

## Aquinas' Theology of Peace: A Veritable Tool for Peace in Present-Day Nigeria

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### Abstract

This paper explores the relevance of Thomas Aquinas's theology of peace as a potential tool for fostering peace in present-day Nigeria. Aquinas, a renowned medieval theologian and philosopher, developed a comprehensive framework for understanding peace rooted in natural law and virtue ethics. His teachings emphasize the importance of justice, charity, and the common good in achieving true peace within societies. Nigeria is chosen as the scope of study due to its present struggles with deep-seated ethnic, religious, and political conflicts, which have hindered national unity and development. The application of Aquinas's theological framework offers a grounded approach to addressing these conflicts, as it emphasizes the necessity of justice and moral virtue in achieving true peace. By promoting principles such as respect for human dignity, solidarity, and reconciliation, his teachings provide a moral foundation for addressing the root causes of violence and promoting harmony among diverse communities. Drawing upon Aquinas's timeless wisdom, this paper argues that integrating his theology of peace into Nigeria's social and political discourse could serve as a veritable tool for promoting reconciliation, justice, and sustainable peace in a country deeply divided by sectarian tensions and structural inequalities. The researcher employed the use of works of reputable authors in the general works, journals, internet and other relevant materials. The researcher recommends that *promoting understanding and cooperation among different religious and ethnic groups through dialogue and education, promoting responsible journalism that fosters peace, unity, and tolerance, implementing policies that promote equitable economic growth and reduce poverty, addressing root causes of conflict and promoting ethical leadership based on the principles of justice, accountability, and service to the people can promote peace, reduce the conflict race and promote meaningful dialogue among the citizens of Nigeria. By implementing these recommendations, Nigeria can move towards a more just, equitable, and peaceful society, aligning with the principles of Aquinas' theology of peace.*

Keywords: peace, Nigeria, political instability, religious tensions, and ethnic conflict

## Introduction

Nigeria is a nation of many different ethnic and religious identities, all of which have contributed significantly to the ongoing ethnic violence in the country. In Nigeria, divide and conquer politics are a manifestation of these identities or nations, as well as the easy access to political power through the manipulation of religious and ethnic passions by political elites. One of the hardest and most complex cultural diversities in the world is found in Nigeria, where three distinct ethnic groups make up the majority: the Hausa-Fulani ethnic group, which is predominantly Muslim in the North, the Yoruba ethnic group,<sup>1</sup> while Christianity is the dominant religion in the south-west, including the capital, Lagos, and southeast,<sup>2</sup> and the Igbo ethnic group, which is predominantly Christian in the East. There is an unpleasant competition between these three major ethnic groups in Nigeria as they fight for limited resources. Thousands of innocent people have been killed as a result of these divides and differences, which led to violent ethnic conflicts. Political elites in Nigeria are taking advantage of this terrible situation to further their own personal agendas.<sup>3</sup> The social and spiritual phenomenon of religion entails the categorization of individuals according to their beliefs. Global peace is elusive as a result of the growing weight that religious intolerance has placed on nations alike. Our daily lives are guided by religion, which shouldn't be centred only on the morality of particular people.<sup>4</sup> The political landscape of Nigeria is still dominated by political instability, which is also a recurrent occurrence. Even though Nigeria is known as the "giant of Africa," the nation has gone through and continues to go through a number of restless phases of bloodshed and strife. Nigeria has been subjected to oppressive systems and injustices from the pre-independence era that have persisted since then, having been imposed by previous colonial authorities. It leads to the state's weak institutions and the never-ending battle for political dominance. This frequently works against the interests of the general populace and the advancement of the nation as a whole.<sup>5</sup> Nigeria is currently dealing with three main issues: political instability, religious tensions, and ethnic conflicts. The serenity of order is what Aquinas refers to as peace (*"tranquillitas ordinis"*). According to Thomas Aquinas, peace is the state of harmony and order in relationships both divine and human rather than just the absence of conflict.

According to this concept, real peace entails arranging relationships in a way that up-

6 holds justice and the common good. This paper will examine Thomas Aquinas' theology of peace, evaluate how well Aquinas' ideas apply to the current problems facing Nigeria, and offer practical suggestions based on Aquinas' teachings.

## What Is Peace?

It is well known that from ancient times to the present, people have been very interested in peace. In addition to being a pleasant term, the word “peace” describes the beautiful world and a tranquil society. It is possible to argue that everyone hopes to personally attain peace and that peace will ultimately be established in society and the entire planet. The word “peace” has several different meanings. It appears that the meaning of peace varies depending on the context in which it is used.<sup>7</sup> The Latin word *pax*, from which the English word “peace” is literally derived, refers to a contract, a control, or an agreement to put a stop to war or any other dispute or conflict between two people, two nations, or two opposing groups of people.<sup>8</sup>

Peace can be categorized into two types: internal and external. Internal peace, or mental peace, is the serenity and quiet of mind achieved by overcoming mental disturbances like anxiety, greed, and hatred. It is cultivated within oneself, even in hostile environments. External peace refers to peaceful coexistence in society and with the natural world. Negatively, it means the absence of conflict and violence; positively, it involves harmony, social justice, and respect for human rights. Internal and external peace are interconnected, each supporting the other. Individual peace reflects societal harmony, and vice versa. Additionally, there are two more forms of peace based on their aspects: positive peace and negative peace. Negative peace is the lack of civil unrest, terrorism, war, conflict, hostility, agitation, disturbance, dispute or argument, struggle, violence, and social disorder. It also refers to the absence of mental disturbances like worry, anxiety, and restlessness. A state of positive peace includes serenity, public order, pacification, social justice, peace, repose, silence, harmony, friend-

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liness, amity, concord, peaceful or amicable relations, and spiritual contentment.

## Thomas Aquinas’ Early Life

Saint Aquinas was one of the most important mediaeval Scholasticism’s intellectuals, fusing the philosophical and theological tenets of reason with faith. Aquinas, a prolific writer and eminent figure in the Roman Catholic Church, passed away on March 7, 1274, at the Cistercian abbey of Fossanova, close to Terracina, Latium, in the Papal States of Italy. Prior to the birth of Saint Thomas Aquinas, his mother received a prophecy from a holy hermit that her son would join the Order of Friars Preachers, excel in learning, and reach unmatched sanctity. At the age of five, Saint Thomas Aquinas was sent, in accordance with the custom of the day, to the Abbey of Monte Cassino to receive training among Benedictine monks. The impish little child at Monte Cassino asked his benefactors, “What is God?” on several occasions. Up until the age of thirteen,

Saint Thomas Aquinas lived at the monastery; however, the political situation compelled him to return to Naples.<sup>10</sup>

### Theology of peace

At the core of Aquinas' thought are two of his descriptions of peace.<sup>11</sup> The first is "tranquility of order," which he derives from Augustine. This explanation of peace can be used to summarize a lot of the other descriptions that can be found in his corpus. Second, according to Aquinas, the fundamental components (ratio) of peace are unity (*unio*) and silence (*quietudine*).

Order is inherently prior starting with the first description (tranquility of order). Put differently, peace requires order. Conversely, when one speaks of order, one is always speaking of a principle. Divergence of orders, whether final, efficient, formal, or material, results from divergence of causes or principles. Regardless of the causality type, all orders involve differentiation. Order is impossible in an absolute singularity. Second, the concept of prior and posterior are included in all constructed orders based on how close they are to the principle of that order (the degree of influence from the cause). According to Aquinas, order is "nothing other than a determinate relation of one part to another" and "a disposition by which things of equal and unequal nature are each given a place." Their proportion to the order's guiding principle, which assigns each element a location and a relationship to other elements within the same order, is the basis for this definite relation or disposition. It appears likely that Aquinas is referring to *ordo* when he states that *unio* is of the ratio of peace. A union is the coming together of several into one. Union signifies unity, yet unity requires multitudes. In this sense, union and absolute singularity are incompatible, much as order. Similar to this, Aquinas also explicitly links *unio* to relationship. As shown earlier, Aquinas asserted that *ordo* is merely a definite relation. Additionally, both occupy the more broadly conceptualized stance. Calm in the midst of chaos is called peace. The remainder of union is peace. There is no denying the consonance, and it appears plausible that Aquinas intended for *unio* and *ordo* to be interchangeable terms when discussing the ratio of peace. The relation (*ordo*), or union, of different constituents of a being or diverse beings, would then constitute the positive ele-

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ment of the ratio of peace.

Thomas Aquinas links the concepts of peace to order and union, emphasizing that peace arises from a pursuit of the good, rooted in final causality. He explains that everything tends toward an ultimate end- God. Aquinas uses the triad of love, desire, and joy to illustrate the rational appetite's connection to the good: love is the initial union with the good, desire follows when the union is incomplete, and

joy results from achieving the desired good. Aquinas's ideas about peace and rest are embedded in this triad.

John Meinert claims that Aquinas connects peace to the continuance of the will's order or unity with the good in ST I-II q. 70, a. 3 (*Summa Theologica*). Aquinas makes the dual claim that peace is the epitome of joy in that passage. First, happiness is unaffected by other people or other cravings. *Desideria fluctuantis*, or the remainder of restless desire, is the other. Put another way, the absence of both internal and external conflict along with the remaining desire is peace. John further reviewed that according to Aquinas, joy and charity come first, then peace. "The result of charity is joy, but the perfection of charity is peace." According to this interpretation, peace stands for the fullest and most profound union a person may have with the good. Aquinas uses the terms tranquilly and rest to refer to these two negations: the absence of barriers to the good and rest in it. The first is that there are no barriers or conflicts when someone is trying to do good. This opposition appears to be a precondition for achieving the good, and these barriers may come from opposing internal desires or other people. *Quietundine*, or rest, is the second aspect. The remainder of all the positive abilities make up this aspect. Rest is the cessation of motion, or absence of motion. This aspect of peace appears to come after the good is accomplished, albeit organically rather than chronologically. Put differently, serenity also refers to the absence of movement that results from obtaining the good that fully satisfies desire. Thus, peace exists to the extent that a person rests in the good, as stated by Thomas Aquinas.<sup>13</sup>

A lack of external barriers is essential to Aquinas' concept of internal tranquility through peace, interior order/unity between all desires generated by training them on one object capable of fulfilling each. Concord is a necessary component of peace, as Aquinas states. Without both a rest after obtaining the good and a lack of disruption in the process, one cannot experience peace. However, Aquinas reserves the term "peace" for interior rest, or the absence of internal conflict (i.e., the union of the animal, natural, and rational appetites). This can only exist when all appetites ultimately converge on a single object, and that one object is able to satiate each individual appetite; only then will all motion and becoming come to an end. In other words, only the ultimate resolution which is capable of uniting all desires and providing them with rest can usher in complete rest. Interior conflict may only be avoided by assimilating into a greater order, that is, by focusing all desires on a single principle or good that gives origin to the order. Therefore, even among the natural ones, peace signifies the *appetituum unius appetentis unionem*.

## Aquinas' Theory of War

The moral philosophy of St. Aquinas is permeated with the idea of warfare. To begin this inquiry, Saint Thomas Aquinas poses the question of whether war is ever justified. He emphasized that war is inherently evil. He therefore denounced it, stating that "Our Lord threatens war with punishment according to Matthew 26:52, 'all that take the sword shall perish with the sword.'" Consequently, all warfare is unlawful. Aquinas follows the path of the pacifist, who believes that war is immoral and should be abolished. He even goes so far as to believe that going to war is wrong and against God's will. Some verses from the Bible, such as Matthew 5:39, which states, "But I say to you, that ye resist not evil," and Romans 12:19, which says, "Dearly beloved, avenge not yourself, dearly beloved, but rather give place unto wrath," are used to support his argument. Saint Thomas Aquinas does not primarily condemn war, in contrast to the pacifist tradition that rejected all forms of warfare.<sup>14</sup>

## Aquinas' Concept of Just War

Just war theory is the "notion that resort to armed forces in war is justified under cer-

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condition. Even though just war theory has been the subject of extensive discussion among philosophers, Saint Augustine is credited with laying the groundwork for it throughout the Middle Ages. Saint Thomas Aquinas "codified Augustine's reflec-

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into distinct criteria that remain the basis of just war theory as it is used today."

Aquinas lays out the three conditions required for a war to be just as such in the Sum-

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Theologica: authority of the sovereign, a just cause, and right intention.

**Authority of the sovereign:** According to Saint Thomas Aquinas, the sovereign's rightful authority conducts a just war. There is no right for individuals or groups to go to war. Furthermore, Saint Thomas Aquinas invokes specific scriptural verses to bolster the utilization of swords to protect the populace from exterior adversaries: For he is God's minister to thee for good (Rom. 13:4). However, if you engage in immoral behaviour, you should be terrified since God has appointed him as an avenger to exact revenge on those who commit evil deeds. This is demonstrated in Psalm 82:40, which calls for the delivery of the needy and impoverished from the hands of the wicked. In line with this assertion, he cites Saint Augustine's work: "The natural order conducive to peace among mortals' demands that the power to declare and counsel war should be in the hands of those who hold the supreme authority."<sup>18</sup>

**Just cause:** According to Aquinas, a just war requires a just cause. “A response to a wrong suffered” or “repairing an inflicted injury” are examples of just causes. It may also be done to defend one’s life or territory in self-defense. “A just cause is required, namely that those who are attacked, should be attacked because they deserve it on account of some fault,” in Saint Thomas Aquinas’ words.<sup>19</sup> He quotes Saint Augustine as saying “A just war is to be described as one that avenges wrongs, when a nation or state has to be punished, for refusing to make amends for the wrongs inflicted by its subjects, or to restore what it has seized unjustly.”

**Right intention:** St. Augustine believes that a just war must have right intention. He states this idea thus: “it is necessary that the belligerents should have a rightful in-

ention, so that they intend the advancement of good, or the avoidance of evil.” According to the just war tradition, achieving peace is the primary goal of war. However, there are other, sinister reasons to use force than bringing about peace. As a result, Saint Thomas Aquinas views war as wicked when it is motivated by a desire for dominance, territorial expansion, or other selfish goals. His own opinion is that the pur-

ose of war is to bring about peace by punishing these wrongdoings or injustices.

## Overview of Conflict in Nigeria

Numerous factors, including differing perspectives, the effects of colonialism, status differences, resource control, extreme poverty and acute unemployment, differences in religion and ethnicity, a high rate of illiteracy, differences in personal traits and behaviours, poor communication skills, mutual dependence on scarce resources, and differences in values, contribute to conflicts and crises in Africa, especially in Nigeria. These elements have consistently placed Nigeria in the midst of several wars and mul-

22 tifaceted crises. Nigeria’s 120 million people are evenly divided between Muslims and Christians and come from more than 250 different ethnolinguistic groups. A sizeable portion of the population also practices traditional African religions. Conflict between the nation’s many peoples has been sparked by a number of historical and other circumstances, particularly in modern times. When Othman dan Fodio, a Fulani preacher, started a holy war in 1804, it marked a turning point in Nigerian history and led to the subjugation of the former Hausa city kingdoms in northern Nigeria. Following their conquest, the Fulani assimilated into the ruling classes of the Hausa and became Hausa-



Fulani, an ethnic group ruled by the Sokoto Caliphate. They also acquired the Hausa language.<sup>23</sup>

The encounter with Europeans in the 16th century through trade, primarily slavery, was another significant development, this time in the southern coastline and forest region. The industrial revolution in Europe sparked interest in agricultural and mineral commodities in the interior of Africa, which led to the start of colonization in the 19th century. Christian missionaries arrived with the colonialists and converted a sizable portion of southern Nigeria. The British had administered northern and southern Nigeria as separate colonies; these were combined to become the colony of Nigeria in 1914. Many of the rivalries that would later blow out in conflicts were cultivated during this colonial era. Uzoatu said that the British had formed an alliance with the Sokoto Caliphate, which used the emirate system which gave authority to traditional and religious leaders known as emirs to rule over large swaths of northern Nigeria. This “indirect rule” arrangement allowed the Caliphate to maintain its power over its subject peoples by securing its allegiance to the British empire. Other ethnic nationalities in northern Nigeria that had successfully resisted Sokoto hegemony before colonial conquest were also subject to same authority during colonial control. Meanwhile, the British faced greater difficulties in southern Nigeria. One of the three largest ethnic groups in Nigeria, together with the Hausa-Fulani and the Igbo in the southeast, are the Yoruba of southwest. They possessed a centralized political structure that was appropriate for indirect administration. However, because the Igbo had a dispersed system, the British imposed chieftaincies, appointing loyalists who were personally chosen. In other parts of southern Nigeria, the numerous minor ethnic groups were also forced to adopt the concept of establishing chieftaincies and designating collaborators as chiefs. The Sokoto Caliphate was given authority over the several ethnic communities who reside in the north. According to the *New Humanitarian*, Uzoatu said that the British divided the south into two regions, keeping the north as one, in order to undermine the south, which had embraced western education and started to agitate for independence. He went further by saying, “This lopsidedness gave the north bigger numbers and ensured its political dominance under the parliamentary system of government inherited at independence,” stating that “Northern Nigerian dominance of power was thus set in motion.”

Nigeria, which gained independence in 1960, faced escalating tensions due to ethnic and political divisions. The Tiv rebellion in 1962 and violent outbursts following the 1964 elections highlighted growing unrest. A coup in 1966 by mostly Igbo officers led to the rise of Gen. Aguiyi-Ironsi, an Igbo, who was later overthrown in a “revenge coup,” bringing Gen. Yakubu Gowon to power. This sparked pogroms against Igbos, leading to the declaration of the Republic of Biafra and a brutal civil war from 1967 to 1970, resulting in over a million deaths.



Post-war, military rule dominated, but ethnic tensions persisted, especially in the Niger Delta. The mismanagement of resources, corruption, and failed development exacerbated these conflicts, with over 10,000 deaths reported in recent years. Much of the violence, particularly in the southern oil sector, stems from disputes over land ownership, as it is tied to benefits from oil companies.<sup>24</sup>

Environmental degradation, especially desertification, has forced nomadic groups in northern Nigeria to migrate southward, leading to violent conflicts with established farming communities. Religious tensions, particularly between Muslims and Christians, have also fuelled violence, especially with the implementation of Shari'a law in the Muslim north, which Christians in the south view as a threat. Aggressive evangelism by Pentecostal preachers has further strained relations.

These conflicts stem from divisions in leadership, ethnicity, and religion. Aquinas's theology of peace, emphasizing order, justice, and charity, could offer a productive approach to resolving these conflicts. However, due to widespread injustice and division, many Nigerians have taken the law into their own hands, worsening the situation. Applying Aquinas's principles could help establish justice, peace, and harmony in Nigeria.

## **Application of Aquinas' Theology of Peace to Nigeria**

**Promoting justice and the common good:** Nigeria, a nation rich in diversity, faces challenges to peace due to issues like religious tensions, ethnic conflict, and economic inequality.

**Justice as the foundation:** Aquinas believed a just society is the bedrock of peace.

In Nigeria's context, this translates to:

**Fairness:** Ensuring equal opportunity and rights for all Nigerians, regardless of religion, ethnicity, or socioeconomic background.

**Distribution of Resources:** Equitable distribution of wealth and resources across the country to address grievances arising from perceived marginalization.

**Upholding the Law:** A strong and impartial legal system that guarantees safety and security for all citizens.

**The common good:** Aquinas emphasized the "common good," which refers to the well-being of all members of society. For Nigerians to achieve peace:

**Dialogue and Understanding:** Promoting interfaith dialogue and cultural exchange to foster understanding and break down prejudices.

**Social Cohesion:** Building a sense of shared identity as Nigerians, transcending ethnic and religious divides.

**Collaboration:** Working together across societal lines to address issues like poverty, education, and healthcare that affect everyone.<sup>25</sup>

## Conclusion

Aquinas' theology of peace, rooted in natural law, justice, and the common good, offers profound insights for addressing the complex challenges facing Nigeria, a nation plagued by persistent ethnic, religious, and political conflicts. Aquinas conceptualizes peace not merely as the absence of conflict but as the presence of justice and right order, which provides a robust foundation for promoting social justice, equitable resource distribution, and respect for human dignity. By applying these principles, Nigerian leaders and citizens can foster dialogue, reconciliation, and sustainable development, ultimately contributing to lasting peace and stability. To align with Aquinas' theological framework, several recommendations emerge as essential for addressing Nigeria's multifaceted challenges. First, the promotion of interfaith and intercultural dialogue is crucial. By fostering understanding and cooperation among different religious and ethnic groups through dialogue and education, the nation can build bridges of trust and reduce tensions. Second, the media must play a responsible role in this process by embracing journalism that actively promotes peace, unity, and tolerance, rather than exacerbating divisions. Third, there is a pressing need for policies that ensure inclusive economic growth. Equitable economic development can address the underlying causes of conflict by reducing poverty and mitigating disparities in resource distribution. Finally, the promotion of ethical leadership is paramount. Leaders must embody the principles of justice, accountability, and service to the people, guiding the nation toward a more just and peaceful society.

Implementing these recommendations, grounded in Aquinas' theology of peace, could steer Nigeria towards a future marked by justice, equity, and lasting peace. However, it is essential to acknowledge that achieving such an outcome is a long-term process requiring sustained commitment and collaboration from all stakeholders. Only through such a holistic and sustained effort can Nigeria hope to realize a society that embodies the principles of Aquinas' vision of peace.

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