

“Taking up a sword”

A missiological reflection of violence in Gaza in the light of a missional reading of Luke 22:47-53 and global sustainability

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Abstract

“Lord, shall we strike with a sword?” (Luke 22:49). This article seeks to interrogate this religious question in the context of global wars, and particularly the Israel-Hamas war in the Gaza Strip. The question which this article seeks to answer is whether it is correct for both Israel and Hamas to lift their swords in the name of God and for God. While interrogating this context through the lens of a missiological reading of Luke 22:47-53, it became clear that this war is not only disruptive, violent, and an assault on a triad of God, humanity and entire creation, but also have devastating consequences, as in the death of many civilians, including women and children, in the Gaza Strip. This article proposes a missional ecclesiology and ecclesial praxis, which defines a missional church as an agent of transformative encounters interfacing with and mediating the shalom of God in the face of global wars and woundedness. The missional reading of Luke 22:47-53 calls for a cease-fire in favour of love, peace, forgiveness, reconciliation, and solidarity with humanity irrespective of their religious affiliation.

Keywords: sword, missiological, missional, violence, Israel, Hamas, Gaza, sustainability

1. Introduction

“Lord, shall we strike with a sword?” (Luke 22:49). This is a religious question by the disciples after a kiss of betrayal by Judas Iscariot, who sold him to Jewish religious leaders who came to arrest him violently, armed with swords and clubs. One of his disciples, Peter, applied violent resistance by using his sword in defence of his masters. It was after this incident that other disciples of Jesus Christ wanted to know from him whether it was religiously correct to use violence to counter violence.

This article seeks to revisit the foregoing religious question in the context of global wars, particularly the current Israel-Hamas war. This ongoing war, which started on 07 October 2023, has turned the Gaza Strip not only into a site of bloody

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violence and struggle for life, but one where unidentified bodies of the dead are buried in unmarked mass graves. Israel's violent attacks on Hamas in Gaza are said to have reached a catastrophic level; hence, Üngör (2024:1) categorises the Israel-Palestine war as 'screaming, silence, and mass violence.' It is noted, "A flurry of opinion pieces, articles, and essays claimed that the Israeli army was committing genocide in Gaza, or that chants of "from the river to the sea" constituted genocidal discourse" (Üngör, 2024:1). The South African government had taken Israel to the International Court of Justice for the same reason.

The war between Israel and Palestine has a long history, which dates back over one hundred years of attacks and counterattacks between Israel and Palestine (Gilboa, 2023:475). The underlying reasons for these wars includes a complex interplay of historical, territorial or colonial and occupational politics (Karsh, 2023:842), recognition of Israel and Palestine as independent states that must co-exist (Michael, 2024:1), international dynamics and the influence of the West (Silver, *et al*, 2024:4), border and security matters among others (Üngör, 2024:2). This article limits its investigation to the religious nature and justification of the ongoing Israel and Hamas (Byman, 2024).

On the religious front, Israel and Hamas are fighting what they consider to be a just and holy war. They are both fighting for the right to the Holy Land and access to key religious points, including Jerusalem, the temple, mosque, and other religious sites. In his war rhetoric, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu cites Biblical text that prompts the Israelites to fight in the name of God against their perceived enemies in a similar fashion that the Israelites fought against the Amalekites. Hamas, on the other end, seeks to use the nationalist drive to resist Israel's occupation of the Palestinian territories, the religious motif to establish an Islamist state in historic Palestine land remains very much part of their agenda. The question which this article seeks to answer is whether it is correct for both Israel and Palestine to lift their swords in the name of God and for God.

In the efforts to answer this question, this paper seeks to explore the following issues: (1) The religious nature of violence in the Gaza Strip, (2) Missiological reflections on violence, (3) A missional reading of Luke 22:47-53, and (4) Conclude by a proposal that seeks to reimagine a missional ecclesiology and ecclesial praxis, which defines a missional church as an agent of transformative encounters interfacing with and mediating the shalom of God in the face of global wars and woundedness.

2. Setting the tone: A missiological framework

This is a qualitative literature study which is undertaken from a broader Missiological framework of transforming missiology (Bosch, 1991). It builds on missiology

as encounterology (Kritzinger, 2008:764) and missional theology of disruptive pop-ups, naked truth, and madness (Mashau, 2020b:52). Global wars are disruptive in nature, as we have seen with the Israel-Hamas in the Gaza-Strip, but because of the religious nature underpinning the ongoing violence in the Gaza Strip, we should make efforts to search for the naked truth about whether we should choose submission or fight in the face of violence. Using the missional lens of the missiology of madness, we are pushed to rethink violence beyond the simple pacifist approach which Jesus Christ is accused of. A missional reading of Luke 22:47-53 is critical because it helps us to answer the question of whether the use of violence, 'lifting up the sword,' is religiously justifiable or not.

3. "Taking up a sword": The religious nature of violence in Gaza

3.1 Historical perspective

The current Israel-Hamas war is a representation of the ongoing creative tensions between Israel and Palestine. Its history is well documented, and this conflict has lasted for over one hundred years. The chronology of this war is well recorded and includes key moments such as the reign of the Ottoman Empire, the reign of Britain over Palestine, the 1917 Balfour Declaration and the Palestine Mandate, and the two separate state proposal between Palestine and Israel in 1947 among others (Cohn-Sherbok and El-Alami, 2023:xiii-xxii). The thorny issue has always been the involvement of the West in ensuring that Britain does not only rule over Palestine, but also produce the two-state proposal that supported the establishment of the Jewish territory in Palestine. The declaration of the State of Israel on 14 May 1948 exacerbated the already existing tensions between Palestine and Israel, and a series of wars ensued. It is correctly asserted, "The long-lasting plight of the Palestinians is not a contemporary phenomenon, nor did it start after the recent Hamas attack on Israel" (Işiksal, 2024:1). Attacks and counterattacks on both sides characterise this war. Any efforts to ceasefire look like mission impossible. Both Israel and Hamas have elements of religious fundamentalism, making it challenging to negotiate a peaceful settlement. The Israelites have a Zionist state mentality, while Hamas is grounded on religious radicalism. In the case of Hamas, it is opined, "Hamas, by its charter, is doctrinally jihadist, and sees Muslim and Jewish interests in a zero-sum framework. Its foundational eschatology calls for the extermination of Jews, even if some recent documents made a nod towards religious tolerance" (Simon & Stevenson, 2023:38).

Historically, this war has had multiple stops and starts to allow access to humanitarian aid and, in some instances, to allow trade-offs to happen, like the release of prisoners of war. Both parties have blood on their hands and have made attempts

to frustrate efforts for peaceful and lasting solutions. The religious motif is one of the many reasons for this long-standing war. Both parties are using religion, among others, to justify their cause. It is about the Holy Land, Jerusalem, religious sites, and the call to fight a 'just war.' In the case of Israel, while struggling with the intersectionality between religious and secular conceptions of nationality in Israel, the suffocation and isolation of the Palestinians from Gaza remains very much part of Israel's strategy with settler colonial agenda. It is opined, "Secular Zionism and Jewish religious nationalism are part and parcel of a system of exclusion via grouping which constitutes the boundaries of national identity – and leaves out non-Jewish parts of the population in Israel/Palestine" (Baumgart-Ochse, 2014:402). In the case of Hamas, it is argued, "Military *jihad* had served as the fundamental tenet of Hamas's platform, portrayed by the movement as a legitimate response to an illegitimate entity occupying Muslim holy land. In addition to its religious sanctity as a means to repel infidels, jihad guaranteed Hamas's independent existence, while also serving to mobilize internal and external public support" (Hatina, 1999:43). A critique of this approach is given by Litvak, who acknowledges that it leads to self-justification and vilification of the enemy of the people and God, and in the end the war becomes more existential and endless until victory is attained (Litvak, 2010:717, 718).

3.2 Benjamin Netanyahu on religious violence

In his justification of Israel's continued bombardments of Hamas in Gaza since 07 October 2023, the Prime Minister of Israel, Benjamin Netanyahu, refuses to budge on calls for a ceasefire by evoking the religious nature of the war against Hamas. Part of the narrative from the Hebrew Bible that he cited 28 October 2023, while addressing the crowd that gathered outside his home to call for his resignation, has to do with the history between Israel and the Amalekites (see Deuteronomy 25:17-19, cf. Samuel 15:2-9). He uses this to justify why Hamas needs total destruction because they pose an existential threat to Israel, as did the Amalekites in the Bible (El-Affendi, 2024:2). As part of the retaliation program, the Israelites, under the leadership of David, were commanded to attack and eradicate the Amalekites, including women, children and their animals. This reference simply means that the agenda of Israel, under the leadership of Netanyahu, is to wipe out the Palestinians from the Gaza Strip.

However, Netanyahu refuses to accede that this is an agenda against the Palestinians but Hamas. Benjamin Netanyahu also refuses to endorse that their war is the battle of the Jews against Islam. This, somehow, displays a supremacist attitude that seeks to undermine the very existence and equality to the religious other(s) as we have witnessed during the Apartheid South African where White Christians dis-

played the very same attitude. While displaying this attitude, Netanyahu also sought to extend an olive branch to other Arabic nations who would have joined the war if it was indeed a religious war between the Jews and Muslims. We can conclude that Netanyahu sees himself and the Israeli forces as people fighting a holy war against Hamas and, by implication, weaponises biblical passages to justify their violent conduct. As he isolates Hamas as the target of his bombardments in Gaza, he also uses anti-Semitic and holocaust rhetoric to appeal to the conscience of the religious Zionist community in Israel to support his military exploits. Netanyahu appealed to right-wingers, ultra-Orthodox Jews, and socially conservative Jews who still had the appetite and commitment of "Judaizing the occupied territories and making them a formal part of Israel" (Benn, 2024:50).

The foregoing demonstrates how Netanyahu mastered the art of using the rhetoric of religion and populism to sustain fuel Israel's war with Hamas (Yashiv, 2023:3). Consequently, Benjamin Netanyahu refuses any calls for ceasefire and peace efforts that include the proposed two-state solution as proposed in Oslo and, most recently, by the United States as Israel's ally. This political ally also funds Israel's economic and military programmes (Gilboa, 2023:479). Netanyahu will stop at nothing, but the destruction of the Palestinians as the Israelites did to the Amalekites and, therefore, the settler and colonial annexation of Palestine is an integral part of his war strategies and tactics. He insists that all hostages need to be released before they can call for a ceasefire.

3.3 Ilan Pappé on religious violence

Prof Ilan Pappé is an Israeli Historian at the European Centre for Palestinian Studies, University of Exeter, England. In his analysis of the relentless bombardments of Gaza and continued incarceration of Palestinians, Pappé acknowledges that Israel as a settler colonial project of the West is not only motivated by the need to avenge the 07 October 2023 attacks by Hamas, but a multi-faceted motif that includes land occupation and the establishment of Israel state, and motivated by the existing ties between Israel and America as also sponsored by American Jews (Gilboa, 2023:484) and Germany's pro-Israel foreign policy among others (Mertes, 2023:268). Accordingly, Israel is exploiting the 07 October 2023 attacks to continue the Palestinian Nakba (catastrophe) since Israel's 1948 ethnic cleansing agenda of Palestine (Pappé, 2020:6). The real reason is about the religious idea of Israel and the notion of Zionism, which seeks to restore the biblical narrative of Israel as the Holy Land. Accordingly, Benjamin Netanyahu and Jewish leaders use the rhetoric of terrorism with reference to Hamas to continue the program of the "ethnic cleansing of Palestinians." Concerning the Zionist settlers and the Jews today, Pappé noted that they refer to the natives as 'aliens' in their own land as part

of the propaganda machinery. He concluded, “This is why ethnic cleansing began as an idea, turned into a strategy, was executed as policy, and remains a vision for the future” (Pappé, 2012:56). The current strategy is to isolate Hamas by domesticating the current Israel-Palestine discourse on one hand and the continued use of the holocaust rhetoric, which Pappé (2016:416) refers to as “the universalisation of Holocaust memory,” to justify the continued onslaught to the Palestinians today on the other hand.

Ilan Pappé calls for a lasting, peaceful solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict in the Gaza Strip by inviting all interested parties to the negotiation table. However, with the continued airstrikes by Israeli troops, Pappé does not see any possibility for the two-state solution as something that the two parties can still pursue. The vicious cycle of violence does not seem to be coming to an end. The Gaza Strip will continue as a colonial settlement (one state under Israel) or one under continued siege until Israel accomplishes its mission.

3.4 Mitri Raheb on religious violence

Mitri Raheb, Palestinian theologian and activist, has made efforts to study and understand the religious dynamics around the Israel-Palestine conflict and the violent nature of this religious conflict. Concerning the context of violence in the Middle East and other parts of the global community, Raheb (2002:101) concluded, “The symbol of the church as a ship sailing through troubled waters is an apt description of the Palestinian Christian community.” He continued to define this as a context of uncertainty and instability, “Today, Palestine and Israel are going through a state of uncertainty and political, social, economic, as well as religious instability” (Raheb, 2002:102).

Raheb has always believed in the collective witness of the Palestinian Christians. Their collective mission is summed up in his interpretation of the collective mission of the Palestinians as follows, “The Kairos Palestine movement is a clear example of how a group of Palestinian Christian clergy and lay individuals, with support from their international partners, dared to speak truth to power; name injustice; and engage in the struggle of their people for justice, dignity, and freedom. At the same time, this document can be seen as a desperate cry for justice” (Raheb, 2023:177).

In terms of the religious violence in the context of Gaza, Raheb identified, named, and challenged Israel and Zionism as perpetrators of pain and suffering among the Palestinians in the first instance. Secondly, Raheb argues that the theology of the land and naming has been used to dispossess land from the Palestinians by Israel (Raheb 2020:23), and by implication, blames the use of the Scriptures in justifying the continuous violent attacks of the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip. Thirdly, but not least, he concluded, the support that Israel receives which includes monetary and

military aids from the West remains a key factor why Israel is able to sustain the war. They, unfortunately receive these types of aid because Israel belongs to the empire (Raheb, 2023:103).

In terms of the use of violence to counter violence, Raheb believes in peace initiatives and has, in the context of the Israel-Palestine conflict, called for interfaith dialogue. This entails efforts to find common ground to co-exist alongside each other in the region and foster issues around reconciliation. He sees the role of churches and religious communities across religious divides as "peacebuilders" and "bridge-builders." These communities should try to advocate for love, peace, and justice.

3.5 The *Kairos Palestine* on religious violence

According to Patierno (2015:443), "The ongoing Israeli occupation of the Palestinian Territories has widely affected the Christian population in the region," hence the *Kairos Palestine* as one of the responses to this challenge. The document was released around 2009 by the interdenominational Palestinian Christian leaders. While calling upon the global communities to reflect deeply on the underlying political and religious issues regarding the Israel-Palestine conflict (Le Bruyns, 2015:465), the document also condemns the violent nature of this conflict.

The *Kairos Palestine* called for the liberation of the Palestinian people through peaceful means—the use of force and efforts to avenge were discouraged. As they rejected theologies that sought to instill a culture of violence, the *Kairos Palestine* called for non-violent resistance. They condemned the manipulation and abuse of religion to justify unjust acts, which include land grabs through violence and in the name of God. *Kairos Palestine* advocates for a spirituality rooted in love, compassion, forgiveness, reconciliation, justice, and human solidarity. These human virtues push for non-violent resistance and help end the vicious cycle of violence. It is asserted that the *Kairos Palestine* is about "following the ways of love, peace, and justice" (Boesak, 2017:27).

The foregoing reveals how much Palestinian Liberation Theology has influenced the *Kairos Palestine*. Patierno (2015:455) states, "... the inclusive, universalist, and nonviolent character of Palestinian Liberation Theology is evident throughout the Kairos order." The *Kairos Palestine* also calls for Interfaith dialogue and cooperation to achieve peace and harmonious living for all involved. Dialogue is a valuable instrument to break the vicious cycle of religious violence. Both the rights and dignity of both Palestinians and Israelis must be respected and protected to achieve peace in the region. To achieve this, it is suggested, "Palestinian Liberation Theology offers a theological counter-narrative to demonization, religious violence, and ethnic antagonism – a blueprint for revolutionary collective action guided by plurality, nonviolence, and collaboration" (Patierno, 2015:449).

4. “Taking up a sword”: South African missiological reflections on religious violence

Two South African theologians, David Bosch and Allan Boesak, and the Kairos Document (KD) are critically interrogated in the efforts to tap into missiological responses from southern Africa as my immediate context and interlocutor that continues to shape my missiology and missions’ praxis. I find the two theologians immensely helpful regarding the current discourse on global wars and the religious nature of these acts of violence in shaping a missional agenda that embraces the shalom of God as the main driver in terms of how we respond when prompted to use violence to counter violence. The KD brings another dimension in terms of what we do when the empire becomes violent and uses violence to oppress others in the name of God. The opinions of both David Bosch and Allan Boesak are somehow directly and or indirectly shaped by their views of this document.

4.1 David Bosch on religious violence

Bosch’s missionary agenda was always grounded on the need for an alternative theological model with a missional ecclesiology that seeks to identify a missional church as God’s alternative community (Van Wyngaard, 2013:1). Bosch conceptualised this notion of church was done within two contexts which were his interlocutors. Historically, it was done within the Jewish context where Jesus Christ interacted with the four prominent Jewish communities of the first century, namely, the Sadducees, the Pharisees, the Zealots, and the Essenes (Bosch, 1982:5). His immediate context was that of the Dutch Reformed Church’s support of the apartheid government and its oppressive and violent system towards the majority Black people (Mashau, 2020a:39). Bosch saw the church as alternative community with a legitimate Christian strategy for social transformation.

However, with the influence of his Mennonite friend, John Yoder, and his tradition “supplied the dimension of separation and alternativeness” (Saayman, 2011:9), Bosch opted for a non-violent approach even when Black people were faced with death and dying in the mighty and violent hands of the apartheid regime. With the influence of Desmond Tutu’s view of reconciliation without violence, David Bosch also did not participate in the conception and signing of the South African KD (Saayman, 2011:10). It is opined, “He [Bosch] firmly opposed the apartheid government but refused to consider responding to violence with violence as inevitable, even in the face of the brutal events of the 1980s” (Van Wyngaard, 2011:163).

Bosch held the view that religious violence is prompted and driven by religious differences where faith can be manipulated to justify aggression and conflict. Historically, religion has been manipulated to further socio-economic and political agendas, leading to devastating consequences. According to Bosch, there is a need

to engage the complexities of one's context in the efforts to unearth the real causes of the misuse of religion to justify violence. Bosch advocates for a paradigm that seeks to promote religious inclusivity and tolerance as we forge ahead with alternate communities. Bosch advocates for the missiology that promotes peace, justice, and reconciliation in the efforts to build a more harmonious world. In his view, mission should be characterised by a commitment to the well-being of all people, irrespective of their religious affiliations. Issues of common humanity, mutual respect, and co-existence in sharing God's world are, therefore, key elements of his missional ecclesiology and praxis that seek to drive the transformation agenda in the world.

While we appreciate Bosch's contribution in this regard, the following critique remains relevant, "We need to continuously break the silence between the church as alternative community and liberation theology" (Van Wyngaard, 2013:94). The Black majority were forced to choose between dying through police brutality of state agencies or dying while countering violence with violence as they did with the African National Congress' military wing uMkhonto weSizwe (MK) and the Azanian People's Liberation Army (APLA) among others. The liberation movements in South Africa were compelled to take arms and fight back because of the increased security forces' brutality.

4.2 Allan Boesak on religious violence

Allan Boesak is a South African theological and human rights activist who provided a prophetic critique during the apartheid and post-apartheid dispensations. Boesak has always stood on the right side of history by speaking up against Russia, the authoritarian and oppressive powers of the empire—be it in the case of the religious violence during and post-apartheid South, regional and global wars like the DRC, Burundi, Russia and Ukraine—and, in this case, Israel and Palestine. In his book, "Farewell to Innocence," Boesak, whilst wearing the lenses of Black Theology of Liberation, called the religious and political communities to bid farewell to ignorance, neutrality, and justification of heretical systems like apartheid using the Bible. We cannot remain silent in the face of violence, especially when it is committed in the name of God (Boesak, 1977).

In the context of religious violence in Israel and Hamas, Boesak calls Israel an apartheid state and a settler colonial empire that needs to be defeated in solidarity with the people of Palestine. He considers the current and relentless attacks on the Gaza Strip by Israel as genocide. However, if you are to ask Boesak whether submission or fighting is an option, he remains consistent in advocating for a peaceful yet prophetic resistance at all material times. This is a position that he has advocated for during the apartheid era and continues to do so today. In his analysis of the

Kairos Palestine, Boesak (2017:26) opted for a liberative philosophical framework, which he calls “the *ubuntu*fication of the revolution.” He argues, “It is not just about winning a revolution and overturning an evil, unjust order. It is about preserving the humanity of the revolutionary while restoring the humanity of the oppressor, seeking the creation of a new humanity, a humanized society” (Boesak, 2017:26-27).

Boesak’s insistence on non-violent prophetic resistance is premised on the need for Christians to bring to life the message of the Bible in the contexts of oppression and violence. He opines, “It is true that words such as *reconciliation* and *forgiveness* taken from the Bible and made applicable to politics can become powerful means of radical transformation” (Boesak, 2017:25). He further argues that efforts to revenge your enemies by repaying evil for evil only empowers the oppressor. While arguing in the Palestinian context where others pushed for violence to counter violence, Boesak argued for a counter-psychological onslaught as follows, “But they forget that the language of violence is incessantly, unceasingly spoken by the occupier with the very intention that it will become the only language the oppressed will ever know how to speak. If that is the case, the oppressor’s inability to speak in another language except the language of intimidation, threat, oppression, and excessive violent force will never be unmasked” (2017:29). Accordingly, violence begets violence as in the Biblical proverbial sense, “Put your sword back in its place because all who take up the sword will perish by the sword” (Matthew 26:52).

4.3 The South African Kairos Document on religious violence

The KD is a historic religious document in South Africa, which was conceived in 1985 and provided space for a bold and prophetic stance against the violent apartheid regime. Saayman (2011:10) noted, “The Kairos Document was drawn up under the auspices of the Institute for Contextual Theology (ICT), with prominent leaders such as Frank Chikane, Albert Nolan, Zach Mokgoebo, Wesley Mabuza, Molefe Tsele, Simon Maimela, Bonganjalo Goba, and many others at the helm.” According to Ndhlovu (2016:79), “The underlining question that the Kairos Document seeks to answer is, what is the role of the church in a country where many lives are consistently lost or negatively affected due to the direct cause of state policies or acts of terror?” It is asserted, “The *kairos* theologians were not proposing something new; they were discerning ‘the signs of the times (*kairos*)’ and challenging the church to respond in obedience to the witness of the prophets and the testimony of Jesus” (De Gruchy, 2016:2).

Whilst unmasking the systemic oppression faced by the majority of South Africans, the KD also shed light on the intersection of racial discrimination and religious violence. Religious violence also implies the use of Scriptures to justify the

system that violated and dehumanised most Black people—justification of the oppressive policies of apartheid by the church. The Christian church became complicit in the entire process, and the system was so violent that many lost their lives in the hands of security forces and their brutality. The KD called the church to resist and condemn all forms of violence, including religious violence, in solidarity with those in the dungeons. It advocated for an ecclesial praxis that sees the agency of the church as one that drives change or transformation by advocating for non-violent resistance. It fostered the courage to fight for justice and human dignity in the face of injustice and oppression.

5. "Taking up a sword": A missional reading of Luke 22:47-53

5.1 Taking up a sword in a missional context.

The question, "Lord, shall we strike with a sword?" (Luke 22:49) is about the religious use of violence to counter violence. The question should be read within the violent missional context, which is grounded on the awaiting violent arrest and death of Jesus Christ, a cup of anguish (Luke 22:41, 42)—the Gethsemane and Golgotha encounters. Jesus Christ discouraged his disciples from using their swords in the physical sense of the word. This pacifist approach of Christ to religious violence seems to be contradicted by the fact that he is the one who encouraged his disciples to sell their tunics and buy swords instead (Luke 22:35-38). It was as if he was encouraging them to be ready for violence when prompted to act accordingly, but at the same, denied them the opportunity when it presented itself. In this context, the question in Luke 22:49 reads more like, "Is it now time for us to use the swords that you encouraged us to have?" Is this the opportune time for us to use them?

A missional reading of Luke 22:47-53 should help us unpack Christ's attitude towards violence and both the theological and ethical underpinnings of his non-violent approach, as suggested by Scheffler (2006a:312, 313). Here are some of the reflections:

5.2 A non/violent kiss of betrayal

Judas Iscariot's kiss was supposed to be a "holy kiss" but a kiss of betrayal. It was adequately plotted (Luke 22:1-6) and executed (Luke 22:48) by Jesus' disciples (Scheffler, 2005:278). The practice of a kiss on the cheek was a common cultural practice in first-century Israel. It was used to demonstrate human solidarity in sharing common love, affection, and respect, among others (Hendriksen, 1997:986), but a demonstration of a religious bond at the same time. Judas Iscariot's kiss became a kiss of betrayal and a sign that opened the door for Christ's violent arrest and death. It is asserted that "He had functioned as a spy, now as a traitor, in leading Jesus' enemies right to him, under cover of darkness. Judas had arranged with

his backers that he would single Jesus out by planting a kiss of friendship on his cheek” (Milne, 2013:347). Judas Iscariot’s kiss looked innocent and non-violent, as concluded by Heil (1989:275), but it was and by implication, a violent kiss of betrayal that led to Christ’s violent arrest and death on the cross. It was a painful experience for Jesus that one of his disciples had betrayed him. It is concluded, “Jesus’ question forms a focal point of Luke’s experiences as a result of Judas’s betrayal” (Sheffler, 2005:279).

5.3 Armed with swords and clubs: A violent arrest

Judas led a crowd which had all the intention to arrest and subject Jesus Christ to mob justice through violent means. In his address to the Jewish leaders, Jesus Christ points out that they were carrying swords and clubs as if he were a criminal (Luke 22:52). It shows that they were ready to use any violent means if Jesus Christ resisted his arrest or if anyone attempted to stop them from arresting him. In his analysis, Scheffler highlights that when you combine his violent arrest with his crucifixion, it demonstrates that “Jesus now becomes the victim of violence par excellence” (2006b:306). Jesus Christ died a violent death, which meant utter rejection by both God and humanity, to achieve his vision for a harmonious, sustainable, and peaceful life between a triad of God, humanity, and the entire creation. God’s vision and sustainable ecosystem of life are achieved through the suffering of Christ, who died “like a lamb to a slaughter” (Isaiah 53:7).

5.4 Armed with a sword: A violent resistance

In his comprehension, Peter saw the opportunity to use his sword to defend his master. He did not see anything wrong in countering violence with violence. While others would have asked whether it is permissible to use violence or not, Peter took out his sword and cut off the right ear of one of the servants of the high priest (Luke 22:49, 50). Jesus Christ denounced the use of the sword by pronouncing, “Enough of this” (Luke 22:51). His vision remained one of peaceful and non-violent response to violence. It is asserted, “The difference between Jesus’ action and that of his followers is borne out by their different *words and actions*: The disciples *contemplate violence*, Jesus says *no*, they *use violence*, Jesus *heals the wound*” (Scheffler, 2006a:319). This implies that Peter lifted the violent sword religiously without the directive from the Prince of Peace, Jesus Christ.

5.5 A peaceful resolution by the Prince of Peace

Upon witnessing the violent resistance by Peter, and in response to the question about the use of violence by his disciples, Jesus Christ issued a stern rebuke, “Enough of this!” (Luke 22:51). He demonstrates that violence is not part of his

missional agenda. Jesus Christ immediately healed the man by restoring his ear. This was a sign of showing not only compassion, but human solidarity in pain and suffering. This element is underscored and summed up as follows, "By choosing to become a victim of human injustice and violence, Jesus reveals the God who does not abandon humanity in the brokenness of injustice but suffers with them as they search for the ways of overcoming injustice and violence through efficacy of the Holy Spirit" (Kaunda, 2015:3). It was also a clear exemplification of what true restoration means—forgiveness, reconciliation, and healing. This model clearly demonstrates how humanity, in its diverse religious affiliations, should journey together towards life. It is asserted, "The reaction of Jesus to violence is a main concern of his. It does not merely consist in non-violent passive pacifism, but rather in proactive acts of healing and compassion in which violence by definition has no place" (Scheffler, 2006b:307). It is more of a principle than an exception, as suggested by Scheffler (2006a:319).

6. A proposed missional paradigm of religious violence

The foregoing discussion is a testament to the fact that global wars and the so-called just and holy wars are not so holy. They are disruptive, violent, and an assault on a triad of God, humanity, and the entire creation. They have devastating results, such as the death of many civilians, including women and children, in the Gaza Strip. They contribute towards ecological degradation and socioeconomic and geopolitical instability in the world. It is for this reason that a sustainable and alternative solution to violence must be sought.

The missiological reflections on the Israel-Hamas war in the light of a missional reading of Luke 22:47-53 proposes a sustainable, peaceful vision that includes the following:

Humanity must, first and foremost, rethink our position when deciding to drag God to intervene in our human-sponsored conflicts. The use of the name of God and the Sacred scripture to justify our desire and thirst for blood in our resolve to destroy human life and nature is unethical and, therefore, cannot be condoned as just or holy. The fundamental question is: who decides what constitutes a just or holy war? Bosch captures the dilemma here as follows, "[T]he problem here is that of drawing a direct connecting line between certain historical events of our own choice and the revelation of God. Biblical categories are blurred, and the suffering Christ is almost without any qualification identified with those engaged in a particular liberation struggle" (Bosch, 1981:10). The choice to fight a just or holy war, in the main, remains our selective and subjective choice as to who becomes the enemy of God or not. As Litvak pointed out earlier, it leads to self-justification and vilification of one perceived as the enemy. It removes any possibility of compromise

or ceasefire until total victory is attained. That is why Benjamin Netanyahu is able to cite the narrative of the Amalekites in the Hebrew Bible to justify the unending onslaught on Hamas and Palestinians in the Gaza Strip.

A missional church should embrace a missional ecclesiology modelled by Jesus Christ in Luke 22:47-53, among others. Christ stood where God stands in terms of mediating justice, love, compassion, forgiveness, reconciliation, and solidarity with those experiencing pain and suffering as a result of violence caused by a sword. These are missional efforts to mediate and advance social justice and peace initiatives which stands at the heart of Christ's reconciliation ministry on earth. And therefore, a missional ecclesial praxis propagated by Christ is that discourages people not to use Sacred scripture to justify violence and any form of injustice against others and the environment just as we have witnessed in South Africa when the Bible was used to justify the Apartheid system (Fortein, 2018:507).

While the shadow side of God is projected as the God of battles and one who is violent, as in the case of the Old Testament and New Testament, it is argued, "... although the military image is retained, God is pictured as a God of peace and has lost his Warrior status" (Scheffler, 2006b:298). Therefore, humanity must learn to leave God to fight the battles of God and embrace the vision of Christ for the world.

Christ is the Prince of Peace whose mission rejects violence and promotes peace as far as it is humanly possible. This does not only speak to the absence of violence, but transformed human actions that seek to restore human rights and dignity and, in the process, promote the spirit of harmonious and sustainable co-existence and mutual respect. It is asserted, "God's salvific and transformative actions through the ages restored people to their full humanity. Just as God does this unconditionally and without regard to status, God challenges the disciples to display the same unconditional and inclusive behaviour to others. True peace is only possible where it is shared in fellowship with all people everywhere" (De Villiers, 2008:126).

While a peaceful solution to violence remains ideal and something to pursue as humanly possible, there are instances where the use of the sword to counter violence becomes a choice of a lesser evil between two evils. Mashau (2020b:48) notes that we should not ignore the fact that Jesus Christ, in his hour of madness, flipped the tables and whipped those who had turned God's temple into a den of thieves. Reflecting on the contribution of Mitri Raheb in the context of Palestinian Liberation Theology, Patierno remarked, "He also relates Palestinian resistance to other national campaigns for liberation, asserting that Mandela's South Africa, King's USA, and Gandhi's India would not have been won without a combination of violent and nonviolent tactics of resistance" (2015:449).

The foregoing suggests that it is human to always be tempted to counter violence with violence, and in our hour of madness, we find ourselves fighting the so-called

just and holy wars; we should never forget that God's vision for humanity remains one of non-violence. It is a vision that, in the context of disruptive and destructive global wars, humanity must advocate in order to put an end to the vicious cycle of violence in the world. If we continue to use the language and actions of violence, we must be reminded that the cycle will never end, as we are experiencing the Israel-Palestine conflict, which has gone beyond one hundred years. Iksal (2024:4) rightly concludes, "Violence will only exacerbate the situation and breed new violence, while retaliation attempts will lead to further retaliations, perpetuating the vicious circle." God's vision is for humanity not to engage in activities where we seek "an eye for an eye" or "tooth for tooth" (Matthew 5:38-48) or seek to "avenge for ourselves" (Romans 12:19). Humanity must, therefore, foster a vision of co-existence, mutual respect, and human solidarity irrespective of socio-political and religious differences. Therefore, we should embrace the words of Christ to his disciples, 'It is enough . . . of violence.' We need to change the language of violence as suggested, "Changing the language of response to oppression empowers the oppressed, weakens the grip of violence, places the initiative in the hands of the powerless" (Boesak, 2017:29).

The missional reading of Luke 22:47-53 calls for a ceasefire in favour of peace and reconciliation irrespective of being violated. If the Israel-Palestine conflict is destroying the world and contributing towards the ecological crisis, with the threat of weapons of massive destruction, its peace initiatives will contribute towards the liberative, renewal, and sustainable agenda in the world. The Bible can therefore not be weaponised to justify the killing of the Palestinians and risking the lives of the Israelites who are mobilised to fight Palestine in the name of God and religion. The same can be said for Hamas who also use their Islamic faith to justify their violent cause. The same conclusion can be applied in any global context of war and woundedness, including how we treat the environment which also suffers in the process.

7. Conclusion

The question of whether it is religiously acceptable to counter violence with violence remains relevant in the global context where more than 50 countries are currently at war, some of which are justified as just or holy wars, like in the case of Israel and Hamas in the Gaza Strip. While a missional reading of Luke 22:47-53 paints a picture of religious pacifism and remains ideal, Peter's reaction and the question by the disciples of whether it is permissible to use their swords suggest otherwise. It becomes evident that we are tuned as humanity to counter violence with violence, and if pushed to the corner where we must choose between submission and fighting, we find ourselves fighting back, as is the case with Israel and Hamas. However, the missional reading of Luke 22:47-53 pushes us to affirm the

assumption that ‘we need to reimagine an ecclesial praxis of a missional church as interfacing with and mediating the *shalom of God* in the face of global wars and woundedness.’ We must do our best to resist the temptation to retaliate and avenge as Christ did as far as it is humanly possible.

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