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REDEEMING EVIL: A CHRISTIAN THEOLOGICAL EXPLORATION OF THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF FORGIVENESS AND RECONCILIATION IN THE FACE OF NIGERIA'S SOCIO-POLITICAL CRISES

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Abstract

In the past, Nigeria's socio-political landscape has been marred by conflict, violence, and division, hindering national healing and peace building. This prolonged instability has led to a plethora of complex issues, including ethnic and economic inequality, social injustice, and political instability. The need to address these underlying issues has become increasingly urgent, necessitating a comprehensive approach to conflict resolution and peace-building. Thus, this article aimed to explore the transformative power of forgiveness and reconciliation within the concept of Christian theological understanding, seeking to contribute to the healing and peace-building process in Nigeria. The research employed a critical analysis of relevant texts, including scriptures and scholarly articles, to identify key themes and insights related to forgiveness, reconciliation, and peace-building in Nigeria context. The findings of this research highlighted the importance of forgiveness and reconciliation in addressing the complex issues such as; ethnic and religious conflicts, political instability, social injustice, psychological trauma, economic inequality, National healing, conflict resolution, rebuilding trust, promoting accountability, and fostering inclusive growth that are facing Nigeria. Hence, these principles, grounded in Christian theological understanding, offer a powerful tool for healing, sustainable peace-building, economic growth, conflict resolution and social justice. Therefore, the study recommends that policymakers, religious leaders, and civil society organizations should prioritize forgiveness and reconciliation initiatives, incorporating these principles into policy and practice to promote national healing and peace-building in Nigeria. By working together, Nigeria can harness the transformative power of forgiveness and reconciliation to build a more just and peaceful society.

Keywords: Christianity, Forgiveness, Reconciliation, Peace, Nigeria.

Introduction

Nigeria, a rich nation in terms of cultural diversity and vast natural resources, has been plagued by persistent socio-political crises stemming from ethnic tensions, religious conflicts, and socio-economic inequalities which have been raising a lot of dust globally. Many write ups from North (1987) and Enright and the Human Development Study Group (1991 & 1996:108) Scholars came up with diverse views regarding the meaning and scope of forgiveness as a healing process in peace building but there is a consensus of opinion that it constitutes one of its main elements. It was defined that forgiveness is a willingness to abandon one's right to resentment, condemnation and subtle revenge toward an offender who acts unjustly while fostering the undeserved qualities of compassion, generosity and even

love toward him or her. Forgiveness presupposes the existence of injury, deep or otherwise as a result of conflict or disagreement. The effect of the injury might be physical, emotional or otherwise, but it is usually accomplished with pain.

When found in a conflict situation, individuals can be the victims or agents while in some situation the same person might be the agent and victim of conflict. According to Galtung (2000), peace could be seen as the absence of direct violent. Reychler (2001) also noted that peace building goes beyond problem solving or conflict management but it attempts to fix the core problems that underlie the conflict and change the pattern of interaction of the parties involved. This article sets out to examine the role of forgiveness and reconciliation.

When looking into the happenings of diverse cross ethnic and religious conflicts you will always find a pre-existing communion amidst them because, Nigerians had cohabited peacefully right from early 1800 tilldate, gradually they were engulfed in politics power tussle, social injustice and corruption which led to loss of lives and properties. The reoccurring violence among different ethnic groups and social strata is a clear reflection that the old wounds on account of previous conflict were not healed as this motivates this study to examine the healing power of forgiveness.

Statement of the Problem

Nigeria, a country in West Africa, has been plagued by numerous socio-political crises and evils that have hindered its development and stability. These crises have resulted in widespread suffering, division, and trauma among Nigerians, emphasizing the need for forgiveness and reconciliation to address the root causes and promote national healing and peace-building.

According to Olaopa, (2012) one of the significant crises facing Nigeria is ethnic and religious conflicts, particularly the Boko Haram insurgency and Fulani-herder clashes. Boko Haram, a terrorist group, has targeted civilians, especially Christians, causing displacement, death, and destruction. Fulani-herder clashes have also resulted in violent conflicts between Fulani herders and farmers, often along ethnic and religious lines.

Political instability and corruption have also undermined Nigeria's progress. Political assassination and extra-judicial killings have become commonplace, while electoral violence and malpractices have compromised democratic processes. Social injustice and inequality persist, with gender-based violence and human trafficking being significant concerns. Women and girls are disproportionately affected by domestic violence, sexual assault, and discrimination, while human trafficking has led to forced labor, sexual exploitation, and organ harvesting.

Economic inequality and poverty remain significant challenges, with high poverty rates and income inequality. Many Nigerians live below the poverty line, while a small elite holds most of the wealth. Psychological trauma and violence have also affected many Nigerians, with terrorism and kidnapping causing fear and emotional distress.Unresolved conflicts and division, such as the Biafra agitation and Niger Delta crisis, continue to simmer, threatening national unity. Government repression and human rights abuses, including human rights violations and suppression of free speech, have further exacerbated the crises.

Hence, Nigeria's socio-political crises and evils require urgent attention and address. This and many more has motivated this study to examine the transformational power of forgiveness and reconciliation through a Christian theological lens with specific references to bring peace and unity in face of social-political crises and to inspire a new era of hope and harmony for its people.By confronting the root causes of these crises and working towards justice, accountability, and inclusivity, Nigeria can harness its potential and build a more just and peaceful society for all.

Theoretical Framework

The study of the term "forgiveness" covers many disciplines such as medicine, theology, psychology and other related social sciences. Lazarus & Folkman, (1984) postulate the stress and coping model. Al-Mabuk (1990), Enright(1991) and Freedman (1995) emphasize training and learning about forgiveness as an essential condition for forgiveness. Bonar (1989) approached forgiveness by discussing the significance of our human concerns that compels us to want a healing reconciliation with our God, with ourselves, with others and with our community. He therefore compares the psychoanalytic approach of Jung (1928), Dollard and Miller's (1965) learning paradigm and Maslow's humanistic approach (1965) to explain the process of forgiveness. Jung and the psychoanalytic approach focus on individuation and looking for wholeness and integration within the individual. Pingleton (1989) attempt focuses on integrating and synthesizing theological and psychological perspective of the nature and dynamics of forgiveness.

This study adopts the cognitive approach of Enright (1996) based on various studies conducted at the Wisconson-Madison University as it possesses the necessary attributes that can contribute to the transformational power of forgiveness and reconciliation. Enright (1996) study reveals that the terms 'forgive' and self-forgiveness are at times misunderstood and easily distorted. Enright views forgiveness as involving an attempt to overcome resentment and seen as the one person's response to other. The approach further notes that focusing on the forgiveness goes beyond solving interpersonal and intrapersonal conflicts. The emphasis here is on the relationship and intrinsic worth of the self and the other, rather than exclusively on interpersonal relationships and conflict. Enright (1996) notes that this would "bring about a cognitive awareness, fostered on self-respect and moral love; result in an increased moral strength; create a protection or buffer against continued anxiety, depression, despair and hopelessness and improve emotional healing and well-being". This led Enright et al., (2008:8) cited in Bowman (2003:40) to establish the four major phases of forgiving consisting of twenty units. The four phases include uncovering, decision, work and deepening. Explaining the cognitive nature of forgiveness, Maltby, Macaskill, and Gillett, (2007) include the construct of low control stressors as applicable to men and women.

Forgiveness presupposes the existence of wrong doing, sin or injury caused on individual, a group of people or both. The wrong doing could be as a result of cultural, structural or direct violence (Murphly and Hampton, 1988).Enright, et al (1996) believe that the offense is an objective reality and not just a perception of the offended. On the other hand, Kahrthoff (1988) opines that the event itself is neutral and that people give meaning to the event according to their perceptions. According to Musser, (2012), when people with negativity from the past repeatedly comes into ones thought,its often holds tenaciously to the consequences of the past and produce a vicious circle of anger and agony that can instigate vengeance.

Forgiveness for the purpose of this study is seen as the inner conviction that is divine in nature, to let go the feelings and planned actions to revenge on account of injury suffered from probably known agents and the development of strong will not to allow the remembrance of the event to evoke the sentiment to revenge and also to forgive self for perceived or real wrong doing. It is-as an element of the healing process that is believed to run contrary to human nature as it seeks vengeance; hence it has been viewed as a divine process. Forgiveness is associated with cost and the cost is that the offended/victim assumes responsibility of the evil done to him by internalizing the pain without vengeance. Neto and Mullet(2004). Borris (2003) traces the source of forgiveness to inexplicable power which comes from God.
Enright and the Human Development Study Group (1992) propose that Forgiveness is the overcoming of negative effect and judgment toward the offender, not by denying ourselves the right to such effect and judgment, but by endeavoring to view the offender with benevolence, compassion, and even love, while recognizing that he or she has abandoned the right to them. Forgiveness requires self-empty and is a voluntary act in which a person makes a decision, a choice about how he or she deals with an event concerning the past. According to Fillipaldi, (1982.75) it is a focus on the present that is free from the past and opens up the future.

GaassinEnright, and Wu, (1992) observe that forgiveness entails reciprocal love which impacts the affective, behavioral and cognitive systems of the offenders. Richard,(1988) notes that from its inception, forgiveness involves a process which required a change in one's perception, and judgment by subtracting elements from the three systems named above. He observes that negative emotions such as anger, hatred, contempt and sadness are given up in the affective system. As these emotions are released, with emotional healing, thoughts and perceptions also begin to change. This, however leads to stopping the act of judging, condemning and planning revenge (Augusburger, 1981, Cunningham, 1985 and North, 1987). The cognitive changes that take place then filter to onesbehavior in which one no longer act out revenge. This explains why Borris,(2003) notes that there are many ways to alleviate the symptoms of suffering and pain in the world, but one way to heal its cause, and the only one way is found in the healing power of forgiveness.

In addition, forgiveness might not restore relationship to its original quality. Also, it is however important to note that to forgive is one of the most difficult aspects of human relations. For instance, amnesty was granted to Born Again General Joshua Milton B.(General Butt Naked) in Liberia based on his confessional statements before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that he had killed over twenty thousand people. He further went for reconciliation with many victims' families including Johnson (Senegal), Lovetta and Dehankso, confessed his sin and pleaded for forgiveness. He was forced to go on voluntary exile to Ghana and also in Nigeria on account of threat to his life and for a long time refused to forgive himself.

Theological Foundations of Forgiveness and Reconciliation

Forgiveness, as understood within the Christian tradition, is rooted in the teachings of Jesus Christ and exemplified in his life, death, and resurrection. Central to Christian theology is the

belief in God's unconditional love and mercy, which extends to all humanity, regardless of sin or wrongdoing. The act of forgiveness is thus seen as a reflection of God's grace and fundamental principles of Christian discipleship. These principles are not just moral guidelines but divine imperatives that shape the Christian understanding of relationships, justice, and community.

In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word *"salah"* denotes forgiveness, emphasizing God's willingness to pardon sin and restore relationship. This is evident in the sacrificial system established in the Mosaic Law, Particularly the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16), where the high priest makes atonement for the sins of the people, symbolizing God's readiness to forgive and restore. The New Testament intensifies this concept through the life and teaching of Jesus Christ. The greek word *"aphesis"* means release or pardon, which depicts the wholesome nature of forgiveness offered by Christ. Scriptural passages such as Mark 2:5-12, Luke 7:47-50, Matthew 6:14-15 and Colossians 3:13 underscore the importance of forgiveness in the Christian life, emphasizing its liberating and transformative power for both the forgiver and the forgiven.

Reconciliation, closely linked to forgiveness, is portrayed in the Scripture as the restoration of broken relationships and the establishment of peace and justice. The greek word *"katallage"* signifies a change from enmity to friendship. It underscores that reconciliation is rooted in God's desire to restore broken relationship. The biblical narrative highlights God's reconciling work in Christ, bridging the gap between humanity and God and calling believers to be agents of reconciliation in the world. 2 Corinthians 5:18-20 elucidates this theme, affirming the believer's ministry of reconciliation and the transformative impact of Christ's redemptive work on individual and communal relationships.

In the context of Nigeria's socio-political crises, forgiveness and reconciliation offer a compelling alternative to cycles of violence and retribution. Drawing on insights from transitional justice theory, restorative practices, and conflict resolution methodologies, Christian communities and organizations can promote healing and reconciliation through dialogue, truth-telling, respect of individual perception, and the acknowledgment of past wrongs. Case studies from other conflict-affected regions, such as South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), demonstrate the potential of restorative justice processes to foster healing and social cohesion in the aftermath of violence. However, Strelan and Covic (2006) note that the understanding of the forgiveness process is hindered by a lack of consensus on what forgiveness is, and consequently what constitutes the endpoint of the process.

Significance of Forgiveness and Reconciliation in Addressing Root Causes of Conflict in Nigeria

Beyond immediate peace building efforts, a theological perspective on forgiveness and reconciliation compels us to confront the systemic injustices and structural inequalities that underlie Nigeria's socio-political crises. This requires a holistic approach that addresses issues of poverty, corruption, marginalization, and ethno-religious discrimination, while promoting inclusive governance, human rights, and sustainable development. By addressing the root causes of conflict, rather than merely treating its symptoms, Nigeria can lay the groundwork

for lasting peace and reconciliation. To tackle the root problem, let us throw more light into key components, such as:

-Christian Theological Concept of Redemption, Redemption in Christianity typically refers to the act of Jesus Christ sacrificing himself to save humanity from sin. It involves forgiveness, reconciliation, and restoration of a broken relationship between God and humanity. Nigeria faces significant challenges including political corruption, instability, and social unrest. These issues have deep historical roots and continue to affect the nation's development and well-being, as instanced by Ethnic and religious conflicts.

-Exploring Forgiveness and Reconciliation, Forgiveness and reconciliation are central themes in Christianity and can be powerful tools in addressing societal conflicts. They involve acknowledging past wrongs, seeking repentance, and working towards healing and restoration.

-Transforming Evil and Promoting Peace, Applying the principles of forgiveness and reconciliation can help transform evil and promote peace in Nigeria. By fostering a culture of accountability, transparency, and justice, these concepts can contribute to building trust and unity among diverse communities.

-Good Governance in the Face of Corruption, good governance requires integrity, accountability, and responsiveness to the needs of the people. By embracing principles of Christian redemption, leaders can work towards combating corruption and promoting the common good.

The significance of forgiveness and reconciliation in addressing Nigeria's crises is a clarion call to the body of Christ to embrace the teachings of Jesus and exemplify the love of God. As followers of Christ, we are called to be ministers of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18-20), promoting unity and harmony in the body of Christ and extending forgiveness and reconciliation to a broken world. One of the most critical areas where forgiveness and reconciliation are essential is in addressing ethnic and religious conflicts. For decades, Nigeria has grappled with conflict between different ethnic and religious groups, leading to loss of life, destruction of properties, and displacement of people. Forgiveness and reconciliation can help bridge the divide between conflicting groups, promoting understanding and peaceful coexistence. By addressing historical grievances and injustice, Forgiveness and reconciliation can reduce tension and prevent further violence. Moreover, reconciliation initiatives can foster interfaith and interethnic dialogue, promoting a culture of tolerance and acceptance, exemplifying the love of God that surpasses human understanding (Ephesians 3:19).

Another critical area where Forgiveness and reconciliation are vital is in addressing political instability. Nigeria has experienced political instability for many years, characterized by corruption, inequality, and marginalization. Forgiveness and reconciliation can facilitate National unity and stability by addressing historical political grievances and promoting inclusive governance. By promoting a culture of accountability, we can reduce political tensions and violence, reflecting the justice and righteousness of God (Isaiah 58:6-12). Social injustice, including discrimination, inequality, and marginalization, can be addressed through forgiveness and reconciliation, promoting restorative justice and reparations for marginalized communities. By promoting social cohesion, we can address issues such as poverty, inequality, and discrimination, embodying the love and compassion of Christ (Matthew 25:31-46). Economic inequality can also be addressed through forgiveness and reconciliation, promoting economic empowerment for marginalized communities and reducing poverty and

inequality. By promoting economic inclusion, we can reflect the generosity and provision of God (Deuteronomy 15:7-11).

Furthermore, forgiveness and reconciliation can help individuals and communities heal from psychological trauma, promoting mental health and well-being. By providing a safe space for victims to share their experiences and receive support, we can promote a culture of empathy and understanding, reducing stigma and promoting healing (Psalm 34:18). National healing and unity can also be facilitated through forgiveness and reconciliation, promoting a shared vision for Nigeria's future and reducing anger and resentment. By promoting a culture of forgiveness, we can reflect the mercy and grace of God (Ephesians 2:8-10). In addition, forgiveness and reconciliation can help resolve conflicts peacefully, reducing violence and promoting sustainable peace. By promoting dialogue and negotiation, we can address the root causes of conflict, reflecting the peace and love of Christ (John 14:27). Rebuilding trust among communities, institutions, and leaders can also be achieved through forgiveness and reconciliation, promoting transparency and accountability and addressing issues such as corruption and abuse of power. By promoting a culture of integrity, we can reflect the character of God (Psalm 15:1-5).

Finally, forgiveness and reconciliation can promote inclusive growth and development, addressing historical injustices and promoting equal opportunities. By promoting economic empowerment for marginalized communities, we can reduce poverty and inequality, reflecting the justice and compassion of God (Isaiah 58:6-12). Summarily, it is imperative to note that forgiveness and reconciliation are essential in addressing Nigeria's crises, reflecting the teachings of Jesus and the love of God. As followers of Christ, we are called to embrace forgiveness and reconciliation, promoting unity, harmony, and peace in the body of Christ and extending forgiveness and reconciliation to a broken world.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, the transformative power of forgiveness and reconciliation, grounded in Christian theology, holds great promise for addressing Nigeria's socio-political crises and fostering a culture of peace and justice. By embracing these principles, individuals, communities, and policymakers can contribute to healing the wounds of the past, promoting social cohesion, and building a more inclusive and equitable society for future generations.The study revealed that forgiveness has elements of divine touch and self-emptiness that calls for a higher level of thinking and acting though it does not obliterate remembrance of old wrong doing but it does not provoke negative emotion.

In addition, Nigerians can easilyidentify themselves and accommodate each other inpeace building process while efforts must not be directed only at pacifying the victims at the expense of reconciliation. The study recommends that government or third party including religious groups intervening in the conflict must be governed by high degree of integrity, sincerity and honesty that will be transparent enough for the conflicting parties to develop confidence in them and be willing to accept the outcome. Furthermore, the Christian society should reconsider the adoption security approach to peace as extant literature support the adoption of peace approach to achieve security.

Lastly, the study recommends the setting up of any Christian Peace Corps where people are enlightened on the transformative power of forgiveness and reconciliation. Such organisations can reconvene the message of inner peace which can be restored to make forgiveness possible. This is achievable since Nigerians are willing to forgive and live in peace. As agents of redemption and reconciliation, Christians are called to embody the love and forgiveness of Christ in all aspects of their lives, working tirelessly towards the restoration of God's shalom in Nigeria and beyond.

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