

**CHRISTIAN ETHICS AND THE QUESTION OF SELF-DEFENCE
IN THE FACE OF VIOLENCE IN NIGERIA****Authors & Affiliations****JAMES IGBABEE JONATHAN UKPE**

Department of Religion and
Cultural Studies,
Benue State University, Makurdi
Benue State, Nigeria
Email: chigbabee@gmail.com
Phone No: 08066021097

&

SALIFU JOYCE MARY

Department of Arts Education
Faculty of Education
Prince Abubakar Audu University,
Anyigba.
Kogi State, Nigeria
Email: rjoycesalifu@gmail.com
Phone No: 08033851881

Abstract

The persistent rise in terrorism, banditry, kidnapping, communal conflicts and other forms of violence has intensified ethical debates concerning the legitimacy of self-defence within Christian thought, particularly in Nigeria's fragile security environment. This study examines the question of self-defence from the perspective of Christian social ethics, with the aim of evaluating the biblical, theological and ethical foundations of defensive force, assessing the moral limits of self-defence, and determining its relevance to contemporary insecurity. The study adopted a qualitative research design, relying on documentary sources. Data were collected from the Bible, books, journal articles and other relevant scholarly publications and analysed using historical, theological and content analytical methods. Findings reveal that Christian ethics consistently upholds peace, forgiveness and reconciliation as fundamental moral ideals, while recognising that carefully regulated self-defence may be morally permissible where innocent lives face imminent danger and peaceful alternatives have failed. The study demonstrates that ethical self-defence must satisfy the principles of just cause, proportionality, right intention and last resort. It recommends greater peace education, ethical guidance by church leaders, stronger interfaith collaboration and sustained engagement with the structural causes of violence. The study concludes that Christian ethics provides a balanced moral framework that safeguards human dignity, promotes justice and encourages peace without legitimising revenge or indiscriminate violence.

Keywords: Christian ethics, Self-defence, Violence, Justice, Peacebuilding.

Introduction

Violence has become one of the defining challenges of the twenty-first century, affecting the moral, political and religious life of societies across the globe. Terrorism, insurgency, communal conflicts, organised crime, political violence and forced displacement continue to threaten human dignity, weaken social cohesion and undermine sustainable development. Beyond the destruction of lives and property, persistent violence raises difficult ethical questions concerning the legitimacy of self-defence, the limits of retaliation and the moral responsibility to protect innocent lives. Christian ethics occupies a significant place within these debates because it provides moral principles that shape Christian responses to conflict, justice and peace. The teachings of Jesus Christ consistently emphasise love, forgiveness, reconciliation and mercy, yet Christians frequently encounter situations in which the preservation of life appears to require resistance against violent aggression. Contemporary Christian ethicists therefore continue to

examine whether the use of defensive force can be reconciled with biblical teachings without compromising the Christian commitment to peace (Cebula 509–12; Cahill 171–74). Consequently, Christian ethical reflection has expanded beyond the traditional contrast between pacifism and the Just War tradition to embrace broader concerns relating to human dignity, restorative justice, peacebuilding and responsible moral action in societies affected by violence. Across Africa, these ethical questions have become increasingly significant as religious extremism, ethnic conflicts, unconstitutional changes of government, violent pastoral conflicts and transnational terrorism continue to destabilise countries such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sudan, Somalia, Mozambique and Nigeria. Churches and Christian organisations have responded through humanitarian assistance, reconciliation initiatives, trauma healing, peace education and advocacy for justice, yet the moral legitimacy of self-defence remains a subject of considerable theological debate. While some scholars maintain that the Sermon on the Mount requires Christians to reject every form of violence and embrace non-retaliation even under persecution, others contend that protecting innocent persons from unjust aggression constitutes an expression of Christian love rather than a departure from it (Cahill 176–80; Cebula 514–18). These contrasting perspectives demonstrate that Christian ethics seeks to balance forgiveness with justice, restraint with courage and peace with the responsibility to preserve human life.

Existing scholarship has examined the morality of war, Christian pacifism and the Just War tradition within the Nigerian context (Sibani and Haruna 72–76), while recent theological discussions have reflected on Christian responses to persecution and mass killings in Northern and Middle Belt Nigeria. Much of this literature, however, concentrates either on warfare or on Christian suffering under persecution, leaving comparatively little sustained analysis of the ethical boundaries separating legitimate self-defence from retaliation, vigilantism and revenge within Nigeria's present security environment. This study addresses that gap through an examination of personal and communal self-defence undertaken to protect innocent persons from imminent unlawful aggression in situations where lawful protection is unavailable or has demonstrably failed. The discussion does not defend private revenge, mob justice, vigilantism or indiscriminate violence, neither does it examine military operations or the state's broader use of force except where these provide ethical context. Instead, the paper argues that Christian ethics remains fundamentally committed to nonviolence as the governing moral ideal while recognising that carefully restrained defensive action may be morally permissible in exceptional circumstances where innocent life faces immediate danger, peaceful alternatives have proved ineffective, and any force employed satisfies the ethical requirements of just cause, right intention, proportionality and last resort (Biggar 71–76; Stassen and Gushee 129–136). Against this background, the study investigates the biblical and theological foundations of self-defence, examines major Christian ethical perspectives on violence, and evaluates their relevance to Nigeria's contemporary experience of terrorism, banditry, communal conflict and persistent insecurity.

Conceptual Clarification

Self-Defence: Self-defence refers to the morally and legally recognised use of necessary and proportionate force to protect oneself or other innocent persons against an imminent and unlawful threat of death, serious bodily harm or comparable injury. Within Christian ethics, self-defence is not understood as an unrestricted right to employ violence but as an exceptional moral response whose legitimacy depends upon the protection of life rather than the punishment of an aggressor. The ethical tradition associated with Augustine and Thomas Aquinas maintains that defensive action may be permissible only where it seeks to

preserve innocent life, satisfies the requirements of just cause and right intention, and employs no more force than is reasonably necessary to remove the immediate threat (Biggar 71–76; Johnson 58–63). Christian moral reflection therefore distinguishes self-defence from retaliation because its objective is protection rather than retribution. For the purpose of this study, self-defence refers specifically to personal and communal defensive action undertaken to protect innocent persons where an immediate threat exists and peaceful alternatives are unavailable or ineffective.

Violence: Violence denotes the intentional use of physical force or coercive power that causes, or is likely to cause, death, injury, psychological harm or serious deprivation. Christian ethics evaluates violence not merely according to its physical effects but also according to its purpose, moral intention and consequences for human dignity. While Scripture consistently condemns violence motivated by hatred, oppression or injustice, it also recognises that limited force may, in exceptional circumstances, serve the protection of innocent life and the restoration of justice (Hays 321–23). Violence therefore constitutes a broader category within which both unjust aggression and morally regulated defensive force may be located, although the latter remains subject to strict ethical constraints.

Retaliation: Retaliation refers to responding to an injury or offence with a counter-action directed against the original offender. In ordinary usage the term may include lawful punishment imposed by public authorities, but within Christian ethics it usually denotes personal repayment of wrong for wrong. The teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount reject retaliation as the governing principle of interpersonal relationships and instead call believers to forgiveness, reconciliation and love of enemies (Matt. 5:38–48). Stassen and Gushee argue that Christian discipleship replaces the logic of retaliation with practices that interrupt cycles of hostility and create opportunities for reconciliation (134–136). Throughout this study, retaliation refers to personal acts of revenge or reciprocal violence rather than morally justified defensive measures.

Revenge: Revenge differs from self-defence because its principal motivation is the desire to inflict suffering in return for an injury already received. Whereas self-defence seeks to prevent imminent harm, revenge seeks satisfaction after the harm has occurred. Christian ethics consistently rejects revenge because it is rooted in resentment and personal vengeance rather than justice and neighbourly love. Paul therefore exhorts believers not to avenge themselves but to leave judgement to God (Rom. 12:19). Volf similarly argues that forgiveness does not eliminate justice but rejects vengeance as a legitimate means of addressing wrongdoing (29–34). Consequently, this study treats revenge as ethically incompatible with Christian teaching regardless of the seriousness of the original offence.

Force: Force refers to the application of physical power, restraint or coercion to influence, prevent or control the actions of another person. Force is morally neutral in itself; its ethical character depends upon the authority under which it is exercised, the intention motivating it, the circumstances in which it is used and the degree to which it remains proportionate to the threat encountered. Christian ethics therefore distinguishes legitimate defensive force from excessive, indiscriminate or punitive violence. Biggar observes that morally permissible force must always remain proportionate and directed towards restoring peace rather than causing unnecessary suffering (74–78). In this study, force refers only to the minimum level of physical intervention required to prevent imminent unlawful aggression.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative documentary research design because the ethical questions surrounding Christian self-defence require theological, historical and normative analysis rather than empirical investigation. Data were derived from both primary and secondary documentary sources. Primary sources comprised relevant biblical texts, particularly passages addressing violence, justice, peace, forgiveness and the protection of innocent life, alongside the writings of Augustine of Hippo and Thomas Aquinas, whose works provide the classical foundations of Christian ethical reflection on the legitimate use of force. Secondary sources included peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, and authoritative reports published by organisations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, as well as recent Nigerian scholarship on Christian ethics, insecurity and peacebuilding. Sources were selected on the basis of their direct relevance to the study's objectives, scholarly credibility and contribution to debates on Christian ethics, self-defence and violence. Data were analysed through complementary historical, theological and qualitative content analytical methods. Historical analysis traced the development of Christian teaching on violence and self-defence from the early Church to contemporary scholarship; theological analysis examined biblical texts and Christian doctrinal traditions to identify ethical principles governing defensive force; while qualitative content analysis identified and synthesised recurring themes, including the sanctity of life, just cause, proportionality, right intention, legitimate authority and last resort. The integration of these analytical approaches provided a systematic framework for evaluating the ethical legitimacy and limits of self-defence within contemporary Christian thought and Nigeria's prevailing security context.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in the **Just War Theory**, developed principally through the writings of Augustine of Hippo and later systematised by Thomas Aquinas. The theory emerged from the need to reconcile Christianity's commitment to peace with the moral responsibility to protect innocent life and resist injustice. Rather than legitimising violence, it establishes ethical principles that determine when the use of force may be morally justified and the limits within which it may be exercised. Johnson explains that the Just War tradition seeks to restrain violence through moral reasoning, ensuring that force serves justice and the common good rather than conquest, revenge or personal interest (58–63). Its principal criteria—just cause, legitimate authority, right intention, proportionality and last resort—ensure that force remains an exceptional and carefully regulated response rather than an unrestricted right (Biggar 71–76).

Although originally formulated in relation to warfare, the Just War tradition has been applied to contemporary questions of humanitarian intervention, policing and self-defence. Christian ethicists argue that protecting innocent persons from imminent unlawful aggression may, in exceptional circumstances, constitute a moral obligation where defensive action is necessary, proportionate and directed towards restoring peace rather than inflicting punishment (Stassen and Gushee 129–136). These principles provide the analytical framework for this study by distinguishing morally legitimate personal and communal self-defence from revenge, retaliation and vigilantism, while evaluating whether defensive force can be reconciled with Christian discipleship in the face of terrorism, banditry, kidnapping and other forms of violence in Nigeria.

Question of Self-Defence in the Face of Violence in Nigeria

The question of self-defence has assumed increasing urgency in Nigeria because violence has

developed from isolated criminal incidents into a persistent national security crisis affecting almost every region of the country. Terrorist attacks, armed banditry, kidnapping for ransom, farmer–herder conflicts, separatist violence and recurrent communal clashes continue to expose many communities to repeated assaults despite the constitutional responsibility of the state to protect lives and property. Reports published by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch indicate that unlawful killings, abductions and large-scale attacks remained widespread throughout 2023 and 2024, particularly across the North-East, North-West, North-Central and parts of the South-East. During the Christmas Eve attacks on communities in Plateau State in December 2023, more than 140 people were killed, while subsequent attacks between December 2023 and February 2024 reportedly claimed approximately 1,333 lives, including about 260 children (Amnesty International). Such circumstances have intensified ethical questions concerning the responsibilities of individuals and communities when lawful protection proves ineffective. The concern addressed in this study is not the morality of warfare or state military operations, but the ethical legitimacy of personal and communal self-defence undertaken solely to protect innocent persons facing imminent unlawful aggression. Such defensive action is distinguished from revenge, vigilantism and retaliatory violence because its immediate purpose is the preservation of life rather than the punishment of an aggressor.

These realities have generated sustained debate within Christian communities over whether faithful discipleship requires absolute non-resistance or whether defending innocent life may, in exceptional circumstances, constitute an expression of Christian moral responsibility. Churches in Benue, Plateau, Kaduna, Borno and parts of the South-East have repeatedly suffered attacks resulting in deaths, displacement and the destruction of places of worship, prompting many Christian leaders to reconsider the practical implications of biblical nonviolence within contexts of persistent insecurity. Advocates of Christian pacifism maintain that any resort to violence contradicts the example of Christ, whose ministry was characterised by forgiveness, sacrificial love and reconciliation. Other Christian ethicists contend that neighbourly love includes the obligation to protect vulnerable persons when they face immediate and unlawful threats, particularly where state security institutions are unable to provide effective protection. This latter position does not grant Christians an unrestricted right to employ force. Moral legitimacy depends upon clearly defined conditions: the threat must be imminent, defensive action must seek only the protection of innocent life, peaceful alternatives must be unavailable or ineffective, and any force employed must remain necessary, proportionate and free from hatred or vindictiveness (Cebula 510–20; Stassen and Gushee 129–36). These conditions preserve the Christian commitment to peace while recognising that exceptional circumstances may require restrained defensive action to prevent greater injustice.

The consequences of Nigeria's insecurity extend well beyond the immediate loss of lives and property. Large numbers of people have been displaced internally, agricultural production has declined across conflict-affected communities, schools and healthcare facilities have experienced repeated disruption, and fear has become embedded in the daily lives of many citizens. Amnesty International reports that Boko Haram, the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), armed bandits and unidentified gunmen remained responsible for unlawful killings, mass abductions and attacks on civilian communities throughout 2023 and 2024. The organisation also records at least 555 deaths arising from 363 incidents of mob violence between 2012 and August 2023, an indication of declining public confidence in state institutions and increasing resort to unlawful forms of self-help (Amnesty International). These developments demonstrate that the ethical

discussion surrounding self-defence cannot be reduced to questions of personal survival alone; it also concerns justice, public order, lawful authority and the preservation of human dignity. Existing Nigerian scholarship has examined terrorism, insecurity and Christian responses to persecution, yet comparatively little attention has been devoted to developing a coherent ethical framework capable of distinguishing morally legitimate self-defence from vigilantism, revenge and retaliatory violence. Such a framework is indispensable if Christian ethics is to remain faithful to its commitment to peace while offering principled guidance to believers confronted with imminent threats to innocent life within Nigeria's contemporary security environment.

Biblical Basis for Christian Ethics of Violence

The Christian understanding of violence and self-defence is rooted in the moral and theological witness of Scripture, which consistently upholds the sanctity of human life while calling believers to pursue justice, peace and reconciliation. Both the Old and New Testaments provide ethical principles governing responses to wrongdoing and aggression, yet neither presents violence as a legitimate means of advancing personal interests or settling grievances. Christian ethics therefore approaches the use of force within a moral framework that seeks to preserve human dignity, restrain injustice and prevent unnecessary harm. Within the Old Testament, the principle of *lex talionis*- "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" (Exod. 21:24; Lev. 24:20; Deut. 19:21); functioned as a judicial safeguard against excessive retaliation rather than an invitation to personal vengeance. Wright explains that the principle established proportional justice by ensuring that punishment corresponded to the offence committed, thereby preventing cycles of escalating revenge and preserving social order (262). Responsibility for enforcing this principle rested with recognised judicial authorities rather than private individuals. Old Testament legislation also acknowledges circumstances in which the protection of innocent life may require defensive action. Exodus 22:2–3, for example, distinguishes between situations involving an immediate threat and those where the danger has passed, suggesting that necessary defensive force may be morally permissible while placing clear limits upon excessive violence.

The New Testament deepens this ethical vision through the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. During the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus instructed His followers not to retaliate against personal insults but to respond with forgiveness, love and active concern even for their enemies (Matt. 5:38–48). These commands reject revenge as a governing principle of Christian conduct without requiring passive acceptance of every act of injustice. Stassen and Gushee argue that Jesus replaced the logic of retaliation with a transformative ethic centred on reconciliation, mercy and restorative love, making forgiveness and nonviolence defining characteristics of Christian discipleship (134–36). Christ's refusal to seek vengeance during His suffering reinforces this moral pattern, while contemporary Nigerian scholars maintain that Christian moral teaching promotes integrity, justice and peaceful coexistence as indispensable foundations for addressing social conflict and strengthening national development (Gbinde and Ukpe 315–18).

Scripture also recognises the responsibility of civil authorities to restrain evil and preserve public order. Romans 13:1–7 presents governing authorities as servants of God entrusted with administering justice and protecting society from wrongdoing. Hays explains that this passage distinguishes the state's responsibility for maintaining public order from the personal ethical obligations of individual believers, thereby preventing the conflation of lawful justice with private vengeance (321–23). Read together, these biblical teachings indicate that Christian ethics does not confer an unrestricted right to employ force. Instead,

the present study argues that Scripture permits only carefully regulated personal and communal self-defence where innocent life faces imminent unlawful aggression, lawful protection is unavailable or ineffective, peaceful alternatives have failed or are impossible, and any defensive action satisfies the ethical requirements of necessity, proportionality and right intention. Peace and forgiveness therefore remain the governing ideals of Christian life, while the preservation of innocent life may, in exceptional circumstances, justify morally restrained defensive action rather than passive acquiescence to violence.

Early Christians' Views Concerning Nonviolence

The earliest Christian communities understood the life and teachings of Jesus Christ as a call to radical nonviolence, making peaceful witness a defining characteristic of Christian identity during the first three centuries of the Church. Rather than participating in the cycles of retaliation that marked much of the Roman world, they embraced forgiveness, patient endurance and love of enemies as practical expressions of faithful discipleship. Teachings such as "love your enemies" and "pray for those who persecute you" (Matt. 5:44), together with Christ's refusal to retaliate during His arrest and crucifixion, shaped an ethical outlook that regarded revenge as incompatible with the gospel. Bainton observes that many early Christians declined military service because they believed allegiance to Christ required the renunciation of bloodshed and personal vengeance (45–48), while Yoder argues that nonviolence was not merely one ethical option but the normative pattern of Christian discipleship rooted in the life and ministry of Jesus (42–45). Although scholars broadly agree that nonviolence occupied a central place in early Christian ethics, they differ over its continuing normative significance. Pacifist writers maintain that the early Church's witness remains binding upon Christians in every age, whereas others contend that its position was shaped partly by the Church's minority status within the Roman Empire and therefore requires careful interpretation in societies where Christians share broader civic responsibilities. Hauerwas maintains that the Church's refusal to retaliate distinguished it from imperial political culture and expressed confidence in God's justice rather than military power (99–103), while Gushee argues that enemy-love remains a continuing moral obligation capable of transforming individuals and communities through forgiveness and reconciliation (114–18). Contemporary Nigerian scholars likewise affirm that Christian ethics promotes moral formation, peaceful coexistence and responsible citizenship (Ukpe, Obasi, and Salifu 116–19), yet much of the literature gives limited attention to the ethical questions that arise when innocent lives face immediate and unlawful threats in contexts of persistent insecurity.

Political developments following Christianity's legal recognition within the Roman Empire introduced new ethical questions concerning governance, law enforcement and the protection of society. Christian thinkers therefore began to consider whether the pursuit of peace could coexist with the responsibility to defend vulnerable persons against unjust aggression. These debates prepared the way for the development of the Just War tradition, which sought to regulate rather than abandon the Christian commitment to peace. Biggar argues that later Christian ethics attempted to reconcile love of neighbour with the moral responsibility to protect innocent life under carefully defined conditions (57–63). This historical development provides the foundation for the present study. Rather than treating early Christian nonviolence and the later acceptance of carefully regulated defensive force as contradictory traditions, the study argues that both express a common concern for preserving human dignity and promoting justice. Peace remains the governing moral ideal of Christian ethics, while personal and communal self-defence may become ethically permissible

only in exceptional circumstances where innocent life faces imminent danger and the principles of necessity, proportionality, right intention and last resort have been satisfied.

Tradition of Just War and Self-Defence

The Just War tradition occupies a central place in Christian ethical reflection because it seeks to reconcile Christianity's commitment to peace with the moral responsibility to protect innocent life and uphold justice. Rather than accepting every use of force as morally legitimate or rejecting all defensive action without exception, it establishes ethical standards for determining when force may be employed and the limits within which it may be exercised. Its foundations were laid by Augustine of Hippo and later systematised by Thomas Aquinas. Johnson explains that the tradition developed from the conviction that governments have a moral responsibility to defend society against injustice while remaining subject to ethical restraints governing the use of force (58–63). Augustine maintained that violence motivated by hatred, revenge or personal ambition is incompatible with Christian morality, whereas force directed towards protecting innocent life and restoring justice may, under carefully defined circumstances, be ethically permissible. Aquinas refined these ideas into a coherent moral framework that continues to shape Christian thinking on warfare, public security and self-defence.

Within the Christian tradition, a war—or, by extension, the use of defensive force—is regarded as just only when it satisfies recognised moral conditions intended to prevent the abuse of power and ensure that force remains an exceptional response. These conditions include **legitimate authority**, requiring force to be exercised under recognised public authority rather than through private action (Johnson 60–63); **just cause**, limiting force to the defence of innocent persons or the prevention of grave injustice (Biggar 71–73); **right intention**, excluding revenge, hatred and personal gain while directing action towards justice and peace (Biggar 73–74); **proportionality**, requiring that no more force than is reasonably necessary be employed (Biggar 74–76); and **last resort**, which requires peaceful alternatives such as dialogue, negotiation and mediation to be genuinely pursued before force is used (Johnson 62–63). Collectively, these principles impose strict moral limits on the use of force and ensure that defensive action remains accountable to the demands of justice, restraint and respect for human dignity.

The Just War tradition continues to inform contemporary Christian ethical reflection on terrorism, insurgency, humanitarian intervention and self-defence. Within the context of this study, its principles provide the ethical framework for evaluating **personal and communal self-defence** undertaken to protect innocent persons from imminent unlawful aggression, rather than state military campaigns or acts of retaliation. They distinguish morally legitimate defensive action from revenge, vigilantism and indiscriminate violence by requiring that any use of force remain necessary, proportionate and directed solely towards preserving life and restoring peace. These principles are especially relevant to Nigeria's contemporary security challenges, where terrorism, armed banditry, kidnapping and communal violence continue to threaten vulnerable communities. Nigerian scholars similarly argue that Christian ethics should promote social justice, responsible leadership and peaceful conflict resolution while recognising the obligation to protect vulnerable members of society (Amase and Ukpe 87–92). Persistent attacks on farming communities in Benue State further demonstrate the need for ethical responses that combine justice, reconciliation and lawful protection. The Just War tradition therefore provides the principal moral framework through which this study examines whether carefully regulated self-defence may, in exceptional circumstances, be reconciled with the broader ethical demands of

Christian discipleship.

Modern Christian Reflections on Moral Issues

Contemporary Christian ethics approaches violence through the interconnected principles of peace, justice, forgiveness and the dignity of the human person. Rather than accepting a false choice between passive submission to injustice and unrestricted retaliation, modern theologians argue that authentic peace requires the protection of victims, accountability for wrongdoing and the restoration of broken relationships. Christian peace therefore signifies more than the absence of armed conflict; it encompasses social justice, reconciliation and respect for human dignity. Miroslav Volf argues that forgiveness neither excuses evil nor eliminates the pursuit of justice but instead breaks the cycle of hatred while preserving accountability for wrongdoing (29–34). Likewise, Glen H. Stassen and David P. Gushee contend that protecting oneself or vulnerable persons from imminent unlawful aggression may, in exceptional circumstances, express neighbourly love rather than aggression, provided such action is necessary, proportionate and directed towards preserving life rather than exacting revenge (118–123). Modern Christian ethics thus maintains peace as its governing ideal while recognising that carefully restrained defensive action may become morally permissible when innocent lives face immediate danger.

These ethical insights are particularly relevant to Nigeria's contemporary security challenges, where terrorism, kidnapping, communal violence and organised criminality continue to threaten lives and weaken public confidence in state institutions. Christian churches increasingly contribute to peacebuilding through mediation, humanitarian assistance, trauma healing, civic education and advocacy for justice, demonstrating that Christian ethics seeks not only to condemn violence but also to address its underlying causes and consequences. Nigerian scholars similarly maintain that religious ethics promote justice, integrity, accountability and peaceful coexistence as essential foundations for national development and social stability (Ukpe, Obasi, and Salifu 116–20). Amase and Ukpe further argue that religious institutions can help address insecurity through moral reorientation, dialogue, reconciliation and collaboration with legitimate security agencies rather than encouraging revenge or vigilantism (88–94). These perspectives reinforce the central argument of this study that Christian ethics upholds peace as its highest moral ideal while permitting only carefully regulated personal and communal self-defence, undertaken to protect innocent life under conditions of necessity, proportionality and moral restraint.

Christian Self-Defence as Subject to Ethical Principles

Christian ethics does not regard the right of self-defence as absolute or unrestricted. Rather, it places the exercise of defensive force within a carefully defined moral framework intended to preserve human dignity, promote justice and minimise unnecessary harm. Christian social ethicists generally agree that the legitimacy of self-defence depends not merely upon the existence of danger but also upon the ethical character of the response. Consequently, moral evaluation extends beyond the outcome of defensive action to include its intention, necessity, proportionality and conformity with Christian teachings on love, justice and the sanctity of life. These ethical principles seek to prevent self-defence from degenerating into revenge, vigilantism or excessive violence while recognising the moral responsibility to protect innocent persons from unjust aggression. Such a framework remains particularly relevant in societies experiencing persistent insecurity, where difficult choices often arise between preserving peace and safeguarding human life.

The first ethical principle concerns the sanctity of human life. Christian theology regards every human person as created in the image of God and therefore possessing inherent worth and dignity. Protecting innocent life consequently becomes a moral responsibility rather than merely a legal obligation. Defensive force may therefore be ethically permissible where it represents the only realistic means of preventing imminent death or serious harm to oneself or others. Even in such circumstances, preserving life rather than destroying it remains the primary objective. A second principle requires proportionality in the use of force. Nigel Biggar argues that defensive action should never exceed what is reasonably necessary to remove an immediate threat, since excessive or punitive violence contradicts the Christian commitment to justice tempered with mercy (74–78). Christian ethics therefore rejects every form of unnecessary brutality, insisting that force should remain measured, restrained and directed solely towards ending aggression. Contemporary Nigerian scholarship supports this understanding. Ukpe and Gbinde observe that Christian moral teaching promotes social justice through responsible conduct and respect for human dignity rather than retaliation or violence motivated by personal grievance (114–119). Similar reasoning appears in Amase and Ukpe's discussion of insecurity in Benue State, where they argue that religious institutions should encourage lawful protection of communities alongside reconciliation, dialogue and moral reformation instead of endorsing revenge (89–92).

Christian ethics also places considerable emphasis on right intention and the principle of last resort. Stanley Hauerwas maintains that the moral quality of self-defence depends significantly upon the motive behind the action; defensive measures inspired by hatred, vengeance or the desire for retaliation remain ethically unacceptable, even where force appears justified (219–223). Christian responses to violence should therefore arise from the desire to preserve life, restore justice and prevent further harm rather than to inflict suffering upon an opponent. Equally significant is the requirement that peaceful alternatives be genuinely explored before force is employed. Negotiation, mediation, de-escalation, forgiveness and reconciliation remain the preferred responses because they reflect Christ's ministry of peace and restoration. Force becomes morally defensible only when such alternatives have proved ineffective or when immediate action is necessary to protect innocent life from imminent danger. Stassen and Gushee maintain that Christian ethics consistently seeks creative, nonviolent solutions to conflict while recognising that exceptional situations may require carefully restrained defensive action to prevent greater injustice (129–136). Nigerian scholars similarly argue that religious ethics should strengthen peaceful coexistence through moral education, dialogue and responsible leadership capable of addressing the underlying causes of violence (Ukpe, Obasi, and Salifu 117–120). Collectively, these ethical principles ensure that Christian self-defence remains a morally accountable response governed by justice, compassion and reverence for the sacredness of human life rather than an unrestricted licence to employ violence.

Conclusion

Christian ethical teaching on self-defence neither grants an unrestricted right to employ force nor requires absolute non-resistance in every circumstance. Rather, it places peace, forgiveness and reconciliation at the centre of moral life while recognising that the protection of innocent persons from unlawful and imminent aggression may, in exceptional circumstances, constitute a moral responsibility. Scripture consistently rejects revenge and personal retaliation while affirming justice and the preservation of human life (Exod. 22:2–3; Rom. 12:19), and the witness of the early Church reflects a profound commitment to nonviolence as an expression of faithful discipleship. Building on this foundation, Augustine and Thomas

Aquinas developed the Just War tradition, which established the ethical conditions under which defensive force may be morally permissible, namely legitimate authority, just cause, right intention, proportionality and last resort. These principles remain indispensable for evaluating the ethics of self-defence within contemporary Christian thought, particularly in Nigeria, where terrorism, banditry, kidnapping, communal violence and recurrent attacks on vulnerable communities have intensified the moral urgency of the debate. Within this context, Christian social ethics calls believers to pursue peaceful resolutions wherever possible while recognising that carefully restrained personal and communal self-defence may be ethically justified when innocent life faces imminent danger, provided such action is motivated solely by the preservation of life, the restoration of justice and the prevention of further harm rather than by hatred, revenge or retaliation. The study therefore contributes to Christian ethical scholarship by distinguishing morally regulated self-defence from vigilantism, retaliatory violence and revenge, demonstrating that Christian nonviolence and carefully regulated self-defence are not irreconcilable alternatives but complementary ethical commitments within a framework that upholds peace as the governing moral ideal. By integrating biblical teaching, early Christian witness and the Just War tradition, the study provides churches, theologians, policymakers and other stakeholders with a coherent ethical framework for responding to contemporary insecurity without compromising Christianity's enduring commitment to justice, reconciliation and the sanctity of human life. Its central contribution lies in showing that authentic Christian peace is inseparable from justice, that forgiveness does not negate accountability, and that every resort to defensive force must remain subject to the ethical demands of love, restraint and reverence for the image of God in every human person.

Recommendations

- i. Christian denominations, theological seminaries and Christian educational institutions should incorporate structured courses on Christian ethics, peacebuilding, conflict transformation and responsible self-defence into discipleship programmes, ministerial training and theological curricula. Church leaders should organise periodic workshops, Bible study series and practical simulations that equip members with biblical and ethical approaches to resolving interpersonal, communal and religious conflicts without resorting to violence. Such programmes should also address contemporary security challenges, including terrorism, kidnapping, communal conflicts and hate speech, enabling Christians to respond to insecurity in ways that preserve both justice and human dignity.
- ii. Church leaders, theologians and Christian ethicists should develop practical policy statements, pastoral guidelines and teaching materials that explain the ethical boundaries of self-defence from a biblical perspective. Regular public lectures, clergy conferences, radio and television programmes, and digital platforms should be utilised to educate Christians on the distinction between legitimate self-defence and revenge, emphasising the principles of proportionality, right intention, sanctity of life and last resort. Such initiatives would reduce moral confusion among believers and promote responsible responses to violence while discouraging vigilantism, mob justice and retaliatory attacks.
- iii. Faith-based organisations should work closely with government agencies, security institutions, traditional rulers, civil society organisations and community leaders to design and implement programmes that address poverty, youth unemployment, corruption, injustice and social exclusion, all of which contribute significantly to violent conflict. Churches should establish community peace committees, provide counselling and trauma-healing services for victims of violence, support livelihood

initiatives for vulnerable populations and advocate for equitable access to justice. Such interventions would complement government security efforts by reducing the social conditions that often fuel violence and insecurity.

- iv. Christian and Muslim leaders should establish permanent interfaith peace committees at national, state and community levels to facilitate dialogue, mediate emerging disputes and coordinate rapid responses to incidents capable of triggering religious or communal violence. Joint peace campaigns, youth engagement programmes, community service projects and educational forums should be organised regularly to promote mutual understanding, counter extremist narratives and strengthen social cohesion. Security agencies should also involve recognised religious leaders in community-based early warning and peacebuilding initiatives, thereby improving trust between communities and public institutions while reducing opportunities for violent extremism and sectarian conflict.

WORKS CITED

- Amase, Emmanuel Emberga, and James Igbabee Jonathan Ukpe. "Leveraging Religious Institutions to Address Banditry and Insecurity in Benue State." *International Journal of Arts*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2025, pp. 84–95.
- Amnesty International. *Nigeria 2023*. Amnesty International, 2024. Web. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/africa/west-and-central-africa/nigeria/report-nigeria/>.
- Amnesty International. *Nigeria 2024*. Amnesty International, 2025. Web. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/africa/west-and-central-africa/nigeria/>.
- Amnesty International. *Nigeria: Instantly Killed! How Law Enforcement Failures Exacerbate Nigeria's Wave of Mob Violence*. Amnesty International, 2024. Web. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr44/8191/2024/en/>.
- Bainton, Roland H. *Christian Attitudes toward War and Peace*. Abingdon Press, 1960. Print.
- Biggar, Nigel. *In Defence of War*. Oxford UP, 2013. Print.
- Cahill, Lisa Sowle. "Just War as a Theory, Just Peace as a Virtue." *Studies in Christian Ethics*, vol. 37, no. 3, 2024, pp. 490–506. Web. <https://journals.sagepub.com/home/sce>.
- Cebula, Adam. "Catholic Ethics of War: On the Plausibility of Christian Pacifism." *Studies in Christian Ethics*, vol. 37, no. 3, 2024, pp. 507–526. Web. <https://journals.sagepub.com/home/sce>.
- Gbinde, Samuel Anger, and James Igbabee Jonathan Ukpe. "Christian Teaching and Moral Formation in Nigeria." *Philosophy and Social Concerns: A Publication in Honour of Rev. Fr. Dr. Ntui Victor Ntui on His 25th Priestly Anniversary*, 2020, pp. 313–320.
- Gushee, David P., and Glen H. Stassen. *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context*. InterVarsity Press, 2003. Print.
- Hauerwas, Stanley. *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics*. University of Notre Dame Press, 1983. Print.
- Hays, Richard B. *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation*. HarperCollins, 1996. Print.
- Human Rights Watch. *World Report 2024: Nigeria*. Human Rights Watch, 2024. Web. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2024/country-chapters/nigeria>.

- Johnson, James Turner. *Just War Tradition and the Restraint of War*. Princeton UP, 1981. Print.
- Sibani, Clifford Meesua, and Ezekiel Excellence Haruna. "The Morality of War and Its Impact on Sustainable Development in Nigeria: A Christian Ethical Analysis." *International Journal of Professional Practice*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2021, pp. 71–78.
- Ukpe, James Igbabee Jonathan, and Samuel Anger Gbinde. "The Place of Integrity in Secular and Christian Leadership in Nigeria." *Jalingo Journal of Christian Religious Studies*, vol. 5, 2020, pp. 1–15.
- Ukpe, James Igbabee Jonathan, Francis Augustine Obasi, and Joyce Mary Salifu. "The Impact of Religious Ethics on National Development in a Pluralistic Nigerian Society." *Journal of the Nigerian Association for the Study of Religions*, vol. 30, no. 2, 2020, pp. 114–122.
- Volf, Miroslav. *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*. Abingdon Press, 1996. Print.
- Wright, Christopher J. H. *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*. InterVarsity Press, 2004. Print.
- Yoder, John Howard. *The Politics of Jesus*. Rev. ed. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994. Print.