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CHRISTIAN TEACHINGS ON RETALIATION AND JUSTICE IN AN AGE OF TERRORISM AND INSECURITY

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Abstract

The increasing incidence of terrorism, violent extremism and insecurity has generated profound ethical concerns regarding retaliation, justice and the appropriate moral response to violence. While governments often rely on military and legal measures to combat terrorism, questions remain concerning how justice can be pursued without perpetuating cycles of revenge. This study examines Christian teachings on retaliation and justice in an age of terrorism and insecurity, with the aim of analysing the biblical foundations of Christian ethics, evaluating Christian perspectives on justice, forgiveness and peacebuilding, and assessing the relevance of these teachings to contemporary security challenges, particularly in Nigeria. The study adopted a qualitative research design based on documentary research. Data were collected from the Holy Bible, books, peer-reviewed journal articles, official reports and other relevant scholarly publications, and analysed using theological and content analytical methods. Findings revealed that Christian ethics rejects personal retaliation while affirming lawful justice, reconciliation and respect for human dignity as essential responses to terrorism and insecurity. The study established that Christian communities can contribute significantly to peacebuilding through ethical leadership, interfaith dialogue and restorative justice initiatives. The study recommends strengthening ethical education, institutionalising interfaith peacebuilding, expanding church-based reconciliation programmes and promoting human rights-based counter-terrorism policies. The study concludes that Christian teachings provide a balanced ethical framework for pursuing justice, promoting reconciliation and fostering sustainable peace without compromising accountability.

Keywords: Christian ethics, retaliation, justice, terrorism, insecurity.

Introduction

Retaliation and justice have remained central concerns in moral philosophy, theology and contemporary security discourse because societies confronted with terrorism and violent extremism often struggle to balance accountability with restraint. Terrorist attacks frequently provoke demands for vengeance, yet cycles of revenge have repeatedly prolonged violence rather than restored lasting peace. According to the Institute for Economics and Peace (2024), terrorism continues to impose significant human, economic and psychological costs across many regions, with the Sahel accounting for over half of global terrorism-related deaths in recent years. Such trends demonstrate that conventional retaliatory measures alone have not eliminated insecurity but have often intensified distrust, displacement and social fragmentation. Miroslav Volf (2021) argued that justice divorced from reconciliation easily degenerates into renewed hostility because revenge seldom heals wounded communities or restores human dignity. Christopher Marshall (2022) also maintained that authentic justice seeks restoration and accountability rather than personal vengeance, insisting that moral responses to violence should preserve both the dignity of victims and the humanity of offenders. These perspectives suggest that retaliation, when driven by anger rather than ethical restraint, weakens prospects for sustainable peace and social cohesion.

Across Africa, terrorism and insecurity have increasingly tested legal institutions, religious communities and moral values. Armed groups operating in the Sahel, the Lake Chad Basin, Somalia and Mozambique have subjected millions of people to killings, kidnappings, forced displacement and destruction of livelihoods. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (2024) reported that violent conflicts across Africa continue to generate one of the world's largest humanitarian crises, leaving millions dependent on emergency assistance. Within this context, Christian teachings offer an ethical framework capable of interrupting cycles of retaliation without abandoning justice. Stanley Hauerwas (2023) contended that Christian ethics rejects revenge as a moral response because the gospel calls believers to overcome violence through forgiveness, truth, reconciliation and responsible justice. N. T. Wright (2021) likewise argued that biblical justice does not excuse wrongdoing; rather, it demands accountability while encouraging forgiveness that prevents hatred from shaping individual and collective responses to violence. Such teachings reflect Christ's command in Matthew 5:38–48, where love of enemies replaces personal retaliation with redemptive engagement. Christian ethics therefore presents justice as a moral responsibility exercised within the boundaries of compassion, restoration and respect for human life rather than retributive vengeance.

Nigeria presents one of the clearest illustrations of the tension between retaliation and justice in an age of terrorism and insecurity. Boko Haram, the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), armed banditry, farmer–herder conflicts and widespread kidnapping have produced profound humanitarian, economic and psychological consequences. The Institute for Economics and Peace (2024) ranked Nigeria among the countries most affected by terrorism despite improvements recorded over previous years. Tarela Juliet Ike (2022) found that persistent terrorist violence has generated deep feelings of fear, victimisation and religious insecurity among many Nigerian Christians, circumstances that often create

pressure for retaliatory responses instead of peaceful coexistence. Peace Ngwoke and Gladys Akabike (2022) further argued that prolonged insecurity has undermined sustainable development, weakened public confidence in state institutions and strained interreligious relationships across the country. Christian teaching, however, proposes a different moral response through forgiveness, reconciliation, respect for lawful authority and the pursuit of restorative justice. Such principles neither deny the responsibility of government to punish criminal acts nor encourage passivity in the face of evil; instead, they distinguish legitimate justice from personal revenge while promoting peaceful coexistence and social healing.

Existing scholarship has examined terrorism, insecurity, religious persecution, conflict management and peacebuilding from political, criminological, sociological and security perspectives. Tarela Juliet Ike (2022) concentrated on Christian experiences of terrorism and perceptions of victimisation in Nigeria, whereas Robin Harding and Arinze Nwokolo (2024) investigated the relationship between terrorism, trust and identity. Favour Chukwuemeka Uroko (2024) examined attacks against Christian clergy in parts of Nigeria, while Peace Ngwoke and Gladys Akabike (2022) explored the implications of insecurity for sustainable development. Despite these valuable contributions, limited scholarly attention has been devoted to a systematic examination of how Christian teachings on retaliation, forgiveness, justice, reconciliation and legitimate authority can provide an integrated ethical framework for responding to terrorism and insecurity. Most recent studies have concentrated on documenting violence, explaining its causes or assessing its social consequences, leaving the theological and ethical dimensions comparatively underexplored. This study addresses that practical gap through a critical examination of Christian teachings on retaliation and justice in an age of terrorism and insecurity, with the expectation that its findings will contribute to theological scholarship, ethical discourse and peacebuilding initiatives within Nigeria and comparable conflict-affected societies.

Conceptual Clarifications

Terrorism: Terrorism remains one of the most contested concepts within security studies, international law and ethics because no universally accepted definition adequately captures its diverse manifestations. Differences in political interests, ideological positions and legal traditions have contributed to varying interpretations across states and international organisations. According to the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism (2023), terrorism generally refers to criminal acts intended to cause death or serious bodily harm to civilians or non-combatants with the purpose of intimidating a population or compelling a government or international organisation to perform or abstain from performing a particular act. This understanding places deliberate violence against innocent people at the centre of terrorism regardless of the perpetrators' political, ethnic or religious motivations. Alex P. Schmid (2022) similarly argued that terrorism constitutes a method of coercive violence that relies on fear, psychological intimidation and symbolic attacks against civilians in pursuit of political, ideological or religious objectives. Such a perspective distinguishes terrorism from conventional warfare because its primary targets are often ordinary citizens rather than military personnel, while fear becomes a strategic weapon intended to influence broader audiences beyond the immediate victims.

Contemporary manifestations of terrorism extend beyond physical violence to include economic disruption, humanitarian crises, forced displacement and the destruction of social

trust. According to the Institute for Economics and Peace (2024), the global impact of terrorism continues to evolve, with the Sahel accounting for more than half of terrorism-related deaths worldwide in 2023, demonstrating a significant geographical shift in the epicentre of terrorist activities. Nigeria has remained among the countries most severely affected because of sustained attacks carried out by Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), alongside emerging forms of violent extremism in several regions. Bruce Hoffman (2021) maintained that terrorism succeeds not merely through acts of violence but through its ability to generate fear disproportionate to the scale of an attack, thereby influencing political decisions, disrupting economic activities and weakening public confidence in state institutions. Within the context of this study, terrorism refers to the deliberate use or threat of unlawful violence against civilians or non-combatants for political, ideological or religious purposes, with the intention of creating fear, undermining public order and compelling governments or societies to respond in particular ways. This conceptual understanding provides the foundation for examining how Christian ethical teachings address questions of retaliation and justice in societies affected by terrorism and persistent insecurity.

Insecurity: Insecurity refers to a condition in which individuals, communities or nations experience persistent threats to their lives, property, livelihoods and fundamental freedoms. The concept extends beyond the absence of physical safety to include social, economic, political and psychological vulnerabilities that diminish human well-being and limit opportunities for development. According to the United Nations Development Programme (2022), insecurity arises when people are exposed to chronic risks that undermine their ability to live free from fear, want and indignity. This understanding reflects the human security approach, which places individuals rather than states at the centre of security concerns. The United Nations Development Programme (2023) further argued that insecurity is multidimensional because armed conflict, terrorism, poverty, environmental degradation, food shortages and weak institutions often reinforce one another, creating conditions that perpetuate violence and instability. Such a perspective demonstrates that insecurity cannot be understood solely in military terms, since economic hardship, social exclusion and political marginalisation frequently create environments in which violent extremism flourishes.

The Nigerian experience illustrates the complex nature of insecurity in contemporary society. Terrorist attacks, armed banditry, kidnapping for ransom, communal conflicts, farmer–herder clashes and organised criminal activities have disrupted livelihoods, weakened social trust and displaced millions of people across different parts of the country. According to the National Bureau of Statistics (2022), millions of Nigerians experienced crime-related incidents, including kidnapping and violent attacks, while households suffered substantial financial losses arising from insecurity. The Institute for Economics and Peace (2024) also observed that persistent terrorist activities continue to affect Nigeria's economic growth, public confidence and national stability despite improvements in certain security indicators. Peace Ngwoke and Gladys Akabike (2022) argued that widespread insecurity undermines sustainable development because it discourages investment, interrupts education, weakens governance and deepens humanitarian challenges. Within the context of this study, insecurity refers to a persistent condition of fear and vulnerability created through terrorism and other forms of organised violence that threaten human life, social order and national development. This understanding provides a suitable framework for examining how Christian ethical teachings

may contribute to justice, reconciliation and peaceful coexistence in societies affected by prolonged violence.

Retaliation

Retaliation refers to a deliberate response to perceived injury, injustice or aggression through the infliction of comparable harm upon an individual or group considered responsible for the original offence. Moral philosophers, legal scholars and theologians distinguish retaliation from legitimate justice because retaliation is generally motivated by personal resentment or collective revenge, whereas justice seeks fairness, accountability and the restoration of social order. Christopher D. Marshall (2022) argued that retaliation is rooted in the human desire to repay evil with evil, a tendency that often perpetuates hostility rather than resolving conflict. Miroslav Volf (2021) similarly maintained that retaliatory behaviour frequently intensifies violence because revenge invites further revenge, creating cycles of hatred that undermine reconciliation and peaceful coexistence. Such perspectives demonstrate that retaliation may provide temporary emotional satisfaction but rarely produces enduring justice or social healing.

Modern societies continue to wrestle with retaliation in contexts of terrorism, communal conflicts and violent extremism. Public outrage following terrorist attacks often generates demands for severe reprisals against perpetrators or groups perceived to be associated with them. Such reactions may result in collective punishment, ethnic profiling or excessive use of force, thereby creating fresh grievances that sustain violence. N. T. Wright (2021) argued that Christian teaching rejects personal retaliation because vengeance belongs to God, while lawful authorities bear responsibility for administering justice within ethical and legal boundaries. Stanley Hauerwas (2023) also contended that discipleship requires Christians to resist revenge even in situations of grave injustice, choosing forgiveness and reconciliation without denying the seriousness of criminal wrongdoing. Within the context of this study, retaliation refers to the intentional act of responding to violence or perceived injustice through revenge or reciprocal harm rather than through lawful, ethical and restorative processes of justice.

Justice

Justice represents one of the foundational principles governing human relationships, legal systems and moral responsibility. The concept encompasses fairness, impartiality, accountability and the protection of human dignity within society. Contemporary discussions extend beyond punishment to include restorative practices that repair relationships, compensate victims and strengthen peaceful coexistence. Nicholas Wolterstorff (2022) argued that justice consists in rendering to every person what is due on the basis of their inherent worth as bearers of human dignity. Such an understanding rejects discrimination, arbitrary punishment and abuse of power because genuine justice protects both victims and the rights of the accused. Christopher D. Marshall (2022) further explained that biblical justice is inseparable from righteousness, mercy and restoration, insisting that punishment should serve the common good rather than satisfy desires for revenge.

Questions surrounding justice become especially significant in societies confronted with terrorism and persistent insecurity. Governments possess the legitimate responsibility to prosecute offenders and safeguard citizens, yet such responsibilities must remain consistent with the rule of law and respect for fundamental human rights. The United Nations Office on

Drugs and Crime (2022) argued that effective counter-terrorism measures should uphold due process, accountability and the protection of human rights because violations committed in the name of security frequently deepen social grievances and weaken public trust. N. T. Wright (2021) likewise maintained that Christian justice seeks restoration alongside accountability, encouraging responses that preserve human dignity while confronting wrongdoing. Within this study, justice refers to the fair and ethical administration of accountability through lawful processes that protect society, uphold human dignity, restore damaged relationships where possible and distinguish legitimate punishment from personal vengeance.

Christian Ethics

Christian ethics refers to the moral principles and standards that govern the conduct of Christians in response to God, fellow human beings and the wider society. These principles derive primarily from the teachings of Jesus Christ, the Scriptures and the enduring moral traditions of the Christian faith. Christian ethics seeks not merely to regulate outward behaviour but to cultivate virtues such as love, justice, forgiveness, compassion, humility and faithfulness. David P. Gushee (2022) argued that Christian ethics is fundamentally centred upon faithful discipleship, requiring believers to imitate the character of Christ in both private conduct and public engagement. Stanley Hauerwas (2023) likewise maintained that Christian ethics forms a distinctive way of life in which followers of Christ bear witness to God's kingdom through peace, truthfulness and sacrificial love rather than coercion or revenge. Such a framework presents morality as an expression of transformed character rather than mere compliance with legal rules.

Contemporary challenges such as terrorism, gambling, violent extremism, political instability and widespread insecurity have expanded scholarly interest in the public relevance of Christian ethics. Ethical questions surrounding retaliation, justice, forgiveness and the legitimate use of force require careful engagement with biblical teachings alongside contemporary realities (Ukpe, & Oko, 2026). N. T. Wright (2021) argued that Christian moral responsibility combines forgiveness with accountability, rejecting both passive acceptance of evil and uncontrolled retaliation. The World Council of Churches (2023) also affirmed that Christian communities contribute to peacebuilding through dialogue, reconciliation, justice, respect for human dignity and protection of vulnerable populations affected by conflict. Within the context of this study, Christian ethics refers to the application of biblical principles concerning love, justice, forgiveness, reconciliation and responsible stewardship in addressing terrorism and insecurity while encouraging responses that uphold both moral integrity and the rule of law.

Biblical Foundations of Christian Teachings on Retaliation and Justice

Christian teachings on retaliation and justice are firmly grounded in the Scriptures, where God's concern for righteousness, mercy and the sanctity of human life unfolds progressively from the Old Testament to the New Testament. The Bible neither condones personal vengeance nor ignores the need for justice. Instead, it presents justice as an expression of God's holy character while directing believers to reject revenge and pursue reconciliation. This biblical framework demonstrates that justice and mercy are complementary rather than contradictory virtues. Throughout Scripture, God consistently condemns oppression and violence while calling His people to uphold justice with compassion and humility (Micah 6:8;

Isaiah 1:17). Such teachings provide the theological foundation upon which Christian ethics addresses contemporary issues of terrorism, insecurity and violent conflict.

The Old Testament establishes the principle of justice through the doctrine commonly known as *lex talionis*, expressed in Exodus 21:24, Leviticus 24:20 and Deuteronomy 19:21 as "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." Modern readers often misunderstand this principle as an endorsement of revenge. Its original purpose, however, was to regulate judicial punishment and prevent excessive retaliation. Ancient Near Eastern societies frequently experienced blood feuds in which minor offences escalated into prolonged cycles of violence between families and tribes. The Mosaic Law introduced proportionality into the administration of justice, ensuring that punishment corresponded to the offence without exceeding it. Consequently, *lex talionis* functioned as a legal safeguard that restrained vengeance and preserved social order under God's covenant.

Another significant feature of the Old Testament is its insistence that vengeance belongs to God rather than to individuals. Deuteronomy 32:35 declares, "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," establishing divine justice as the ultimate standard for addressing wrongdoing. Similar ideas appear throughout the wisdom literature, where believers are instructed not to rejoice over an enemy's downfall or seek personal revenge (Proverbs 20:22; Proverbs 24:17–18). Such passages reveal that although civil authorities were authorised to administer justice, personal retaliation remained incompatible with covenantal faithfulness. Justice therefore operated within legal and moral boundaries designed to protect both victims and offenders from arbitrary violence.

The New Testament develops these principles further through the teachings and ministry of Jesus Christ. During the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus directly addressed the traditional interpretation of *lex talionis*, declaring, "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other also" (Matthew 5:38–39, NIV). Christ did not abolish justice; rather, He challenged the human tendency to transform legitimate justice into personal revenge. His teaching redirected attention from retaliation towards forgiveness, patience and moral courage. Such instruction called His followers to overcome hostility without mirroring the violence of their opponents.

Jesus expanded this ethical vision through His command to "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:44). Such teaching represented one of the most radical moral demands within the Christian tradition because it extended love beyond friends and neighbours to include adversaries. Love for enemies does not imply approval of injustice or indifference towards criminal behaviour. Instead, it reflects confidence that reconciliation possesses greater transformative power than revenge. Christ Himself embodied this principle during His crucifixion when He prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34). His response demonstrated that forgiveness remains possible even in the presence of profound suffering and injustice.

The ministry of Jesus also reveals that forgiveness does not eliminate accountability. Several encounters recorded in the Gospels demonstrate that Christ confronted sin while simultaneously offering grace and restoration. His interaction with the woman caught in

adultery illustrates this balance. After protecting her from unlawful execution, Jesus instructed her to "go now and leave your life of sin" (John 8:11). Justice therefore remained inseparable from moral transformation. Christian ethics consequently rejects two opposing extremes: vindictive retaliation on one hand and moral permissiveness on the other.

The Apostle Paul reinforced Christ's teaching in his letter to the Romans. Romans 12:17–19 instructs believers not to repay evil for evil but to leave vengeance to God, who alone possesses perfect justice. Paul's exhortation reflects profound trust in divine sovereignty because it releases individuals from the destructive burden of revenge. Romans 12:21 continues this ethical argument with the command, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." Such instruction encourages believers to respond to hostility through compassion, generosity and moral integrity rather than hatred. Christian responses to violence therefore become instruments for interrupting cycles of revenge instead of sustaining them.

Paul nevertheless recognised the legitimate responsibility of civil government to uphold justice. Romans 13:1–4 presents governing authorities as servants of God entrusted with maintaining law, order and public safety through the punishment of wrongdoing. This distinction is crucial within Christian ethics because it separates personal forgiveness from public justice. Individual believers are forbidden from seeking revenge, yet the state retains the responsibility to protect citizens, prosecute criminals and preserve social order. Such a distinction provides an important ethical framework for responding to terrorism and organised violence within contemporary societies.

The biblical witness reaches its fullest expression in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The cross reveals both God's justice against sin and His mercy towards humanity. Divine justice is satisfied without abandoning divine love, making reconciliation possible between God and humanity (Romans 5:8–11; 2 Corinthians 5:18–20). Christian ethics therefore understands justice not merely as punishment but as the restoration of broken relationships and the renewal of communities. This theological vision challenges societies affected by terrorism and insecurity to pursue responses that combine accountability with compassion, legal responsibility with forgiveness and security with respect for human dignity.

These biblical teachings remain profoundly relevant in an era characterised by terrorism, violent extremism and widespread insecurity. Governments possess the legitimate responsibility to protect citizens and prosecute offenders, yet Christian ethics insists that such responsibilities should never descend into indiscriminate retaliation or collective punishment. Believers are called to pursue justice through lawful means while resisting hatred, vengeance and dehumanisation. Such an approach offers a moral framework capable of promoting reconciliation, healing fractured communities and strengthening peaceful coexistence without compromising the demands of justice.

Christian Ethical Perspectives on Retaliation

Christian ethics rejects retaliation as the appropriate response to wrongdoing because revenge contradicts the character of God revealed through Jesus Christ. Rather than encouraging believers to repay evil with evil, the Christian moral tradition calls them to demonstrate love, mercy and self-restraint even under conditions of hostility. Such an ethical position does not

deny the reality of injustice or the suffering experienced by victims of violence. Instead, it distinguishes personal retaliation from legitimate justice administered through lawful authority. David P. Gushee (2022) argued that Christian ethics centres on faithful discipleship, requiring believers to reflect Christ's character in their relationships with others, including those who inflict harm. Similarly, Stanley Hauerwas (2023) maintained that the Christian community bears witness to God's kingdom through practices of peace rather than revenge, demonstrating that the Church's moral identity is shaped by the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. This perspective transforms retaliation from a perceived moral obligation into a temptation that Christians are called to resist through obedience to God.

The ethical rejection of retaliation is firmly anchored in biblical teaching. Jesus' instruction in Matthew 5:38–44 reinterprets the Old Testament principle of *lex talionis* by discouraging personal vengeance and replacing it with active love for enemies. Such teaching does not encourage passivity in the face of injustice; rather, it promotes responses capable of interrupting cycles of violence without abandoning truth or accountability. Christopher D. Marshall (2001) argued that biblical justice should be understood within a restorative framework that seeks reconciliation while maintaining responsibility for wrongdoing. Likewise, Miroslav Volf (2006) observed that forgiveness does not minimise evil but refuses to allow hatred and revenge to determine human relationships. These theological perspectives reinforce the biblical conviction that retaliation often perpetuates conflict, whereas forgiveness creates opportunities for repentance, restoration and peaceful coexistence. Christian ethics therefore views love as a moral force capable of confronting injustice without reproducing violence.

Questions surrounding retaliation become particularly complex in contexts of terrorism, armed conflict and widespread insecurity, where victims naturally desire justice for grievous offences. Christian ethics acknowledges the legitimacy of such concerns while insisting that justice must remain distinct from revenge. According to Romans 13:1–4, governing authorities possess responsibility for maintaining public order and punishing criminal behaviour, whereas individual believers are instructed in Romans 12:17–21 to refrain from personal vengeance and overcome evil with good. This distinction preserves both justice and moral integrity because it recognises the state's obligation to protect society while preventing private acts of retaliation that frequently escalate violence. Contemporary Christian ethics therefore encourages responses to terrorism that combine lawful accountability with compassion, reconciliation and respect for human dignity. Such an approach provides a balanced ethical framework capable of addressing insecurity without sacrificing the fundamental Christian values of love, forgiveness and peace.

Terrorism and the Ethical Challenge of Christian Response

Terrorism presents one of the most difficult ethical challenges confronting Christians because it deliberately targets innocent people, destroys communities and generates widespread fear. Such acts violate the sanctity of human life, undermine social stability and threaten the moral fabric of society. Christian ethics unequivocally condemns terrorism because it contradicts the biblical affirmation that every human being is created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26–27). Deliberate attacks against civilians therefore constitute not only criminal offences but also moral transgressions against God's design for humanity. The United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism (2023) described terrorism as criminal violence intended to intimidate

populations or compel governments to act in particular ways through fear and destruction. Bruce Hoffman (2021) similarly argued that terrorism derives much of its effectiveness from psychological intimidation, creating fear that extends far beyond the immediate victims. Christian ethics consequently rejects terrorism as incompatible with the principles of justice, love and respect for human dignity.

Responding ethically to terrorism presents a more complex challenge than condemning the violence itself. Victims, families and affected communities frequently experience profound grief, anger and a desire for retribution. Such emotional responses are understandable given the devastating consequences of terrorist attacks, yet Christian teaching cautions against allowing anger to develop into revenge. Jesus' command to love one's enemies and pray for persecutors (Matthew 5:44) remains one of the most demanding ethical obligations within Christianity, particularly when believers face persecution or violent extremism. Miroslav Volf (2006) argued that forgiveness should never be confused with excusing evil or abandoning justice. Instead, genuine forgiveness acknowledges the seriousness of wrongdoing while refusing to allow hatred to shape moral judgement. Stanley Hauerwas (2023) likewise maintained that Christian discipleship requires believers to resist violence without surrendering to despair, demonstrating that hope and faith remain stronger than the destructive power of terror. Such an ethical response seeks to interrupt cycles of violence rather than reproduce them.

Christian ethics also recognises that governments possess a legitimate responsibility to protect citizens from terrorism and maintain public order. Scripture affirms the role of civil authorities in administering justice and restraining criminal behaviour (Romans 13:1–4). Effective counter-terrorism measures, however, must remain consistent with the principles of justice, proportionality and respect for fundamental human rights. Collective punishment, indiscriminate military operations and discrimination against particular ethnic or religious communities risk creating fresh grievances that may encourage further radicalisation. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2022) argued that counter-terrorism strategies should uphold the rule of law and human rights while ensuring accountability for perpetrators of violence. Christian ethics therefore encourages a balanced response in which governments pursue lawful justice against terrorists while avoiding retaliation that undermines human dignity or fuels additional conflict. Such an approach preserves both security and moral integrity, demonstrating that the pursuit of justice need not abandon compassion or respect for life.

Christian Justice, Forgiveness, and Peacebuilding

Justice, forgiveness and peacebuilding constitute three interconnected pillars of Christian ethics that shape the believer's response to conflict, violence and injustice. Christian theology does not present these values as competing alternatives but as complementary responsibilities that contribute to the restoration of broken relationships and the promotion of social harmony. Justice seeks to uphold righteousness and hold offenders accountable, forgiveness releases individuals from the destructive burden of hatred, while peacebuilding creates conditions that foster reconciliation and sustainable coexistence. The life and ministry of Jesus Christ demonstrate that genuine peace cannot exist where injustice prevails, yet justice itself loses its moral character when it is driven by revenge rather than righteousness. Christopher D. Marshall (2001) argued that biblical justice extends beyond punishment because it aims to

restore relationships damaged through sin and wrongdoing. Nicholas Wolterstorff (2008) likewise maintained that justice is grounded in the inherent dignity and rights bestowed upon every human being by God, making the protection of human life and dignity a fundamental Christian obligation. Terungwa and Ukpe (2018) maintained that biblical principles of justice, particularly those reflected in the Book of Joshua, provide valuable guidance for equitable resource distribution and good governance in Nigeria. They argued that fairness in the management of national resources reduces poverty, social grievances and conflict, thereby strengthening peace and national development.

Forgiveness occupies a central place within Christian ethics because it reflects God's gracious relationship with humanity. Throughout the New Testament, believers are encouraged to forgive others in the same manner that God has forgiven them through Christ (Ephesians 4:32; Colossians 3:13). Such forgiveness does not imply forgetting painful experiences or abandoning legal accountability for criminal behaviour. Instead, it represents a deliberate moral decision to reject bitterness and relinquish personal vengeance. Miroslav Volf (2006) argued that forgiveness creates the possibility of a future no longer controlled by memories of violence, allowing individuals and communities to pursue reconciliation without denying the reality of past suffering. Desmond Tutu and Mpho Tutu (2014) also observed that forgiveness liberates both victims and offenders from cycles of resentment, creating opportunities for healing, truth-telling and renewed relationships. Christian forgiveness therefore functions as an act of moral courage rather than an expression of weakness, enabling justice to coexist with mercy and compassion.

Peacebuilding represents the practical expression of Christian justice and forgiveness within divided societies. Jesus described peacemakers as "blessed" and identified them as children of God (Matthew 5:9), indicating that the pursuit of peace lies at the heart of Christian discipleship. Christian peacebuilding extends beyond the absence of violence to include reconciliation, dialogue, social justice and the transformation of relationships fractured by conflict. Churches and faith-based organisations have frequently contributed to mediation, trauma healing, humanitarian assistance and community reconciliation in regions affected by terrorism and insecurity. John Paul Lederach (1997) argued that sustainable peace emerges through the restoration of relationships rather than through military victory alone, while David P. Gushee (2022) maintained that Christian ethics calls believers to become active agents of reconciliation within fractured societies. These perspectives demonstrate that justice, forgiveness and peacebuilding are mutually reinforcing principles that enable Christians to respond to terrorism and insecurity without compromising either accountability or compassion. Such an integrated ethical framework offers practical guidance for communities seeking lasting peace amid persistent violence.

The Nigerian Context: Terrorism, Insecurity, and Christian Ethics

Nigeria has experienced persistent security challenges over the past two decades, making the relationship between terrorism, insecurity and Christian ethics particularly significant. The emergence of Boko Haram in the North-East, the activities of the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), armed banditry in the North-West, farmer–herder conflicts in the North-Central region, kidnapping for ransom and communal violence across different parts of the country have resulted in widespread loss of life, displacement and destruction of livelihoods. The Institute for Economics and Peace (2024) reported that Nigeria remains among the

countries most affected by terrorism despite recent improvements in some security indicators. Similarly, The National Bureau of Statistics (2022) found that millions of Nigerians experienced crime-related incidents, including kidnapping, armed robbery and violent attacks, with households suffering substantial financial and psychological consequences. These realities have created an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty that continues to threaten national unity, economic development and peaceful coexistence among diverse religious and ethnic communities.

The persistence of terrorism and insecurity has also generated profound ethical dilemmas for Christians. Many believers have become victims of terrorist attacks, church bombings, abductions and communal violence, leading some to question whether forgiveness remains appropriate in situations involving repeated acts of brutality. Ukpe and Tsendzuul (2018) observed that ineffective leadership and the erosion of ethical values contribute significantly to social instability and underdevelopment in Nigeria. Their analysis suggests that sustainable responses to insecurity require leaders who uphold justice, accountability and the common good, principles that align closely with biblical ethics. Christian ethics acknowledges the pain, grief and desire for justice experienced by victims while cautioning against responses motivated by hatred or revenge. Jesus' command to love one's enemies and Paul's instruction to overcome evil with good (Matthew 5:44; Romans 12:21) remain relevant even in contexts marked by severe violence. Such teachings do not require Christians to ignore criminal acts or surrender their right to legal protection. Instead, they encourage believers to distinguish personal retaliation from lawful justice while trusting that God remains the ultimate judge of human actions. This ethical perspective enables Christians to pursue justice without reproducing the cycles of violence that terrorism seeks to sustain.

The Nigerian Church has responded to insecurity through humanitarian assistance, advocacy for justice, interfaith dialogue, trauma counselling and community peace initiatives. Numerous Christian organisations have provided relief materials to internally displaced persons, supported victims of terrorism and collaborated with government agencies and civil society organisations to promote peaceful coexistence. Despite these efforts, significant challenges remain, including religious polarisation, political manipulation of ethnic and religious identities, weak governance and inadequate protection for vulnerable communities. Christian ethics therefore calls the Church to combine compassionate ministry with prophetic engagement, encouraging accountability, defending the rights of victims and promoting reconciliation across religious and ethnic divides. Such an approach recognises that sustainable peace in Nigeria requires more than military responses alone. Moral renewal, responsible leadership, social justice and genuine reconciliation remain indispensable components of any lasting solution to terrorism and insecurity.

The Role of Christian Communities in Promoting Justice and Peace

Christian communities occupy a strategic position in promoting justice and peace because churches function not only as places of worship but also as centres of moral formation, social support and community engagement. Ukpe and Oko (2026) contended that religion serves as an effective instrument for regulating human behaviour and promoting national development through the cultivation of moral discipline, responsible citizenship and ethical conduct. Their argument supports the view that Christian communities possess considerable capacity to discourage violence, extremism and other behaviours that undermine peaceful coexistence.

Throughout history, the Church has contributed to conflict resolution, humanitarian assistance and the defence of vulnerable populations during periods of social unrest. Within societies affected by terrorism and insecurity, Christian communities possess the capacity to shape public attitudes towards forgiveness, reconciliation and responsible citizenship through biblical teaching and practical service. David P. Gushee (2022) argued that Christian ethics extends beyond personal morality to include active participation in the transformation of society through justice, compassion and faithful public witness. Similarly, Stanley Hauerwas (2023) maintained that the Church fulfils its mission when it embodies the values of God's kingdom, demonstrating peaceful alternatives to cultures shaped by violence and revenge. Such perspectives emphasise that Christian communities should become instruments of hope capable of influencing society through both proclamation and practical action.

The promotion of justice and peace requires Christian communities to engage intentionally in peacebuilding initiatives that address the underlying causes of conflict. Churches can facilitate dialogue between divided communities, provide trauma healing for victims of violence, advocate respect for human rights and encourage reconciliation among groups separated by ethnic, religious or political differences. Christian leaders also possess significant influence in shaping ethical attitudes through preaching, discipleship programmes and public advocacy against corruption, injustice and violent extremism. Educational initiatives within churches can cultivate values of tolerance, mutual respect and peaceful coexistence among young people, thereby reducing the attraction of extremist ideologies and retaliatory violence. Humanitarian ministries directed towards internally displaced persons, widows, orphans and victims of terrorism further demonstrate the practical expression of Christian compassion while restoring hope to communities devastated by insecurity. These ministries reveal that justice involves not only legal accountability but also the restoration of human dignity through acts of mercy and solidarity.

Effective Christian witness in contexts of terrorism and insecurity also requires collaboration with governments, traditional institutions, civil society organisations and other faith communities. Peacebuilding becomes more sustainable when religious communities cooperate across denominational and interfaith boundaries to address common social challenges. Such cooperation strengthens social cohesion, counters religious intolerance and reinforces shared commitments to justice and national unity. Christian communities therefore possess both a prophetic responsibility to challenge injustice and a pastoral responsibility to heal those affected by violence. Their mission includes speaking against oppression, supporting lawful efforts to protect citizens, encouraging forgiveness without compromising accountability and promoting reconciliation founded upon truth and justice. These responsibilities position the Church as a significant moral agent in contemporary society, capable of contributing to lasting peace through ethical leadership, compassionate service and faithful obedience to the teachings of Jesus Christ. In this regard, Christian communities remain indispensable partners in addressing terrorism and insecurity while nurturing a culture of justice, reconciliation and peaceful coexistence.

Conclusion

Terrorism and persistent insecurity continue to pose profound moral, social and political challenges that test the capacity of governments, religious communities and individuals to

uphold justice without perpetuating violence. This study has demonstrated that Christian teachings provide a coherent ethical framework for responding to these challenges through principles rooted in Scripture and the life of Jesus Christ. While Christianity unequivocally condemns terrorism and every form of violence directed against innocent people, it also rejects personal retaliation as a legitimate response to wrongdoing. Biblical teachings consistently distinguish revenge from justice, calling believers to practise forgiveness, love for enemies and reconciliation while recognising the responsibility of lawful authorities to protect citizens and administer justice. Christian ethics therefore presents justice as an expression of righteousness, accountability and respect for human dignity rather than an opportunity for vengeance. Such an understanding encourages responses to terrorism that combine moral integrity with legal responsibility, ensuring that the pursuit of security does not undermine the values it seeks to defend. The study has further established that justice, forgiveness and peacebuilding are complementary dimensions of the Christian moral tradition rather than competing ideals. Lasting peace cannot be achieved solely through military action or punitive measures but also requires ethical leadership, reconciliation, social justice and the restoration of trust within fractured communities. Within the Nigerian context, where terrorism, violent extremism and other forms of insecurity continue to threaten national stability, Christian communities have an important responsibility to promote peace, defend the dignity of every person and encourage dialogue across religious and ethnic divides. Governments, faith-based organisations and civil society should therefore work collaboratively to address both the immediate consequences and the underlying causes of violence through policies that uphold justice, protect human rights and strengthen social cohesion. Such a balanced approach offers a realistic and morally grounded pathway towards a more peaceful, secure and just society in which accountability is pursued without sacrificing compassion, and security is strengthened without compromising the enduring values of the Christian faith.

Recommendations

1. Educational policymakers, curriculum developers, Christian educational institutions and theological seminaries should incorporate structured instruction on Christian ethics, peacebuilding, restorative justice and conflict resolution into relevant curricula. Courses in Religious Studies, Civic Education, Peace and Conflict Studies, and Moral Philosophy should include biblical teachings on forgiveness, justice, reconciliation and respect for human dignity as practical approaches to addressing violence and extremism. Churches should also strengthen discipleship programmes, youth fellowships and leadership training that cultivate ethical decision-making and responsible citizenship. Such initiatives would help equip young people with moral values capable of resisting violent ideologies, promoting tolerance and encouraging peaceful responses to conflict.
2. Federal, state and local governments, in collaboration with the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC), Muslim organisations and civil society groups, should establish regular interfaith peace forums in communities vulnerable to terrorism and communal violence. These forums should facilitate dialogue, early conflict mediation, joint humanitarian activities and public campaigns against religious extremism and hate speech. Religious leaders should also develop joint declarations condemning violence committed in the name of religion while encouraging peaceful coexistence among diverse communities. Sustained collaboration across faith traditions would strengthen social cohesion, reduce mutual suspicion and create community-based mechanisms for preventing violent conflict before it escalates.

3. Churches, Christian denominations and faith-based organisations should establish dedicated peacebuilding ministries that provide mediation services, trauma counselling, reconciliation programmes and psychosocial support for victims of terrorism and insecurity. Christian leaders should receive specialised training in conflict mediation, restorative justice and trauma-informed pastoral care to improve their capacity to respond effectively to communities affected by violence. Churches should also collaborate with professional counsellors, psychologists, legal practitioners and humanitarian organisations to provide comprehensive support for survivors of terrorism and internally displaced persons. Strengthening these ministries would promote healing, reduce cycles of retaliation and facilitate the restoration of relationships within conflict-affected communities.
4. Governments and security agencies should ensure that counter-terrorism operations remain consistent with constitutional safeguards, the rule of law and internationally recognised human rights standards. Security personnel should receive continuous training on ethical policing, proportional use of force, protection of civilians and respect for human dignity during security operations. Judicial institutions should prioritise the timely prosecution of terrorism-related offences through transparent and impartial legal procedures while avoiding collective punishment, arbitrary detention and discrimination against particular ethnic or religious groups. Public policies should also address the structural drivers of violent extremism through investments in education, employment opportunities, social inclusion and community development programmes capable of reducing the conditions that facilitate radicalisation.
5. Political leaders, public office holders, religious leaders and community stakeholders should demonstrate ethical leadership founded upon integrity, accountability, justice and service to the common good. Government institutions should adopt transparent governance practices that strengthen public confidence, reduce corruption and improve equitable access to public services. Christian leaders should continue to provide prophetic leadership by speaking against injustice, corruption, hate speech and all forms of violence while encouraging forgiveness, reconciliation and responsible citizenship. Greater collaboration among government agencies, religious institutions, traditional authorities, educational institutions and civil society organisations should also be encouraged to develop coordinated strategies for preventing terrorism, strengthening community resilience and promoting sustainable peace across Nigeria.

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