

Public Relations and Peace Communication in A Multi-Religious Society: The Interfaith Initiatives in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Nigeria is a multi-religious country whose multi-religious make up has been crossed over with ethnic, political, and socio-economic tensions resulting in most occasions conflict. These narratives in the media and popular conversation have occasionally articulated religion as a source of division disregarding its communicative capacity to build peace. This paper addresses the concept of interfaith initiatives as a way of building peace in Nigeria using the strategies of public relations and peace communication. It evaluates the application of strategic communication by religious actors to promote dialogue, trust and social cohesion by a multi-religious society. The study will be based on a qualitative research design, in which the content analysis of documents on interfaith programs, public communiques, media information, policy documents, and online resources will be conducted regarding the interreligious engagement in Nigeria. The patterns of communication, stakeholder participation, and message framing in the chosen interfaith initiatives are explored on the basis of a case-based approach. The findings found that interfaith initiatives employ basic PR practices of dialogic communication, management of stakeholder relationships, strategic message formulation, and media involvement to then foster harmonious living. These measures can be used to combat misinformation, diminish the effect of religious stereotyping, and communicate the importance of common values of unity and tolerance in both the traditional and digital media. The research drawing comes to the conclusion that the effectiveness of interfaith initiatives in Nigeria is determined by the role of PR and peace communication. Religious communication carefully utilized can make religion a source of tension to one that will bring sustainable peace and social integration in multi-religious societies.

Keywords: Public Relations, Peace Communication, Multi-Religious Society, Interfaith Initiatives, Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria can be described as one of the most diverse African societies with regards to religion where Christianity, Islam, and the African Traditional Religions are practiced co-existently. This pluralism is well-rooted in the social, cultural, and political life of the country and has an impact on the identity formation, the ways of the population discourse, and social interactions. As much as diversity in religion can lead to mutual enrichment and moral cohesion, religious diversity has been linked to simmer and frequently recurrent conflicts especially where religious identities clash with ethnic, political and economic grievances. Most of these conflicts over the years have been religiously framed, and in many cases, worsened by political interference and sensationalistic media accounts that define religion as a major cause of violence (Obadare, 2018; Ojebode, 2016).

Religion has generally been portrayed in the publicity as a divisive agent, obscuring its positive potentials as a

socializing, moral persuasive and peacebuilding agent. Such portrayals look down on the communicative strength of religion as a social institution that can facilitate dialogue, reconciliation and coexistence by nonuse of violence. Researchers have opined that responsible communication through strategic framing can be used as a source of peace instead of war, when religion is strategically framed and communicated in a responsible manner (Adeyanju & Oriola, 2018). It is this viewpoint that demands the re-evaluation of the way religious actors speak in the public and how their messages are mediated, interpreted, and accelerated within the framework of larger communication systems.

In the view of mass communication, religion is a belief system as well as a very influential communicative institution, which can influence opinion of masses, social attitudes and even behavioral patterns. Religious institutions, religious leaders and other religious organizations tend to act as opinion leaders whose

messages bear moral weight and have symbolic credibility. These actors affect the way communities understand conflict, peace, and coexistence through sermons, public statements, interfaith forums and more and more through digital and social media platforms (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2015). Such communication could also be critical in shaping the agenda of conflict-prone situations, and the religious narratives may either cause polarization or foster mutual values and understanding (McCombs and Shaw, 1972).

In this communicative environment, interfaith initiatives have been developed as a conscious effort to put a stop to religious polarization through dialogue, trust and cooperation among various faiths. These programs aim to shift religious differences into a new paradigm of not a sign of hostility but a chance to engage in constructive interaction and solve common problems. Nevertheless, the success of interfaith programs will heavily rely on the communication strategies they use such as message framing, stakeholder involvement, and relationship management with religious and secular masses.

This paper looks at the role of interfaith projects in Nigeria in terms of peacebuilding as part of public relations and peace communication strategies. The paper has applied the public relations theory by contextualizing the interfaith dialogue within the context of strategic communication, two-way symmetrical communication and relationship management (Grunig and Hunt, 1984; Taylor et al., 2001). The study examines interfaith initiatives as a form of purposive communicative acts to emphasize how PR can be used as a facilitative means of bringing religious actors and the rest of the society into contact with one another in such a way that they understand each other, become less suspicious and maintain sustainable peace in a multi-religious world.

Literature Review

Religion, Conflict and Peacebuilding.

The idea of religion as an ambivalent social force holds in the scholarly literature that has the potential to simultaneously contribute to both conflict and peace, based on the mobilization of religious identities, narratives and institutions in particular socio-political conditions. Religion is not necessarily violent or peaceful, but it is usually used as a symbolic and communicative resource that can be used by different actors to justify competing interests (Haynes, 2013). Religion is often brought into the fore, as a notable point of difference which reflects underlying structural contradictions, in plural societies like Nigeria, in which religion is strongly linked to ethnicity, regional identity and political authority. Religious conflicts in the Nigerian context hardly have their basis on theological difference. Instead, they are usually incorporated in larger battles about political representation,

resource access, ownership, and land, as well as social-economic disparities (Nwankpa, 2020). Religious identities have usually been used by the political elites to enlist their support, in-group loyalty, and marginalizing perceived other thus fueling communal divisions. This functionalization of religion makes religion no longer a moral and spiritual system, but an instrument of political struggle, which is more subject to violence, especially in times of election campaign or economic instability.

This is further complicated by the role of the media in creating the social awareness of religious conflict. The process of media framing tends to oversimplify multifaceted conflicts through foregrounding of religious categories and thus, the strengthening of binary opposites like, Christian versus Muslim, or north versus south. This kind of adversarial framing leads to moral polarization and shared fear, and conceals the politics and socio-economic factors behind violence (Ojebode, 2016). Communicatively, these frames will do not only shape the perception of the people but also the response in policy and even the attitude of the community that can continue the cycles of mistrust and retaliation.

It is against this backdrop that there has been a growing scholarly acknowledgment of positive contribution by religion and religious organizations in the prevention of conflicts, mediation and reconciliation of conflicts that have taken place. In opposition to the previous secularization assumptions, which pushed religion aside in the process of securing peace, modern research points at the fact that religious parties tend to have certain privileges when it comes to the process of peacebuilding. These are moral credibility, strong rootedness in the community as well as mobilizing followers across social boundaries (Bercovitch et al., 2009). Since religious figures have a lot of trust and influence in Nigeria, participating in peace efforts will assist in de-escalating the conflict, encouraging dialogue, and enhancing social cohesion.

Specifically, interfaith programs offer orderly forums of long-term dialogue, reconciliation and joint action between various religious groups. Interfaith forums establish spaces of communication through the unification of leaders and followers of various religious traditions, where the false beliefs may be refuted, values expressed, and solutions to the social issues worked out together. These efforts can help religious actors to use their moral authority and social capital in a manner that enhances peaceful coexistence and not division (Adebayo, 2019). Significantly, interfaith peacebuilding is not limited to the symbolic dialogue process to also practical collaboration in community development, early warning of conflicts, and promoting justice and inclusion.

In the peace communication view, these interfaith

activities can be regarded as strategic interventions to re-frame religious discourses that are characterized by exclusivist and confrontational discourses to inclusive and reconciliatory discourses. Interfaith initiatives help to change the conflictual relationships and create sustainable peace by focusing on common ethical values, i.e., justice, compassion, and the sanctity of human life. At that, religion, properly communicated and strategically, becomes not an issue to control but a crucial means of peacebuilding in Nigeria, a multi-religious society.

Interfaith Programs as Communication Media.

The interfaith initiatives serve as structured and deliberate communication sites where the religious actors make common meanings and negotiate, control and create the shared peace narratives. These initiatives are not intended to be informal interaction, but are formalized communication processes that will support dialogue and eliminate suspicion and establish long-term relationships between different faith communities. In those platforms, communication is not only a process of information exchange but a relationship in which the purpose is to understand each other and change attitudes towards religious others.

Strategically, interfaith efforts are dependent on the intentional working of messages, mapping of stakeholders, and management of relations. Players in interfaith dialogue are further faced with complex communication milieu involving several diverse stakeholders such as religious groups, civil society groups, government bodies, security agencies, and the media. These relationships have to be managed with sensitivity to power structures, culture and historical resentment and have to be able to deliver messages that cut across boundaries of doctrines (Cowan and Arsenault, 2008). To this end, interfaith activities are highly reflective of the practice of public relations which places more emphasis on the aspect of mutual communication, negotiating, and building long term trust.

Interfaith communication usually takes various and complementary forms that include workshops, roundtable meetings, joint communiques, peace campaigns, lectures with the community, and community outreach. These communicative processes are used as the medium through which narratives against exclusivist and absolutist ideologies are propagated, and that other ethical standards which include justice, compassion, dignity of the human person and peaceful coexistence are upheld. In expressing these values in the collective way, the interfaith agencies strive to relocate the religious difference as a source of separation to a platform of cooperation and societal reconciliation.

Media involvement is a very vital aspect of interfaith communication since it allows peace stories to be shared among the actual participants and other people. Interfaith

efforts attempt to affect the manner in which religion and conflict may be framed within society through press releases, interviews, opinion pieces, and digital media content. The key to responding to the inflammatory or polarizing coverage by interfaith actors is to engage strategically both on traditional and novel media platforms to present other frames that focus on collaboration, reconciliation, and a sense of joint responsibility (Eisenlauer, 2019). This media exposure does not only make interfaith activities legitimate, but they also increase their ability to influence popular opinion and policy discourse.

Furthermore, interfaith activities are becoming more digitized and rely on digital communication tools and social media platforms to engage more people and maintain the interest, especially among younger generations. Interfaith groups can use online campaigns, webinars and social media advocacy to spread peace messages at a fast rate, react to the emerging tensions and develop virtual communities of dialogue that transcend geographical boundaries (Esler and Olsen, 2012). They serve as the extension of interfaith communication platforms, as these digital spaces strengthen the peace narratives and allow continuous communication between stakeholders.

All in all, interfaith initiatives can be viewed as strategic communication ecosystems through which dialogue, media, and relationship management intersect to facilitate the process of peacebuilding. As platforms of inclusive communication and narratives creation, interfaith efforts show how religion, under strategic communication and expression, can play a significant role in peace, social cohesion and democratic coexistence in multi-religious societies like Nigeria.

Public Relations and Chance to Communicate Peace.

The PR theory highly emphasises on building relationships, understanding each other and a long-term dialogue between organisations and their different publics. The main concept of this theoretical tradition is the two-way symmetrical model, which promotes communication and negotiation and adaptation in both sides rather than persuasion in one direction (Grunig et al., 2002). In the circumstances of peacebuilding, these principles can form a helpful conceptual framework to regulate the communication that is sensitive to conflict, build trust, and generate positive interactions between groups exhibiting diverging identities, values, and historical experiences.

In fractured societies or those marked by conflicts, breakdowns in communication usually lead to confusion, intimidation and heightening of tensions. These risks can

be addressed through dialogue-based PR practices based on relationship management to promote openness, listening and responsiveness to the concerns of the stakeholders. Through ethical communication and mutual respect, PR facilitates the processes of peacebuilding that are participatory and inclusive instead of coercive and manipulative. This is especially true in the multi-religious societies, where the religious agents are compelled to communicate across the doctrinal divides whilst remaining valid in their respective religious jurisdictions.

Peace communication builds upon and expands the theory of public relations with more specific emphasis on the contribution of media, strategic communication, and narrative framing to the escalation or deflation of conflict. According to scholars of peace communication, communication practices could help to achieve peace in the event that they combat misinformation and hate speech, and highlight messages of reconciliation, common humanity, and social justice (Eisenlauer, 2019). Peace-oriented communication aims to change the discursive space within which conflict actually occurs, instead of passively reporting the occurrence of conflicts and thus influencing the way audiences make sense of violence, responsibility and resolution options.

When used in the context of interfaith programs, PR and peace communication intersect as the tools of analyzing how religious participants influence the perceptions of the population about peace and coexistence. Interfaith groups play the stakeholder identification and engagement role through the process of uniting religious leaders, grassroots communities, policymakers, security agencies and the media. They frame messages of peace that focus on shared values and shared responsibility, and are very attentive to delicate theological and political distinctions. The reputation management also comes into play, as interfaith organizations are trying to gain credibility, neutrality, and moral authority in the settings where religion is typically linked with the conflict (Coombs, 2015).

Moreover, PR strategies will allow interfaith initiatives to cope with crisis and address religious violence or misinformation situations in ways that will not lead to further intensification. Timely coordinated statements, joint appearances, and symbolic acts of unity acts as communicative interventions enabling a message to be sent that unity and calmness are present, decreasing fear and hostility based on rumors. The interfaith initiatives, through these practices, are an indication that PR when practiced ethically, can be used as a peacebuilding instrument, but not propaganda.

In general, the combination of the theory of PR and the theory of peace communication can offer a powerful unit to study the example of interfaith initiatives as effective communicative agents of the multi-religious society in Nigeria. This combined framework demonstrates the possibilities of communication to transform religious diversity by integrating elements of

foregrounding dialogue, trust-building, and narrative transformation as the place of contestation to a means of peaceful coexistence and sustainable social harmony.

METHODOLOGY

The qualitative and case-based research design to study the role of interfaith initiatives in Nigeria in adopting PR and peace communication strategies in their peacebuilding is adopted in this study. This research will use a qualitative approach since it will allow studying the meanings, narratives, and communication practices that interfaith activities entail in-depth as opposed to quantitatively measuring the variables. This is because the case-based design enables the contextual analysis of interfaith initiatives as communicative players that exist in the multi-religious and socio-political setting of Nigeria that is complex.

Data Sources and Collection

The study data were obtained by analysing documents systematically. The documents under analysis are official reports, policy documents, communiqués to the population, press releases, organizational statements, peace charters, and media coverage concerning the chosen international interfaith efforts in Nigeria. Moreover, the updated online materials including web sites of the organizations, social media messages, and electronic campaign materials were reviewed to reflect the current communication practices and the strategies of engaging the population.

Interfaith initiatives were chosen based on their visibility, this is because of their proclaimed peacebuilding goals, as well as, long-term commitment to interreligious dialogue and conflict prevention. These efforts were analyzed on the premise of their stated objectives, communication channels, target audiences and recorded peace-oriented campaigns. The application of documentary sources made the study analyze both formal and mediated expressions of interfaith communication as it is presented to internal and external publics.

Analytical Framework and Procedure.

This analysis was aimed at analyzing and identifying the elements of PR practices and peace communication in interfaith activities. In particular, the paper reviewed the communication practices associated with message framing, media relations, stakeholder engagement, reputation management, and feedback mechanism. These factors were considered against the background of the known theories of public relations, especially the model of

relationship management and the two-way symmetrical communication, and the principles of peace communication, focusing on such aspects as de-escalation, dialogue, and narrative change.

Thematic qualitative analysis was used to determine common patterns, themes and communicative strategies in the activities of the chosen cases. The documents were read and coded in a repetitive form with regard to previously established analytical categories founded on literature resource in peace communication and public relations. It was through this that the methodological comparison of the ways in which various interfaith initiatives use the narratives of peace, the stakeholders, and the media to shape the discourse of the people was possible.

Methodological Justification and Limitations.

The use of document analysis has a number of methodological benefits. It also enables the researcher to analyse real world publicly available documents, reflecting the way interfaith efforts are presented deliberately to wider audiences through accountability of the resources used by interfaith efforts to build peace. It can also be used to study communication strategies in a time series and over a variety of platforms without the logistical and ethical issues relating to field interviews in sensitive conflict situations.

The study however recognizes some limitations. The lack of first-hand interviews implies that the inner mechanism of decision-making and unrecorded problems of the interfaith actors might not be entirely conserved. However, the study offers insightful information regarding the roles of interfaith initiatives as strategic communicators in the public sphere of Nigeria, because they pay attention to the communication practices that are publicly articulated and the mediated representations.

In general, this research methodology is appropriate to fulfilling the goal of the study of analyzing the role of public relations and peace communication in interfaith peacebuilding, which provides an even more insightful view on the role of communication practices in creating coexistence in a multi-religious society.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the analysis of the interfaith activities in Nigeria, it is apparent that they use diverse public relations and peace communication strategies that make a big difference in their peacemaking initiatives. The strategies are applied on interpersonal, organizational, and mediated levels, which is a conscious effort to regulate relationships, influence the popular discourses, and build trust in religiously diverse communities. Through the prism of public relations, interfaith initiatives become not only a place of dialogue but a

communicative participant in a relationship management on a long-term basis.

One of the main conclusions is that dialogic communication is prevalent in interreligious interaction. Interreligious initiatives focus on free, mutual interactions where religious actors are able to express their own views, hear the other voices and engage in compromises to reach mutual agreements. The two-way symmetrical model of PR presents the two-way communicational strategy as mutually understood and adaptive, as opposed to persuasive and domineering (Grunig and Hunt, 1984). Interfaith programs will reduce the level of religious stereotypes and break-down of rigid in-group and out-group identities by establishing communicative spaces that are based on respect and equality. This type of dialogue is especially important in situations where identities of religious people have been traditionally mobilized to justify exclusion or even violence.

Another major communication practice that also presents as strategic message framing in interfaith peace building activities is also evident in the tactics of communication. Religion efforts always contextualize these messages with common value of peace, justice, compassion, human dignity and national unity. This framing serves as the counter-narrative to the divisive religious rhetoric that happens to dominate conflict situations and media coverage. Interfaith communication allows redefining religious diversity as a shared strength instead of a threat by focusing on shared moral grounds instead of doctrinal differences (Adeyanju and Oriola, 2018). In terms of peace communication, this framing will help in de-escalating because the focus on identity-related hostility will be shifted into a mutual concern between society duties.

Another important discovery is interaction with the media. Interfaith movements are energetically interested in the media coverage of their activities in order to affect the way people discuss religion and war. Religious leaders also give a common picture through the joint press release, organized peace campaigns, declaration on the part of the masses, and media coverage which sends the message that they are working together and they are determined to make peace. This civic appearance plays a reassurance role especially when tension levels are high, as it decreases fear, spreads rumors, and discourages retaliatory violence (Ojebode, 2016; Nwankpa, 2020). To the PR language, this type of media interaction increases the credibility of the organization and builds on the validity of interfaith actors as peace brokers.

Online communication platforms also increase the scope of interfaith peace messages and their influence. Social media, websites and internet based campaigns allow interfaith activities to reach wider and more diverse audiences, particularly the youth who might not be so

reachable in the traditional religious set up. The digital spaces allow constant interaction, quick reaction to the arising conflicts, and building of relationships in the long term. In line with the relationship management theory, online interaction facilitates the evolution of trust, transparency, and understanding among the religious boundaries (Taylor et al., 2001). In addition, the interactive features of online platforms also enable the provision of feedback, which raises responsiveness and flexibility in peace communication.

In general, the results show that the interfaith initiative in Nigeria does put the major principles of PR dialogue, strategic framing, media relations, and stakeholder engagement into practical uses that are directly linked to the peacebuilding outcomes. Overseeing and influencing the discourse in the sphere of publicity, such initiatives can be regarded as a way of how strategic communication may help to change religious diversity into the source of sustainable peace out of the conflict. The argument is reinforced by the discussion that public relations, when applied with ethics and context-based situations, is important in promoting peace and coexistence in multi-religions.

CONCLUSION

This paper has shown that religion with a well-planned communication strategy based on interfaith programs can serve as an important and positive peacebuilding tool within the multi-religious society in Nigeria. As opposed to hegemonic discourse, which describes religion as the cause of conflict, the results indicate that interfaith actors will use active strategies of employing the public relations and peace communication processes to initiate dialogue, maintain and regulate relationships as well as reinterpret the public discourse. Interfaith efforts can help diminish mistrust and encourage social cohesion in relation to religious boundaries by means of purposeful interaction, inclusive communication patterns, and framing of ethical messages.

Using major principles of public relations, including dialogic communication, stakeholder involvement, media relations, and strategic message framing interfaith efforts can disprove conflict-provoking messages and develop other discourses based on the common values, national integrity, and peaceful living. These practices comply with the theory of relationship management and peace communication scholarship and represent how the communication process can be used to build trust and transform conflicts in heavily plural societies. The paper therefore highlights the significance of considering interfaith dialogue not only as a theological activity but as a communicative strategy that has some material peacebuilding consequences.

The contribution of the paper to the mass communication and PR literature is that interfaith initiatives will be the communicative peacebuilding processes that are established

in the social domain. It builds on current literature by revealing how the theory of PR and especially the two-way symmetrical communication and relationship management could be productively applied to the religious and the interfaith situations in Africa. By so doing, the study fills gaps between religion, communication and peace studies to provide a framework of studying faith-based peacebuilding considering more than purely normative or theological views.

With these findings, the study suggests that the policymakers, religious organizations, and the media practitioners should strengthen collaborative communication systems through which the interfaith engagement would be enhanced. Through interfaith communication, policymakers should institutionalize the interfaith communication platforms as a component of the wider peace and conflict prevention measures. Religions are advised to invest in the capacity-building aspect of communication to increase strategic messaging and media participation. The media practitioners, on their part, ought to consider conflict-sensitive and peace-oriented news coverage that exaggerates interfaith peace stories instead of exaggerating on the religious differences. The combination of all these steps can lead to the unification of sustainable peace and peaceful coexistence in Nigeria and other multi-religious societies with this problem.

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