

Research Article

Conflict, Conflict Transformation and Peace Building: The Role of Religion in Cameroon from a Biblical Perspective

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Abstract

Conflict is a human problem. This paper examines from a biblical perspective, the role that conflict has played in the disruption of human relations and how religion tries to mitigate the situation from complete breakdown through conflict Transformation and Peace building. Jesus equally lived in an agonistic society of conflict and racial differences wherein the question of the clean and unclean was a matter of endless discussion. The Jews considered their election and their religious purity to mean that God was to deal with them more favourably to the exclusion of the Gentiles *One of the religious pillars which stood out as a symbol of ethnic conflict was the temple. While the Jews worshiped in the temple in Jerusalem, the Samaritans worshiped at Mt Gerizim and Jews viewed Samaritans with scorn as corrupters of their faith. When Jesus stepped into the scene, he fought this generational hatred and conflict between the Jews and Samaritans and Gentiles with love and compassion. This paper contends that the continuous existence of cultural prejudice, bad governance and marginalisation of the minority are some of the debilitating factors that breed conflict in Cameroon. To overcome these impediments, the paper recommends that conflict resolution should be strengthened through dialogue, mediation, and mitigation with particular attention to the biblical values of love and compassion.* Contribution: This article highlights the negative role that conflict has played in the disruption of human relations in Cameroon and seeks to employ the role of religion as a trump card in peace building. The paper proposes that the over seven year's conflict in Cameroon can be overcome through dialogue, mediation and arbitration using biblical models of conflict resolutions. It thus contributes to the possible resolution of conflict situations in the Cameroonian society.

Keywords

Conflict, Conflict Transformation, Peace Building

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1. Definition of Terms

1.1. Conflict

Etymologically, conflict is derived from a Latin word *confligere* which means literally, “to strike together [4]. Jacoby surmises that conflict is an incompatible interest built in to the structure of the system where conflict is located [14]. Conflict is a generic term which is linked to terms such as disagreement, clash, argument, quarrels, discord, dispute, contradictions and confrontations. According to Ikyase & Olisah, conflict like all social concepts cannot be put into a unilateral and acceptable definition, as attempts to conceptualize it seems to generate a lot of controversy [13]. For the purpose of this paper, conflict is a condition in which one identifiable group of human beings (whether tribal, ethnic, socio-economic, political, et. al) is engaged in conscious incompatible interest because these groups are pursuing goals [13].

1.2. Conflict Transformation

Conflict transformation is a comprehensive approach that addresses personal, relational, structural, and cultural dimensions of disagreements. Shailor agrees that conflict transformation is geared toward the development of healthier communication patterns, in the service of goals such as personal growth, building relationships, reducing or eliminating violence, addressing human rights, and increasing democratic participation [29]. Shailor further notes that conflict transformation is a concept that emerged from the socio-political and cultural struggles of the later 20th century. It is used by academics, peacemakers, artists, religious organizations, facilitators, activists, and advocates for social change and social justice.

1.3. Peace Building

The term peacebuilding was made popular after 1992, when Boutros Boutros Ghali, the then United Nations Secretary General, presented a report titled: An agenda for peace. In his report Boutros defined peacebuilding as a range of activities meant to identify, and support structures which will tend to strengthen and solidify peace in order to avoid relapse into conflict [10]. The process of an effective peace building begins with the elimination of threats to the root causes of conflicts in society. Peace building therefore encompasses all efforts involved in sustaining pre-conflict and post-conflict peace [32]. Peace building from a biblical perspective is understood in the light of the gospel (*euaggelion*) which means good news or good tidings and proclamation of God’s saving activity which is demonstrated in the life of Jesus. Peace building is incorporated in the ability to be a witness of the gospel by telling the truth, loving ones neighbours and reconciling with any common misunderstandings of life [26].

It is the obligation of this paper to proceed by examining the evolution of conflict from a biblical perspective.

2. Conflict from Old Testament Background

Old Testament conflict evolved along the lines of nationalistic exclusivism. Israel saw themselves as the chosen ones of God among all the people of the earth (Dt 7:6). The feeling of a special status was further consolidated by the fact that they understood the Torah as giving an injunction that they must not intermarry with Gentile races or other nations (Dt 7:3, 1 Kg 11: 2). Israel lived from generation to generation with the erroneous idea that they were the legitimate divine favourites of God to the exclusion of the Gentiles.

In another aspect, Israel’s form of worship was monotheism, different from polytheism which was characteristic of other pagan nations. Monotheistic worship was a temple centred religion [27].¹ This singular prerogative made the surrounding nations to be suspicious of Israel. This may account for the fact that Israel was never without enemies who colonised them at various instances in the life of the nation. Randall has made allusion to the fact that the Israelites counted the purity of their religion as of supreme importance and to take any measures necessary to prevent it from being compromised and distorted by syncretism with the false religions of the heathen nations around them [28]. For this reason, intermarriage with Gentiles was in principle prohibited (Ex 34:15f, Dt 7:3f, Neh 13:26f, Mal 2:11).

Moses the great lawgiver of Israel did not marry a woman from among his people, but a Cushite woman from the Midian (Ex 2:16f, Nu 10:29). Cushites were possibly black descendants from the negroid people who lived in the land south of Egypt [28]. Miriam the sister of Moses went into conflict with him because of her prejudice against mixed marriage. She however ended up suffering the fate of her behaviour (Nu 12:10). The Jewish impression was the fundamental existence of two races in the world namely, the Jews and the Gentiles all put together. Between these two groups, there was to be strict segregation.

The immediate cause of the Maccabean revolt was the fact that one of the Seleucid Kings, Antiochus Epiphanes IV² attempted to forcibly Hellenise Palestine [31]. He desecrated the temple by sacrificing unclean animals like pigs at the temple alter. By doing this he underestimated the strength of Jewish religious feelings. A loyal Jew, Mattathias along with his five sons (John, Simon, Judas, Eleazar and Jonathan) could not take it, they formed an armed resistant movement to fight back for self-defense (1Macc 2:29-40).³ Even though

1 Divine presence (in the Temple) was important at least as a guarantee of safety and prosperity, in war and in the case of oaths and treaties. A god could be present on earth above all through its image (or symbol), and a temple was an earthly house of a god where the god resided through its image (or symbol)

2 This was a self-given nickname which means “the manifest god”. He had decreed that the Jews worship the Greek god, Zeus, rather than the God of Israel.

3 In their conviction they said: “If we all do as our kindred have done and refuse to fight with the Gentiles for our lives and for our ordinances, they will quickly destroy us from the earth” [31]

they succeeded to defeat the Seleucid dynasty and rededicated the temple which gave Israel new independence under the Hasmonean dynasty, this new independence did not last for long because the Roman General Pompey defeated the Maccabees and took over the colony in 63BC. The use of force was not actually the solution to free the land of Israel from foreign domination. Right to the time of Jesus Israel was still under foreign domination.

3. Conflict in the New Testament

One of the greatest conflicts from the Old Testament that resonated into the New Testament was the hatred between the Jews and the Samaritans. The historical and religious atmosphere in Palestine at the time of Jesus was characterised by ethnic conflicts. Samaritans and Jews were both joined and separated by geography, religion and history. Samaritans descended from Israelites who had been conquered by Assyria in 721 BC. Later, at some point under the Persian kings, they were authorized to rebuild their own temple on Mt Gerizim [24]. Samaritans and Judeans to the south shared the Torah and a monotheistic faith, yet continuously fought each other in a bitter, seemingly unsolvable conflict. Smith remarked further that when the Jews from the south returned from the Babylonian exile in 537 BC, they regarded the Samaritans who had presumably intermingled with foreigners, as corrupt and apostate [30].

Biblical communities of the first Century Mediterranean were group oriented and collectivist⁴ societies [17]. In such a society, one person's weakness was complemented with another person's strength. Each group tend to develop strong feelings in order to affirm and protect their identity as members of a particular group. This however was the justification for the formation of distinct religio-political groups in first Century Palestine, such as pure Jews, Samaritans as a larger group, Pharisees, Sadducees, Scribes, Zealots, Essenes, elders, and chief Priests. Other groups were given negative name tags such as tax-collectors and lepers. The intention of these labels⁵ was to ex-communicate and finally ostracised them from the fellowship of the community [9]. An important theological theme which was a source of conflict among Pharisees and Sadducees in particular was the idea of the resurrection. Sadducees were conservatives and did not believe in the resurrection [5]. Pharisees were the chief interpreters of the law and hold very strongly that people will rise from the dead. This theological conflict was never resolved before the de-

struction of the Jerusalem temple in AD70. The Sadducees disappeared from the scene following the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, perhaps because their base of power in the temple was destroyed and they did not have a popular following like the Pharisees did [3].

At the time of Jesus, Harris recalls that the Samaritans were still despised by the true Jews of Judah. Samaritans were uncharitably regarded as foreign corrupters of the faith [12]. For Harris, this hostility was still current in the New Testament times, when Jesus probably shocked his Jewish audience by making a Samaritan the moral hero in Luke 10:29-37. In this wise, Jesus' approach to humanity and ethnic conflict in Luke 10:29-37 flows from the fact that all people are created in the image of God and thus are equal before God.

Kuecher holds that Luke's Gospel is written from the background of a world filled with competing racial identities and cultural hatred which shows its ugly head at various points in Luke-Acts (Lk 4:24-30, 9:51-56, 10:8, 10:25-37; Ac 6:1-6, 11:1-18, 15:1-4, 16:19-24, 19:23-41, 22:17-23) [16]. Racial conflict and ethnic hatred in Luke-Acts develop steadily from Jesus' rejection in Nazareth in Luke 4 right to Paul's defence in Jerusalem in Acts 22:38.

Jesus mentioned in his inaugural sermon in Luke 4:27 that there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed-only Naaman the Syrian. This is indicative of the fact that Jesus' works of mercy were not only limited to the Jews. Balch asserts that Jesus' shift in ethnic values generated a lot of fury in the Synagogue among the Jews who rose and drove Jesus out of the town [2]. Jesus' shift in ethnic concerns was his general intention to narrow the ethnic conflict between Jews and Gentiles.

In Luke 9:52, Jesus and his disciples were rejected from entering a Samaritan village to prepare for a reception. This was probably because Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem the seat of the Temple where Jews worshipped. Jews and Samaritans had been living under racial conflict for a long time. Jesus rejected the wish of the disciples to call down fire from heaven to consume the whole village. The disciples (James and John) were acting on racial prejudice but Jesus was concerned with resolving ethnic conflict. Another critical issue of conflict that Luke addresses *et al* was that of dealing with the tension produced by the existence of diversity among believers, demonstrated by the conflict in the Jerusalem Church over alleged favouritism in the charitable distribution of food to widows (Acts 6:17). Had ethnicity disappeared, the issue would not have arisen. Luke's concern is that ethnic identity is radically and completely transcended through the Gospel [8].

When Jesus sends out the seventy-two on mission in Luke 10:8, the disciples were going to face uncomfortable social consequences because of dietary restrictions. Conflicts from ethnic and cultural diets were to be a hindrance to the feeding of the disciples but Jesus commands them saying: "eat what is set before you" [2]. In this commission, Jesus conveniently

4 Collectivism suggests that group goals naturally precede individual goals as a cultural orientation [17].

5 Labelling is the technical word for the social interpersonal behaviour of name-calling. These are means by which individuals and groups are evaluated and categorized and which can carry either positive or negative connotations. As such, labels are powerful social symbols, and the use of negative labelling, especially by the socially powerful, can be used as significant and effective weapons in stigmatizing a person as radically out of place. In this way, and from an etic perspective, conflict can be expressed and monitored in the way that derogatory names are used against others [9].

took away any ethnic prejudice regarding food either clean or unclean. The Samaritan woman at Jacob's well expressed surprise that Jesus would request a drink from her (Jn 4:9), coupled with John's note that Jews and Samaritans had no dealings or do not use vessels in common are both typical Jewish-Samaritan conflict relations of the time.

Jesus constantly went into conflict with Pharisees and custodians of the law of his day because He went out of his way and was acting like a non-Jew. He was thus labelled as a deviant⁶ [11] because He ate with tax-collectors and sinners (Mk 2:16). The Pharisees fasted while Jesus' disciples went on eating (Mk 2:18). They charged Jesus for breaking the Sabbath law (Mk 2:24) and casting out demons by the power of Belzebul⁷ (Mt 9:34, 12:24). Gentiles and Samaritans were strictly segregated to the outer court of the Gentiles at the temple in Jerusalem which was the focus of Jewish worship. Any Gentile who ventured into the inner court of the Temple did so at the risk of death. From the Jewish point of view, Gentiles and Samaritans were labelled unclean⁸ and liable to cause impurity through contact [21]. Therefore contact with them was avoided as much as possible.

4. Biblical Concern for Conflict Resolution and Peace Building

Considering the idea of election, Randall holds that God had chosen the people of Israel not because they were intrinsically different or superior or greater than the other people of the earth but purely on the grounds of his grace [28]. Abraham was elected in order that through him all the families of the earth will be blessed (Gen 12:3) and Israel in order that through them the darkness of the Gentiles might be changed into light (Is 42:6). The issue was fundamentally not that of race or people or blood, but that of religion. Any person of any race who embraced the worship of the true God like Ruth was welcomed into the family of Israel. Moses' marriage to a foreign woman of Midian was criticised by Miriam and Aaron (Nu 12:9f) but approved by God was a way to bridge the gap that existed between Israelites and the Gentiles.

As a solution to the conflict between Jews and Gentiles, the New Testament embraces a radical change in nationalistic and

racial segregation of the Jews which nursed the seeds of conflict. To concretise this conflict resolve, Matthew goes out of his way to highlight that the ancestry of Jesus included three Gentile women (Tamar⁹, Rahab¹⁰ and Ruth- Mt 1:3, 5) and Bathsheba (Uriah's wife). Jesus initiated conflict resolution in one way by crossing racial boundaries in his journey through Samaria and above all discussing with a Samaritan woman in public and asking for water (Jn 4: 7).

At the peak of ethnic conflict, a lawyer sought to justify the Jewish ethnic position by asking Jesus the question "who is my neighbour?" Jesus surprisingly made a Samaritan the moral hero of neighbourly love for the Jews in his story in Luke 10:29-37. This was probably Jesus' concern for resolving ethnic conflict. In the same vein, his healing of a Samaritan leper in Luke 17:11-16 among the other nine was in line with his intention to do away with ethnic barriers and to create a new community of God's people where people are not known by ethnic identity but as followers of Christ. The response of a Samaritan in coming back to give thanks (Lk 17:15) must have been both an anticipation and a substantiation in advance to Jesus' pronouncement in Luke 17:21 that God's reign is already operational in his own presence and healing activity [22]. This was the affirmation that Jesus' redefinition of a new community was imperative.

Several passages in the Acts of the Apostles also affirm Luke's concern for all humanity despite their racial identity. Luke writes in Act 8:4 that Samaria had accepted the word of God and so the Apostles in Jerusalem sent Peter and John to them. It is the preaching of the word of God that took away ethnic conflicts that existed between the Jews and Gentiles, thus the preachers of the word were able to cross social and religious boundaries. Peter equally crosses ethnic boundaries by baptising the pagan Cornelius (Act 10 23-33). Peter's statement in Cornelius house ("you know that it is unlawful for a Jewish man to associate with or visit a Gentile, but God has shown me that I should not call any person profane or unclean" Act 10:28b) reveals how provocative this social and ethnic conflict was. By crossing ethnic boundaries, God's message breaks barriers and enabled Peter to baptise Cornelius and his household.

McElrea considers the Mosaic idea of conflict resolution in the form of retributive justice by citing the chief Rabbi of UK who wrote in his letter to the 'Times' of 20th February 1991 and said: The Levitical law of an eye for an eye (Lev 24:20) was introduced to prevent excessive retribution and has traditionally been construed to require monetary compensation to be paid instead of the loss of an eye [19]. Retributive justice could only have served as a deterrent without really resolving the conflict. Jesus makes a redefinition of this OT retributive

6 Deviance is perceived as something affecting the honour of the group, not just the individual. The strong-group, collectivistic quality of that society is likewise important. This quality makes social boundaries more defined and at the same time more dangerous [11].

7The name "Belzebul" is derived from the name of a pagan deity or deities, likely the Philistine god referenced in 2 Kgs 1 (Baal-Zebub/l), whose name likely meant "Lord of the heavenly Dwelling". The ancient name, familiar from the OT, was likely revived by Jews in Jesus's day, to avoid blasphemously referring to the pagan Semitic gods as "Lord of Heaven". Given the Jewish practice of identifying pagan deities with demons, it was natural to think of this supreme god as the prince of demons. The scribes, then, were accusing Jesus of pagan magic, calling him an idolatrous name-Belzebul [25]

8This situation of conflict is best captured by the Johannine expression: 'Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.' It is the fourth evangelist's comment in John 4:9 on the consternation of a Samaritan woman at Jesus' request for a drink. It was a racial conflict which became religious and political and led up to the tendencies of class distinctions and inequality at the level of social interactions [21].

9 Gen 38:6ff

10 In Joshua 2:1-15, Rahab the Canaanite betrayed her people in Jericho and hid the spies of Israel in her roof when they were being sought for and she was blessed. Randall (1972:88) things that this is a dramatic symbol of the fact that faith in the true God destroys ethnicity and makes even patriotism quite secondary and irrelevant.

law in the New Testament by pointing completely to the opposite direction: “meet violence with love, turn the other cheek when one is slapped (Mt 5:39), love one another as I love you, love your enemies and pray for them (5:44). The idea of love your enemy in conflict resolution and Peace building was the basic philosophical and theological orientation of the Rev Martin Luther King Jr in his fight for marginalisation of the blacks in South America [1].

Luther King Jr opines that the first step to love your enemy in Peace building and conflict resolution is to examine your own self. This is what Jesus meant by, “first remove the plank out of your eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye” (Lk 6:42b). Luther’s second step in the philosophy of love your enemy is to discover the elements of good in the enemy and every time look at those good points which will eventually overshadow the bad points. Third, when the opportunity presents itself for one to defeat the enemy that is the time that you must not do it. It could be through recommendation for a job, or through helping that person to make a move in life. In the final analysis love becomes creative understanding and goodwill for all men and women. Mahamat Gandhi of India also discovered the power of love in conflict resolution and peace building a few years before the Rev Luther King Jr.

Cameroon is facing a revolutionary crisis resulting from the concept of marginalisation of the Anglophone minority. Martin Luther King Jr. recommended mass non-violence resistance based on the principle of love which he used in South America. This was done in Cameroon in September 2016 but government responded not only to eye for an eye but to killing of civilians as a deterrent. Some youths have chosen armed conflict as a means of self-defence. This might have been from a desperate situation, but using brute force is the wrong way of conflict mitigation because violence only begets violence and creates more social problems than it solves. Great military leaders of their time like Napoleon Bonaparte finally lost all that they acquired out of military might and acknowledge that Jesus built His kingdom on love and even to this day millions will die for Him [1]. Love seems to be the only way out for the conflict situation in Cameroon.

Religion and Peace Building in Cameroon

“The role of Christianity is to build bridges” [6]. The Anglophone crisis that began in 2017 in Cameroon and finally evolved into a full scale war could not keep the Churches in Cameroon indifferent. [15] says that during serious problems, many individuals run to the Church because the Church helps them face challenges of life by offering them a solid foundation of faith and attending to their deepest spiritual, psychological and economic needs among others. Korir’s insinuation is a build up to the idea that the Church then becomes a place of refuge and a pillar of hope for all in society especially in the face of war and conflict [15]. Since the beginning of the Anglophone crisis in Cameroon, mainline Churches in Cameroon have continuously made their positions clear to the Cameroon government through Memoranda and Declarations

[6]. Dah further notes that the following documents were made public from the Roman Catholic and Protestant Churches to conscientise the government.

First was a Memorandum¹¹ presented to the head of state by the Bishops of the ecclesiastical province of Bamenda on the current situation of unrest in the North West and South West regions of Cameroon 22nd December 2016 [6].

Second, a Declaration of the Bishops of the Bamenda Provincial Episcopal Conference (BAPEC), following the massive demonstration and the curfew imposed on the North West and South West regions on Friday 29th September to Monday 2nd of October 2017.

Third, the Official statement of the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon on the prevailing socio-political situation in Cameroon and the call for pastoral care, 10th October 2017.

Fourth, a report on the havoc on PCC workers in the ongoing arms conflict within the Anglophone community, 10th October 2018.

Fifth, a statement by the Cameroon Baptist Convention (CBC) reacting to ongoing strike by the Common Law Lawyers and teachers of Anglophone extraction in Cameroon, 9th December 2016.

Sixth, a memorandum of the Council of Protestant Churches in Cameroon (CEPCA), to the Government of Cameroon; through the Prime Minister, Head of Government on the 5th of January 2017 in Yaoundé

In all Memoranda which the Churches sent to the Presidency, the Churches expressed their readiness and interest if given the permission to assist in seeking lasting solution to the ongoing Anglophone conflict [20]. These Memoranda and Declaration from the Church were done with the hope that the Government of Cameroon will see reason into creating an atmosphere of dialogue and eventual resolution of the crisis. Dialogue appears as the key factor in resolving the Cameroon Anglophone crisis [18]. The response was that some church leaders were taken to court but no one presented himself as the complainant against the Church [23]. Again and again, the Church committed the Anglophone crisis into prayers but human vindictiveness made the situation to remain adamant.

5. Conclusion

This paper began with the watchwords that conflict is a human problem and has traced the role that conflict has played in the disruption of human relations. The paper shows that religion is a very important tool in mitigating conflict situations through conflict Transformation and Peace building. The continuous existence of cultural prejudice, bad governance and marginalisation of the minority is at the root of the Cameroon crisis. To overcome these impediments, the paper

11 In the Memorandum, they expressed their willingness of the Catholic Church to play a role in resolving the conflict. Unfortunately, the government of Cameroon never replied to the Bishops Memorandum and it was reported that the Memorandum sent to the Presidency got missing in the mail service at the Presidency [20].

recommends that conflict resolution should be strengthened through dialogue, mediation, and mitigation with particular attention to the biblical values of love and compassion.

Abbreviations

CEPCA	Council of Protestant Churches in Cameroon
CBC	Cameroon Baptist Convention
BAPEC	Bamenda Provincial Episcopal Conference

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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