

Urban Violence and the Question of Self Defense from the Perspective of Thomas Aquinas: The Case of Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Outstanding among the social problems facing urban centers of the world in general and Nigeria is the problem of crime. The increasing rate of criminal activities has become a major concern across the globe. Today, lives and properties are no longer safe for both the rich and the poor. All seem to live one day at a time. Content Analysis is used as the method of data analysis. The method adopted was more of an exposition, critical analysis and evaluation. More specifically, this paper gave a general background about violence, urban violence and the question of self-defense. Furthermore, a philosophical answer was given in the light of the medieval thinker St. Thomas Aquinas. It was concluded that there is a need for social living. A good citizen is one who has an unselfish love for the common good of his state; a love issuing forth in an efficacious desire to see that good is procured and furthered. Thus, a good citizen realizes that he is part of a social and political society. Thus, his personal goodness, and the goodness of his actions contributes to the good of all.

KEYWORDS

Sociology, Urban Violence, Self-defense, Thomas Aquinas, Qualitative Research, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

The rate of violence across the continents of the world especially in Asia, Latin America and particularly Africa in recent times, has become a threat to lives and property for both rural and urban dwellers. Crime and violence are particularly problematic in many urban areas. The range and type of urban violence is context-specific and complex. The rate of violence in urban areas is more compared to that in the rural areas. Urban violence in Nigeria is more alarming recently than ever before.

Nigeria the most populous country in the African continent (Library Congress, 2008), gained her independence on October 1, 1960 despite many challenges among its various component groups. Nigeria had great hopes and high expectations because as a nation, it is endowed with both human and natural resources. Nigeria was seen by many then as a land of abundant potentials and great opportunities. When late Pope John Paul II visited Nigeria in February 1982, he described Nigeria as a land of promise and hope. He posited that Nigeria is blessed by God with both natural and human resources. Despite the abundance of natural and human resources, majority of Nigerians without doubt have suffered untold hardship such as injustices, the evil of bribery and corruption, violation of human rights, self-centeredness, greediness, unemployment, a succession of despotic rulers, decadent administrators, embezzlement, visionless leaders, abject poverty, and so on.

Some cities in Nigeria are quite unsafe for both residents and visitors alike. All over the country, citizens especially in urban residents, face different types of urban violence and crime. Thus, the question of self-defense in the face of violence is inevitable since the state apparatus for the maintenance of law and order have failed in its responsibilities of ensuring the safety of lives and property. Scholars have opined that the act of self-defense may have two effects: (1) the saving of one's life, and the other (2) the slaying of the aggressor. If one's intention is to save one's own life, it is not unlawful, seeing that it is natural as humans to keep oneself in "being" as far as possible. Nevertheless, an act though proceeding from a good intention, may be rendered unlawful, if done out of proportion to the end.

FRAMEWORK

The study looked at urban violence and the question of self-defense from the perspective of Thomas Aquinas: the case of Nigeria. The reviewed literatures show that there is no consensus with regards to the definition of violence. Scholars over the years have viewed violence from their various disciplines. Some scholars opined that the only body charged with the moral right to carry out any act of violence is

the State.

Violence as defined by World Health Organization is the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against a person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation (Krug et al., 2002). Thus, violence which is a threat to human lives and properties may be viewed from three perspectives: psychological; ethical, and political.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study is aimed at looking at urban violence and the question of self-defense of Nigeria.

More specifically, it gave a general background about violence, urban violence and the question of self-defense. Furthermore, a philosophical answer was given in the light of the medieval thinker St. Thomas Aquinas.

METHODOLOGY

The method adopted was documentary analysis, reviewing books, journals and articles. Exposition, critical analysis and evaluation of the documents were also done by the researcher.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Case of Nigeria

The situation in Nigeria today has never been this frightening. Not only has the incidence of violence become more frequent, the nature of crimes and criminal activities such as armed robbery, murder, suicide bombers and so on has flooded the mass media. The society at large appears helpless in the face of urban violence. These problems have been attributed mainly to a large number of youths in search of a living as well as the attendant social disorganization. Research has shown that most of these crimes are urban centered.

We cannot fail to mention here that a good number of these problems are complex. These include the contained bastardization of the economy, widening social and economic inequality and the rising wave of unemployment, the large proportion of migrants (especially youths in search of jobs), breakdown of family values, lack of

social control within the anonymity of cities, and most especially, the social discord created by huge contrast between the rich and the poor in close juxtaposition with great wealth, and the frustration produced by the marginalization and inability to do anything about it, have greatly accentuated the wave of violent urban crimes in recent times.

The security system in Nigeria is not helping matters. The system is in fact a failure. One of the important duties of every government is the provision of security equipment for preventing and detecting crime in a modern urbanized society. The main body vested with the responsibility of keeping peace and preventing crimes without fear of favor in Nigeria is the Nigerian Police Force (NPF). The force is paid for and controlled by the Federal Government of Nigeria. However, its daily command and its use in keeping peace and preventing crimes are in the hands of the Inspector General of Police (IGP). Each state has its own section of the NPF headed by the state commissioner.

The former Inspector General of Police of Nigeria (IGP) Mr. Sunday Ehindero once posited that the present Nigerian Police lacks the operational capability to combat the rising crime wave and insecurity, especially the insurgence of the Islamist sect, "Boko Haram". He gave this stunning verdict in an exclusive interview with Daily Sun just as the Nigerian Bar Association passed a vote of no confidence on the security agencies. Ehindero said the agencies have collectively failed in the discharge of their statutory duties (Godwin, 2011).

The claim of the former IGP Ehindero is timely. Recently, "Boko Haram" group which in the Hausa language of Nigerian means "Western education is sinful" is an Islamist movement based in the northeast of Nigeria strongly opposes man-made laws. It was founded by Mohammed Yusuf in 2001 or 2002 and has been terrorizing the northern part of Nigeria. They are viewed by some as a Jihadist group that aims to further enshrine Sharia Law in Nigeria. They sometimes attack Christians and bombing churches (Nigeria: Dozens dead in church bombings and rioting 2012).

Interestingly, when the group began its activities the first seven years of its existence, it was very peaceful. When M. Yusuf was killed, the group carried out its first terrorist attack in Borno in January 2010. Four people were killed during the attack. Since then, violence has been on the increase. The group has claimed responsibility for some bombing in some part of Nigeria. In 2011, it was reported that the group was responsible for at least 450 killings in Nigeria (AlJazeera, 2011). It was also reported that they had been responsible for the death of over 620 people for the past 6 months of 2012 (Haruna Umar; Bashir Adigun, 2012).

Following the sectarian violence in Nigeria in July 2009 which left over 1,000 people dead, the group became known internationally. It is still a matter of debate

whether “Boko Haram” has links to terror outfits outside Nigeria since its adherents have repeatedly clashed with the government of Nigeria (AlJazeera, 2011). To further stimulate the debate, a US commander posited that “Boko Haram” is likely linked to al-Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) (Mail & Guardian, 2012).

When the government of Nigeria intervened, it led to the arrest of some members of “Boko Haram” in Bauchi (a state in the northeast of Nigeria) and sparked a deadly clash with the Nigerian security forces which in turn led to the death of citizens estimated at 700. The “Boko Haram” group reportedly “used fuel-laden motorcycles” and “bows with poison arrows” to attack a police station (Nossiter, 2009).

More so, other forms of urban violence have been perpetuated in Nigeria and other parts of the world such as drug trade and unethical behavior. “Area Boys” also known as “Agberos” (Ngwobo, 2004) are hooligans---mainly organized street children and teenagers predominantly males---who are mainly found around car parks, bus stations and sometimes in market places. They roam around in cities extorting money from drivers with expensive cars, pedestrians and passengers alike in vehicles stuck in traffic, and force them to pay (for some actual or pretended service) before letting them go (IRIN, 2005). Sometimes they place nails in the road or mount road block on streets during traffic jams to aid them in collecting money. Sometimes, they also aid motorists in avoiding ditches, pot holes and when a car breaks down along the way. They also sell/use illegal drugs (such as: cocaine, heroin, marijuana, etc), act as traffic enforcers for people with expensive cars as a way of solicitation, theft, persuasive request, petty crime and other “odd jobs” (IRIN, 2005). “Area Boys” sometimes take advantage of crisis situation to perpetuate their unethical behavior.

A critical look at the problem in contemporary Nigeria is connected to the long overdue military rule. The reason for this is not far-fetched. Out of its 43 years of independence, over 25 years have been under military rule. When we look at the average Nigerian today, we cannot but agree to the fact that whether consciously or unconsciously we have become militaristic in nature.

Though under civilian administration, most Nigerians are bold enough to assert that what was obtainable during the military regime is almost the same today if not worst. These problems have been attributed mainly to a large number of youths in search of a living as well as the attendant social disorganization. Research has shown that most of these crimes are urban localized. A good number of the problems are complex. Some of the problems include breakdown of family values, lack of social control within the anonymity of cities, and most especially, one social discord created by huge contrast in economic well-being is abject poverty in close juxtaposition with great wealth and the frustration produced by the marginalization and inability to do anything about it---have greatly accentuated the wave of violent urban crime

in recent times.

The Question of Self-Defense

Thomas Aquinas presented a general outline in the *Summa Theologiae* of what has become the just war theory. In his treatment of this theory, he discussed just war and kinds of activities that are acceptable in war. Aquinas postulated that in order for war to be just, a war must be according to the following: (1) Be declared by a competent authority (2) Be for the just cause, and (3) Be fought with the right intention (St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae.*, II-II Q. 40, a.1).

Following the just war tradition, war is justified if it is necessary to protect innocent people from harm and to protect a nation or people from unjust aggression. It has been argued that wars of aggression, wars initiated to subjugate a nation's neighbors, are immoral and illegitimate. What constitutes a just or unjust resort to armed force is disclosed by the rules *jus ad bellum* (which concerns the justices of resorting to war).

According to the just war tradition, both nations and individuals have a right to self-defense. Self-defense for a nation means the defending of the lives, freedom, property and health of the citizens, more so the defending of its territorial integrity and political dependence. Furthermore, the just war theorists are of the opinion that, resistance to military attacks and invasions constitute just cause. The basic principle underlying just cause, and just war tradition more broadly, is vindication of fundamental human rights and the protection of those who have such rights. Self-defense and other forms of defense are thus best just causes for resorting to war. Traditionally speaking, these rights are understood as the rights of states to both political sovereignty and territorial integrity (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2000).

The just war theorists insist that for a war to be just, the following criteria must be fulfilled: just cause, right intention, proper authority and public declaration, last resort, probability of success and lastly proportional response. It is important to note the first three, has been described as the first-principle requirements. "For a war to be just, some core duty must be violated: in this case, the duty not to commit aggression. A war in punishment of this violated duty must itself respect further duties; it must be appropriately motivated, and must be publicly declared by (only) the proper authority for doing so" (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2000). The other three, has been described as consequentialist in the sense that after the first requirements have been met, we must also put into consideration the anticipated sequences of launching a war which seems justified according to first principles (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2000).

In Part II-II, Question 64, Article 7 of the *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas presents his arguments for the lawfulness of killing in self-defense. He quoted Exodus 22:2, “If a thief be found breaking into a house or undermining it, and be wounded so as to die; he that slew him shall not be guilty of blood”. (*Summa Theologiae* Part. II-II, Q. 64, A. 7.) The scriptural passage further justified the guiltlessness of the individual who kill not attackers but simple trespassers in self-defense.

In article 7 Question 64 of the *Summa Theologiae* Aquinas postulates that an act has two effects: that which is intended while the other is beside the intention. Moral acts take their species according to what is intended, and not according to what is beside the intention since this is accidental. As earlier mentioned, the act of self-defense may have two effects, one is the saving of one’s life, and the other is the slaying of the aggressor.

It is unlawful for a man who uses more than necessary violence in self-defense whereas if he repels force with moderation; his defense will be lawful, because according to the jurists. Nor is it necessary for salvation that a man omit the act of moderate self-defense in order to avoid killing the other man, since one is bound to take more care of one’s own life than of another’s. It is unlawful to take a man’s life, except for the public authority acting for the common good, as stated above (Article 3), it is not lawful for a man to intend to kill in self-defense, except for such as have public authority, who, while intending to kill a man in self-defense, refer this to the public good, as in the case of a soldier fighting against the foe, and in the minister of the judge struggling with robbers, although even these sin if they be moved by private animosity (*Summa Theologiae* Part. II-II, Q. 64, a. 3).

Nature’s Demand for Social Living: The Way Forward

Aristotle was the first to articulate the principle of the natural sociability of man. He gave a classical statement with regard to this evident truth in the words: “man is naturally a social animal” (Aristotle Nichomechean Ethics, 8). More so, he posited: “Man is by nature a political animal” (Aristotle, *Politica*, Book 1, chapter 2). Aristotle, indicates in this later statement that man is not only to live socially by nature, but to live in a particular type of society, a political society. This teaching of Aristotle was further reaffirmed by Aquinas in his tract on law in the *Summa Theologiae* I-II, Q. 94, a.2. He shows a connection between social living and the natural moral law. Thomas writes: Man has a natural inclination to do this that he lives in society (*Summa Theologiae* I-II, Q. 94, a.2).

Aquinas uses the words natural inclination to mean, not a distinct power or faculty, but rather, a basic appetitive tendency of the whole nature towards objects

agreeable or needful for nature. Among the fundamental natural tendencies in man, Aquinas mentions some which man has in common in an analogical term all reality; others which man shares with all living things; and a third class which are distinctly human (*Summa Theologiae*, I-II, Q.94, a. 2).

Aquinas further opined that the role of the intellect in human action is that of a director and preceptor. Upon the recognition of the term of a natural inclination as that which is in the service of natural want, the intellect evaluates it as good and at the same time judges what is opposed to it as evil. Natural reason in line with his function as preceptor issues a mandate: what is good ought to be done; what is evil, ought to be avoided. A look at Aquinas's postulation will indicate that human shows that it is not the case that man is to be deprived of all direction to the ultimate objective becoming of his nature, but rather, that such guidance be through moral regulation and through moral law. Thus, all men are to order their lives in such a manner so as to reach the life of virtue which is the life according to reason (*Summa Theologiae*, I-II, Q.94, a. 2).

From the need and dependence of an individual upon other people, arises not only the obligation to live in society, but likewise so to regulate his actions as to make them compatible with social living. Whatever tends to foster harmonious mutual communication among individuals and peace in society is good; whatever is disruptive of social concord is evil (*Summa Theologiae*, I-II, Q.94, a. 2). Furthermore, Aquinas posited that it is the precept of the natural moral law that one should not offend those with whom he lives. For man's social life he says, cannot be dissociated completely from his moral life. He is to live a moral life in the society according to nature's demand. This also shows that as a member of a political society, he is part and parcel of a political whole; his actions and personality has a great impact on the society at large.

Aquinas in trying to show that as human beings, we are required to live in a society. By the law of his nature, man's responsibilities to his community are traced to the Author of nature (God). Society he went further to say has its ultimate beginning in God who so constituted human nature as to will that its perfection be achieved only in society, and willing the end, He willed also the means, namely to implant in human nature not only the capacity for mutual and friendly communication, but also the tendency and guidance from law to such communication (*Summa Theologiae*, I-II, Q.94, a. 2).

The teaching of Aquinas with regard to the social nature of man is in direct opposition to those theories which portrays man as decidedly or, what is meant to be merely less extreme. "Among all things", Aquinas says, "that they may be useful to

man, other men hold first place” (Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, III, 128). Social life says Aquinas, is necessary to the exercise of perfection (*Summa Theologiae*, II-II Q. 188, a. 8). Aquinas’ doctrine on social life is no less opposed to the contemporary theory of individualism.

According to Aristotle man as a citizen, is a bearer of a fourfold relationship. By reason of his incorporation into the political society, a citizen is ordained to the common good for that society, as to an end; he is constituted a part of a political whole, and a subject of the lawful rulers of a state. A citizen is a member of a political community and co-related with them as partners in a common enterprise (Aristotle, *Politica*, III). The purpose is the common welfare of the state in which citizenship is enjoyed.

CONCLUSIONS

The good man is distinguished from the evil man in that the will of the former is straining earnestly towards the ultimate objective of human existence. The good citizen differs from the bad citizen in that, by goodness of the will, he is well inclined in regard to the common good. He also realizes that he is part of a social and political whole, and that, as such, by his personal goodness, and the goodness of his actions he contributes to the good of the whole.

It was concluded that there is a need for social living. A good citizen is one who has an unselfish love for the common good of his state; a love issuing forth in an efficacious desire to see that good is procured and furthered. Thus, a good citizen realizes that he is part of a social and political society. Thus, his personal goodness, and the goodness of his actions contributes to the good of all.

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