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PROMOTING RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY THROUGH EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

With more than 230 million people split into diverse demographic, psychographic, ethnocultural, and religious segmentations, Nigeria is a relatively complex nation. It is a secular state by legislation because Christianity, Islam, and African traditional religion (ATR) dominate the religious environment. Interfaith strife and violent extremism have plagued Nigeria's history, endangering national security, sustainable development, and group interests. This article, "promoting religious diversity through effective communication," makes a conscious effort to investigate the basic triggers of violent religious conflicts and examine the ideas that effective communication can foster religious inclusivity and interfaith understanding among various religious leaning. The paper examined modern methods for fostering religious diversity and inclusivity through successfully implemented impactful communication by utilizing the principles of the two-step communication framework. In addition to published data on religious tensions in Nigeria and their causes, the study made extensive use of the qualitative approach, thematic review of online resources, expert opinions (EDIs), and grey literature. According to the research, religious adherents' morals, values, and mental and financial dispositions can all be influenced by effective religious communication, which is a powerful instrument and crucial force for social transformation and integration in society. The study comes to the conclusion that religious followers, their opinion leaders, and the government should not undervalue good communication due to its strong influence and potential to incite societal unrest that jeopardizes economic growth and national security. In order to avoid portraying other religious sects negatively, the article advises religious leaders and their followers to be cautious, sensitive, and strategic in all forms of religious communication. Similarly, the government and its agents should always remain

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completely impartial in matters pertaining to religion.

Keywords: interfaith, secular, extremism, adherent, diversity, segmentation, effective communication.

Introduction

According to United Nations data found on Woldometer as of October 17, 2024, Nigeria is home to an estimated 234 million ethnocultural and multireligious individuals. Nigeria is a secular country according by constitution, which means that the freedom of religious association is protected by the nation's current legal framework; making it ethnoreligious diverse and pluralistic. Although Nigerians have very different perspectives and worldviews, they are essentially unified in their diversity and humanity. The cultural and religious customs of the populace clearly demonstrate these differences. For example, the two major faiths of Islam and Christianity, as well as, to a lesser extent, the traditional religion, are practiced by over 400 identified ethnic groups across the geopolitical divisions (Albert, 2002).

The Nigerian constitution forbids all levels of government from establishing a state religion since it upholds religious plurality. In support of this position, Ostien, P. (2014), emphasized that the constitution forbids religious discrimination and the Federal and State governments from establishing a state religion. This gives citizens the freedom to choose, practice, spread, or alter their religion without fear of retaliation. Since the preamble acknowledges that the country and its citizens exist and live "UNDER GOD," the Nigerian constitution is actually religious.

According to the CIA World Factbook (2022), the majority of Nigerians are followers of the two major religions: Islam (53.5%) and Christianity (45.9%). This suggests that 99.4% of Nigerians are either Muslims or Christians. It worth emphasizing that there are notable differences in how the followers understand and practice their faith, both within and between groups. One such example is that, despite the fact that all Muslims share a common understanding of the five pillars of Islam, many of them behave differently due to sectarian differences. This explains why Nigeria and other sub-Saharan African countries are home to numerous Islamic sects, such as Sunni, Shia, Izala, Tijaniya, Qadiriya, and Ahmadiya.

Sectarianism is not exempt from Christianity. Evangelical churches, Seventh-day Adventist churches, Lutheran churches, African Instituted churches (Aladura, Cherubim and Seraphim, Celestial Church of Christ, Christ Apostolic Church, etc.), Protestant churches (Anglican Communion, Methodist, Baptist, and Pentecostal churches), and Catholic churches are among the many Christian denominations that are found throughout the world, including Nigeria.

It is crucial to stress that Nigeria's widespread intra-faith denominationalism is

not the main issue with divergent religious views and the root cause of violent religious disputes. Insensitive and poorly handled religious communication, along with the politicization, manipulation, or outright mischievous framing and amplification of these sectarian differences by cunning followers and violent agents who aim to incite conflict, are what typically lead to interfaith conflicts (Pate, 2010).

Conceptual Review and Clarifications

Here, the emphasis is on offering practical insight into the core ideas represented in the article's title, such as religion, communication, and effective communication. Without a deep understanding of communication and religion, as well as how they interact and intersect to promote religious harmony in society, we may not be able to make the right impression and present a convincing case on the topic (i.e., how effective communication can promote religious diversity).

Since religion encompasses such a wide range of viewpoints, it is challenging to distill it into a single, universal definition. Some thought leaders may define or characterize religion according to its roles and contributions to society, while others may examine it from a different perspective or viewpoint or convictions. The belief in the existence of a supernatural controlling power, the creator and controller of the universe, who has endowed man with a spiritual character that endures after the death of the body, is what Hornby (2007, p712) describes as religion in light of this background. "A social institution involving beliefs and practices based upon a conception of the sacred" is how Lester (1995) defines religion. For example, the New Testament of the Holy Bible defines faith as the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen (Hebrew 11:1). Marcionis (2005:488) also characterized religion as 'the belief (faith) anchored in conviction rather than scientific evidence'.

Furthermore, religion was described by Echekwube (1984) as "that vital encounter with the supernatural or divine being to which one responds with one's whole being, it is a special experience by man in depending on a superpower for the purpose of a greater realization of himself" (p.36). In his view, religion is "a fixed relationship between the human self and some non-human entity, the sacred, the supernatural, the self-existent, the absolute who is simply called God in religion," according to Bouquet (quoted in Omoregbe, 1999) (p. 22). The beauty and significance of religion in traditional culture are demonstrated by a number of concerns mentioned in the definitions or descriptions of religion above, including sacred, relationship, self-realization, ruling power, creator, and controller. One of the most important factors in each human culture is religion (Duke & Osim 2020). Through its operations, it either favorably or unfavorably influences the development of people and society.

Religion is as old as man himself and is the belief in the existence of an ultimate entity. The creation of man and related theories suggest that the world as we know it

today was created and shaped by a supreme creator. This explains why people are inherently drawn to a certain religion in order to honor and worship the deity who is thought to be their creator. According to Little (2013), religion is characterized by its exceptional capacity to offer people answers to the most important issues regarding existence, purpose, life, and death. As devout followers of a certain religion, we should be able to answer questions about who we are, why we are here on Earth, what drives us, what our purpose is while we are here, how we can achieve it, how we should measure that purpose's fulfillment, and what happens to us when we die. The responses given to these questions determine how people behave and interact with one another in society. Rexach-Rivera (2014) defines religion as a systematic set of worldviews, cultural systems, and beliefs that connect people to a higher order of existence. People who follow certain religions typically act or behave in ways that are consistent with certain cultural customs, such as how they dress, speak, and behave in public, as well as the holidays or rituals they observe. An adolescent Muslim female, for example, is supposed to dress appropriately in public by covering every part of her body.

In most assemblies, Christian women are expected to cover their heads during worship. The following significant aspects of religion in society are brought to light by a broad understanding of it, though: it is essential in providing a person with cultural identity through participation in festivals, customs, and mythologies that contribute to the nation's material and intangible heritage. It contributes to the development of a person's character by establishing an ethical framework and serving as a regulator for values in daily life. Religion serves as a socializing tool. Thus, values like love, empathy, respect, and peace are fostered by religion. Additionally, it is essential for building our relationship with the divine and the conviction that there is a higher power that governs our daily existence. Thus, the spiritual connection is formed by the elements of prayer, chants, hymns, etc. Eighty-four percent of people worldwide identify as members of a religious group, according to Sherwood (2018). In the same vein, Nigeria's religious outlook have a sizable base of devoted adherents of the major religious leaning. According to the CIA World Factbook (2022), the Nigerian population consist of Christianity (45.9%), Islam (53.5%), and African traditional worship (0.6%) are the three main religions practiced in Nigeria.

The existence of several religions in one culture while enabling each follower to cling tenaciously to their beliefs, practices, and beliefs is known as religious pluralism. According to Ele (2019), religious pluralism entails a wide range of different faiths that coexist in a society, as is the case in Nigeria. The value of religious pluralism in its most basic form is that each religion can profit from what the others have to offer in a perfect and accepting setting. For instance, celebrating Islamic religious holidays alongside Christians can assist the Christians better understand Islam and vice versa. Negative religious pluralism, on the other

hand, occurs in cultures where adherents of one religion maintain their beliefs and practices as superior to those of other religions. This breeds intolerance, which frequently leads to catastrophes. Unfortunately, racism, intolerance, hostility, and division have been hallmarks of Nigeria's three major religions. This emphasizes how important it is to use excellent communication to advance religious sensitivity and inclusivity.

Concept of Communication

It is crucial to stress that different people may have different ideas about communication because it lacks a universally accepted and definitive definition. This is understandable given how knowledge and communication studies are always changing (dynamic by nature). According to Ushie (2018) and Udoudom (2018), communication is a human activity that takes place amongst people, families, social groups, clubs, religious groups, and political parties, to name a few. Furthermore, Okhakhu (2010) believes that communication is essential to all facets of human existence and interactions and that only successful communication produces positive outcomes. This can be accomplished in a variety of methods, including but not limited to speaking, writing, and listening. He emphasizes further that a number of aspects of our lives will suffer if we are unable to communicate effectively; in fact, it is a very small part of our existence that does not actively participate in communication (Bittner, 1989).

It is reasonable to draw the conclusion that, freedom of expression and effective communication; be it verbal or nonverbal, oral or written, formal or informal, personal or interpersonal, intra-group or inter-group is the cornerstone of social and societal interaction. Effective communication is also the cornerstone of other life professions. They have meaning because people utilize communication to convey and explain everything about other disciplines, without which society and humanity would find them worthless.

Moreover, communication is the process by which many people exchange information, ideas, feelings, wishes, or messages via sound or symbols. It can be defined as a process that assigns and communicates meaning in order to create and distribute an equilibrium of understanding. This viewpoint is consistent with Craig's (2004) submission. Active listening, clear communication, curiosity for probing, analysis, evaluation, observation, and interpersonal and intrapersonal processing are among the fundamental abilities needed for this process. As a process, communication provides participants with insightful information that enlightens, illuminates, and empowers them.

Collaboration and social cohesiveness are enhanced via communication. Communication is a process that uses the right channels to convey ideas, meaning, and information from one place to another. According to Berko et al. (2010), "communication processes are mediated interactions between different agents which

share a repertoire symbols and semiotic rules." According to this definition, communication is the sharing of thoughts or messages through writing, speaking, and signifying. This coincides with Wrench, McCroskey, and Richmond's (2008) inputs.

It is more effective and beneficial to perceive communication as a two-way process rather than a one-way or unidirectional one. This suggests that communication is the process of transferring ideas, thoughts or emotions via proper channels of exchange for the benefit of the community. According to Berko (2010), communication is the process by which information is packaged, channeled, and transported from a sender to a recipient via a specific medium.

In the aforementioned procedure, the sender receives a feedback message from the recipient based on the decoded message. This means that there are always messages, senders, and recipients in communication. It is beneficial for all parties involved to have a communicative commonality in every act of communication. Notable activities here include non-auditory (non-verbal) means like body language, touch, media, and writing, as well as auditory (verbal) means like tone, voice, song, and speaking. Human communication is a dynamic, ever-evolving process (Worugji et al., 2008; Iyorza 2017).

According to Schramm (1954, the components and contents of communication can be categorized along a few major dimensions namely:

(i) Message – the idea, feelings, wishes or information being transmitted.
(ii) Source (emisor/sender or encoder) – source of transmission.
(iii) Form – method of transmission.
(iv) Channel – the means, through which the message is being transmitted.
(v) Destination (receiver/target or decoder) – the end receiver of the message being transmitted.
(vi) Receiver – the person the message is shared with.

Effective Communication in Religion

The goal of religious communication is to transfer religious values from one generation to the next, starting with the family, where parent-child ties act as a conduit for the spread of religious beliefs and ideals. Particularly when parents instruct their children in the observance of prayer rituals, this is a crucial kind of oral religious communication (Bassey & Bubu 2019; Duke & Osim 2020). The endeavor to communicate orally across and among people with divergent religious orientations that have fundamentally different ideas about what is true is another significant aspect of religious communication.

Religion facilitates bidirectional communication. For instance, people in society always get together because they have similar goals. Suffices to emphasize that shared myths, legends, ethics, values, and customs may be among the factors that unite individuals of a society (Ogar & Ogar 2019).

Beyond all the values listed above, they could also join together for additional reasons. For example, people gather to make sacrifices, conduct prayers, or carry out other rituals. As a unifying element, religion helps people to communicate and transfer knowledge and comprehend themselves within their communities. It is crucial to note that religion brings people together to form religious commitments. Since it is a conversation between people, this type of religious communication is horizontal in nature. Communication becomes vertical when it occurs between humans and one or more gods. The majority of Africans, particularly Nigerians, are very conscious or aware that there are two worlds: the visible and invisible worlds, and that they are both near to one another – and that the unseen world wields strong influence on the physical. They therefore believe that in order to sustain life, they must tap into the mystical world and connect with the unseen world. Religion is what enables people to speak with God, other spirits, the invisible world, and their ancestors.

Televangelism, radio evangelism, town cries, bus evangelism, tract and literature evangelism, indoor and outdoor crusades, educational evangelism, hospital and prison evangelism, email evangelism, postal evangelism, special festivals, and many more noteworthy forms of religious communication are worth mentioning. In contemporary human civilization, these are the means by which religious concepts and principles are spread. It is noteworthy that religious communication has benefited greatly from globalization, the internet, and digital communication technology, also known as new media technology.

From the earliest known human communication on cave walls to the present tech-age of digital media, people have persistently attempted to integrate religion and communication in churches, synagogues, and everyday talks, according to Duke & Okafor (2020). Making religious experiences tangible and intelligible for both current and potential followers, as well as documenting and preserving them for future generations, is a strong argument for effective religious communication. A notable degree of excellence in communication arts has been attained by some of these endeavors, such as those found in the Bible documentations and literary works. The core principles of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and other religions beliefs are passed down from one generation to the next through preaching, rites, texts, and literature, as well as through family interactions. Religious communication is now easier and faster, thanks to the emergence of new media like the internet, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and other digital platforms. As a result, this study encourages religious practitioners to actively refrain from igniting the religious ecosystem with explosive and provocative messages and to be aware of the latent negative potential of misguided communication, particularly in this digital age.

Alarming Spate of Ethno-religious Conflicts in Nigeria

Religious extremism has plagued Nigeria's history, occasionally escalating into the violent and wanton destruction of life and property to a startling degree. Even more troubling is the fact that, after years of independence, the basic causes of the interfaith conflicts that have marred our past have not been eliminated. This explains why the nation continues to face an increasing level of religious violence, which threatens national security and severely damages our sense of national identity. Given that individuals in various towns and regions live in constant terror that a crisis could erupt at the smallest provocation is evident there is imminent ethno-religious tension and fear. This has the consequence of endangering peaceful coexistence, particularly in Northern Nigeria. For example, there were over fifty (50) documented ethno-religious clashes in that region of Nigeria between 1976 and 2009, resulting in the deaths of over 100,000 people and the destruction of property valued at billions of Naira (NewsWatch, Nov 2, 2009; Elaigwu, 2004). These conflicts created trauma and losses of alarming proportion in the political, social, and economic fronts. Furthermore, it has eroded and ruined relationships and trust among Nigerians.

Different political dispensations have had a dent with ethno-religious crises with differing degrees of material and human losses. (Mohammed, 2005). These include the Jimeta-Yola religious issue (1984), the Zango Kataf unrest in Kaduna State (1992), and the "maitatsine" religious struggle in areas of Kano and Maiduguri in the early 1980s. History also documents the Muslim-Christian riots at Kafanchan College of Education (1987), the Muslim-Christian confrontations at Kaduna Polytechnic (1981–1982), and the University of Ibadan's cross vs. crescent (1981–1985).

Interreligious confrontations and their repercussions, such as deep-seated sense of vulnerability and insecurity, are clearly part of the scars the country still grapple with. Unfortunately, some places have developed a reputation for violence and fear that has caused people to flee or abandon them, turning them into "ghost communities." Such pictures and perceptions portend incalculable implications for economic stability, national unity, and integration. In order to strengthen and encourage religious diversity among Nigerians of many religions, it is crucial to use efficient communication.

Theoretical Consideration

A significant part of empirical research activities are theories, which offer the framework and contextual explanation of social and scientific phenomena in society so that we can relate to them clearly and comprehensibly. The two-step framework or concept is the foundation of this investigation. Theorists Elizabeth Noella-Newmann and Paul Lazarsfield developed this concept in 1948 after studying 600 people and finding that their campaign views were primarily shaped by people they knew, such as friends and acquaintances, rather than

the media. "Personal contact is more important than media contact, in that, people are less motivated and influenced by the mass media (impersonal in nature) than by the people they know personally and respect," according to the theorists cited in Vivian (2009:403). The main participants in the two-step model are individuals known as opinion leaders, which include clergy, teachers, neighborhood merchants, union leaders, people of reputable character, influential friends, acquaintances, and loved ones (McQuail, 2005).

Furthermore, it was shown that those who have firsthand knowledge will not only transmit the information but also assist in its interpretation and shaping (Folarin, 1999). As opinion leaders, the clergy and other high-ranking men of God (messengers or servants of God or whatever title their denomination bestows on their most esteemed officials), claim to receive their messages directly from God and, as a result, convey them to their followers (adherents or followers). This standpoint, align with the finding of Blake (1979), opinion leaders are at the center of communication and have a significant impact on the recipients of the messages. Consequently, it is crucial for our religious leaders and clergy ALWAYS be aware that they wield strong impact on their followers. This is primarily made feasible by the followers' perception of them as "representative or mouthpiece of God" despite their human form. The followers treat them with unwavering respect since they are seen as the earthly representative of God. It is implied that they have a significant impact on communication, particularly within the religious environment. This paper's focal thrust is to evaluate and reaffirm the role of effective communication is in advancing religious inclusivity as a solution to religious extremism and its effects on the nation.

Methods

The mixed-approaches technique, which combines two distinct qualitative methods to gather data and information leading to the conclusion and recommendations, served as the motivation for this academic exercise. The two-pronged qualitative technique consists of thematic review of journals and related publications and extended in-depth interviews (EIDIs). Purposive sampling was used to conduct semi-structured extended in-depth interviews (EIDIs) with key community members, religious leaders, and communication specialists to learn more about how effective communication tactics might support religious inclusivity.

The exploratory character of the study and the necessity to interact with pertinent, information-rich respondents who have a respectable level of subject-matter expertise informed the choice of sampling approach. In order to find themes, tone, and language used to support religious diversity and inclusivity in Nigeria, content analysis was then utilized to objectively examine religious texts, sermons, and social media content. In order to find and record patterns, themes, and insights from the datasets that influenced the study's conclusions and

suggestions, thematic and content analysis were used.

Conclusion

Since communication is dynamic and ever-evolving, driven by both ongoing scholarly inquiry and technological advancement, it has been determined that there is no singularity or universally accepted definition. Human behavior, attitudes, and the social structure of society all have a significant role in communication, which is a continuous process that promotes social integration, the expression (encoding) and transmission of ideas and emotions, experiences and social relationships. It is clear from the discussion of religion, religious diversity, and effective communication that these ideas are closely related. The study also comes to the conclusion that impactful communication is an essential component of the religious ecosystem that fosters religious diversity and inclusivity, hence bolstering national unity and long-term economic growth for the benefit of all citizens. Effective communication is the hallmark of intellectual interaction, experimentation, and shared ideas that make this possible. This supports the claim made by Abel and Uket (2016) that effective communication and religion are the most prevalent social tools or elements in modern human society that unite people regardless of their social, educational, economic, traditional, or tribal status. They went on to say that both contribute to and sustain human society via interpersonal relationships, fostering harmony and stability via the peaceful settlement of disputes and misunderstandings. For this reason, this article urges religious leaders and followers to embrace the principles of effective communication to entrench religious and interfaith understanding as the precursor for promoting religious inclusion and tolerance for the benefit of all.

Recommendations

Effective use of communication can foster peaceful cohabitation while also having the potential to incite conflict when misused. As they say, "the tongue has the power to make or break." Therefore, in order to promote and tolerate religious diversity, our religious leaders should learn and adopt the principles of effective communication while preaching from these holy books to their converts and non-converts. The rationale is that religious inclusivity will reduce the preponderance of religious fanaticism and ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria, which has a significant impact on both sustainable economic development and national security. Instead of encouraging political manipulation of religion, the government ought to truly and profoundly preserve its constitutional status in terms of impartial policymaking and enforcement.

Furthermore, more research in this field is advised in order to improve people's comprehension of how to appreciate and value religion and its diversity in general. Religious leaders should be aware of the power they have as opinion leaders and refrain from using religion as a cover to further the political and financial interests of certain avaricious ruling elites.

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