-independence legal frameworks, such as the 1984 Family Code and 2006 Ordinance 06-03, institutionalised Islam as the state religion, marginalising Christianity and restricting non-Muslim activities (McDougall 2017:89).

Pre-war peacebuilding initiatives, like the Catholic Church's interfaith dialogues and Protestant grassroots education programmes (Pacini 1999:45; Ammour 2012:33), were hamstrung by the Church's "apolitical" avoidance of critiquing the authoritarian FLN regime (Roberts 2003:112). During the conflict, Bishop Pierre Claverie's condemnation of atrocities by Islamist groups (e.g., GIA) and state forces exemplified moral courage, though his 1996 assassination highlighted the risks of dissent (Claverie 1996:4). Protestant churches provided covert humanitarian aid (Hadjadj 2001:78), while the Church's endorsement of the Sant'Egidio peace initiative was dismissed by the state as foreign interference (Martinez 2000:156). Algerian churches lacked the theological cohesion to challenge state narratives framing the war as counterterrorism (Volpi 2003:92).

Post-conflict, the Church shifted to symbolic reconciliation, organising trauma-healing workshops and interfaith dialogues (Chenntouf 2010:61). However, these efforts avoided confronting systemic issues like state-imposed amnesty for wartime crimes under the 2005 Charter for Peace (Werenfels 2007:44). Challenges included lethal security risks (e.g., the 1996 Tibhirine massacre; Kiser 2002:123), restrictive state policies (Hannachi 2015:34), and denominational fragmentation (Ould Mohamedou 2018:77).

Scholars argue that the Church's focus on institutional survival over prophetic dissent weakened its peacebuilding role (Roberts 2003:118; Appleby 2000:89). Unlike contexts such as Liberia, where grassroots mobilisation thrived (Gifford 2009:56), Algeria's repressive environment stifled such efforts. The Church's limited impact in averting war reflects its colonial legacy and political marginalisation. Nevertheless, its post-war moral witness – though largely symbolic – hints at untapped potential for advancing social cohesion and inclusive justice amid Algeria's enduring trauma.

Angola

Angola's civil war (1975–2002), one of Africa's deadliest conflicts, resulted in over 500,000 deaths and entrenched poverty. The Catholic Church, while instrumental in post-war reconciliation, faced institutional limitations rooted in colonial legacies and political co-optation that hindered its ability to prevent the conflict. Post-war efforts emphasised symbolic healing but often neglected structural injustice, reflecting tensions between ecclesiastical agency and state influence (Péclard 2015; Messiant 2008; Soares de Oliveira 2015). The Catholic Church's alignment with Portuguese colonial rule, including legitimising forced labour, eroded its moral authority after independence. The Marxist-Leninist MPLA government nationalised Church assets, deepening mistrust among rural communities sympathetic to UNITA rebels (Péclard 2015; Heywood 2000). Internal divisions, such as the fragmented advocacy of the "Angolan Council of Christian Churches (CICA)" and the Catholic Church's cautious "Justice and Peace Commission", further weakened its pre-war influence (Schubert 2010; Moorman 2018).

During the war, clergy like Bishop Dom Pedro Luís Guidão condemned atrocities,

but the Church's efforts were undermined by MPLA propaganda and denominational divides. Humanitarian aid from groups like Catholic Relief Services (CRS) and evangelical churches inadvertently reinforced territorial and ideological splits (Birmingham 2006; Gifford 2004). The Church's top-down support for peace accords, such as the 1991 "Bicesse Accords", failed to address grassroots grievances over resources like land and diamonds, highlighting a disconnect from local needs (Lederach 1997; Le Billon 2001; Hodges 2004). Post-2002, Church initiatives like the Catholic "Peace and Reconciliation Program" and CICA's interfaith dialogues prioritised symbolic acts of forgiveness over systemic issues like corruption or land dispossession (Péclard & de Oliveira 2015; Soares de Oliveira 2015). Grassroots efforts, such as the "Ecumenical Committee for Peace in Angola (CEPA)", blended traditional "kimbo" rituals with Christian ethics but were marginalised by state-led authoritarian peacebuilding (Sanches 2020; Pearce 2018).

Scholars highlight Appleby's (2000) "paradox of religion," wherein the Church vacillated between complicity and resistance. Its pre-war failure is attributed to "institutional survivalism" prioritising state access over dissent (Messiant 2008; Moorman 2018). Conversely, post-war reconciliation efforts align with Lederach's (2005) concept of "moral imagination," leveraging spiritual capital for trust-building, albeit within constraints (Schubert 2010). The Church's colonial entanglements and fragmented advocacy limited its conflict prevention role, yet its post-war reconciliation work underscores potential for grassroots transformation. Scholars argue that decentralising authority, addressing historical complicity, and prioritising structural justice are critical for the Church to transcend its "reluctant prophet" status in a nation still grappling with inequality and authoritarianism (Péclard 2015; Pearce 2018).

Burundi

Burundi's ethnopolitical civil war (1993–2005), which resulted in over 300,000 deaths and 1.2 million displaced, is another case that highlights the Church's ambivalent role as both a complicit historical actor and a post-conflict reconciler. Despite its reconciliation efforts, the Church's failure in helping to prevent violence is linked to colonial legacies, institutional fragmentation, and political entanglements (Lemarchand 1996; Chrétien 2003).

The Church's colonial-era alliance with Belgian authorities entrenched ethnic hierarchies, privileging Tutsi elites in education and clerical roles, framing them as a divinely ordained "ruling caste" (Lemarchand 1996). Post-independence, the Church maintained ties to Tutsi-dominated regimes, notably remaining silent during the 1972 genocide of Hutu intellectuals under President Micombero, eroding its moral authority among Hutu communities (Chrétien 2003; Ndarishikanye 1998). During the 1993 crisis, Catholic bishops' pastoral letters condemned violence but avoided naming perpetrators or addressing systemic inequality, exemplifying "spiritual bypassing" (Appleby 2000; Reyntjens 2016).

The Church's response was fragmented: Anglican Archbishop Ntahoturi condemned Tutsi-led army atrocities, while Catholic leaders equivocated due to internal divisions (Ndayiragije 2004). Anglican peace initiatives focused on symbolic dialogues but avoided challenging authoritarianism, reflecting Lederach's (1997) critique of "mediators without muscle." Humanitarian efforts, like Catholic Relief Services (CRS),

were constrained by military surveillance and politicised aid distribution (Daley 2008).

Post-2005, the Church prioritised symbolic gestures (e.g., apologies, prayer rallies) over systemic justice. The Catholic-led "National Reconciliation Commission" sidestepped land restitution and accountability (Nindorera 2012), while the Anglican-supported Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) emphasised forgiveness over reparations (Lemarchand 2009). Grassroots efforts, like ACAT-Burundi's documentation of mass graves, were marginalised by Church hierarchies focused on political access (Ntahombaye 2018; Turner 2020).

Scholars critique the Church's "institutional survivalism" for prioritising state alliances over dissent, such as in its post-war silence under President Nkurunziza's regime (ICG 2016; Ndayiragije 2004). To reclaim moral authority, scholars advocate a liberation theology framework and integrating traditional mediators (*bashingantahe*), as seen in the Diocese of Bubanza (Ntahoturi 2015). The Church's historical complicity in ethnic stratification and wartime timidity limited its preventive role. Yet, post-conflict efforts, though often superficial, reveal potential for grassroots renewal. Scholars urge decentralising authority, confronting colonial legacies, and prioritising structural justice to transform the Church from a "reluctant mediator" into a catalyst for enduring peace in a nation still grappling with cyclical violence.

Chad

The Church in Chad has played an ambivalent role in the country's protracted civil conflicts (1965–present), balancing peacebuilding efforts with systemic limitations rooted in colonial legacies, political repression, and institutional fragmentation. Despite humanitarian and reconciliation initiatives, its capacity to prevent violence was critically hindered by historical entanglements and denominational divisions, though its post-conflict efforts reveal nascent potential for fostering cohesion. The Church's colonial-era establishment under French rule entrenched perceptions of it as an extension of colonial authority, exacerbating Christian-Muslim tensions (Debos 2016). Post-independence, political leaders like François Tombalbaye instrumentalised Christianity to marginalise Muslim communities, while Hissène Habré co-opted religious leaders to legitimise repression, eroding the Church's neutrality (Decalo 1987; Buijtenhuijs 1993).

The Church engaged in peacebuilding through education (Catholic Justice and Peace Commission) and interfaith dialogue (Platform of Religious Confessions), yet avoided critiquing authoritarianism under Idriss Déby, reflecting a "strategic silence" to avoid reprisals (Seignobos 2015; Appleby 2000; Magrin 2016). This limited its ability to address systemic grievances like ethnic marginalisation (Maslanik 2018). Humanitarian efforts, such as Caritas Chad's aid, operated under military oversight, inadvertently legitimizing the regime (Debos 2013). Fragmented advocacy - Catholic diplomatic engagement versus evangelical "spiritual warfare" framing - mirrored societal divisions (Kodjo-Grandvaux 2019). State surveillance, as seen in Archbishop Djitangar's case, further restricted activism (HRW 2009).

Symbolic initiatives like "Healing of Memories" workshops blended Christian and traditional practices (Foucault 2020), while grassroots programmes addressed trauma but lacked structural impact. The 2006 "Comprehensive Peace Agreement" failed to tackle land dispossession or militia disarmament, entrenching impunity (Marchal 2017; ICG, 2021; Debos 2019). The Church's "institutional survivalism" – prioritising state

patronage over dissent – explains its preventive failure (Magrin 2016). Unlike South Africa's grassroots anti-apartheid mobilisation, Chad's repressive context stifled such strategies (Lederach 1997). The Church's colonial legacy, political pragmatism, and fragmentation constrained its conflict prevention role. Yet, its post-conflict moral agency, though limited, suggests potential if it decentralises authority, confronts complicity, and prioritises structural reforms – a necessity for healing Chad's fractured society.

Central African Republic

The Church in the Central African Republic (CAR) has played an ambivalent role in the country's conflict (2012–present), balancing post-war reconciliation efforts with systemic limitations rooted in colonial legacies, institutional fragmentation, and political entanglements. While praised for fostering interfaith dialogue and healing, its failure to prevent sectarian violence reflects historical complicity and structural constraints, though its post-conflict initiatives reveal latent moral agency.

The Church's colonial-era alignment with French authorities entrenched its influence in education and healthcare but fostered perceptions of elitism (Lombard 2016). Post-independence ties to autocratic regimes, notably François Bozizé (2003–2013), who framed his rule as a "divine mandate" against Muslims, which eroded its neutrality (Marchal 2015). The Church's reluctance to confront state corruption or Muslim grievances exemplified "spiritual bypassing" (Appleby, 2000), as seen in the Catholic Justice and Peace Commission's cautious documentation of abuses (Carayannis & Lombard 2015).

The Church's response was marked by fragmentation and insecurity. Archbishop Dieudonné Nzapalainga co-founded the "Interfaith Peace Platform" with Muslim leaders, yet grassroots clergy faced lethal risks, with over 20 pastors killed (ICG 2017). Denominational divisions deepened: Evangelicals framed the conflict as a "holy war," while Catholics emphasised dialogue (Vircoulon 2015). Humanitarian aid, such as Catholic Relief Services' operations in Christian zones, inadvertently reinforced sectarianism (Carayannis 2019).

Efforts prioritised symbolism over structural justice. The "Interfaith Peace Platform" organised prayer rallies but avoided land dispossession and militarisation issues (Debos 2016). The Catholic "Healing Hearts" programme provided trauma counselling but ignored clergy complicity in violence (HRW, 2018). Grassroots initiatives like "Sant'Egidio"'s peace committees showed promise but were overshadowed by elite-focused international frameworks (Pouligny 2020; Bøås & Strazzari 2020). The Church's role as both "victim and perpetrator" reflects "institutional survivalism" prioritising donor and state ties over dissent (Lombard 2020; Appleby 2000). While Archbishop Nzapalainga's interfaith collaboration exemplified Lederach's (1997) "moral imagination," reliance on superficial peacebuilding risks perpetuating Galtung's (1969) "negative peace." It needs to be noted that before Johan Galtung – widely regarded as the Father of Peace and Conflict Studies – formally defined negative and positive peace, Martin Luther King Jr. had already expressed these ideas through his calls for justice beyond the mere absence of conflict (King 1963).

The Church's historical complicity and fragmentation hindered its preventive role, yet its post-war efforts signal potential for grassroots renewal. Decentralising authority,

confronting colonial legacies, and prioritising justice (e.g., land restitution) could transform its role from "reluctant mediator" to a catalyst for durable peace, a necessity in a nation where 70% of the population rely on faith-based aid (UN OCHA 2023).

Ethiopia

Ethiopia's history of violence, including the Red Terror (1977–1978) and Tigray War (2020–2022), highlights the Ethiopian Orthodox Church's (EOC) complex role, constrained by historical entanglements, political co-optation, and institutional fragmentation (Kebede 2011; Tibebu 1995). The EOC's alignment with Amhara hegemony under the Solomonic dynasty and Emperor Haile Selassie entrenched ethnic marginalisation, a legacy exploited by the Marxist "Derg" regime (1974–1991), which co-opted the Church while persecuting dissenting clergy (Zewde 2002; Donham 1999). During the Red Terror, institutional paralysis prevailed; Patriarch Abune Tewophilos was executed for resisting the "Derg", yet the EOC hierarchy avoided systemic condemnation of state violence (Gebru 2009). Protestant and Catholic churches faced harsher repression, weakening advocacy (Abbink 2014).

In the Tigray War, the EOC's fragmented response—epitomised by Patriarch Abune Mathias's symbolic peace calls—failed to address root causes like ethnic federalism, while its Amhara-centric identity alienated Tigrayan Orthodox communities (Aalen 2021; ICG 2021). Interfaith initiatives, such as the Joint Council of Churches, adopted Appleby's (2000) "strategic quietism," prioritising survival over dissent, while evangelical churches lacked political influence (Feyissa 2020).

Post-conflict, reconciliation efforts emphasised symbolism over structural justice. The EOC's government-aligned Reconciliation Commission faced criticism for prioritising unity over accountability (Tronvoll 2022), while interfaith forums sidestepped issues like Oromo land dispossession (Jalata 2020). Grassroots initiatives, however, showed promise: the Mekane Yesus Lutheran Church integrated indigenous "Gadaa" practices (Deacon, 2018), and Catholic Relief Services (CRS) supported Tigrayan women's trauma recovery, aligning with Lederach's (1997) "integrated peacebuilding" (UN OCHA 2023).

Scholars critique the EOC's "theology of submission" to state power (Tareke 2009), urging adoption of liberation theology and decentralisation to amplify marginalised voices, such as Tigrayan clergy (Beyene 2017; Freeman 2021).

The EOC's historical complicity with state power and ethnic favouritism hindered conflict prevention. Yet, post-conflict grassroots efforts suggest potential for renewal through structural justice and interethnic solidarity—essential for Ethiopia's fractured landscape.

Liberia

The Liberian civil wars (1989–2003) exposed the Church's limitations in preventing conflict due to its historical ties to the Americo-Liberian elite, theological fragmentation, and neglect of systemic socio-political grievances. Scholars note that the Church's alignment with oppressive power structures—exemplified by leaders like President Tolbert and Vice President Warner holding dual religious-political roles—eroded its moral legitimacy among the indigenous majority (Gifford 1993:58; Kieh 2008:4; Ellis 1999:112). Pre-war efforts to advocate peace were fragmented and failed to address root

causes such as land dispossession and ethnic marginalisation, reflecting a lack of strategy unlike in South Africa's anti-apartheid movement (Tourer 2002:89; Tite 2009:76; Gbotoe 2016:03).

Post-conflict, however, the Church emerged as a key reconciling agent. Ecumenical initiatives by the Liberian Council of Churches (LCC), trauma-healing programs, and participation in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) underscored its adaptive agency (Pham, 2005: 144; Sawyer, 2008: 92). Yet scholars highlight a paradox: its strength in healing emerged only after failing to prevent violence, as preventive action would have required confronting power imbalances and grassroots mobilisation—tasks hindered by hierarchical detachment from rural communities (Lederach 1997:29; Moran 2006:117).

For future impact, scholars urge a transformative ecclesiology that prioritises social justice, grassroots partnerships, and integration of indigenous traditions like the Poro and Sande societies (Tite 2009:81; Appleby 2000:109; Lederach 1997:56). Challenges persist, including donor dependency, wartime complicity, and waning political influence (Harris 2006:63; ICG 2011:15). Institutional reforms – decentralisation, lay leadership, and secular civil society collaboration – are deemed critical to fulfilling the Church's peacebuilding potential (Bowers 2020:44). While the Church's pre-war complicity and fragmentation limited its preventive role, its post-conflict reconciliation efforts highlight latent agency. Addressing historical legacies and reorienting toward structural advocacy remain imperative for sustaining peace in Liberia's fragile context.

Libya

Libya's civil war (post-2011) revealed the Church's limited capacity to prevent conflict from escalating due to its marginalisation as a religious minority, restrictive legal frameworks, and internal divisions. Historically, under Gaddafi's regime, non-Muslim institutions faced repression via laws like Law No. 20 (1991), which confined church activities to private worship and criminalised proselytisation (Pargeter 2012:67). The Catholic Church, focused on pastoral care for migrants, avoided public advocacy to survive state scrutiny (Wehrey 2018:89). Pre-2011 peacebuilding efforts, such as the Catholic Justice and Peace Commission's discreet documentation of abuses and Coptic Orthodox aid to migrants, prioritised "strategic silence" over confronting systemic injustices (Appleby 2000:112; St. John 2015:45). During the civil war, the Church faced existential threats, including attacks on churches by Salafist militias (e.g., the 2013 destruction of the Coptic Orthodox Church in Dafniya) and targeted violence against clergy, such as the assassination of Father Mina Abbad by ISIS (Lacher 2020:34; BBC 2017). Humanitarian efforts, like Caritas Libya's aid to migrants, operated under severe security constraints (Varvelli 2016:56). Denominational fragmentation further weakened collective action, with Catholics focusing on international diplomacy and evangelical groups aiding refugees clandestinely (Wehrey 2018:102).

Post-conflict, the Church engaged in symbolic reconciliation, such as Catholic-Muslim interfaith dialogues emphasising shared Abrahamic values (Cole 2021:23) and Coptic trauma counselling for trafficking survivors. However, these efforts avoided addressing root causes like militia impunity and migrant exploitation, exacerbated by the weak UN-backed GNA (Pack 2021:67). The 2015 Skhirat Agreement, endorsed by church leaders, failed due to its exclusion of grassroots actors (Lacher 2020:89), while

Vatican appeals for justice lacked enforcement mechanisms (Varvelli 2018:34).

Scholars critique the Church's "survivalist pragmatism," a common strategy for religious minorities in Muslim-majority states, which limits political engagement to avoid persecution (Petersen 2012:156). Dependence on foreign donors such as Caritas Internationalis further reduced peacebuilding to apolitical humanitarianism (Wehrey 2018:123). Comparative studies, such as Egypt's Coptic civil society, highlight the need for grassroots mobilisation – untenable in Libya due to institutional fragility (Sedra 2013:78). The Church's preventive failure stemmed from marginalisation, security risks, and fragmentation. Yet its post-2011 efforts, though constrained, suggest potential for moral witness. Amplifying its impact requires alliances with Libyan civil society and advocacy for inclusive governance, contingent on courage and international solidarity.

Mozambique

Mozambique's civil war (1977–1992) illustrates the Church's constrained role in conflict prevention, shaped by colonial legacies, state repression, and internal fragmentation, despite its post-war reconciliation efforts (Morier-Genoud and Anouilh 2012; Cabrita 2000). The Catholic Church, historically aligned with Portuguese colonialism, faced institutional distrust post-independence, as Frelimo's Marxist-Leninist regime curtailed its influence through restrictive laws like the 1978 Law on Religious Associations (Cabrita 2000:89; Morier-Genoud 2009:45). Simultaneously, insurgent group Renamo co-opted religious symbols while perpetrating violence against missionaries, trapping the Church between state repression and insurgent manipulation (Morier-Genoud and Anouilh, 2012:218; Vines 1991:72).

Structurally, the Church's fragmentation and urban-elite disconnect hindered grassroots engagement, limiting its ability to address rural grievances like land dispossession or counter Renamo narratives (Pruitt and Kim 2004:103; Hall and Young 1997:54). Unlike Lederach's (1997:33) emphasis on local cultural integration, the Church's colonial legacy alienated rural communities, while Frelimo's secularism marginalised religious actors from early peace processes (Synott 2005:117). Post-war, the Church shifted to reconciliation through initiatives like the Christian Council of Mozambique (CCM), promoting interfaith dialogue and spiritual renewal (Igreja 2003:435; Appleby 2000:178). However, efforts were hampered by symbolic gestures (e.g., prayer rallies) over structural reforms and reliance on donor funding (Tikka 2019:162; Tvedten 1997:95).

Scholars stress the need for a transformative ecclesiology: Appleby (2000:192) urges addressing root causes like governance failures, while Bräutigam (2000:121) highlights grassroots partnerships. Integrating indigenous practices (e.g., "curandeiro" healing) could enhance legitimacy (Igreja 2008:309), and Galtung's (1996:32) "structural peacebuilding" calls for systemic advocacy—though NGO dependency risks depoliticisation (Haynes 2009:77). The Church's wartime limitations stemmed from colonial complicity, state repression, and disconnection from grassroots realities. While post-war reconciliation demonstrated adaptive agency, fulfilling its peacebuilding potential requires confronting colonial legacies, fostering ecumenical solidarity, and prioritising systemic justice – a strategic and ethical imperative for Mozambique's fragile context.

Nigeria

Nigeria's history of violence, from the Biafra War (1967–1970) to the Boko Haram insurgency (2009–present), underscores the complex role of religious institutions in ethno-political conflicts. The Church, while pivotal in post-conflict reconciliation, has been constrained by colonial legacies, denominational fragmentation, and political co-optation, limiting its capacity to prevent violence (Lubeck 1985; Falola 1998). Its entanglement with ethno-regional identities – exemplified by its alignment with Igbo interests during the Biafra War – framed conflicts as Christian-Muslim struggles, undermining its neutrality (Nwankwo 2020; Uchendu 2007). During the war, Church bodies like the Christian Council of Nigeria (CCN) and the Catholic Justice, Development, and Peace Commission (JDPC) faced accusations of sectarianism due to perceived partiality (Ilo 2016). Structural challenges persisted in later conflicts. The Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) struggled to unify northern and southern Christians against Boko Haram, while denominational rivalries diluted advocacy efforts (Higazi 2016; Ojo 2007). Humanitarian responses, such as those by Catholic Relief Services (CRS), often reinforced ethno-religious divides, mirroring societal fragmentation (ICG 2014; Suberu 2001). Post-conflict, the Church emphasised symbolic reconciliation (e.g., interfaith dialogues via NIREC) but avoided structural issues like resource inequality (Achebe 2012). Grassroots initiatives, such as the Jos Peace Dialogue integrating traditional reconciliation practices, showed promise but were under-resourced (Krause 2018; ICG, 2020).

Scholars critique the Church's "institutional myopia" (Omenka 2010), noting its tendency to spiritualise conflicts or prioritise denominational interests over systemic justice, as seen in Pentecostal rhetoric (Ukah 2016). Conversely, initiatives like the Zango Kataf Peace Pact reflect Appleby's (2000) "ambivalence of the sacred" and Lederach's (2005) "moral imagination," leveraging religious plurality for trust-building (Best 2007). While the Church's structural entanglements and reactive strategies hindered conflict prevention, its post-conflict efforts highlight potential for grassroots-driven social cohesion through decentralised authority and systemic reform. This shift remains vital for addressing Nigeria's enduring divides.

Rwanda

The 1994 Rwandan genocide exposed the Church's systemic failure to help prevent mass violence, rooted in its colonial-era complicity with ethnic hierarchies and post-independence alignment with authoritarian regimes. Belgian colonial administrators and Catholic missionaries institutionalised the Tutsi-Hutu divide through racialised policies, reserving clerical roles for Tutsis (Mamdani 2001:76; Longman 2001:167). Post-independence, the Church sacralised Hutu-dominated regimes under Kayibanda and Habyarimana, framing their rule as divinely ordained and legitimising ethnic nationalism (Newbury 1998:44; Rittner et al., 2004:92). By 1994, churches became genocide sites, with clergy providing death lists and participating in massacres (OAU 2000:112; Des Forges 1999:234). The Church's theological fragmentation and prioritisation of institutional survival over prophetic dissent silenced opposition to genocidal rhetoric, despite isolated acts of heroism (Appleby 2000:63; Barnett, 2002:158). Its failure to counter dehumanising narratives underscored a lack of "moral imagination" (Lederach 1997:87), eroding public trust as it became a "site of betrayal" (Pruitt and Kim

2004:145).

Post-genocide, the Church pursued reconciliation through ecumenical initiatives like trauma healing, interethnic dialogues, and a 2016 Catholic apology (RCC 2005:22; Vatican Radio, 2016). Grassroots efforts included participation in "gaçaça" courts and interfaith memorials (Clark 2010:189). However, survivors criticised the Church's reluctance to disclose archival evidence of complicity, hindering accountability (Hirondelle News Agency 2018), while the RPF government marginalised it from formal processes (Buckley-Zistel 2006:112).

Scholars advocate for a transformative ecclesiology: Gopin (2000: 54) emphasises a "theology of repentance" with reparations, while Lederach (2005:39) proposes multi-level engagement to address structural inequities like land disputes (Hintjens 2008:112). The Church's renewal hinges on transcending historical complicity to prioritize justice and grassroots solidarity – a spiritual and political imperative in post-genocide Rwanda.

Sierra Leone

The Church in Sierra Leone played a dual role during and after the civil war (1991–2002), marked by its failure in helping to prevent conflict but partial success in post-war reconciliation. Historically, the Church's colonial-era alignment with British indirect rule entrenched socio-political inequalities, privileging Creole elites and legitimising post-independence authoritarian regimes (Fanthorpe 2001; Kabbah 2003; Gberie 2005). This complicity eroded its moral authority, particularly among marginalised rural youth who fuelled the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) rebellion (Richards, 1996). Despite Lederach's (1997) emphasis on confronting systemic violence, pre-war churches avoided critiquing state corruption and resource exploitation (Turay 2000). "Structural barriers" further limited conflict prevention. Urban-centric leadership and denominational fragmentation (Harris 2013; IPSS Report 2019) hindered engagement with rural grievances. Dependency on foreign donors prioritised reactive humanitarianism over structural reform, aligning with Galtung's (1996) critique of "negative peacebuilding" (Smillie 2000). The Church's silence on diamond-driven inequality (Keen 2005) underscored its institutional timidity.

Post-war, the "Inter-Religious Council of Sierra Leone (IRCSL)" emerged as a key actor, mediating disarmament and supporting the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) (Schwoebel 2010; Barnes 2005). However, the TRC (2004) criticised churches for ignoring wartime complicity. While interfaith initiatives fostered symbolic reconciliation, they neglected systemic reforms like youth employment or land redistribution (Lederach 2005; Millar 2016), perpetuating urban-rural divides (IPSS Report 2019).

Scholars advocate "transformative peacebuilding", urging churches to shift from reconciliation to justice advocacy (Appleby 2000), decentralising authority (Bowers 2020), and addressing grassroots issues like land disputes (Jackson 2007). Challenges remain, including donor-driven depoliticization (Haynes 2009) and youth disillusionment requiring innovative engagement (Peters 2011). The Church's wartime failures stemmed from institutional complicity and disconnection from marginalised communities, while its post-war interfaith efforts, though limited, highlighted the potential of religious coalitions. A moral imperative exists for systemic advocacy and centring marginalised voices to address Sierra Leone's enduring inequalities.

South Africa

The Church's role during South Africa's apartheid era (1948–1994) was marked by institutional complicity and fragmented resistance, undermining its moral authority to prevent systemic oppression. The Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) sacralised apartheid through theological doctrines like "sphere sovereignty," framing racial segregation as divinely ordained (Elphick 2012:89). It enforced congregational segregation and lobbied globally to defend apartheid (Chapman and Spong 2003:6). Even ostensibly oppositional institutions like the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) maintained segregated seminaries until the 1980s, reflecting hypocrisy despite condemning apartheid (Cochrane 1999:112; Villa-Vicencio 1992:78). The Seventh-day Adventist Church's silence further illustrated complicity (du Toit 2006:145). Resistance emerged through figures like Desmond Tutu and Allan Boesak but also among theologians such as Beyers Naude, a Dutch Reformed minister (Walshe 1983). Tutu, leading the South African Council of Churches (SACC), denounced apartheid as heresy and mobilised international sanctions (Tutu 1994:64), while Boesak's "Black Theology" reinterpreted Reformed doctrines to condemn oppression (Boesak 1984:33). Grassroots movements like the "Kairos Document" (1985) accused churches of legitimising state violence, urging active dissent (Kairos Theologians, 1985:12). John De Gruchy's book *The Church Struggle in South Africa* (1995) captures the ecumenical nature of the church struggle in South Africa but notes the generally the role played by Christian churches in the support and rejection of apartheid. He succinctly articulates the churches' complicity with and then resistance to apartheid.

Post-apartheid, the Church contributed to reconciliation through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), blending Christian ethics with "Ubuntu" principles (Verdoolaege 2008:102). However, the DRC's 1994 "Belhar Confession" faced internal resistance (de Gruchy 2004:73), and the RCC struggled with racial inequities in clergy leadership (Kumalo 2020:44). The TRC criticised churches for incomplete accountability (TRC Report 1998: Vol. 4,112).

Scholars critique this ambivalence. Appleby (2000:9) notes the Church's oscillation between sanctifying and resisting violence, shaped by ties to power (Lederach 1997:56). Transformative change requires confronting complicity and prioritising justice over institutional preservation – a necessity as South Africa grapples with enduring racial divides.

Uganda

The Church in Uganda has played a complex role in the nation's conflicts, marked by its failure in helping to prevent atrocities under Idi Amin (1971–1979) and during the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) insurgency (1987–present), yet contributing to post-conflict reconciliation. Historically, the Church's colonial-era alignment with British authorities entrenched ethnic and political hierarchies, a legacy persisting post-independence (Ward, 2005; Gifford, 1998). Under Amin, while Anglican Archbishop Janani Luwum's dissent symbolised moral resistance, his assassination (Marshall, 2009) and the broader Church's "strategic silence" (Hansen 2013) revealed institutional fragmentation and fear of reprisals. Amin's co-optation of religious rhetoric further legitimised his regime (Kasozi 1994). During the LRA conflict, the Church faced challenges due to the group's appropriation of Christian imagery (Allen 2006). Grassroots clergy faced lethal risks

(Finnström 2008), while humanitarian efforts by groups like "Catholic Relief Services" were constrained by militarisation, inadvertently legitimising state tactics (Dolan 2009). Evangelical focus on spiritual warfare overshadowed structural critiques of poverty and land dispossession (Baines 2014).

In post-conflict reconciliation, initiatives such as the "Healing of Memories" workshops and the "Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative" (ARLPI) blended Christian and traditional rituals (Baines 2007; Atkinson 2010). However, Church leaders' endorsement of the 2000 Amnesty Act prioritised peace over accountability (Branch 2011), neglecting structural issues like land grabs (Mwenda 2016).

Scholars critique this duality through Appleby's (2000) "ambivalence of the sacred," where the Church oscillates between complicity and resistance. Institutional survivalism—prioritising state relations over dissent (Kassimir 1998)—explains its preventive failures. Conversely, Lederach's (1997) "moral imagination" framework highlights its grassroots peacebuilding, though initiatives like Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative (ARLPI) risked "shallow peace" without addressing inequities (Baines 2014; Opiyo 2019). The Church's historical entanglements, political pragmatism, and fragmentation hindered its preventive role. Yet, its reconciliation efforts, albeit superficial, signal potential for moral renewal. Decentralising authority, confronting complicity, and prioritising structural justice remain critical for transforming the Church into a proactive agent of societal healing.

Zimbabwe

The Church in Zimbabwe has exhibited a dual role, marked by complicity during periods of state violence and tentative efforts toward post-conflict reconciliation. During the "Gukurahundi" massacres (1980–1987) most denominations, including mainstream Protestant churches, remained silent, reflecting institutional deference to Robert Mugabe's ZANU-PF regime (Zakeyo 2012; Chitando 2013). The Roman Catholic Church (RCC) eventually condemned the atrocities in 1997, albeit reactively and a decade after the violence (CCJP 1997; Ranger 2004). This hesitation stemmed from colonial-era entanglements, where missionary institutions relied on state patronage, fostering a culture of political caution (Chitando 2013; Togarasei 2016). Marongwe (2011) critiques this silence, framing churches as "accidental accomplices" to state repression. In the "2000s crisis", characterised by land invasions and election violence, the Church's response was fragmented. The Zimbabwe Council of Churches (ZCC) issued sporadic critiques, but evangelical groups like Emmanuel Makandiwa's United Family International Church endorsed Mugabe's "divinely ordained" rule (Gunda 2017). Urban-rural divides further polarised congregations, with rural churches echoing ZANU-PF rhetoric and urban ones aligning with opposition civil society (Chitando and Togarasei 2013). The RCC's 2007 pastoral letter, "God Hears the Cry of the Oppressed", marked a shift, condemning state violence, yet lacked grassroots engagement (CCJP 2007; Matsinhe 2015). Dissenting clergy, such as Anglican Bishop Pius Ncube, faced expulsion (Willems 2013).

"Post-2008 reconciliation efforts" saw the Church facilitating national prayer gatherings and dialogue forums (Bhebhe 2019), while groups like the Churches in Manicaland partnered with NGOs to document abuses (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2015). However, ZANU-PF excluded religious actors from the National Peace and

Reconciliation Commission (NPRC), and the Church's emphasis on forgiveness over accountability alienated victims (Tendi 2020; CCJP 2012). Lederach (1997) warns that such approaches risk entrenching impunity.

Institutional self-preservation – prioritising state access over moral advocacy – explains its failures (Chitando 2013), exemplified by groups like Zimbabwe Assemblies of God Africa (ZAOGA) aligning with ZANU-PF elites (Dube 2020). Scholars urge adopting Gutiérrez's (1973) liberation theology to centre marginalised voices, as seen in the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace (CCJP)'s grassroots legal clinics (Mashingaidze 2018), and forming interfaith coalitions akin to Malawi's movements (Phiri 2021). The Church's historical timidity and fragmentation undermined its prophetic role during Zimbabwe's crises. While post-conflict efforts signal potential renewal, transformative change requires decentralising authority, confronting complicity, and prioritising grassroots justice—a theological and political imperative for a nation still grappling with authoritarianism. Lederach (1997) emphasises the Church's unique capacity to bridge divides through moral authority, as seen in South Africa's TRC. However, institutional complicity, as in Rwanda and Liberia, underscores the peril of aligning with power. Appleby (2000) and Tite (2009) advocate for proactive engagement with root causes, transcending theological divides to foster transformative justice.

The National Political Responsibility of the Church

For some scholars, the national political responsibility of the Church is about the obligation of the Church and its leaders to get involved in political issues advocating for the common good and promoting the values and teachings of the Christian faith. This includes addressing social, economic, and environmental issues, as well as justice, human rights, and dignity. Villa-Vicencio (1992:270) argues that "the task of the religious institutions in society is to be accomplished through persuasion and participation in the democratic process, neither by coercion nor by special privilege." The church, especially in democratic nations, has a responsibility to offer moral guidance and contribute to public discourse on important national issues including poverty, ethnicity, economic inequality, discrimination, peace and violence, climate justice, political freedoms, human rights and others. The Church has a responsibility in the community to initiate, facilitate, advocate for, and mediate national reconciliation. In its national ecclesiastico-political responsibility. For the Church to maintain its authority in fostering dialogue and reconciliation in a nation, it should keep to its own sphere of involvement, be non-aligned with any political party or political ideology, and be involved in engagement with political issues in a non-partisan manner, promoting principles and values that transcend political divides. Unfortunately, for various reasons, as highlighted earlier, in some African countries, influential Church leaders may have strong political allegiances, affiliations, and partisan political leanings of their own.

Challenges and Limitations

As reflected in the existing literature, the role of the Church in helping to avert national conflicts from escalating into catastrophe includes certain challenges and limitations faced by the Church. Some scholars, such as Appleby (2000), Abu-Nimer (2003), Katongole (2008), Hibbard (2012) and Gopin (2015), have observed that in some cases,

the church's involvement in conflicts has been perceived as biased or aligned with particular political interests. It is also worth noting that in some cases, the churches lacked the prophetic foresight, while in other cases like in South Africa, churches which actively voice out against the injustices faced intimidation from those in authority. Additionally, the church's influence may vary depending on the context, religious diversity, and strength of its leadership. Understanding these challenges is crucial in order to develop effective strategies for maximising the church's potential in helping to avert conflicts from escalating into catastrophes.

The Church in National Peacemaking

The reviewed literature underscores the Church's predominant focus on post-conflict peacemaking and reconciliation rather than proactive conflict prevention to help avert national catastrophes. While the Church actively engages in truth commissions and post-catastrophe reconciliation, its role in helping to prevent conflicts from escalating remains underdeveloped (Villa-Vicencio 1992; Longman 2001). Case studies reveal systemic shortcomings, such as the Church often avoiding to address root causes of conflict, and at times aligning with political powers for influence or protection, thereby compromising its moral authority (Rogge 1984; Court 2019). Internal divisions, theological ambiguities, and resource constraints further hinder the Church's conflict prevention efforts. In some cases, a lack of theological grounding in social justice, fear of persecution, and prioritisation of spiritual matters over socio-political engagement contribute to passivity (De Gruchy 1999). For instance, the Church's silence during the Rwandan genocide—and even complicity in some cases—exemplifies its *failure to act decisively* (Court 2019; Longman 2001). Rogge (1984:73) critiques such inaction as "abscondita est Ecclesia" a Church "hidden away" from societal suffering, preoccupied with spiritual matters.

Factors limiting proactive engagement include spiritual prioritisation where churches often emphasise individual salvation and moral teachings over systemic socio-political issues and thus limit their capacity to address drivers of conflict (Villa-Vicencio 1992). In addition, the churches' political sensitivities sometimes result in the churches' concerns about neutrality or retaliation, thereby deterring churches from confronting authorities, as seen in Rwanda (Longman 2001). Moreover, limitations include resource and expertise gaps, resulting in limited diplomatic, mediatory, and analytical skills, coupled with financial constraints all hindering churches' proactive engagement.

The Church's post-catastrophe contributions – reconciliation programmes, humanitarian aid, and truth-seeking – are well documented and commendable. However, overemphasis on post-conflict roles risks neglecting root causes, as exemplified by Rwanda's genocide, where Church inaction enabled escalation (Longman 2001). Villa-Vicencio (1992) argues that the Church's prophetic role in conflict prevention is both theologically and politically vital, particularly in nations facing socio-economic strife. De Gruchy (1999:35) echoes Dietrich Bonhoeffer's imperative that the Church must not merely "bandage wounds" but "drive a spoke into the wheel" of injustice itself. To prevent conflicts, the Church must critically reassess its societal role, acknowledging past failures (e.g., political alliances, silence during crises) and realigning with its prophetic mandate for justice and peace. This requires promoting values like compassion, dialogue, inclusivity to heal divisions, investing in conflict analysis,

mediation training, and resource allocation. Above all, churches' ought to balance spiritual priorities with socio-political advocacy. Longman (2001) warns that reactive post-conflict engagement risks perpetuating cycles of violence. Proactive prevention not only preserves the Church's moral authority but is also more cost-effective than post-catastrophe reconstruction. Villa-Vicencio (1992) further challenges the Church's abstention from legislative processes, asserting that political engagement is critical for nations in reform or reconstruction.

The Church's peace-making legacy remains significant, yet its reluctance to address conflict precursors – driven by theological, political, and institutional constraints – undermines its potential. By adopting a dual focus on prevention and reconciliation, the Church can help to mitigate catastrophes rather than merely responding to their aftermath. As Rwanda's case illustrates, inaction carries profound moral and practical consequences. The Church should embrace its role as an agent of systemic change, leveraging its influence to address inequities before conflicts erupt and later evolve into catastrophic events.

Conclusion

From our review of the various case studies buttressed by the relevant literature, we can affirm that the Church in Africa, as exemplified by a cross-section of the African countries discussed, has tended to have greater input in national reconciliation after catastrophic events compared to its role in helping to avert national conflicts from escalating into catastrophes in the first place. In its religious teachings, mediation efforts, grassroots initiatives, and community engagement, the Church has demonstrated its capacity to foster peace, dialogue, and reconciliation. Unfortunately, that capacity and potential of the Church, in various seasons, has been seen to have been lacking effectiveness when it comes to the churches' role in helping to avert national conflicts from escalating into catastrophes. While the Church's involvement in national peace-making and post-conflict reconciliation is important and valuable, there is a need for the Church to actively engage in conflict prevention and peacebuilding efforts to help avert national conflicts from escalating into catastrophic events in the first place. By doing so, the Church can contribute to creating a more peaceful and just society. The findings of this review of the literature indicate that the Church needs to reflect more on its role and seek ways and means to contribute to peace and reconciliation rather than focusing more on post-conflict processes. This may involve addressing the factors that hinder its involvement, such as focusing more on spiritual matters at the expense of socio-political issues, navigating political sensitivities, acquiring expertise in conflict prevention, mobilising resources, and finding ways to exert influence in national and international affairs. The Church should prioritise the well-being of communities and work towards healing divisions, bridging differences, and promoting dialogue among conflicting parties. By doing so, the Church can enhance its credibility and effectively contribute to national reconciliation efforts, ultimately helping to avert conflicts from escalating into catastrophic events. Further, the national political responsibility of the Church includes advocating for justice, human dignity, and the common good. It should offer moral guidance, contribute to public discourse, and play a vital role in fostering dialogue and reconciliation. In light of this investigation, further studies may consider specific national case studies to further explore the role of the church in helping to avert national

conflicts from escalating into violence. Such more narrowly-focused studies may further inquire into the state of the religious resources of the Church in this regard.

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