

Pentecostals and Transitional Justice in Liberia

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We believe in justice, but we also believe in forgiveness ... so what I believe is that if somebody, one way or the other, decided to leave this life for the Lord, then I don't think there is anything better for him.

Pentecostal believer speaking about ex-fighter General Butt Naked

You are not welcome here.

Pentecostal minister to a repentant young member of his church who had an illicit girlfriend

This paper begins with the assertion that in order to more fully understand social and political life anywhere, one must consider the religious worldviews that its people possess. Conducting a case study of a specific religious group and examining how the people in the group tend to perceive and act upon a particular issue can expose subtle reasons that a person might hold a particular opinion. Thus, this paper will examine Pentecostal perceptions of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and wider issues pertaining to transitional justice, specifically by considering practitioners' opinions surrounding three public figures in Liberian life, each of whom became famous through his high-profile

brutality during the war and still has a prominent role in public life today: Joshua Blahyi, Prince Johnson, and Charles Taylor. Opinions about these characters provide insight into the way Pentecostals perceive the TRC and wider issues related to transitional justice. We will see that many Liberians are supportive of a blanket amnesty—“forgiving and forgetting” the well-known atrocities that were committed by each of these individuals during the war. Neither formal retributive nor formal restorative transitional justice mechanisms are supported. What stands out about Pentecostals is the reasons they give for holding these opinions and the certainty they have that their opinions are correct. Non-Pentecostals, by contrast, tend to be more ambivalent about their opinions, and when asked to explain the reasons for their opinions, have far less “vocabulary” at their disposal.

The post-conflict environment in which Liberians are dealing with such difficult questions is also an important factor in understanding why this type of religiosity is so popular today. The Pentecostal churches are situating themselves in Liberian society as the most serious and powerful ^[11] interpreters of the realities of Liberian life; they do this through their use of spiritual idioms, including the idea that mentioning the Devil only serves to give the Devil power; forgiving and forgetting is the acknowledgement that judging is God’s work; public repentance is worthless because no one but God can know if it’s genuine; and only the church, the state, can bring sinners face to face with God in the spiritual realm, hence the criminal court is hopeless. However, Pentecostalism, like all religions as they are practiced in Liberia,^[12] is fluid, dynamic and always open to multiple interpretations and methods of interaction. Still, in Liberia it is the Pentecostals who have been the most relevant and practical for the people. When compared to any other religious or secular group, Pentecostals are far more explicit in addressing the evils that have caused so much pain and suffering during and since the war. For Pentecostals, other religious groups do not provide enough explanation, nor do they provide enough encouragement that the situation can be changed. Nor do other religious groups stress the seriousness of the spiritual war in which they are engaged, which, albeit confusing, can always be addressed using Pentecostal discourses.

Since the country is lacking in rational-legal mechanisms for solving problems--and the breakdown in education over the last twenty years has disabled average Liberians from thinking in these terms or having the political or economic ability to influence events even if they could think in these terms--these idioms and spiritual activities become reality for

people. Not only do idioms give them some type of discourse with which they can begin to understand the war and subsequent events, idiom also gives them the necessary moral component to make this discourse more relevant and meaningful than any others that might be available; there is no question for believers that Pentecostal churches, filled with what they perceive to be the unlimited and benevolent power of the Holy Spirit, are a force for solving problems. Pentecostals believe that they can use this power in order to play an active role in their fate and the fate of Liberia.

Because Pentecostals, in talking about the TRC, tend to call for forgiveness and redemption, one might assume that they would call for similar behaviour in other situations. To show that this is not the case, we will also examine a narrative surrounding a situation in which one church did not forgive one of its members for a relatively small transgression. This indicates that rather than holding opinions that are strictly Pentecostal--as if there exists some type of Pentecostal theology—Pentecostals have opinions that are practical, and they use Pentecostal discourses to articulate and rationalize these ideas and opinions, whatever they are. Pentecostalism thus helps Liberians make sense of and articulate solutions to the problems that arise in the unique, post-conflict environment.

The Relevance of Religion in Liberia

Religions in Liberia tend to fall under the broad categories of Islam, Christianity, and African Traditional Religions (ATRs); most Liberians are at least nominally affiliated with Christianity, ^[3] though there have been shifts in the type of Christianity that is most popular today. Since the late 1980s, like elsewhere in the developing world, Pentecostalism in Liberia has been growing at a phenomenal rate. There is huge variety in the beliefs and practices of by Pentecostal churches, but most of the scholarship agrees that there are two fundamental elements common to all these churches: a central emphasis on this-worldly manifestations of the Holy Spirit, and an experiential nature of worship.^[4]

Many, Christians, Muslims and practitioners of ATR in Liberia are also members of the Poro or Sande secret societies. Poro (for men) and Sande (for women) secret societies were first observed in West Africa in the early nineteenth century. These societies were acephalous and hierarchical systems of political and social organization, legitimized through the leaders' contact with the spirits. responsible for advising humans how to act in order to

appease the spirits. Over time, Poro became diffused by modernization and monotheistic religious thought, and traditional Poro leaders lost much of their exclusive authority to deal with spirits and the power they offered. During the war they lost even more control when institutions became disrupted by violence, destruction, and displacement. Today, few children in Liberia are initiated into Poro or Sande, and, in most cases, the process has been shortened from three years to about three months. A distinct feature of Pentecostal Christianity, unlike non-Pentecostal Christianity, is the former's strong demonization of all aspects of traditional religiosity, including the institutions of Poro and Sande.

The Research

This paper is based on Ph.D. research that was undertaken in three phases: September 2007 through July 2008, May 2009, and July 2010. The research was intended to address two broad questions. First, what is it about Pentecostalism that makes it so popular in such different cultural contexts around the world? Second, what are some possible socio-political roles of Pentecostalism in the unique post-conflict context of Liberia? Fieldwork was conducted primarily in the capital, Monrovia, though at least twenty trips were made outside of Monrovia to ten counties to measure any major differences between the urban and rural contexts. I assumed the role of participant-observer in three Monrovia churches that I decided upon as case studies—CW, SUP and CEM.^[5] These three were purposefully chosen because of certain demographic and theological features that were different in each, and each of which represented a “type” of Pentecostal/charismatic church in Liberia. I spent most of my time attending services and conversing with and interviewing numerous members of the selected churches. Whenever I had extra time, I attended services of other Pentecostal and non-Pentecostal churches and spoke with their members. In addition to participant observation, much research was conducted through phone interviews, reading church publications and national newspapers, and listening to the radio.

In the first phase of research I attended over two hundred church events, encompassing twenty-seven different churches: mainline, Pentecostal, charismatic, non-mainline evangelical, and “spiritist” African Independent Churches.^[6] A research assistant and I conducted over 600 short interviews with Pentecostal and non-Pentecostal residents of Monrovia, and I conducted thirty-two long interviews with leaders and members of Pentecostal and mainline churches and organizations.^[7] In the second and third phases of

research, most of my time was spent re-interviewing key informants and conducting formal and informal interviews with Pentecostal and non-Pentecostal Liberians regarding more specific issues surrounding transitional justice. Many services and interviews were also conducted in Liberian English or in both Standard and Liberian English. All quotations in Liberian English have been translated into Standard English.

Three Perpetrators

Joshua Milton Blahyi--General Butt Naked

Joshua Milton Blahyi is a notorious ex-combatant whose fame largely comes from the ample media attention he received as a result of his war name, “General Butt Naked,” and the unique tactics he employed as leader of the Butt Naked Brigade of young men who went into battle wearing charms and amulets, shoes, but no clothes, believing themselves to be immune to bullets. He was an especially brutal figure in the early stages of the war, particularly in the 1996 battle for Monrovia, during which many people reported seeing him and his men massacring fighters and civilians alike. After this battle, he had a born-again experience, quit the war, relocated to Nigeria and became an evangelist and pastor. Through the remainder of the war, he moved between Nigeria and Ghana, as it was too dangerous for him to be in Liberia. By 2007 he returned to Liberia regularly to preach at crusades and in his own Pentecostal church, the End-Time Train Evangelistic Ministries. He became well known as an evangelist because of his testimonies about the life of evil he had lived during the war, and preached that “If Jesus saved me, he can save you too.” He also established God Bless Liberia Home where he and a fellow ex-combatant-turned evangelist housed fifty excombatant youth who, since the war, had been living on the streets, engaging in criminal activities and abusing drugs.

Blahyi is unique in that he was one of the very few major perpetrators who voluntarily testified to atrocities he committed during the public hearings of the TRC in Monrovia. He has also been vocal about his support of the TRC process as a valuable tool for helping Liberia reconcile. All other major perpetrators, in great contrast, refused to take part in the proceedings; if they did testify, they denied guilt, shifted blame, and told blatant lies.^[8]

What is distinct about Blahyi’s confessions are the details he gives regarding the spiritual aspects of his behaviour during the war; generally, he is adamant that he was totally under

demonic control and that it wasn't completely "he" who committed these atrocities. His being taken hostage by the devil, he explained, was a result of his role since childhood as a high-priest of his Krahn ethnic group.^[9] This role required him to deal directly with the devil, and perform thousands of human (mostly child) sacrifices in order to maintain power and fulfil his spiritual duties. He was so powerful, he claims, that he became ex-President Samuel Doe's spiritual advisor in the 1980s, enabling Doe to maintain power and access more through various ritual killings and other "dark arts," as he called traditional practices. Blahyi has written five books, none of which is legal in Liberia because of the inflammatory content, but the most comprehensive is Trading Priesthood for Royal Priesthood^[10] in which he narrates his complete testimony, the details of which he repeats at every opportunity he is given to speak, including his testimony in front of the TRC.

In this testimony he highlights that during the war he killed over 20,000 people, sacrificed countless children, and committed numerous other brutal and violent acts, all because of being ruled by Satan. Parts of the testimony are worth recounting in detail because of the vivid explanations he gives about the types of beliefs and rituals he took part in, and the specific nature of his later salvation:

TRC: What would you say is the root of the god that you worshiped?

Blahyi: Devilish

TRC: Is this alike to the Maryland^[11] human disappearances or sacrifice?

Blahyi: Exactly so, the devil is spread in different corners and he attack[s] areas differently and the attacked are all the same.

TRC: Would you say that all of the political leaders who are still alive pay homage to this [god]?

Blahyi: Exactly so.

TRC: Would you say that the president Doe was part of this. I mean, did he also worship the deity?

Blahyi: Yes, he was even one of my sub priests. We planted an altar in the mansion. If you can remember in 1990 we planted a lot of craft^[12] around

Monrovia and thought the Masonic craft was even below us and we wanted the entire cabinet member to pay homage to him.

TRC: Are the traditional worshipers also linked to that of the deity?

Blahyi: They are not linked to it, that deity is the boss in the south east. The Poro and the Sande are different but they also pay homage to the devil directly or indirectly. ^[13]

While performing one of his typical human sacrifices, though, Jesus suddenly intervened. Over time, this caused him to be transformed, as Blahyi described to the TRC:

I was overwhelmed by the love and the respect when my Lord and Saviour Jesus showed me the question. ... He said: “my son why are you slaving, why are you living as a slave?” ... The people were there praying for me and after 64 days of fasting and praying the evil spirit left me. ^[14]

Blahyi became the resident pastor of his own church, End Time Train Evangelistic Ministries, in Paynesville, Monrovia, but he also is a regular guest preacher at crusades and revivals in and around Monrovia. His presence draws massive crowds, and many people remark that they came “to see Blahyi.” In this setting, as opposed to the TRC, his discourse is even more graphic in the description of the spiritual warfare in which he is involved; generally his full testimony, as quoted in his book, is given over the course of fifteen to twenty minutes. His mantra in all of it is “If God forgave me, He can forgive you too”; whenever he says those words, the crowds he is speaking to erupt in cheers and applause. He is undoubtedly a popular figure on the Liberian Pentecostal scene. It is worth considering a few Pentecostal opinions of him in detail.

For many Pentecostals, not only is Blahyi popular, but he is considered a hero, a role model to emulate, and a peacemaker. As one man said:

Oh, Blahyi, I love that man, he gets up there and he can preach! He did so many bad, bad things during the war but look at him now, he is changed! He is truly changed! The power of God is great, look what He did for Blahyi, if he did it for that Butt Naked, he will do it for anybody.

A young member of Blahyi’s church said,

I love him; he is like a Jesus to me. Without Blahyi I would still be on the streets, doing crime, doing drugs. He saved me, and he saved so many other people too. He is a man of God and he is so great for this country.

A young woman from CW explained,

That man he really speaks to the people. He knows what they went through, especially those young boys. So he can talk to them, introduce them to Christ, and he can say, "Look, Christ changed me" and so those boys they have faith that Christ will change them too.

Not only do Pentecostals consider Blahyi a hero, they also think that he deserves no punishment for the atrocities he admitted to. To legitimize this opinion, spiritual idioms were always used. For example, a woman from CEM said:

That General Butt Naked, I knew him, I seen him with my eye, April 6 War. I saw him. Right in Mamba Point here. He caused too much trouble, bad, bad man in those times. But I have forgive him, because why? That was war, the wickedness was too much, God was not in control there, so it was a difficult time. ... Now we have peace so we all should forgive him. He's a pastor now! Those he did bad to, they already forgive him. They know that now he has Christ, so he is not a wicked man anymore. ... They need him to do what he's supposed to do through the pastoring work, to do good to those he did bad to before, so we can not stop his good work.

Similarly, a member of CW explained,

He is truly born again, I know him well, we are friends together, we fought together. They called me General Blazo. But that time is passed. Blahyi, when he was in the war, he was in the spirit of the war. And what he did was inside him, was giving him a hard time because what he wanted was to live in the spirit of the war. When he got born again, the wicked things came out of him, and God used him to be a person to come out and confess. That is why he came out to confess to the Liberian people, to tell them what all he did. But not everybody should be like Blahyi, if God does not call them to do it, so like, I will not confess to the people about the wicked things we did. ... I did that with

God and he forgave me, but Blahyi he has a special calling, he is doing so great! He talks a lot on the past but that is his job, he is helping others. Like, he has a good foundation for all of the ex-soldiers, ex-fighters, some of these child soldiers like to listen to him; he has some acre of land and he is going to build, on Barclay highway, like a camp for 4-5 thousand ex-combatants, having some training for them, putting it there, counselling class, he told me that.

Pastor B of SU applied spiritual idioms differently to explain Blahyi's punishment:

If this man were indicted to face the war crimes court, that's the right of the state. I will not disagree. But he is saved. He has come to the Lord. If he is truly saved, God will know how to deliver him from that. God will save him from there. If he has to die because of what he did, so what; he is saved anyway! So he's got nothing to lose! But [when it comes to] the state, and justice, one philosopher said ... Peace is not only the absence of conflict but the presence of justice. Do you understand? So, if that is what the state decides, then we must accept it. It is in God's hands, and whatever happens will be God's will.

These quotations show that Liberian Pentecostals use spiritual idioms to articulate why Blahyi should be forgiven and why, even if he faces secular punishment, this should be viewed as a part of God's plan.

Liberian opinions generally were similar to those of Pentecostals; many saw him as a truly reformed individual who put down his gun and was doing what he could to make up for the wickedness of his past. Very few Liberians I spoke to considered it necessary for Blahyi to be punished for his crimes. He was clearly popular among Liberians generally; walking down the main street of Monrovia with him took nearly an hour because so many people insisted on shaking his hand, saying hello or asking him to pray with them. He told me, "Some people on the other side [West] think that I'm some scary person, but, look, there is nothing to be afraid of. Liberians know that I am a changed man, so I can just walk down the street and there is no problem."

That Blahyi is such a popular figure in Liberia is evidently surprising to many Western observers. Ample criticism has been launched against the TRC Final Report, which recommends Blahyi for amnesty, specifically because he cooperated with the process and was fully repentant and honest about what he had done. In response to this

recommendation, all the pastors of the churches under consideration said almost verbatim, “God has granted him amnesty because he is truly changed and blessed. God has a job for Joshua and the TRC has realised that too.”

In sum, with the figure of Joshua Blahyi, we are dealing with three themes. First, Blahyi legitimized his actions during the war and since the war, in terms of the spiritual battle between good and evil. Because of the wicked life he led before, he is able to highlight just how much he has changed, and just how much spiritual power he has as a result of this profound transformation. Second, Blahyi is an example of an honest and repentant ex-combatant, exactly what the TRC was striving to achieve for all ex-combatants in the country. Third, Blahyi is a very popular figure among all Liberians, not just Pentecostals; most believe his crimes should be forgiven and forgotten. Pentecostals explain this in spiritual idioms and they can easily legitimize the difficult moral decision they must make for forgiving such a man. Liberians generally agree that he should be forgiven, but their reasons tend to be more vague, or they admit that such a decision is difficult to make.

Prince Yormie Johnson

Prince Johnson is the ex-leader of INPFL, a breakaway group from Taylor’s NPFL,^[15] and the man responsible for overseeing the torture and execution of then President Samuel Doe. He is widely known to have been a “drunken psychopath” during the early stages of the war and was suspected of cannibalising Doe, an act that is believed by many Liberians to imbue the cannibal with incredible spiritual power. He wrote and distributed a tract titled “The Guns That Liberate Us Cannot Rule,” though it seemed most of his ambitions were for executive power. Despite his faction’s initial success, and concurrent notoriety, it soon fell apart and he left the country for Ghana. While in Ghana he “found Christ” and became a pastor. He remained involved in Liberian politics from afar and returned to Liberia in 2005 to win a seat as Nimba County Senior Senator, for which he won a huge majority despite only ten days of campaigning under his own new party, having fallen out with Johnson-Sirleaf’s Unity Party. In a 2006 interview with the BBC, Johnson said of his election, “I said, people of Nimba don’t forget yesterday. God used me as an instrument to save you. So choose between those who ran away and I, Prince Johnson, who give my life for you.”^[16] Since his election, only very periodically were there media stories criticising his political power, despite his past.

In 2008, however, he began to receive attention because of his refusal to sit in front of the TRC, where his testimony was clearly expected because of his prominent role in the war. In a number of public statements, he denied any involvement with the death of Doe and talked about the war only when directly confronted about it. Then he would make a variety of excuses for his actions or change the subject. For example, in February 2008 he alluded to his lack of responsibility in the early stages of the war, saying that if he was involved at all, he was being “used”:

The death of Doe was planned amongst some powerful Western countries and our politicians. To prove this, Doe was still a sitting president when Dr. Amos Sawyer, Bishop Michael Francis, Ronald Diggs, and several others, with the support of those Western countries, formed the Interim Government of National Unity (IGNU), aimed at indirectly overthrowing Doe’s government.

After much encouragement, and probably realizing that the TRC could force him to testify anyway, he finally told his story at the TRC public hearings in August 2008. There he admitted that he and his men had killed Doe and that he regretted it; however, he reiterated that he was being used but would not name by whom specifically:

They sat in exile and formed an interim government to replace the Doe government when Doe was still on the throne... I was only the instrument that they used... We all were involved in this Samuel Doe matter... We all wanted a change.

However, he denied reports that he and his men had cannibalized Doe and claimed that they exhumed his body in order to show the media that the man was truly dead to avoid rumours claiming otherwise. Despite numerous victim and witness testimonies to the contrary, he denied ever killing any civilian himself, and denied ever condoning his fighters to kill or injure civilians, aside from cases where, for example, he executed two of his men who had “violated the human rights” of a civilian. He stressed during his testimony that “We need to forgive each other for what happened in this country,” and opposed any establishment of a Liberian war crimes court. The closest he came to a confession and apology, to this author’s knowledge, was when he said: “Forgive me for my sins, but when two elephants fight, the grass suffers.”^[17]

Since his TRC testimony, Johnson has repeatedly made public claims that if he were recommended for prosecution by the TRC, he would “refuse to be arrested.” When his name appeared on the top of the list of major perpetrators in the final report, written as “Number One most notorious perpetrator,” unsurprisingly to most people he repeated his threats that he would refuse arrest, and, more ominously, that if any attempts were made to arrest him, “there will be trouble.” He also repeatedly referred to a law that Charles Taylor passed in 2003 that gave anyone who participated in the war amnesty for their crimes, again stressing that the TRC was totally illegitimate. He and most of the other ex-warlords who signed the Comprehensive Peace Agreement held a tense press conference in which they categorically denied the legitimacy of the TRC, both because of this law and because it was dangerous for Liberia’s peace.

In addition to frequently alluding to God’s role during his campaign for Senator, Johnson still refers to the role God plays in his life now that he is not fighting, though, contrary to Blahyi’s graphic testimonies, he is still careful to avoid conceding too much about his past. Reflecting on his testimony to the TRC, and highlighting one reason he does not deserve prosecution, Johnson insisted that, “I was repentant. I’ve accepted Jesus.” ^[18] He has been a well-known member of CW since his return to Liberia in 2005, and a self-proclaimed evangelist of the Gospel. Unlike Blahyi’s graphic testimonies of his involvement with the dark world, Johnson only vaguely refers to his transformation of being born again and notes that he is fulfilling a special mandate of God by being in office. To this author’s knowledge, since returning to Liberia he has never preached at CW or anywhere in Liberia, nor spoken about his involvement during the war, either in his own church or any other.

Among Pentecostals, Johnson is not considered to be the hero that Blahyi is. However, he is admired for his evident change from fighter to peaceful, God-fearing politician:

He was a wicked man then, everybody knew him. ... You drive past Freeport and you see him sitting there, drinking all day, and he’d just have his boys kill people because he didn’t like how they looked. People feared him—O! He came back a transformed man, he stopped with the drink and he is a man of God. He was preaching on that side [Ghana]. ... He came back to be a Senator and he is doing fine, I voted for him ... So I think it is a good thing that someone who was so wicked can change his ways, to show the other people that you can live a wicked life but come back and still be alright.

When asked about Johnson's continuous denial of his crimes, and refusal to truly repent for them in public, Pentecostals gave explanations in spiritual idioms. As one CW member explained,

It is not a matter of his confession to man. If he confessed to God, then who am I to fault him for not confessing to the TRC? He says he is born-again; he is not doing any crime now so I cannot fault him for this. His heart is with God, and that is all that matters.

Similarly, a member of CEM said that,

We believe in justice, but we also believe in forgiveness ... So what I believe is that if somebody, one way or the other, decided to leave this life for the Lord, then I don't think there is anything better for him. ... If he doesn't repent, what we know is that his sin will find him out, and the wages of sin is death. They say evil will also pursue the sin. So we leave them to their own judgment.

In terms of his possible prosecution, Pentecostals insist that, as with Blahyi, such a prosecution is not necessary; at worst it could incite more tension, and instead "we should just forgive and forget." As we will see, this is not necessarily different from other Liberians, both Christians and non-Christians; however, Pentecostals utilize a graphic spiritual discourse to legitimize this opinion.

He is now a man of God; he has changed his ways and is transformed, so we cannot punish him now. What will that do? Too many people did bad, why should we go and punish the good ones? Johnson did bad, but for Liberia, it would be bad to open old wounds. ... Now he is a peaceful man, he is not fighting, so what is the problem?

Despite the considerably different situation of Prince Johnson as compared to Blahyi (the former is born-again but unrepentant, in denial, and far less vocal), Pentecostals still use language imbued with religious imagery pertaining to his being born-again to justify forgiving and forgetting his actions, and arguing that he not be prosecuted or even restricted from office. The fact that he openly criticizes the TRC as illegitimate was not problematic for anyone interviewed during fieldwork; instead, all that mattered was that he had become

a man of God, and it was now up to God to deal with him. The confession and repentance, they believe, has occurred between him and God; that he is a reformed individual is evident in the fact that he is no longer waging war.

Charles Taylor

Charles Taylor is being tried in the Special Court for Sierra Leone for crimes he committed in Sierra Leone. The Special Court is a hybrid court^[19] that was located in Sierra Leone for every trial except his, which, in an attempt to maintain stability in the country, was moved to a rented chamber of the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague. He has become a relatively common name because he became the first sitting head of state to be indicted by this court. He has not been indicted for any crimes committed in Liberia and never gave testimony in the Liberian TRC because of his ongoing trial in The Hague. Despite that, he is well-known by every Liberian for his major involvement throughout the war, his brutal presidency from 1997-2003, his persistent rejection of responsibility for any war crimes, or even relatively minor violent acts.

Taylor was an active member of the Baptist church throughout his life, though never an active member of a Pentecostal church. Later in his political career, however, he made claims to being born again; in 2002 he hosted a massive three-day revival for Liberia with Pat Robertson. Most Liberians recognized that his claims to being born-again were false, especially because they competed with his 1997 declaration to be the supreme head of the traditional Poro society,^[20] including his assertion that he would have three wives, a position totally counter to Pentecostal ideals of shunning all traditional beliefs and practices. Since his indictment he has not claimed to be born-again; while on trial in The Hague, he even testified to having converted to Judaism, yet had “not given up Christianity.”^[21]

Although Liberian Pentecostals are certain that Taylor was a major instigator of the wars and is evidently not repentant, most are still willing to forgive and forget, and do not see the need for him to be convicted of any crimes. Again, the spiritual idioms that are used to explain why it is best to forgive and forget Taylor’s crimes, and the proper methods to deal with him, vary widely. There are a number of factors that make these spiritual idioms more complex, contradictory, and varied than those that deal with Blahyi and Johnson: first because of the Pentecostal perception that Taylor is not born-again or truly saved, and second because of the fact that he is currently dealing with the possibility of punishment.

For example, one CW pastor pointed out that God would work through the justice system to do His will:

Let Taylor face his judgment. One thing I know is that God doesn't hold back any man. If you are willing to change your life then he is willing to forgive. God will let the innocent go free. If Taylor really confessed [to God], and Taylor is sure [and truthful] of what he's saying, God will forgive him. If he then gets sent to jail then that is not God's work. ... God will not send a repentant man to jail. ... If he goes to jail it is because he did not confess to God, and God has put him there until he changes his ways.

Another pastor also believed that God would work through the justice system, but quite differently: "If Taylor gets convicted, then it is God's will. Perhaps he will be there [jail] in order to make him see Christ, and then he can spread the gospel to those in his prison."

While acknowledging the possibility that Taylor might be punished for his crimes, many Pentecostals were still adamant that he should not be. Again, a variety of spiritual idioms were employed in order to articulate this sentiment. Some Pentecostals considered the prosecution of Taylor to be useless, as the real action should be performed in the spiritual realm:

Yeah, we know [Taylor] caused the war, he was the hand behind it all, he brought Liberia down, he caused too much wickedness, but what good will it do to put him in jail? The man is too powerful, he can do things from his prison room. The devil is not stopped with bars and guards, the devil is stopped with a true change, so if we want to keep Taylor's threat away, we must continue to pray for him. We pray for him every day, to make him to truly see Christ, to repent and to change. ... It is working now, you see it, we have peace because we prayed. We fought the devil. If we stop doing that, we will see war again.

God has a hand over this country now, so he will not let Charles Taylor take it back again, He cannot let war happen again. Charles Taylor had control before, the devil was everywhere and the man was a supreme Zoe ^[22]so he had all kinds of forces of darkness working with him, but they are less now. ... So if we let Charles Taylor go or if we put him in jail there is no difference. So I

think for everybody, all those warlords, we let bygones be bygones and we just let Taylor free.

Others saw his prosecution as dangerous:

Well, it is difficult with Taylor, you see he is not with Christ, that man he is too demonic, he is working with Satan. So we are just giving Satan more and more power with this Hague business, put him on television, give him a chance to talk, talk, talk all these things. The man is lying! You see it every day, lies, lies! That is the devil speaking, so what is the good here? The devil is preaching through Charles Taylor, we need to intervene properly. ... Deliverance will be the only way to start this process. You know, he was the supreme Zee. You know, that is like the general of Satan's army ... He still holds rank, and he is in jail but he still goes to the spirit world and does business whenever he wants, so what are we wasting time for [with prosecution]. ... Right now he cannot cause harm because the Pentecostals are being active against him, so we are trying, but there is much more work to do. ... I forgive him, I have to forgive him before I can pray for him, but we as a nation [we] need to fast and pray for that man.

You know they are showing the trial on television and talking about it in the radio and newspapers, so all these stories being told, about eating babies and raping women and burning villages ... That is making people feel bad, and that is making people remember the past and it can make people vexed ... So this is causing confusion and what good is that in our country today? The devil knows that when you talk about him, he can get power. What we need to say is the blood of Jesus, and that will stop all these tensions. [Whenever we are] talking about the dark world business, the devil loves it. ... If Taylor goes down or not, nothing will change, so we need to pray continuously that this trial doesn't cause more problems.

For many Pentecostals, the best way to deal with Taylor, instead of through the Special Court proceedings, is through spiritual warfare: prayer, deliverance and evangelism. Putting him on trial, accusing him of war crimes and confronting him will not change him in the way that will be most effective for achieving the ultimate goal of true reconciliation. If

Charles Taylor has not repented or confessed, no formal court or TRC will encourage him to do so; the only thing that will is a true experience with God, and only the church can do this.

Liberians at large also support not convicting Charles Taylor, although they are less certain about giving him amnesty than they are for Blahyi or Johnson. Many Liberians want to give Taylor amnesty not because they believe he deserves it, or because they even like him as a leader or individual, but mainly because they consider leaving the issue alone to be better ultimately for Liberia. Again, there is frequent mention about how his war crimes trial, in addition to all of the testimony given about him in the Liberian TRC, is simply opening old wounds that could reignite tension.

At the same time, Liberians are fully aware that for some things it is important to punish somebody for crimes in the name of justice and rule of law. There is also the reality that many people are simply afraid Taylor will re-involve himself with Liberian politics and potential power grabs. Ultimately, Liberians are faced with a difficult decision about whether or not to support the prosecution of a man they fear and blame for the destruction of the country, yet want to forget about and try to maintain the peace that they have finally achieved. Because of this complicated moral and practical decision when speaking about the best way to deal with Taylor, Liberians are ambivalent and unsure about their opinions and the reasons for them. However, many people stick to their general feeling that whatever happened during the war should be forgiven and forgotten for the sake of Liberia's peace. Pentecostals, by contrast, are certain of this opinion because, according to their spiritual worldview, dealing with Taylor and Liberia's peace generally can be achieved only in the spiritual realm. The difficult moral decision is legitimized when situated within the spiritual battle; the issue is effectively resolved.

Flexibility and Practicality of Spirit Idioms for Explaining This-worldly Events

To summarize, Pentecostal opinions about these three very different figures are a good representation of the wide applicability of the spiritual idioms Pentecostals use. Here, the spiritual idioms are being used to explain the actions of perpetrators, and consolidate

opinions as to the best way to deal with them. Blahyi has publically confessed, repented and begged for forgiveness from the Liberian public, and made major attempts to give back to the country through his evangelization efforts, support of the TRC, public speeches, and programs for re-integration and reform of ex-combatants. Johnson has half-heartedly confessed to and apologized for a few crimes, certainly not all that he has been accused of, and only under evident pressure, but he has not asked for forgiveness and has blamed his actions on those in power above him. Charles Taylor, along with most other major perpetrators, has denied any wrongdoing, not asked for forgiveness, not repented, and not made any claims to be born-again and reformed from a dark past.

Despite the wide variety of Pentecostal spiritual idioms employed when dealing with perpetrators, all these idioms have one common spiritual explanation: the perpetrators' actions during the war were a consequence of the spiritual battle between good and evil that brought Liberia into total spiritual disorder. However, since then, there has been a relative reordering of the spirit world, which is manifested as relative peace. Whatever wickedness these men did was a result of their being under the control of Satan. Blahyi spells this out literally; for Pentecostals, he is speaking their language and therefore is a perfect role model for post-conflict reconciliation, peace and reintegration. In other words, he is an example of spiritual reorder, manifested in an individual's drastic personal transformation. The other two individuals may not put their spiritual transformation in such explicit terms, but their present-day actions, to Pentecostals, reflect that they are not so strongly influenced by demons: today, these men are not waging war. The physical evidence is that they are not as wicked as they were before; therefore, there must be less demonic influence at work. For Pentecostals, this is positive, and they can explain this by using spiritual idioms.

The applicability of spiritual idioms does not end here, though. As the following will show, flexible and adaptable discourse is able to spiritually legitimize situations in which it is most practical not to forgive.

Pentecostals also use spiritual idioms to legitimize not forgiving or accepting certain fellow Pentecostals who repeatedly behave badly, despite the wrongdoer's admission of guilt and repentance. From earlier discussion, it would seem that, like wartime perpetrators, other criminals and sinners would be forgiven and given more chances to redeem themselves. The reality, however, is that when it is practical or desirable, Pentecostals often find spiritual idioms to explain why certain people are simply a lost cause or that they need to "let them

go” in order to really help them.

Three months after working for me, my research assistant Joseph travelled with CEM to a week-long crusade outside of Monrovia. He had been working as a generator mechanic for the church for those three months, which required him to travel everywhere with the church and sleep overnight on the crusade grounds with a few other workers to guard the equipment. On the first day in Buchanan, Joseph met a young woman in town and spent the night with her. Of course, this was strictly forbidden moral behavior in addition to being irresponsible work behavior. The next day when he finally returned, a pastor’s phone was missing and everyone concluded that Joseph had stolen it to give to his new girlfriend. Because of this behavior, Joseph was asked to leave the crusade, and was given money for a taxi to return to Monrovia. Before he left, the pastors asked him to give them my camera, which Joseph had been using to take pictures for the church; at this point, the pastors later told me, he became aggressive and refused to give it to them.

When the pastors returned to Monrovia, Joseph called one of the pastors of the church, his distant cousin, to apologize and ask for forgiveness, and to volunteer himself to undergo deliverance to “change my wicked ways.” The pastor said he would call him later, but never did. When Joseph called him again a week later, the pastor said quite frankly, “You are not welcome here anymore.” I asked the pastors about this, and they explained the reasons for this decision to not allow Joseph to return; it was not just that it was immoral and sinful to have premarital sex, but more importantly “This is a deliverance ministry, and when Joseph leaves the crusade ground, he goes out there, into the demonic stronghold, and he can bring the demons back in to the people at the crusade ground.”

The church leaders then told me about Joseph’s history at the church. He had been a member since he was a boy. Apparently he had always been a “bad boy,” had frequently been a problem for the church, and that “the only reason we let him back is because he was with you.” However, when it became apparent that Joseph would still be a practical inconvenience for the church, they asked him to leave and legitimized and articulated this decision in spiritual idioms—that his demons were too dangerous for the well-being of the church.

Conclusion

A few points have been made in this paper. First, Liberians are ambivalent about the TRC, and most people consider it more important to simply forgive and forget what happened during the war. Second, what is distinct about Pentecostals are the ways that they articulate the reasons for their opinions and the specific alternatives they propose to the secular initiatives. And third, the difference between the ways Pentecostals deal with individuals and groups depends not strictly on the doctrines they are taught in church, but rather depends on the context in which believers find themselves, just as non-Pentecostal Liberians will shift their opinions regarding certain issues, though without legitimizing their reasons by referring to spiritual idioms as Pentecostals do.

In Liberia, people are confused about how to deal with the war and the people who acted in it. This is not odd; nobody has answers to Liberia's problems and every issue is complicated. However, the Pentecostal discourse enables people to consolidate their opinions about what the best method is, and therefore makes it legitimate and spiritually clear. However, that is just in reference to the war; when it comes to present-day problems with criminals and immorality, Pentecostals are less likely to forgive and forget, specifically when it is not practical to do so. This essay has revealed how Pentecostals do not always adhere to their ideals of forgiveness, reconciliation and love for all. It is clear that forgiveness and non-forgiveness are variable; practicality is the constant. Thus, in some cases, Pentecostalism may appear to be good for peace and reconciliation between individuals; in others, it may not. Much more generally, this paper has revealed that the role of religion in a post-conflict setting is not so clear-cut, and it requires in-depth analysis of beliefs and practices in order to elucidate the more subtle ways that religion works.

1. 1. Steven Ellis, *The Mask of Anarchy* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 233. In this essay, we employ Steven Ellis' explanation of what "power" means in Liberia today: "This assumption that power is what it is, inherently neither good nor evil, is still prevalent in Liberia, where senior zoes [traditional religious leaders] are regarded to this day as having aspects both of a curer and a potential agent of death."
2. 2. Gwendolyn K. Heaner, "Destroying the Destroyer of Your Destiny: The Sociopolitical Role(s) of Pentecostalism in Post-War Liberia" (Ph.D. diss., School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 2011). This is one of the major points made in the dissertation from which a chapter was adapted for the purposes of

this paper.

3. 3. The 2008 census indicates that Liberia is composed of 89 percent Christians, 9 percent Muslims and less than 1 percent practitioners of exclusively African Traditional Religion (ATR). A 2010 Pew survey found that 69 percent of Liberians were Christians, and of those, 26 percent were Pentecostal. Prior to the 1980s, Christians were primarily composed of Episcopalians, Lutherans, Methodists and Baptists.
4. 4. There are a number of terms that scholars have used to describe this type of Christianity, all of which have their own specific nuances and etiologies: charismatic, born-again, new paradigm, neo-Pentecostal, neo-charismatic, evangelical, new-wave, among others.
5. 5. The names of the churches have been changed for this essay.
6. 6. Mainline are those churches that are denominational and institutionalized, such as Lutherans, Methodists, Catholics, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Baptists and Presbyterians. Pentecostal, charismatic and non-mainline evangelical churches are those who are both non-mainline and have aspects of Pentecostal-style worship, such as speaking in tongues, healing rituals, enthusiastic and charismatic preaching, non-liturgical worship and an emphasis on the this-worldly actions of the Holy Spirit in believers' lives. "Spiritist" AICs are those particular churches that arose in Africa in the middle of the twentieth century as indigenous responses to what practitioners considered overly-Western styles of worship; in Liberia the Aladura, founded in Nigeria, were the most prevalent.
7. 7. Questions were asked to elucidate a person's religious affiliation, his/her specific beliefs, and ways that these affiliations and beliefs may have affected his/her life. For example, which churches he/she had attended/joined over time and why he/she changed affiliation; whether he/she was born again and when that experience occurred; whether he/she experienced speaking in tongues, healing, demonic possession or some type of divine intervention, whether the individual has been a victim of witchcraft and if so, how this was dealt with, knowledge of basic Biblical characters and stories, among others. Responses were coded and logged into a database that was later analyzed to highlight trends.
8. 8. See especially Gberie's criticism of the TRC Lansana Gberie, "Truth and Justice on Trial in Liberia," *African Affairs*, 107:2008.

9. 9. The Krahn are one of Liberia's fifteen ethnic groups that the State officially recognized, and the ethnic group of President Samuel Doe (1979-1989), whose overthrow occurred during the first year of the civil war. The Krahn were targeted by Charles Taylor's army during the war because of their perceived injustices during Doe's regime; Krahn fighters typically were part of the AFL and ULIMO in the first decade of the war, and MODEL in the last three years of the war.
10. 10. Joshua Milton Blahyi, *Trading Priesthood for Royal Priesthood: A Testimonial Account of a Liberian Brutal War General and a Traditional Priest that Dramatically Met Christ and Is Now Christ's Ambassador* (Accra: Gee Bee Productions, 2006, in author's possession).
11. 11. Maryland is a county in South-eastern Liberia where the Bokyo cult is rumored to be active and in which disappearances have been relatively common. It is believed that certain adherents to Bokyo perform sacrifices and steal body parts for ritual power.
12. 12. These are physical objects believed to be imbued with certain spiritual powers from any variety of spiritual source. They are used to influence or otherwise affect people for either good or evil purposes. Some examples of craft are pottery, amulets, jewelry, books/papers, bones, and clothing.
13. 13. TRC public hearings, Monrovia, January 2008.
14. 14. TRC public hearings, Monrovia, January 2008.
15. 15. The National Patriotic Front, a faction in the Liberian civil war, founded and led by Charles Taylor until his presidency in 1997.
16. 16. "Meeting the Hard man of Liberia," BBC News, 4 November 2006. See also Glenna Gordon, "An Interview with Senator Prince Johnson of Liberia," *Foreign Policy*, July 2009.
17. 17. "Meeting the Hard man of Liberia," BBC News, 4 November 2006. See also Glenna Gordon, "An Interview with Senator Prince Johnson of Liberia," *Foreign Policy*, July 2009.
18. 18. "Meeting the Hard man of Liberia," BBC News, 4 November 2006. See also Glenna Gordon, "An Interview with Senator Prince Johnson of Liberia," *Foreign Policy*, July 2009.
19. 19. These courts are less expensive, based in their home state (with the exception of the trial of Charles Taylor, being held in a borrowed courtroom in The Hague because

of fears his trial would lead to regional instability), and are funded by international bodies and states.

20. 20. Stephen Ellis, "Young Soldiers and the Significance of Initiation: Some Notes from Liberia," Conference Paper presented in Leiden, 2003.
21. 21. In June 2009, Taylor was reported by his wife to have converted to Judaism, yet had not "given up" Christianity in doing so. "Religious Conversion," BBC radio interview with Mrs. Victoria Taylor, 2 June 2009.
22. 22. A Poro or Sande leader, considered to be imbued with significant spiritual power.