

Strategic Communication to Combat Religious Conflict in Nigeria

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Abstract

Religion being a tool that appeals to both the physical and the spiritual aspect of man's life, and as such it is a very strong tool that can be used to change the perception of an individual, especially when one is under the ideology of religion itself. Nigerians believe more in religion than in what they do. However, it is absolutely not without doubt that religion can be used in divers' ways to facilitate and perpetuate evil. Based on these the study employed the empirical secondary data through published and unpublished works. The paper concluded that religious conflicts or crises arising largely from mistrust, mutual suspicion and intolerance, which resulted from inability to tolerate others who are not of same faith. It also recommended that there is need for effective communication to foster understanding among the various religious groups in Nigeria. The Priest and teachers of the word of God are to be knowledgeable on communication skills as to avoid misconception and mis-presentation of religious information.

Keywords: Religion, Communication, Strategic communication, Tool, Sword, Double-edged sword

INTRODUCTION

Religion has a great role to play in the social, political and economic development of Nigeria. The need to take religion into proper account is even more acutely felt when it is realized that religion is a double-edged sword. It can be a very good tool for fostering national unity and development when properly handled and also it can be a disruptive instrument and viable tool for crisis and war. Nigeria is typical example of one of those countries where religion has wrecked much havoc on the advancement, unity and prosperity of her citizens and the development of the nation as a whole. The history of religious crisis in Nigeria runs like a colossus, Nigeria has witnessed not less than fifteen religious crises in the past years. When these riots occur, many lives are lost; property running into hundreds of millions of naira is destroyed.

The maitatsine religious riots that struck on Kano State was grave and savage, many people were killed in the carnage and the state government paid more than 8 million naira as compensation to various victims of the disturbance. During the post-maitatsine religious conflicts which took place in Ilorin, the kwara State capital on a Palm Sunday, the clash left several people injured and a church burnt. Bauchi town witnessed one of the worst religious crisis unleashed on the country where the destruction was enormous, houses, shops, cars, churches and human lives were lost in great numbers. The issue of Sharia law and Nigeria's controversial membership of the organization of Islamic conference (OIC) have equally proved veritable source of crisis and conflict in Nigeria

In conflicts and crises situation the country cannot witness development and growth. Nigeria has experienced colossal losses politically, economically and socially as a result of these conflicts. Politically the country has tended to divide along religious line, voting is done along religious lines. Appointments are made by government on religious line. Economically the loss is unprintable, home, hotels, and shops factories are wantonly destroyed. Culturally and socially, the unity of Nigeria is in terrible jeopardy, a lot of southern Christians who were living up north are now back to their State, and those who are still remaining live daily in gruesome fear of religious crisis.

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Concept Analysis, Discussion and Explanations

Concept of Religion

Religion has indeed served as an instrument of social harmony in many civilizations, and as well served as a motivation for violence. It also often times plays significant roles in communal harmony, as an instrument for political and other established interest to the detriment of peace and social harmony. Irrespective of its nature, the future of this country lies in the hands of our youths and leaders. Without proper religious tutoring, it might be a difficult task to unleash the godly potentials of these youths for national development in Nigeria. Religion helps man to identify himself as he accepts the religious values and belief system which help him to develop important aspect of his own self-understanding and self-concept.

Religion is and will always be part and parcel of Nigerians, therefore, there is need for effective communication to foster understanding among the various religious groups in Nigeria. It is however important to note that proper understanding of what books and the Holy books contain should be disseminated in order to avoid misunderstanding through effective communication. Priest and teachers of the word of God are to be knowledgeable on communication skills as to avoid misconception and mis-presentation on religious information. It is unfortunate that most of these teachers of the word of God have not had formal training in communication management.

Some of these inexperienced people claimed to be called by God were appointed to manage a congregation in various religious institutions, be it Christians or Muslim are merely based on the rule of intuition without even a smattering knowledge of effective communication and interpersonal relations. They lack the basic skills in communication and knowledge of modern management principles.

Nigeria is a religious country yet, things keep getting worse by the day. Corruption is the order of the day, despite preaching and sermons. It is however also important to note that religion shouldn't be used as a means of acquiring wealth. The future of this country lies in the hands of our youths and leaders. Without proper religious tutoring, it might be a difficult task to achieve. Religion has indeed served as an instrument of social harmony in many civilizations, and had also served as a motivation for violence; hence religion has been seem as a double-edged sword Maregere (2011). Religious bigots in the past have attempted legitimize violence in the name of God, for instance the terrorist attacks often justified as holy warfare. No wonder, religious violence is gaining notoriety as one of the prime security challenges confronting Nigeria, and the world at large, under the veil of 'Cold War'

Reynal-Ouerol (2002), a study conducted in Spain has found that societies that are divided along religious lines are more prone to intense and prolonged conflict than those divided by political, territorial and ethnic differences. Perhaps this reality explains the prime position that religious violence occupies on Nigeria's security pyramid.

Relevance of Religion

Religion serves as a source of comfort in times of crises.

Religion serves as a source of explanation for certain events or situations e.g. death, success and failure.

Religion is a form of social control. It can be used to maintain the state of "no change", that is, the status quo. A good example is the biblical support that women are as weaker sex compared with men.

Religion is a force for social solidarity and dis-unity.

Religion is a provider of support, consolation, and reconsideration. It deals with the divine origin of man, human destiny, and welfare; spiritual and moral supports are given by religions in the face of uncertainties or challenges

Religion provides a study of values and morals. It upholds the dominant values and goals in the society by suppressing the negative values.

Religion provides people a way of understanding their existence and then equips them spiritually, emotionally, intellectually and culturally.

Ways to Curb Religious Crisis

Education: They say education is power. Education is the process by which one acquired knowledge on a particular topic or thing. Close in meaning is learning, the purpose of education is to have positive effect and develop one's behavior and one's self. Education is a key to curbing religious crisis because education expels ignorance which is a major cause of religious crisis. Also education will lead to an increase in number of literate persons in an environment. Literacy is vital in fully understanding religious messages and guidelines.

Effective Communication: Communication is the transition of messages within a party or between parties, through appropriate media, to aid mutual understanding. Communication solves all problems as it gets all conflicting parties on the same page. Communication is key to human existence man cannot live without communication. Effective communication can help curb religious crisis in the sense that there will be understanding within and amongst various religious bodies. A platform for such communication can be a general conference for religious leaders in various regions or across the globe.

Sanctity of Life: all religion should always preach about the sanctity of life. God is not to be portrayed as a God who delights in the death of his creation.

Dialogue: religious groups, indigenes and settlers should always resort to dialogue and mediations if any issue arises between such groups. This will prevent religious crisis and violence.

Raise awareness: Sometimes the fuel for religious crisis is lack of awareness. If the people of various religions are made aware of issues in religion, it will be easier to understand that change needs to take place in order to end or prevent the crisis. The first step in fixing a problem is by identifying the problem one before can proffer solutions.

Job creation: As the saying goes "idleness is the devil's playground", it is often times true. The lack of jobs among the youths makes them susceptible to any endeavor. Idle hands and minds are easy to take advantage of and brain washes them into crimes such as terrorism. Terrorists are made to believe that their task is to kill for their beliefs and they will be rewarded with paradise. With this message they initiate desperate youths into their advocacy for destruction. With more jobs there will be less idle people and less people to initiate into religious sects.

Sanctions: Some crimes such as terrorism, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, physical abuse and fraud are committed under the cloak of religion and religious positions. If sanctions are put in place to punish violators, it will deter a huge lot of offenders from committing similar crime.

Concept of Strategic Communication

Strategic communication is a specialized approach to distributing and receiving information. It involves communicating the best message, through the correct channels, to the right people, at the right time and using feedback from this process to stay focused on institutional or organizational goals. It is multidisciplinary field that draws on literature from a wide array of other subfields, including public relations, marketing, advertising and management. The term "strategic communications" has become popular over the last two decades and involves promoting the brand of an organization, using people to do specific actions, or advocating particular legislation. [strategic communications - Search \(bing.com\)](#)

Role of Communication

Anatsui, (2015) says that the purpose of communication is to establish two-way communication seeking common ground or areas of mutual interest and to establish understanding based on truth, knowledge and adequate information. Basically, the major cause of conflict is misunderstanding. So, to resolve conflict, means to achieve an understanding and work for a mutual interest. The achievement of understanding is largely dependent on information, education and communication. Therefore, communication is at the root of resolving conflict situation. Communication principles recognize that a pro-active approach is the best philosophy for

addressing issues that lead to conflict or crisis. And “the best tool for managing crisis is making sure that crisis does not arise by using the regular strategy of a planned and sustained programme of communication.

Anatsui, (2015). Further opines that “wherever a man exists, communication must take place and the communication must be planned. It must be orderly to be effective. For it helps country, institution or environment to ensure that all concerned (internal and external publics) have a better understanding and enjoy cordial relationships. He further observed that communication serves as an instrument of social interaction; it helps us to understand ourselves; to keep in touch with other people and to understand situations. It is a means by which power is acquired; exercised and sustained, and the medium through which relationships are established, extended and maintained. Communication is the bedrock of all that we do and is the vital element of human existence. Without communication, man cannot have knowledge. Communication which is the process of transferring thoughts, ideas, facts, feelings, etc. from one person to another is very important in human existence, while, without it, life will be meaningless and human interaction would be impossible.

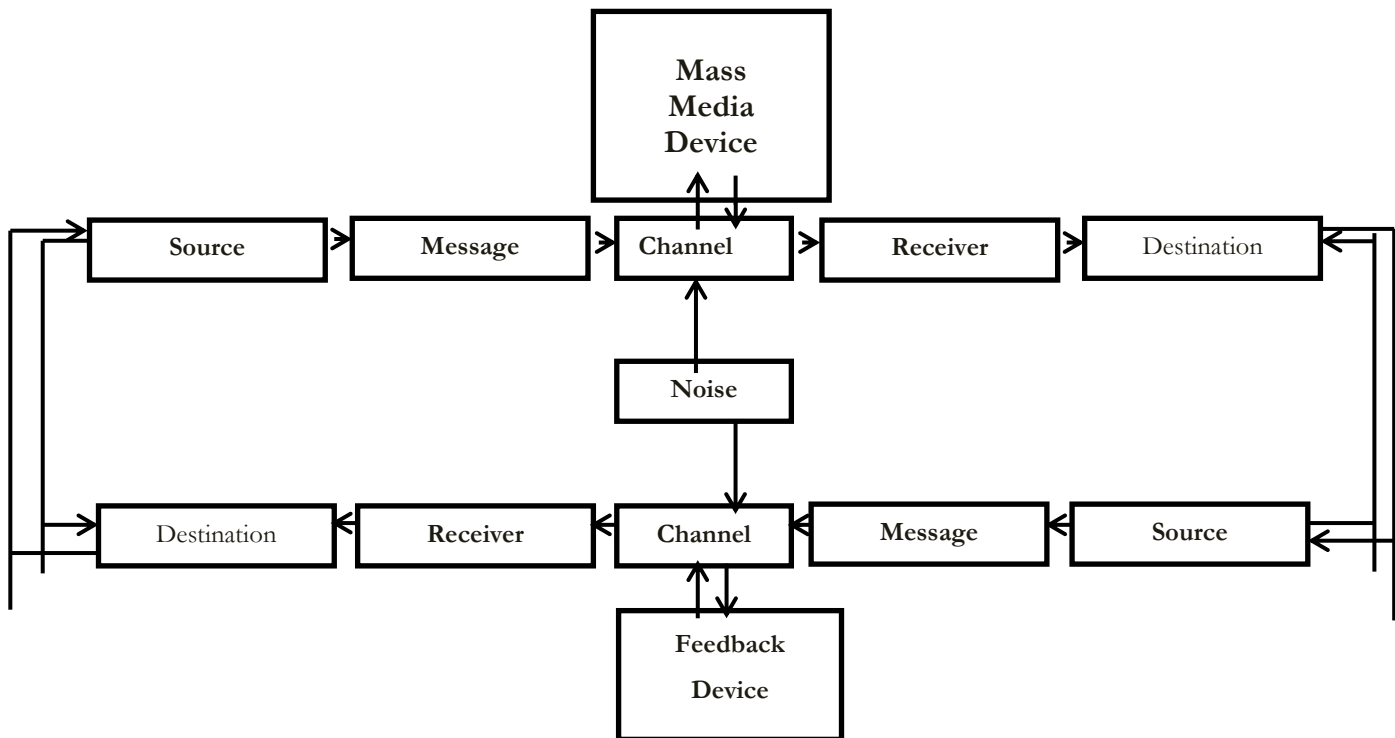


Figure 1. 4. The De Fleur Communication Model

Source: Anaeto, SG. (2008), *Theories of Mass Communication: An Introductory Text*. Abeokuta: Link Productions. p32. Mass communication model]

Anatsui, (2015), defined communication as the process by which an idea is transferred from a source to a receiver with the intention of changing his or her behavior. He further asserts that the message from the source should be well articulated so that the receiver or audience who has expectations concerning an issue of importance can develop consent. The audience affected by the set objective must be identified, analyzed and classified according to their interest. People cannot be carried along without their consent because the support for any given cause must emanate from understanding which marries the articulation of the message with expectation.

It has been established that communication is a complex process. It requires basic components to make it happen. These components are: the source is the originator of the message, the medium through which the message or information is conveyed. The receiver and the feedback is the answer, or the reaction of the receiver to the message. While noise is anything that interferes and causes distortion in the message such as: mis-spelt words, poor reading and listening skills, use of ubiquitous word etc.

To fully understand the nature of communication, the teachers of the word of God must be familiar with the meaning and characteristics of communication, and to be aware that communication involves a source, a channel, a receiver and a feedback mechanism, including noise which could be semantic or channel noise. Communication can be intra-personal, interpersonal, verbal, no-verbal, organizational, group or take the form of mass communication. Organizational communication can take the form of formal and informal communication.

Effective communication is one that produces the desired effect. Communication effectiveness depends on whether a person believes that an idea is good or bad. It has been found desirable that the listener should restate the sender's message to test his comprehension of the total picture, because it enhances the true feedback required for him to retract or attempt a clarification.

The reverse is the case, most of these pastors or Iman and other teachers of the word of God are not educated, not to talk of acquiring communication skills. Some of them claimed to be called by God but they were there for their own 'stomachs' or 'pockets' Their main concern is to mount on pulpit to preach. Whatever they dished out to congregation should be accepted without questions or reactions.

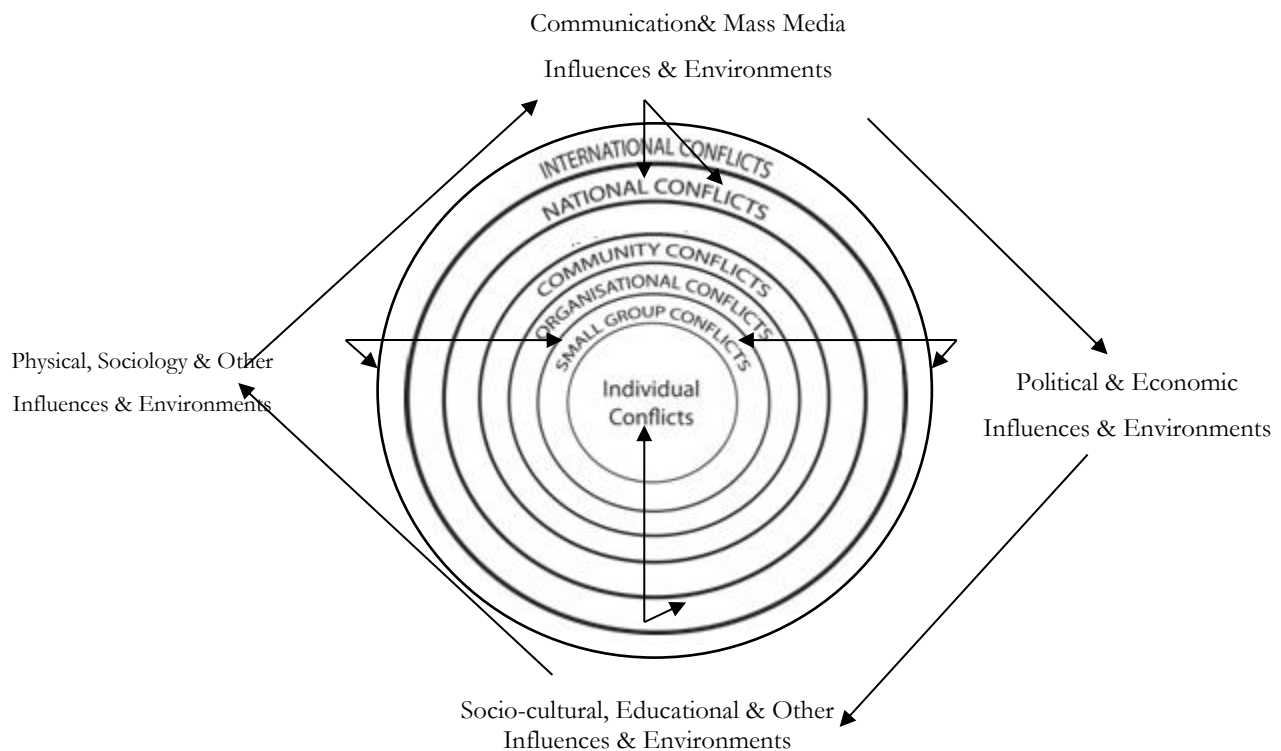


Figure 2. Structural /Six Hubs Wheel Model of Conflict Management

Source: Nwosu, I. E. (2004) *Communication, Media & Conflict Management in Nigeria*, Enugu: Prime Targets Limited Publishers, p16

This model describes the various major forms of conflict in most societies which encapsulates the other minor forms of conflict like intrapersonal, religious, racial, ethnic, institutional conflict etc. The model exposes the various environmental factors which impinge upon these different types of conflicts, which affect their occurrences, outcomes, resolution and their management. It also shows the unique place of the communication and mass media, environment and their influences in the resolution and management of conflicts. It goes further to explain that the root of all these conflicts is the individual or human beings. Therefore, this model serves as a vital part of building block in any effort to initiate a Holistic Theory of Conflict Management, because dispute or conflict at any level needs to be managed properly in human existence.

Anatsui (2015) opines that acceptance of conflict in human society means that individuals involved can compromise and negotiate openly to resolve the conflict. It is only when conflicts are badly handled that we have resentment, aggression or hostile attitudes that define themselves in crisis. In any case, conflicts do not always result in crisis, but it is always strong strikers for positive change. conflict or crisis has both positive and negative impacts. Both of them need proper handling through proactive conflict management approaches and principles

Ten Tips for Effective Communication

The American Management Association came up with Ten Commandments of Effective Communication cited by Nwachukwu, (2007):

Seek to clarify your ideas before communicating

Examine the true purpose of each communication

Consider the total physical and human setting whenever you communicate

Consult with others where appropriate, in planning communications

Be mindful, while you communicate, of the overtones as well as the basic content of your message

Take the opportunity, when it arises, to convey something of help or value to the receiver

Follow up your communication

Communicate for tomorrow as well as today

Be sure your actions support your communication

Lastly, seek not only to be understood but you should also understand –be a good listener

The Role of Communication in Conflict

Anatsui, (2015) opines that communication and conflict have a causal relationship. As a result of communication, conflict might arise, but communication plays a causal preventive and curative role in conflict situations.

Communication as a Casual Factor in Conflict

This explains that conflict can occur during human interaction which is caused by communication between people in an organization. When there is an open discussion, there is the possibility that there will be differences. This shows that communication is a casual factor in conflict.

Communication as a Conflict Preventing Factor

Communication could also help to prevent conflict in an organization and to achieve this, one must foster supportive and participatory communication mood within the organization. If the organization climate is one of trust, confidence and openness, conflict will rarely occur.

Communication as a Conflict Curative Factor

Communication also serves as a curative factor in conflict situations. This means it helps in managing conflict in an organization, and plays an important role in resolving conflict.

Tips for Effective Communicators

Attention always tends to be focused upon words andsentences rather than upon gestures, mannerism, or the way in which one spaces himself or herself. The implication of this to the communicators is that they much are relied on speech which is communication through a learned, organized, system of patterned vocal response which has been so developed and so efficient to everybody in the social interactions or group and public communications that have often thought it to operate to the exclusion of all other modes of communication.

This neglect, by implication, has an adverse effect on the ability and competence to the persuasive communicators

Agwu, (2009) opines that besides, for effective communication in conflicts resolution and crises management, communicators should know what constitutes conflicts and crises in all its' ramifications. For instance, crises and conflicts could be covert or overt in nature just like communication itself. By overt communication, it's mean verbal communication that is highly intended and highly noticeable through the uses of speech and other forms. Covert communication, on the other hand, is the manifest, but least considered aspects of communication, such like the unintended gestures; mannerisms; ways of speaking; spacingEtc. This is how one fails to manage and supplement with overt communication to produce targeted persuasive effects. And it has negative effect on communication just because one tends to only imperfectly aware of only covert communication and thus, it's difficult for one to bring under expressive control. This implies that a great deal of discrepant communication undoubtedly occurs because when one tends to say one overtly (verbally), but say another thing covertly (behaviorally). Proper co-ordination of these two modes of communication, between communicants, is crucial for effective communication.

The ability to coordinate these two modes of communication in crisis between communicants is thus crucial for effective communication. The inability to coordinate these two modes of communication in crisis communication would make it difficult for communicators, as reconciliators or negotiators, to manage crisis effectively and solve conflict situations. The negative consequence of failing to synergize verbal and non-verbal elements in conflict resolutions exemplified by children who when ask a question will say "yes" (overt communication) and then shake their heads to say "no" (covert communication) this, causing what is referred to as communication dissonance.

Besides, covert communication methods are: communication through touch; proxemics, or communication through the handling of space; kinesics, or communication through motion of the body and limbs. Going by the foregoing, the question that arises is: how many of us as individuals and persuasive communicators manage and use these modes of communication in mundane conversations, let alone in crisis communication? To drive this point home, let's look at how covert communication was used effectively in a crisis situation.

The Oklahoma bombing during the former president Bill Clinton' administration, what happened then was a terrorist attack on school children which expectedly created a crisis situation. Immediately after the attack, the president was at the scene wittily applied covert communication principles-weeping profusely 'kinesics'-showing sympathy and concern to victims; closing the gap between himself and the publics "proxemics" as well as touching and caressing the victims-"tactile" Is that not adding human touch which has its own distinct effects on effective communication? And is it not a perfect coordination of both overt and covert communication?

CONCLUSION

From the foregoing, it is evident that the whole history of religious relationships in this country Nigeria has been replete with crises arising largely from mistrust, mutual suspicion and intolerance, which resulted from inability to tolerate others who are not of same faith.

Religion as we all know will always be part and parcel of Nigerians, therefore, there is need for effective communication to foster understanding among the various religious groups in Nigeria. It is however important to note that proper understanding of what books and the Holy books contain should be disseminated in order to avoid misunderstanding through effective communication. Priest and teachers of the word of God are to be knowledgeable on communication skills as to avoid misconception and mis-presentation of religious information. Nigeria has experienced colossal losses politically, economically and socially as a result of these conflicts. But the interrelationship of the faiths of mankind in our present world is of profound importance to the future of man. How great and wonderful would it be to Nigeria belonging to different creeds, everyone committed to one's faith, living under the same roof, praying and reading from same scriptures as if differences of caste and creed have melted away and a new Nigerian community is created.

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