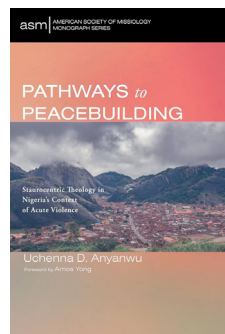


Pathways to Peacebuilding: Staurocentric Theology in Nigeria's Context of Acute Violence

By Uchenna D. Anyanwu. Pickwick Publications, 2022. 485 pages.



Reviewed by Eric Coblentz

Eric Coblentz served along with his wife, Briana, and four children in both Haiti and Indonesia for nearly a decade fulfilling multiple roles including, an orphanage director, university professor, and researcher. He now serves as research fellow for the International Institute for Religious Freedom¹ and promotes religious freedom for all people from an academic perspective. He now resides in Orlando, Florida along with his wife and four children.



This is not just another book on peace. It is a substantial work of contextual theology. It will leave you devastated by the horrific violence among our Nigerian brothers and sisters. With its robust and well-thought-out theology, it will leave you wanting to make peace, the Jesus way. Dr. Uchenna D. Anyanwu's work—a prophetic voice to the global church—is focused on the context of Africa but has deep implications for the Western church where allegiance is increasingly aligned with political views rather than the way of Jesus. Likewise, this work has even further implications for the global church as our world becomes increasingly polarized.

1 For more detailed information on religious freedom and what we do at IIRF go to: <https://iirf.global>.

The US Commission on Interreligious Freedom claims that 46 countries around the world maintain at least one type of anti-conversion law. Moreover, globally there are 73 anti-conversion laws on the books in those countries (USCIRF 2023). The degree to which people groups are unreached is directly tied to the difficulty of living as a Christian in these areas. Therefore, impacting Unreached People Groups (UPGs) is directly connected to the level at which we wrestle with the persecution, violence, and hate we find in these countries, as well as the appropriate Christian response to such violence.

Dr. Anyanwu, who is from Nigeria, is a scholar-practitioner who has served cross-culturally for 15 years in a variety of contexts in West and North Africa and therefore holds the credibility to speak to both academic and practical concerns. This massive work is a major theological contribution which at times reads very academic but is ultimately birthed out of and speaks to urgent, practical concerns. It seeks to answer the question, “how can Jesus’ followers pattern their response to violence after the model of Jesus?” The book is written for academics and practitioners working in African contexts who are facing extreme violence, but broadly speaking it is written for anyone striving to find pathways of peace among violent aggressors.

Summary of Content and Evaluation

This work is written in response to the acute violence of Boko Haram in northern Nigeria towards Christians and the Christian response to such evil acts. Staurocentric, a key term in the book, comes from the Greek word *σταυρος* (*stauros*) meaning “cross.” Therefore, staurocentric pathways follow the example of Jesus’ death on the cross leading to his—and our—triumph over death, evil, sin, and violence. His argument is that peacebuilding contextual theology should be grounded on the mystery of the cross, what he calls:

a theologico-theoretical framework that the church in Nigeria should espouse in order to position herself

to extend hands, heads, hearts, and homes of *staurocentric* practices, whose appropriation must be undertaken through constructive and critical integration of the God-given African peacebuilding concepts autochthonous to Africa's mosaic cultural contexts. (28)

Theologically, he makes the argument by methodically walking through Scripture's voice on the themes of obedience and suffering. Methodologically, the book employs a sophisticated approach, utilizing ethnographic in-depth interviews with leaders, theologians, and seminary students.

Anyanwu starts his argument by working through the historical context of violence in Nigeria and the socio-political factors that led to it. This chapter is particularly important for those who may not know the history of Africa and the British colonialization in Nigeria. Before the British colonialists came to Nigeria, the ethno-linguistic groups existed side by side as their own individual peoples. The "forced" and "unnatural" relationship only came about when the nation-state's lines were drawn by colonizers.

Furthermore, Anyanwu wants to challenge the ways in which Westernization of local communities means the loss of African traditionalism that spurs on peacemaking. Instead, he advocates for a more contextualized peacemaking theology, drawing from a rich tapestry of the ethno-linguistic backgrounds of Nigeria in dialogue with the way of the cross. While Anywanwu does criticize what Western missionaries have done in Africa, he also acknowledges that "a critique of Western missionaries' failures to have done contextual theology does not imply that their labors were in vain" (129).

After working through his contextual theology, Anyanwu begins to frame his approach to peacebuilding by using the term "carrefour" to represent interconnected aspects of contextual peacebuilding. The first "carrefour" is Muslim artisans of peace working alongside local Christians to form networks of peacebuilders. While the violent examples

of hatred towards “the other” in Nigeria paint a grim portrait of hope for future peacebuilding, there are some Muslim clerics in northern Nigeria who are working towards peace. Imam Muhammad Ashafa, for example, subscribes to a more inclusive and open-minded approach to his Islamic faith, collaborating with Pastor James Wuye to build peace in local communities. Co-authors of *The Pastor and the Imam: Responding to Conflict* (1999), they have both suffered greatly to create patterns of peace in the region.

The second “carrefour” is African traditions such as ubuntu. The African philosophy of ubuntu says,

I know that with the passing on of every person something of me also passes on, and that with the birth of a person is also in a sense my birth, that I am because you are, that otherness is a condition of selfhood. I also know that celebrating and esteeming otherness is, in fact, a celebration of the self. (187)

Recapturing African traditional values that have, in some cases, been left out of the Christian fellowship due to colonialism, can instead be an avenue for peacebuilding.

The third “carrefour,” and the penultimate concept for the Christian response to acute violence, is the “*staurocentric* pathway.” Put plainly, this is the way of the cross which entails dying to the propensity to hold your own sense of security while at the same time entrusting your life and being to Jesus and awaiting the resurrection (210). If followers of Jesus want to obtain victory over violence in this world, then we have to walk the path that Jesus walked. This path includes radical forgiveness, radical humility even to the point of death, and then a radical reversal of the meaning of the cross. The cross, which was meant to publicly shame and abuse an individual and their family, was redeemed by God as a symbol of forgiveness, sacrifice, and humility, which ultimately leads to resurrection, exaltation, and restoration of the *imago Dei*. In an intriguing and creative

manner, Anyanwu then walks the reader through the stories of historical followers of Jesus who have lived the staurocentric life over the centuries and antithetically how Christians have grossly misinterpreted the way of the cross, namely during the crusades. It is the way of the cross to give up oneself in order that others may enter into peace with God.

One challenging concept that some practitioners may struggle with is Anyanwu's explanation of evangelism in spaces of peacebuilding and peacemaking. He admits that both Christianity and Islam are missionary religions in that they both see it as their duty to woo and win non-followers to their faith. However, he says that his position is that "the matter of conversion lies beyond the act of humans. Conversion—a heart-felt conviction and decision to forsake a faith (and follow another) ... can only be an act of God, not humans" (217). He further says that everyone must have the right to exercise and bear witness to their respective faiths to others. We must trust God that he will bring people into his kingdom through our witness of Jesus rather than attempting to force them into his kingdom.

Practitioner's Angle

Considering my own context in Southeast Asia where violence towards Christians exists, I found Dr. Anyanwu's work to be both stimulating and helpful. I wish that I would have read this book before moving away from Indonesia, but I hope the readers of this review will take it seriously and consider new ways of bringing the gospel to UPGs where many of our brothers and sisters are facing violence.

In 2017, a friend and I sat across from an indigenous family who had been living among a UPG on one of the bigger islands in Southeast Asia for over nine years. They had just fled that city after receiving texts claiming that a radical group was sending young people, about the age of their own children, to surveil them, and now this group was threatening them with extreme violence if they did not leave. As we sat on the floor with like-minded friends doing similar work, I felt something different than I had expected to feel. I felt angry, frustrated, confused, and

deeply saddened by what this family had experienced. I sat there and just listened. I cried with them and could almost feel the pain they were experiencing as they attempted to unload the burden of betrayal.

But as I sought to listen and experience their pain, something unexpected happened. As they wiped away tears, I heard them say, "We couldn't imagine our own children being asked to do what these teenagers were asked to do We forgive them." They lost everything and they wanted to forgive them? It was at that moment I felt something else, intermingled with all those other feelings I mentioned. I felt love. They wanted to follow the way of Jesus, and in so doing they took the power of evil and disarmed it. They took it one step further, again accepting the inevitable tears, saying, "We hope to see them again someday so that we can tell them." This family went on to move to another UPG to sacrificially follow the way of Christ.

With over 240 million people, Indonesia has the largest Muslim population in the world. It is also filled with cultural and religious diversity. Conflict is inevitable in such a large, diverse country, but there are indigenous values in all cultures that bear an image of God. Anyanwu's challenge is to find the carrefour of indigenous concepts that come from religio-cultural contexts and place them at the intersection of the *staurocentric* lifestyle. Sociologist Bernard Adeney-Risakotta says that while most Indonesians highly value Western ideals like rationality, science, and modern education, they believe these values are limited. These ideals cannot teach *ikhlas* (committed to giving of yourself in service to others), *pasrah* (submitted to the will of God), *tanpa pamrih* (without self-interest), *mengalah* (allowing yourself to be defeated knowing that you are stronger than the other), *gotong royong* (working together for the good of all), or *rukun* (living in harmony with others) (Adeney-Risakotta 2019, 88). According to Anyanwu, followers of Jesus should translate values such as these through a *staurocentric* lens to find pathways to peacebuilding. This does not guarantee an ideal outcome in an "a+b = c" equation. It may lead to death. But it is a Christian response to the violence that gives us hope for future change.

This is not a passive fatalistic kind of posture; rather it is a call for followers of Jesus to give themselves to love and serve others, including those who perpetrate violence. Uchenna Anyanwu offers three practical steps to live a cross-centered life. This includes the way we talk about people from our pulpits, restorative and public declaration of forgiveness, and loving and blessing Muslim communities. One practical way practitioners can take a first step in living this out is to ask yourself the following questions:

- How can I hospitably talk about my neighbor in my teaching?
- How can I publicly and restoratively forgive those who are committing violence towards me?
- How can I bless the violent communities around me to show the restorative love of Jesus?

I strongly recommend this book for those who are serving among people who are facing violence. While nobody should expect this book to be a handbook for relieving violence, it certainly will help us think about how we can be better vessels of God's peace on earth. We must not forget that Jesus is not only "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, and Everlasting Father"; he is also "the Prince of Peace" (Isa. 9:6). While this work may not be as helpful for someone serving in contexts that do not face much violence, it still has the potential to help one think about how to live the *staurocentric* life in a contextual, peacebuilding way. Finally, this book is another reason to keep working towards including voices from all over the world to help each other find creative ways to bring the kingdom of God to difficult places.

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