

1-1-2022

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Hamdy A. Hassan
Zayed University

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BRILL

JOURNAL OF RELIGION IN AFRICA 51 (2021) 426–451

Journal of
Religion in
AFRICA
brill.com/jra

Religion as a Security Threat

Case Studies of Extremist Christian Movements in Africa

Hamdy A Hassan | ORCID: 0000-0003-1930-9561

Department of International Studies, Zayed University, Dubai,

United Arab Emirates

hhamdy21@yahoo.com

Abstract

Religious extremism presents an ideological perspective found in most major religions and is currently associated with various forms of religiously motivated acts of violence. A conceptual framework is adopted to study the warning features of religious extremism and apply it to case studies of Nigeria, Uganda, and the Central African Republic (CAR). The application of a religious jihadism model to Christianity provides a comparative basis for assessing Islamic radical jihadism, helping to understand religion as a security threat, with particular reference to Christian contexts and examples. Using extremist rhetoric and the mobilization of Christian rituals, members of religious groups attempt to renegotiate their position in the public space within a society from which they are excluded due to political, social, and economic dynamics based on their exclusion. This study finds no significant difference between Islamic jihad and Christian jihad, as each seeks to politically exploit religion for political ends.

Keywords

religious extremism – Christianity – jihadism – Africa – Nigeria – Uganda – Central Africa Republic

1 Introduction

Since the events of September 2001 and the beginning of the global war against terrorism, the prevailing literature on terrorism has tended to focus on studying

extremist and violent movements associated with Islam. However, the phenomenon of religious extremism is witnessed by all religions and beliefs (Pratt 2017; Mason and James 2010). Extremism and violence based on faith exist in different parts of the African continent where the interpretation of religious texts is employed as the main motive to justify the clashes with the existing society. This applies to all major religions in Africa, including Christianity (Basedau 2017). Accordingly, this paper seeks to study the impact of extremist Christian movements on African society, including their vision of the 'Other', whether Muslim or non-Muslim. To accomplish this, it will be necessary to define the concepts of jihad and new religious movements in the African experience. By comparing them with violent Islamic jihadist movements, this paper aims to locate the religious factor in an array of African conflicts.

The literature review shows that it is possible to distinguish between three groups of scientific works that have dealt with Christian fundamentalism in general and particularly in Africa. The first category discusses the historical phenomenon of Christian jihad, starting with the Crusades and ending with the emergence of the Christian extreme right. Caner and Caner (2004) offer a realistic look at the dark side of Christian history in the form of the Crusades, asserting that even prior to them Christian jihad was aimed at Jews with the threat of 'embrace the cross or die'. An important comparison is Pope Urban II's speech in 1095 CE with Osama bin Laden's speech on February 23, 1998. Khaled Diab (2007) argues that Christian fundamentalism and other conservative Christian groups – known as the Christian Right in the United States – seek to 'Christianize' the mainstream. A vision of the church – state marriage may be constructive. A 'Christian nation', which contrasts with modern secular values such as Islamism, is far-fetched but still dangerous. In *Christian Jihad* Doner (2012) provides an important dissection of the new Fundamentalist mind, focusing primarily on its manifestations within Christianity. Pratt (2010) discusses the Fundamentalist model as applied to Islam as a comparative basis for assessing Christian Fundamentalism and extremism, contributing to an understanding of religious extremism and terrorism with special reference to Christian contexts and examples.

The second category focuses on the African context. For example, using a survey of attitudes of people living in 34 African countries, Adamczyk and LaFree (2019) find that the effects of religiosity on the population's civic engagement and interest in violent political behavior are the same for Muslims and Christians. Hock (2008) links Christian 'fundamentalism' with new religious movements, which have become a major challenge to existing

churches. This challenge has a global dimension. It is present not only in the United States where radical conservative groups of Evangelical, Pentecostal, or Charismatic provenance have emerged and gained popularity at the expense of mainstream churches, but also in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Jordan (2014) discusses how different theological agendas regarding race have been employed in Africa. American ecclesiastical organizations have made Africa an important battleground for defending apartheid and Western influence.

The third category focuses on case studies of violent Christian movements, such as the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) (Adam et al. 2007; Taylor 2019), the anti-balaka movement in the Central African Republic (CAR) (Kah 2016; Lombard 2016), and the rebellions that used Christian jihad in southern Nigeria (Omenka 2011; Pérouse de Montclos 2021).

Perhaps the most serious problem posed by radical religious movements, this study argues, is the ongoing conflict between Christians and adherents of other faiths, particularly Islam and traditional religions in many African countries. Despite the goodwill and calls for tolerance from many religious leaders, all indications are that conflicts along religious lines of communication will be the most pressing issue in the next decade. This article focuses on three case studies: the Christian movements in southern Nigeria, the LRA in northern Uganda, and the anti-balaka militias in the CAR. Such groups are motivated in their movement by Christian beliefs and aim to create a new world that will bring about the kingdom of God on earth. The reason for focusing on these cases is that they represent radical or nonstate armed movements that, in different ways and according to their respective circumstances, have used religion as a tool in times of discontent and conflict.

Accordingly, this study, which is mainly based on qualitative analysis tools in collecting information, aims to answer the following questions: 1) What are the factors that drive the emergence of extremist Christian jihadism in Africa? 2) Does adherence to Christian symbols and slogans in public discourse lead to religious extremism? and 3) How does extremist Christianity express the identity and self-definition crisis from which African societies suffer? To address these questions this study is divided into four main parts. The first discusses the theoretical framework for understanding the general context of the crisis of Christian extremism in Africa, while the other three sections discuss case studies of Nigeria, Uganda, and CAR. To help us understand the factors related to violent religious extremism in Africa and the application of the Jihadism model to Christianity, the following sections address the role of religion in security issues and the nature of violent Christian movements in Africa from a case study perspective.

2 The Theoretical Framework: Understanding Religion as a Security Threat

African people are religious by nature. If they are not Muslims then they believe in Christ, and if that is not the case as well they practice rituals that are expressed in one way or another in traditional African culture.¹ Historically, the roots of Christianity in Africa go back to the first century AD when its teachings spread south through the lands of Nubia. The Coptic and Ethiopian churches are considered among the oldest Christian churches on the continent (Baur 1994; Isichei 1996), which means that the presence of Christianity preceded the introduction of colonization and modern missionaries.² However, despite these deep Christian roots, Africa witnessed new religious movements and cults. Between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries Western missionaries began arriving in Africa. These missionaries frequently converted white settlers, Asian laborers, and educated Africans to Christianity. The Catholic, Anglican, Presbyterian, and Pentecostal churches were prized as pioneers, although the Methodist and Baptist churches came to Africa later and enjoyed more success among tribal groups of traditional religions. In the face of marginalization and other negative effects of Western colonialism, independent African churches emerged that differed from Western expressions of Christianity.³ Some African splinter groups, such as Legio Maria in Kenya, have become new religious movements that believe in the ideas of the African Messiah or the Black Jesus (Meyer 2004).

In terms of belief and principle, the saying, 'Give what is Caesar's to Caesar, and what is God's to God' (Matthew 22: 21; Luke 20: 25) was the basis for the concept of separation of church and state in Christian society. This view was reinforced by the teachings of St. Paul to the Romans, that every person must be subject to the governing authorities because there is no authority except that which is established by God. In general, Christians tend to interpret the New Testament in a pacifist manner, believing that they are obligated to 'obey' their rulers and not deviate from their authority. However, many religious cults, such as liberation theology, have challenged this kind of interpretation. The Book of Joshua has long been the starting point for the concept of jihad in the Bible.

Joshua ... speaks of brutal conquest, confiscating the land of an indigenous people, and acts of wholesale slaughter. Many readers squirm when reading Joshua.... Just as disturbing is the concept of a crusading, nationalistic God who fights wars for one ethnic group at the expense of another. The modern reader may be tempted to dismiss Joshua as

nothing more than a theological justification for the forceful appropriation of land that rightfully belongs to another people.

KUIPER 2012, 15

Interpreting this classic example of jihad in the Old Testament helps distinguish the similarities and differences between the jihad of the Bible and that of the Qur'an. At the same time, understanding the context in which the sacred text appears reflects the ethnic, territorial, and sometimes warlike nature of the Hebrew Bible.

For the purpose of this study Christian authenticity refers to a moral pursuit that requires total obedience and the acceptance of God's will. It demands total commitment that affects all aspects of the believers' lives. In addition, religious extremism can be defined as an ideological commitment that is expressed through certain actions that demonstrate deep loyalty to a belief system. This often leads to group-based violence that can be incited by perceived injustice. It is noticeable that religious extremism in its various forms stems and thrives from both global and local factors (Arefin and Ritu 2021; Pratt 2010). Mainstream discourses on religious extremism usually focus on the international security narrative from a reductionist perspective. That is why, in addition to considering global political drivers, it is imperative to place religious extremism in its local and regional context. Accordingly, this study adopts the human security approach that gives primacy to human beings and their complex social and economic interactions (Gregoratti 2018). It can be argued that human security as such may constitute a global ethic by protecting human dignity and safety.

In this study the concept of cults refers to the existence of controversial religious groups that are in a state of tension with established religious traditions and society in general. Since the word 'cult' has negative connotations, many scholars prefer to use the term 'new religious movements'. The term 'cults' means 'religious movements that represent the new and non-traditional religions in society' (Cowan and Bromley 2015). In the African context these cults are complex and intertwined because they often combine beliefs and practices from other cultures and religious traditions to create their own unique blend (Rodney and Bainbridge 1987).

The danger of the new Christian religious cults in Africa appeared on two occasions. First, it was exemplified by the Kanungu incident in March 2000, which led to the suicide of about one thousand people by setting themselves on fire. The members of this cult seemed to believe that the end of the world was about to happen. Why? Simply because their leaders apparently received

visions of Jesus Christ telling them about the end of the world (Brennan 2002). Second, an incident that occurred around the same time was associated with the International Church of Christ, a very aggressive American evangelical group that often focuses its activities on the campus of the University of Cape Town. This cult relies on imposing the rules of evangelism, tithing, baptisms, and internal marriages of members of the group only; offenders are doomed to hell. Accordingly, this sect calls for the conversion of any person, including Muslims and followers of other Christian churches, since none of them know the truth of the Bible and are not biblical Christians (Religious Cult Recruits SA Students n.d.).

In general, there has been a changing face to religious violence over time in modern African reality, a region that has been fairly stable in terms of peaceful faith coexistence. Africa has not historically experienced religious wars since traditional religions were like isolated islands and had no missionary function. Despite small religious conflicts, there have been no major wars or conflicts based on religion in the last decade. Political religious movements were not a concern for the postcolonial secular state in Africa. However, things took a different turn as signs of religious violence began to increase on the continent. This may become one of the main sources of instability and human insecurity in the future. If this potential threat is not taken seriously it could alter the long-term dynamics of Christian–Muslim relations in Africa.

Most of the countries threatened by religious violence are concentrated in the Sahel region and beyond, with a strong Islamic presence in its northern regions and a Christian concentration in the south (Hassan 2020a). An additional factor is the influence from North Africa. There is also a general feeling of political and economic marginalization as a result of hegemony over the political and administrative apparatus of the state by either party. It is noteworthy that the past decade has witnessed an escalation of religious or interfaith tensions and sometimes violence in West, Central, and East Africa. While some of these tensions have been contained, others have escalated. For example, the Ivorian conflict is often portrayed as a confrontation between a Muslim north and a Christian south. With regard to the current religious demographic composition, this is only partially true. It is correct that the vast majority of northerners are Muslims (56 percent). However, there are a large number of Muslims in the south (35 percent as a result of internal migration movements between north and south, as well as waves of migration from the neighboring countries of Burkina Faso and Mali (Miran-Guyon 2006). In 1998 official sources publicly stated that they feared the consequences of the increasing number of Muslim immigrants. Accordingly, religious demographics and their

intersection with regional identities have become the subject of contention in the political debate over Ivorian identity and citizenship since 1993.

It is no secret that the main influence on interfaith relations is due to the fact that extremism from one religious group tends to encourage extremism from other religious groups. This occurred in Nigeria during the Biafra War, and the reaction of Christian organizations to the imposition of Islamic Sharia laws in the north. The case of armed Christian organizations directed against Muslims in the CAR provides another example. These conflicts can correspond to the lines of sectarian and ethnic divisions, which can lead to the violent targeting of some groups (Kagwanja 2014).

A distinction can be made between the two different types of Christian violence in Africa and the reasons behind this violence. The first form is sectarian violence embodied in the dynamics of Muslim–Christian relations in countries such as Nigeria and CAR. It begins as a political insurgency and then becomes religious in character when one community engages in violence against another on sectarian religious grounds. The second form of Christian religious violence is carried out by extremist groups that practice killing in the name of God, such as the LRA in Uganda and the anti-balaka group in the CAR. The goal of these groups is to advance a specific cause in theological thought and then engage in violent activity to achieve it, such as imposing a set of behavioral standards with severe penalties for violators.

In Africa religion is closely related to people's daily lives, and thus religious affiliation is shaped and becomes a decisive factor in building social identity. This affiliation may create sharp differences between religious groups. However, advocates of the concept of societal inequality in its various dimensions interpret interfaith violence as a specific consequence of the economic and other policy-related inequalities that exist between religious groups. In other words, this is the inequality that results in a particular religious group perceiving itself as more marginalized and oppressed than other groups (Ellis and ter Haar 2004). However, the basic assumption underlying this study is that the main reason behind religious violence, in general, is the failure of the postcolonial state in Africa since it is still a national project in progress (Hassan 2020b). Extremist religious movements appear in the context of a state crisis. The public sometimes welcome them as an alternative to the state in its attempts to achieve security and stability because it is believed these movements will be able to provide enforcement of the rule of law and establish stability. Based on the case studies of Tanzania, Côte d'Ivoire, and Nigeria, Basedau et al. (2013) discuss the causes of higher levels of Christian–Muslim violence that are attributable to economic and social inequality, and the

overlapping or intersection of religious and ethnic boundaries that generate grievances and violence between the two religions. This study also finds that when theological ideas are politicized interreligious violence reaches its maximum expression (Basedau et al. 2013).

Some conceptual approaches to religious jihadism associate extremism with violence committed at the group or individual level. This study adopts the model presented by Kimball (2008). This model suggests that the five warning features of religious extremism for individuals (i.e., personal beliefs) or groups (i.e., as embedded in salient group norms) are belief in absolute truth, endorsement of blind obedience, a quest to establish utopia, belief that the end justifies the means, and a declaration of holy war. In the following sections this line of interpretation is explored in relation to religious extremism. The three case studies clearly reveal most of these warning signs of Christian jihadism.

3 Biafra and the Christian Rebellion in Nigeria

Although the literature focuses on examining the case of Boko Haram in northern Nigeria and the Sahel region, some rebel groups in the southern areas use a similar approach by employing religious arguments and claiming to be the teachings of Christ to legitimize their rebellion. The idea of the Republic of Biafra, framed by Christian religious arguments, continues to inspire the justification of the rebellion of many armed groups (Oyewole 2019). They learned from the legacy of separatists who, between 1967 and 1970, insisted on upholding Catholic values in what they perceived as a Muslim genocide against Christians, even though Nigeria's head of state at the time, General Jacob Gowon, was a Christian (Pérouse de Montclos 2021).

3.1 *Holy War*

Thousands of Eastern Christians residing in Nigeria were killed in the aftermath of the 1966 military coup. There have been deliberate attempts to 'religiousize' the conflict. The dominant discourse in the press and radio began to focus on the 'Muslim North' and the 'Christian South', especially in the eastern region. When the war broke out in Biafra in July 1967, Christian religious discourse was used extensively and effectively as propaganda for the war (Omenka 2011). In its campaign to gain Christian support for its movement, the separatist government of Biafra highlighted the religious division between the North and East as an excuse to reject the idea of a united state. The amalgamation of the Muslim North with the Christian and pagan South has been likened

to a hypothetical case in which Egypt and Ireland are merged together within the framework of a united nation. The Catholic archbishop of Westminster, Cardinal Heenan, states:

The problem is quite simply how to integrate the ancient emirates of the North into the rest of the country to form a unitary state. It is a simple matter of fact that nowhere in the world has [it] been possible to combine satisfactorily under a single central government, except in the cases of imperial domination, Mohammedan, and non-Mohammedan states. It would be otiose to draw up the list. An integral Mohammedan society forms a closed society, and as such cannot be asked to accept a central government over which it has no guaranteed control. Its cultural affinity is with the rest of the Islamic world, and those who do not belong to this world form a foreign element that can never be truly accepted into the society. These incontrovertible sociological factors must be respected, and any attempt to ignore them can only lead to failure.

UCHE 2008, 114

3.2 *God and Igbo Utopia*

Igbo-majority areas in southeastern Nigeria, the heart of the former Biafra region, are predominantly Roman Catholic. During the civil war the propaganda for Biafra focused largely on the religious aspect of the conflict, making it a conflict between Christians and Muslims (note that many Christian clergymen supported Biafra). However, the reality is more complex. The secession of Biafra followed two bloody coups and a massacre against the Igbo in the Muslim North, driving the Igbo refugees south into the area that would become Biafra. The secession movement reflects Igbo's desire for a separate Igbo-dominated state. However, the aspirations related to controlling the oil wealth that the region owned cannot be ignored in the motives behind the Biafra crisis.

The Igbo people in the Biafra region were surrounded by Islamic emirates. Accordingly, Igbo activists expressed their discontent by linking the political and religious aspects in their dominant discourse. Since then, some of them have presented themselves as belonging to one of the lost tribes of Israel. For example, Nnamdi Kanu, one of the Biafra protest leaders who was arrested by the government of President Muhammadu Buhari in 2015, states that he converted to Judaism while in prison. Other activists founded the Biafra Zionism movement (Pérouse de Montclos 2021).

In general, protests against the actions of the Muslim ruling class in northern Nigeria have found some resonance within the Igbo groups in the diaspora.

Social media and the 'Voice of Biafra' station, which broadcasts from the United Kingdom, offer modern platforms to preach the goals of the rebel movements, which are covered with a Christian religious facade. To the south along the Atlantic coast of Nigeria, rebels fighting the government in the oil-producing areas of the Niger Delta were not excluded. They are like the Igbo in that some Ijaw in the region compared themselves to the Jews, followers of Moses who were able to break the shackles of 'slavery'. This indicates their desire to be liberated from the yoke of Muslims in the north.

3.3 *The End Justifies the Means*

The Niger Delta Avengers group, which emerged in 2016, denounced the tyranny of the federal government and called President Muhammadu Buhari an 'Egyptian pharaoh'. This rhetoric is familiar to Salafi jihadists who criticized autocratic rulers in the Muslim world. In addition, we can remember the writer 'Ken' Ken' Saro-Wiwa, who led the first protest marches of the Ogoni Survival Movement.⁴ In 1995 the ruling military council, led by General Sani Abacha, executed him by hanging along with eight other people (Osha 2006).

It is possible that the violence of the Niger Delta armed groups was a reaction against the violent jihadist movement represented by Boko Haram. Izon Ebi, the spokesperson of the Niger Delta Revolutionary Crusaders (NDRC), stated:

We want to alert Nigerians and the world that the Islamization plot has been proven by the Boko Haram new leader Abu Masab el Barnaw that their new mission is to kill all Christians and burn down all churches. But, we want to warn them that ... the Niger Delta youths, in this 21st century will not accept the killing of innocent Christians or burning of churches. That if they try it [i.e., kill Christians or burn down church buildings] in the north or any part of Nigeria, we the Niger Delta youths will not see [i.e., accommodate] any Muslim or mosque in the Niger Delta.

EZIGBO 2018, 241

Perhaps the difference between Christian jihad and radical Islamic jihad is that the Christian insurgencies in southern Nigeria do not seek to impose a Christian state, unlike Boko Haram jihadists who dream of restoring the nation of the caliphate. However, there are several indications that political discourse is strongly influenced by religion in Nigerian Christian movements. The evangelical cities that developed on the outskirts of big cities in the south became city-states within the state. In 1990 rebels, who by some accounts were backed by evangelical churches in the Niger Delta, staged a coup attempt in order to 'purify' Nigeria and expel the Muslim-majority northern states from the

federation. Some armed groups formed of 'neosectionarians' try to emulate the violent jihadist practices of ISIS and al-Qaeda fighters. In the Igbo regions, for example, rival groups sometimes behead people and kill priests, which indicates the mixing of religious and criminal motives (Pérouse de Montclos 2021).

Returning to the religious variable, we find that ethnic and religious pluralism in Nigeria is one of the most influential factors. As a result, religion has gained political significance and generated tension in Nigeria due to its pluralism. While there are three major religions in Nigeria, religious and political conflicts largely revolve around the activities of Islam and Christianity and their interrelationships. The history of religious sentiment and involvement in regional and national politics aptly illustrates its activities in post-independence Nigerian politics (Ezigbo 2018). The search and competition for political power have occurred in part within the framework of religion in ways that have reinforced ethnic and regional animosity. Thus religious identity at the individual and group levels is in conflict with other allegiances, such as race, class, and gender, in ways that further exacerbate the polarity between Islam and Christianity and the question of political control in Nigeria (Adogame 2015). There is no doubt that this tension is clearly related to the relentless growth of Islamic and Christian roles, which led to the growth of a culture of religious violence, especially in northern Nigeria. The influence of religion on politics has created an atmosphere of mutual distrust and suspicion to the extent that almost all national issues are approached through a religious lens. Political practice in Nigeria since independence proves that social, economic, and political imperatives have a strong influence on both the politicization of religion and the religiosity of politics in Nigeria. The scramble for political power has occurred partly within the framework of religion in ways that exacerbate ethnic and regional contradictions and worsen misunderstandings between Islam and Christianity. In this case, religious discourse plays an important role in the political mobilization processes and could lead to violence, as shown in the following section.

4 The Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in Northern Uganda

The LRA has been active in northern Uganda since 1986, with its fighters carrying out brutal attacks on the civilian population, engaging in kidnapping, and recruiting children to the movement. Today the LRA is estimated to number only between 500 and 5,000 fighters, but it appears to be strong enough to fight the national armies of Uganda, southern Sudan, and eastern Congo (International Crisis Group (ICG) 2011; Vinci 2005). This army is one of the most mysterious insurgency groups in postcolonial Africa. From the early stages of

the insurgency, the LRA claimed as their main objective the establishment of a government based on the biblical Ten Commandments or other eschatological goals (Branch 2005; Vinci 2005).

4.1 *God and Holy War*

Many accounts emphasize the charismatic qualities of Joseph Kony (Beevor 2017) that give him the power of magic over his followers and soldiers. Kony initially joined the opposition Ugandan People's Defense Forces. At the time Kony was just a priest in a Catholic church. Many Acholi youths at that time joined the rebellion as a result of the abuse of power by the National Resistance Army. Kony refused the peace agreement with the Ugandan government, and he and his comrades decided to continue the war against the government of Yoweri Museveni (van Acker 2004).

Although little is known about the real purposes of the LRA because it seldom makes public statements and Joseph Kony hardly speaks publicly, those purposes can be identified from the testimonies of former rebels, peace brokers, and the characteristics of his fighters' practices. This evidence sheds light on the Christian religious character of the LRA: it wants to fulfill the Ten Commandments of the people, and Kony likens himself to Moses and Jesus Christ as he leads his people to the Promised Land. Former LRA rebels speak of many religious rituals within the movement such as baptisms or sacrifices (Adam et al. 2007). The fighters of the LRA group also wear long beads on their chests and recite verses from the Bible before battle.

The emergence of the Holy Spirit movement led by Alice Lukina represented a significant shift in the evolution of the conflict in northern Uganda. This woman claimed to represent the soul of an Italian who was killed during the First World War. This spirit was put in the body of 'Alice' on 25 May 1985 (Allen 1991). While first claiming that she could heal the sick, she soon announced the founding of the Holy Spirit Movement. This movement was based on the general belief that the Acholi people are threatened with extinction and that immunizing these people from destruction requires adopting a new strategy. Lukina believed that maintaining the survival of the Acholi requires the establishment of an unnatural superpower Acholi. With the help of some defected National Army soldiers, the movement was able to achieve limited victories over government forces, which supported the impression that Lukina possessed superhuman strength (Hassan 2020c.).

There is no doubt that the world of Acholi is full of symbols and spiritual values. It is saturated with spirits, ghosts, and occult forces. The disasters inflicted on the Acholi people, particularly in the aftermath of the collapse of the Milton Obote regime, have led to the belief that the conflict is nothing more than

self-purification. Lukina also claimed that she possessed the Holy Spirit, which enabled her to eliminate the evil spirits of those who were killed in battle and replace them with angels. This religious movement was short lived since it was quickly countered in 1987. The repercussions of this movement were far-reaching in the development of the conflict in northern Uganda (Branch 2005).

After defeating the Holy Spirit Movement, Kony announced that he had inherited Alice Lukina's spirit. However, Kony has not been able to garner the massive public support that Lukina once had. In 1988 Kony initially named his movement the Ugandan Christian Democratic People's Army, but soon changed its name to the Uganda Christian Democratic People's Army. In 1991 Kony changed his movement's name a third time, to the Lord's Resistance Army. Kony's ideas and beliefs fluctuated. He sometimes appeared to believe in the ideas of the Holy Spirit Movement, especially its Christian components that reject magic and sorcery; at other times he rejected it and practiced other religious rituals (Allen and Vlassenroot 2010).

In any case, Kony was able to develop the ideas of the Holy Spirit Movement. He was able to coalesce the LRA around the idea of a radical change to the Acholi from within, similar to a moral crusade. This transformation made the process violent; it seems that through this component of faith Kony has given religious and moral legitimacy to his armed movement. Central to the thought of the LRA is the fact that Kony claims to possess different spirits and sees himself as the one who must convey the message of the Holy Spirit. Through the concept of spirits Kony comes into direct contact with God as his mouthpiece. Therefore the LRA sees its struggle as one directed by God for the salvation of all Acholi people. This divine and religious dimension is manifested by a broad set of religious rules and rituals, which spirits – and thus God – have revealed to the universe. Most of these spiritual rules are directly related to Christianity and traditional Acheulean practices. Perhaps the most famous of these is the 'Ten Commandments' in which the LRA claims to be fighting for a government based on the Ten Commandments. In addition, the LRA has a wide range of rules, introduced by spirits through Joseph Kony himself, that must be obeyed blindly. Many of these rules are anachronistic, such as fasting from food and drinking, or sexual abstinence, while others are perpetual, such as informing and explaining the actions of the LRA to its members.

4.2 *Blind Obedience*

According to Titeca:

There were rules for everything in the bush. For example, an important rule of the spirit was that everything must be done at speed 99! You must

do it very quickly, so the enemy cannot get you. Also, walking must be on 99. They tell you, for example, you go to Lacor, we give you one hour. You must do anything as fast as possible and keep the time they tell you! Cooking must be done in thirty minutes and going for washing as well. Because if you delay with cooking, you are going to meet your enemy. So you need the speed!

2010, 63

One of the ex-leaders describes the prebattle ritual as follows:

The holy spirit reported to the chairman [Kony], who selected the soldiers who could be on 'stand-by'. He picked the controllers. He ordered them to mix this type of herbs (*sic*), mixed them in powder form, put them in a basin together with water and Moo ya. The controllers stand near the basin and splash the soldiers, one by one. When the soldiers are near the basin, they put their guns three times in the basin and women four times. You put the gun up and you say, 'God, you are stronger than anything in the world; therefore, the power belongs to you'. We also sing songs like 'Polo Polo' ['Heaven should come to rescue us in our lives, and we shall never leave the way to heaven'] because when we sing, we do not even hear gunshots! When you finish, you cannot believe what you have done. You say: What has happened? How did I do all this? It is as if you are not the one who did it. It is a force that you have in you: it gives you courage and strength! ... All the spirits are with Kony, but if you are going to the battle, you feel that something is with you. On the battlefield, they will be doing their duty and take care of you: everyone will feel very strong.

TITECA 2010, 64

On the other hand, biblical texts were employed in the process of LRA fighters' spiritual education. For example, a former LRA commander in charge of girls and women argued the following:

For him [Kony], he says it is God who sent him to kill people so nobody should stop him. You know this thing is very difficult to understand, as he [Kony] refers us to the Bible. Because he says God does what he wills, and what he wants to do, He does. If he wants to kill, he sends a person on earth, as he sent in the past. He also said in the past God sent rain to clear and finish people and it rained for 40 days during Noah's time, and also Gomorrah was destroyed. Many were killed. That was the anger of

God. In Kony's time, God has sent the Holy Spirit, and it is the one which is doing the work through Kony.

NKABALA 2017, 94

The purpose of using these violent biblical texts was to achieve two crucial beliefs in the spiritual education of the movement's fighters. First, Kony has been sent by God to confirm God's word. Second, the Acholi can be saved through purification. If the Acholi believe that Kony's spirit is from God, then they will accept Kony as the only soul that can save them. This Savior will be able to fulfill his mission only through strict obedience to the Word of God and its representative on earth, Joseph Kony. This may reflect the concept of blind obedience and religious justification for violence.

Effective leaders are often charismatic, but evil can occur when leaders have the power to enforce obedience. The leader of the LRA was able to create a community that was increasingly disengaged from the larger society so that its members became a huge camp or self-enclosed community.

4.3 *Purification and Utopia*

Additionally, the LRA argues that many Acholi do not obey God because their culture has become 'impure': they use witchcraft practices and cooperate with a corrupt government. As a result, the LRA directs its violence not only against the government's army but primarily against the Acholi people. The LRA, especially the kidnapped children, is the seed of a new 'pure' generation that follows the Word of God.

As this study argues, the conflict in northern Uganda began as a result of the marginalization of northern Uganda in general and the Acholi people in particular. In other words, this is a problem of nation-state building in the post-colonial era. In the LRA's armed rebellion, which was a reaction against this marginalization, religion (Christian rites) played a crucial role in the process of creating an alternative ethnic and religious identity. This process of identity formation occurs through the use of religious rituals and the use of violence against the 'Other', resulting in influences on different levels. First, this renewed spiritual identity is important for achieving cohesion within the group; it creates internal discipline and prevents rebels from escaping. Second, the ethnic and religious identity that the LRA established may save the Acholi 'spiritually', but on a secular level it may lead to their destruction, especially 'outsiders', the nonbelievers who do not join the ranks of the LRA and should therefore be killed by the believers. This suggests the concept of *takfir* in the philosophy of violent Islamic jihadist groups. Third, there is a mixture of religious and Acholi traditions in terms of rituals and practices of external violence, not only

in redefining Acholi identity but also to ensure that the Acholi community in general understands the impetus behind LRA violence.

We propose to enrich the study of religious extremism in Africa as observed in the cases of Nigeria and Uganda by opening a perspective that accurately addresses the societal factors that lead to feelings of marginalization and victimization by certain social groups. The practices of employing religious discourse can be explored in political terms to understand the process of radicalization. The case of CAR in the next section shows that Christian extremists were seeking a holy war fueled by anger regarding perceived injustice.

5 Anti-Balaka in the Central African Republic

As the previous cases suggest, 'Christian terrorism' takes the form of terrorist acts largely through militias that invoke Christian motives or goals for their actions. As such, Christian extremists in Africa also rely on the interpretation of the Bible, often citing the Old and New Testaments to justify violence and murder. It is noteworthy that the extremism of the Christian faith is a growing phenomenon in Africa's internal wars, especially in what is referred to as the 'arc of insecurity' extending from Somalia to Mauritania. Christian 'revenge terrorism' reached its climax in the political crisis that engulfed the CAR, beginning in 2012 (Bellal 2014).

6 A Quest to Establish Utopia

The defining moment in the political history of the CAR was that the Muslim rebel alliance, known as Séléka, was able to oust President François Bozizé in March 2013. The rebel alliance installed its leader, Michel Djotodia, as the first Muslim president of the CAR. Although Djotodia announced the dissolution of Séléka in September 2013, this militia rejected the decision and engaged in large-scale violence.⁵

There is no doubt that this shift cemented the political foundation for the emergence of retaliatory violence by Christian militias. The Christians of the CAR organized into militias known as 'anti-balaka'. This name means 'anti-machete' or 'anti-sword' in the local languages of Mandja and Sango. This name was often used to describe vigilante units that local communities set up to fight thieves, strangers, rebels, and poachers. It may also refer to the French word for bullets (*balles*) because the people of the CAR resisted the Kalashnikov assault, which was often used against them. 'Anti-balaka' is also a general term

for those who resisted the brutal Séléka insurgency. The term roughly means 'indomitable', which refers to a power allegedly bestowed by the charms that hang around the necks of most members (Kah 2016).

The United Nations warned of 'genocide', which prompted the intervention of the International Support Mission. When Djotodia was unable to control the security situation, he submitted his resignation and was replaced by Catherine Samba-Panza as the country's interim president. Nevertheless, anti-balaka militias continued sectarian violence against Muslim civilians, forcing thousands of them to flee the country. Research by human rights groups has revealed that members of the Christian anti-balaka committed massacres and targeted killings against Muslim civilians. Muslims, who compose 15 percent of the population, were forced to flee to the areas that the Séléka rebels controlled and neighboring countries such as Chad.

The events provoked by the Séléka and anti-balaka militias, as well as the deployment of international forces have contributed to the exacerbation and restructuring of public perceptions that pose the question of identity and religion around pervasive violent practices, which are largely unprecedented in CAR history. Evoking the division between 'Christians' and 'Muslims' clearly shows this interrelationship between violent practices (e.g., mutual accusations, extrajudicial executions, murder, revenge, forced displacement) and the motives and perceptions that underlie them. Most of them are reinforced by the act of violence itself. However, the significance of this division and the process that gradually generated it in CAR society remains problematic, and invites us to look beyond simple religious affiliations. This can be done by questioning the true meaning of these sects, both Christian and Islamic, in the eyes of the population. This task is made more difficult by the fact that research relating specifically to the history of the CAR and the political crisis of 2014–2021 is limited. Even though the country is located in a turbulent region, it lies at the center of various political and economic interests and complex dynamics that redefine the relationship between Western powers and their partners in sub-Saharan Africa (Mayneri 2014).

The roots of this deteriorating situation lie in the recent history of the CAR, which is characterized by the weakness of political parties and organizations, and their increasing inability to exercise a true representative function within civil society and access to regional groups. In addition, the ease of the frequent use of weapons and the presence of external actors influence the country's political landscape.⁶ For example, even before Bozizé's coup in 2003 his predecessor Patassé managed to thwart several coup attempts thanks to the support he received on three occasions (in 2001, 2002, and 2003) from the Libyan forces and the Congolese Liberation Movement led by Jean-Pierre Bemba. Between

1996 and 1997 the country witnessed three successive rebellions, partly triggered by disadvantaged soldiers who did not receive their salaries. However, their demands quickly took on political, ethnic, and religious dimensions, which were revealed by the division among the elites.

Since 2011 the government of General François Bozizé has been spreading the concept of Islamophobia and encouraging a national discourse against Muslims. There have been persistent references to the presence of Sudanese Janjaweed and other Chadian Islamists in the rebel movements and the Séléka Alliance. The main theme behind the clashes in Bangui in 2011 was the Central African crisis of questioning Muslims and their foreign origins, especially Chadians (Fancello 2020). The rise in the Christian fundamentalist rhetoric of churches in the CAR against Islam has continued through most of the postindependence years.

6.1 *Toward Holy War*

Like the Nigerian case, Central African presidents since independence have used religion as a tool for political mobilization and fundraising. For example, President Bokassa (1965–1979) converted to Islam and changed his name to carry an Islamic character after a visit to Libya in September 1976, during which he was promised a massive amount of aid by Muammar Gaddafi.⁷ It is apparent that the political elites relied on the educational institutions of the Roman Catholic community as a means of advancement and class mobility. Although Bokassa converted to Islam opportunistically, he and the nationalist leader Barthélemy Boganda studied in Catholic missionary schools, the only institutions where they could obtain a quality education and thus improve their social status. In addition, when the regime of President Kolingba (1981–1993) was collapsing in the early 1990s, he resorted to the political manipulation of religion by establishing a ‘National Day of Fasting and Prayer’ on June 30 (Vlavanou 2021). President Patassé (1993–2003) was widely known as a preacher, and his speeches regularly contained biblical references (Vlavanou 2021). President Bozizé (2003–2013), ordained as the Grand Head of the Celestial Church of Christ, was a follower of this branch of Pentecostalism. In 2003 he decided by decree that December 31 would be a national day of fasting and prayer (extended to three days beginning in 2004) in order to thank God and ask God for forgiveness. Based on her fieldwork in CAR and Benin, Sandra Fancello (2020) explains Bozizé’s involvement in transnational celestial networks and his quest for power both within the church and within the CAR. During his ten years in power he developed a rhetoric of warfare inspired by the spiritual warfare of ‘Holy Jihad’ to free the country from its foreign and Muslim enemies. This exacerbated the violent conflict between Muslims and Christians.

6.2 *The End Justifies the Means*

The tendency of political elites to consolidate their power using religious discourse highlights not only the interaction between religion and politics in the CAR but also the long-standing role of religious institutions in promoting social progress. Indeed, the same political elites who have traditionally mobilized moral and religious discourse have often engaged in violent power struggles in the pursuit of authority and social mobility. For example, many cadres of the administration of Bozizé were keen to attend prayers in these churches. Some members of Bozizé's government have hinted, rightly or wrongly, at the supposed financing of the 'Coalition of Radical Islamic Salafism' and the presence of Boko Haram elements in the ranks of the Séléka. These accusations may have been aimed at prompting Western intervention in the CAR in order to maintain the collapsing Bozizé regime. However, this did not work out well for him and his supporters, who tried to maintain power by various means.

The anti-Muslim rhetoric did not help unite the people of the CAR but rather widened the gap that already exists in the country, especially between the government and the many armed groups that emerged to defend the interests of their leaders. In addition, the interests of external parties such as Chad and Sudan were, directly and indirectly, involved in the long-lasting political crisis. Thus, the polarization of the conflict between Christians and Muslims was gradually grafted onto old ethnic cleavages and presented Muslims as foreigners: 'In the words of the anti-balaka and their "commanders", the confessional identity helps to structure a discourse of autochthony where the Other persecutor, who must be annihilated, simultaneously assumes the features of the Muslim, as a foreigner, often from Chad' (Fancello 2020, 188). Even François Bozizé presented himself as a victim of foreigners.

However, the overthrow of transitional President Michel Djotodia on 10 January 2014, by pressure from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), intensified counterinsurgency efforts and countered the anti-balaka movement that had been formed to fight the brutal Séléka militia. Both armed movements fought a war of a religious nature that led to threats to split the CAR in two: the northern part for Muslims and the southern part for Christians and non-Muslims. It should be noted that religious differences were not the main origin of the crisis in the CAR, as this study confirms. The factors of religion and national identity in the CAR were employed by the dominant elites of the Séléka and anti-balaka militias to achieve political and economic goals, taking advantage of the failure of the national state. This is the essence of the crisis in the CAR, which has led to the emergence of separatist tendencies and the culture of exclusion.

7 Conclusion

This study has attempted, through the cases of Nigeria, northern Uganda, and CAR, to understand the various dimensions of the phenomenon of radical Christian movements in Africa and to put them on the research agenda for studying the phenomenon of violent religious extremism. It is no secret that the dominant Western perspective on studies of religious extremism focuses, for reasons that are not hidden, on violent Islamist jihadist movements such as ISIS, al-Qaeda, and Boko Haram. Importantly, this study sought to shed light on the general context in which these militant Christian movements operate, as well as on the role of religion – in this case Christianity – and the use of religious symbols in local political mobilization processes.

Some general conclusions can be drawn from these three cases. First, the various forms of orthodox Christianity have proven to provide an acceptable alternative in filling the social and cultural void resulting from the national state's failure or the sense of historical grievances. In the case of eastern Nigeria Christianity became a 'strategy for liberation', inspired by the spirit of the Christian Republic of Biafra. In this sense, the religious variable can give meaning to the context of the deeper processes of the social and economic crisis and marginalization (the crisis of state-building in general), and thus can offer new tools for understanding this context. In all three cases religious mobilizations were caused by various factors, such as Christian militancy (Northern Uganda and CAR), the loss of socioeconomic status and a legacy of colonial times (Acholi), marginalization, and subsequent exclusion in favor of dominant groups (Biafra and Niger Delta). The exclusion of certain groups from political power and high levels of poverty created an ideal environment for the rise of rebel groups in the CAR, while the use of religious rhetoric has legitimized the actions and practices of these movements, such as the demands for secession in Nigeria.

Second, although the process of upholding Christian slogans and symbols does not necessarily lead to religious extremism, various case studies reveal that the possibility of this extremism is higher in situations where Christian communities feel increasingly threatened by competing or numerically superior Muslim groups, such as in southern Nigeria or the CAR. Rituals and prayers are usually designed to ask God for help in war and ritual blood sacrifice, a prefiguration of the martyrdom of those fighting for a sacred cause. The risk of losing a life in war for a sacred cause is offset by the promise of salvation in the hereafter. Martyrdom has become the highest mark of religious devotion. The fear of Islamic jihadist expansion in Nigeria and the massacres of Eastern

Christians during the 1966 coup contributed to the emergence of Biafra's Christian identity with its desire for an independent state.

Third, the three cases also demonstrate how Christianity is employed to achieve other political ends apart from dealing with marginalization processes and historical grievances. Christianity here becomes central to the processes of self-definition and the creation of a new identity, which helps achieve the inner coherence of the movement and to define the nature of the relationship with the 'outside'. Notable in these operations is the use of collective symbols, rules, and rituals such as a dedicated space for worship, group prayers that lasted hours in the case of the LRA, or the rituals led by Sara Wiwa and his nonviolent campaign for the emancipation of the Ogoni people.

Fourth, in the three cases discussed in this study other factors contributed to the processes of Christian radicalization within the community. Take, for example, the 1966 coup d'état and the massacre of Eastern Christians in Nigeria, the failed Acholi coup, the consequent repression in Uganda in mid-1985, and Christian-Muslim violence in the CAR in 2013. In this case, religion became the main force for political mobilization, although the content and nature of the religious messages are different. However, as in northern Uganda, while Christian extremism and unpopular methods such as forced conversions and kidnapping of child recruits led to internal divisions within the movement, those divisions were also seen between the LRA, the Acholi people, and non-Christian communities.

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Notes

- 1 The influence of traditional African religions on Christianity and Islam can be observed in many ways such as the nature of interfaith relations, especially between Christians and Muslims. The celebration of the traditional festivals brings various religious groups together (Amanze 2012, 283). Based on this cultural encounter, Ali Mazrui argues that Africa's triple heritage is the result of the encounter of three cultures – the indigenous culture, Western Christian culture, and Islamic culture (Mazrui 1986).
- 2 Christianity first arrived in North Africa and then moved deeper into the heart of the continent. If we look at the three major blocs there are different Christianities in Africa: Coptic Christianity, Ethiopian Orthodox Church, and the modern incarnation reflected in the denominations transplanted in Africa through missionary work (Bongmba 2015).
- 3 The rapid spread of African Independent Churches and the Fundamentalist/Charismatic movements throughout sub-Saharan Africa has led to the development of radical millenarian sects that can turn violent or more self-destructive through the suicide of their members (Hexham 2002).
- 4 There were three waves of resource-centered insurgencies in the Delta Niger region. The first wave was led by Isac Boro in February 1966 with the Niger Delta Volunteers force, which aimed at excising the Niger Delta from Nigeria. The second wave occurred between 1999 and 2009 and had as its epicenter the movement for the emancipation of the Niger Delta. The third wave emerged with the formation of the Niger Delta Avengers in 2016. However, there were some periods of nonviolent protests that successfully globalized the Ogoni resistance against the state-oil business alliance (Oriola and Adeakin 2018).
- 5 Séléka was formally dissolved in September 2013 by Michel Djotodia, one of the leaders of the rebellion who had installed himself as president of the republic after the coup of 24 March 2013. However, this decision did not affect the armed formations that were controlling important areas inside the country. During a meeting in the north of the CAR on 11 May 2014, the Séléka militia formed a new administrative structure and subsequently moved to the city of Bambari, 400 km from Bangui, the capital.
- 6 We propose to explain religious extremism in the CAR through tracing the history of the power struggle among the elite groups. Ruling elites, including anti-balaka and Séléka, exploited citizens' religious and national identities to attain their interests and take over

natural resources. In addition, regional and international actors have been actively involved in the conflict, but their policies and strategies toward the CAR mostly reflect their regional and global interests and ambitions (Siradag 2016).

- 7 His opportunism is evident in that after only several months Bokassa abandoned his plans to establish an Islamic republic in Central Africa and announced his return to the Catholic Church (Vlavonou 2021).