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THE IMPERATIVE OF TRAINING MEDIA PERSONNEL IN RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS REPORTING FOR EFFECTIVE INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE AND RELATIONS IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The means of Communication have been an indispensable organs of the society down the ages. Human speech, gestures, songs, drumming etc. have all been indispensable tools of communication in the different human societies. In the contemporary society, the print and electronic media have been effective organs that link one community to the other. The media practitioners that use/operate the tools of communication are human organs that could help to stabilize/curb religious related crises or violence in the societies through their news reports on religions most especially in contemporary Nigeria. The work guided by the qualitative method of research inquiry established that media practitioners are indispensable organs that could help in ensuring effective interreligious dialogue and relations among men and women of faith in the contemporary Nigeria through their news reports on religious affairs. Hence the imperative of training them in religious affairs reporting for effective interreligious dialogue and relations in Nigeria.

Keywords: Communication, Interreligious Dialogue, Relations, Media, Practitioners.

Introduction

Pope Benedict XVI in his message for the 41st World Communications day on 20th May, 2007 observes that (Benedict XVI:2007:1) "the complex challenges facing education today are often linked to the pervasive influence of the media in our world. As an aspect of the phenomenon of globalization, and facilitated by the rapid development of technology, the media profoundly shape the cultural environment" Furthermore, in the thoughts of the Pope "some claim that the formative influence of the media rivals that of the school, the Church, and maybe even the home. 'Reality, for many, is what the media recognize as real'…" The Holy

Father says further that:

> While affirming the belief that many people involved in social communications want to do what is right, …we must also recognize that those who work in this field confront "special psychological pressures and ethical dilemmas"…which at times see commercial competitiveness compelling communicators to lower standards. Any trend to produce programmes and products - including animated films and video games - which in the name of entertainment exalt violence and portray anti-social behaviour or the trivialization of human sexuality is a perversion, all the more repulsive when these programmes are directed at children and adolescents … Again I appeal to the leaders of the media industry to educate and encourage producers to safeguard the common good, to uphold the truth, to protect individual human dignity and promote respect for the needs of the family.

In line with the thoughts of Pope Benedict XVI, it is an undisputable fact that the media have been an important aspect of the society down the ages. In the contemporary world, many people see the events in the media as the ideal practices and behaviours, and see the information in the media as the only truth. In the same vein, many media men in the past have been sources of unity and some have also been sources of conflicts among people of the different religions in different parts of the world through their news about the world religions. The aim of this work is to point out the need to train media personnel in religious affairs reporting so that the trained persons could help to promote effective mutual interreligious dialogue and relations among Christians, Muslims and adherents of African Traditional Religion in Nigeria through their news. This is because the trained media men would avoid disseminating news in print and electronic media that could cause tensions among religious people.

Understanding Dialogue

Francis Cardinal Arinze in the work "Meeting Other Believers" (Arinze 1997:10) made it clear that dialogue should be understood as a discussion which involves the exchange of ideas between two discussants. It is a two-way communication which is characterized by speaking and listening, a situation whereby the discussants shares their views together in a form of giving and receiving of ideas, where each of the discussants makes equal contributions to the discussions. In this, each of the discussants contributes to the discussions from his own knowledge, ideas and points of views and the eventual consensus among those who are involved in the discussion. Dialogue provide a forum where the other party does not impose his views on the others or to consider his position as the superior position in the discussions. It provides an avenue where the parties are able to discuss and see the strengths and weakness in their different positions.

Arinze pointed out further that listening is an important aspect of dialogue. This is very important because many people find it very difficult to listen to the others. Many want to monopolize the discussion without allowing the others to air their own views. Hence, parties in dialogue should learn to listen when the other in the discussions are talking. Listening to others implies an appreciation of the contributions of the others in the discussions. It is important to say that a partner in dialogue who wants to be listened to and does not want to listen to the others is not a good partner in dialogue. Listening then involves asking questions and clarifications on views presented which could help in a better understanding of the issues under discussion. (Uzoukwu, 2004:144-145) gave a better clarification of dialogue in the following words:

> Dialogue..[is a] reciprocal communication, mutual friendship and respect, as well as joint effort for the sake of shared goals, all in the service of a common search for truth and in the context of religious pluralism, as a complex of human activities, all founded upon respect and esteem for people of different religions…Dialogue does not originate from tactical concerns or self-interest, but is an activity with its own guiding principles, requirements and dignity…Dialogue does not grow out of the opportunism of the tactics of the moment, but arises from reasons which experience and reflection, and even the difficulties themselves, have deepened. Dialogue …is a path worthy of the human person. It is a means by which people discover one another and discover the hopes and peaceful aspirations that too

> often lie hidden in their hearts. It is a central and essential element of ethical thinking among people, and an indispensable tool for the recognition of the truth…The path of dialogue makes it possible to achieve the peace so long for, which is the foundation of fruitful coexistence among people…it excludes all kinds of violence, and helps to build a more human future with the cooperation of all, thus avoiding a radical impoverishment of society.

Interreligious Dialogue

Interreligious Dialogue could be explained in the thoughts of (Bidmos, 2006:5) that: "Dialogue …is qualified by religious and prefixed by inter. While the adjective religious marks out our interest; the prefix further describes our area of operation. Inter connotes interaction with an external body as against intra which connotes within. An event that takes place between two different families is prefixed with inter and when the same event takes place among family members of the same family the appropriate prefix is intra" In the same vein, in the writings of (Poupard,2027:24)

> Interreligious dialogue is above all a matter of building trust and creating relationships across religious boundaries. Interreligious relationships presuppose our fundamental relationships with God, self, others and nature as I mentioned above. I would like to imagine that forging interreligious understanding is a life-long pilgrimage of reconciliation. Through regular meetings we help to nurture this common undertaking. Unlike a physical journey, this pilgrimage of interreligious dialogue, a pilgrimage into the heart that has no end. It is a lifelong journey in mutual trust and friendship. On this journey we grow in respect for each other and in understanding of each other's religious traditions…
>
> Interreligious dialogue is a means and not an end. We know from experience that interreligious dialogue is not reserved only for the elite; every believer is encouraged to engage in it. "Religious communities have great potential to help heal wounds, to build bridges, and to band together against extremists who would manipulate religion to promote hatred and violence.

It is good to make it clear that Interreligious Dialogue is different from the study of the religions with a view to comparing them in a study known as Comparative Religion. Interreligious Dialogue should not also be understood as the debates among followers of the different religions with a view to pointing out the supremacy of one religion over the other one. Interreligious Dialogue is between the adherents of the different World Religions and this is different from Ecumenical Dialogue which is the dialogue between the different Christians Churches in the different parts of the World. With this background, in interreligious dialogue, it is good to point out the different forms of interreligious Dialogue.

Various forms of Dialogue

Dialogue of Life

In this dialogue of life, (Gioia, 2006:1171) "people strive to live in an open and neighbourly spirit, sharing their joys and sorrows, their human problems and preoccupations." The dialogue involves family members and close associates who are followers of African Traditional Religion, Islam and Christianity who strive to live like good and caring neighbours as they participate in each other's sad and joyous moments. In this dialogue of life, Christians,

Muslims and adherents of African Traditional Religion live together and share the same toilets, bathrooms, kitchen, plant crops on the same plots of lands and live together as members of the three religions and as family members or neighbours without religious discriminations.

Dialogue of Action

In the dialogue of action (Gioia, 2006:1171) "Christians and others collaborate for the integral development and liberation of people." This involves for example Christians, Muslims and adherents of African Traditional Religion who engage in family solidarity and joint exercises which include joint assistance to a relation for the cultivation of a new farm, the erection of a new building, or roofing of a new building, provision of seedlings to a needy neighbour or financial assistance. These activities are jointly carried out such that a needy relation could be assisted. Members of the three religions could also belong to the same football clubs, Social Clubs for the promotion of humanitarian needs or joint action for the good and progress of their different communities, villages, towns and cities. The joint actions are carried out without any religious discriminations.

Dialogue of Theological Exchange

In this dialogue, (Gioia, 2006:1171) "specialists seek to deepen their understanding of their respective religious heritages and to appreciate each other's spiritual values." Here, the followers of the religions learn the knowledge of each other's faith. Dialogue of theological exchange could take place in a School forum where students are to discuss for example fasting in Islam, Christianity and African Traditional Religion. In this case, a Muslim student leans informally the understanding of fasting in Christianity and African Traditional Religion. A Christian student also learns about fasting informally in Islam and African Traditional Religion. The students who profess faith in African Traditional Religion also learns about fasting in Christianity and Islam. Dialogue of theological exchange could also be experienced in a situation where two or three friends, members of the family who are Christians, Muslims and adherents of African Traditional Religion gathered to discuss and share views on the contents of their different faiths.

Dialogue of religious Experience

In the dialogue of religious experience, (Gioia, 2006:1171) "persons, rooted in their own religious traditions …share their spiritual riches, for instance, with regard to prayer and contemplation, faith and ways of searching for God or the Absolute." The dialogue of religious experience takes place whereby members of a faith participate informally in the worship of another religion different from one's own religion. The people could converge for prayers on various intentions, such as peace of the community, rainfall on their crops, rich and adequate harvests, and success in their endeavours amongst other favourable intentions. People of faith experienced dialogue of religious experience when they attend the 'worship sessions' of the other religions. This could be understood in occasions whereby a Muslim comes to a Christian Church to attend the funeral service of the parent of a friend or the wedding ceremony of a neighbour in a Christian Church. A Christian who joins a prayer session with a Muslim neighbour also present an occasion of dialogue of religious experience. It is good to point out that in the dialogue of religious experience, (Omojola: 2026:88) points out that "the three religions should have their own proper places of worship and the members of each religion should also respect the period and time of worship of the members of the other religions/" In

all, (Omojola: 2025:147) made it clear that the "lessons on the positive values of the dialogue of life, action, religious experience and theological exchange that could help to sustain the religious relations in the different parts of the world should be imparted on the young minds."

The Works of Media Practitioners in Promoting Dialogue

With the presentation of the understanding of dialogue and interreligious dialogue, it could be established that the works of the media practitioners are imperative in achieving an effective interreligious Dialogue and relations among Christians, Muslims and adherents of African Traditional Religion in Nigeria. This is because some media reports made by Christians on Muslims when it is not properly reported could give the impressions that the Christians are portraying Islam in a bad image. In the same vein, Christians will view News reports on Christian activities by Muslims as an attack on the Christian Religion in Nigeria. In some of these cases, the reporters may not be well informed about the religions that he/she is writing about. In a better treatment of this topic, it is good to present a media report in Nigeria which caused a big problem between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria because the media reporter was not well trained in religious affairs reporting. (Bidmos: 2006:52) explains the contents of the News report in the following words:

> ...during the Second Republic in Nigeria (1979-83) a press report stormed the whole nation like thunderbolt. It was alleged that the Muslims had been given ten million Naira (N10, 000,000) by the then Federal Government, to build a central mosque in Abuja, the new Federal Capital. The gesture was considered a favour to the Muslims and contempt for, or neglect of, the Christians. The tension created by the report was better imagined. Even the prompt intervention of the government to explain the matter could not help the situation. The truth of the matter, as given by a prominent member of the ruling party who incidentally was a Christian, was that both Muslim and Christian groups were given ten million naira each to build a mosque and a church respectively in the new Federal Capital. The circumstances that led to the speculation arose when the Muslims started their mosque project in earnest. They had mobilized their resources to contribute more money sufficient to build a mosque to their taste. About the Christian Church, information gathered indicates that the Christians had to hold prolonged deliberations to resolve some nagging problems. First, would it be possible for them to build a united church where all denominations could worship? Secondly, in case the ten million naira given to them had to be shared, among how many denominations? These and related questions could not be resolved easily and no project could take off. The Muslims were not faced with any problem of the nature.

In the scenario presented above, it is clear that the religious tension created was as a result of the fact that the reporter(s) did not get a better understanding of the issue at hand. In a similar situation, Archbishop Ignatius Kaigama, the current Catholic Archbishop of Abuja Archdiocese commenting on the religious crises in places like Bauchi town, Kotangora, Tafawa Balewa in Bauchi State, Kaduna, Maiduguri and Jos in Plateau State down the years (Kaigama, 2009:23) states that:

> Most of these crises have largely received unfair and biased media coverage that has always aggravated the crises in the country. International media houses like the V.O.A, Deulche Welle, French Overseas Service, and BBC among others, in collaboration with their Hausa/Fulani employees broadcast biased news in the

> Hausa service to the disadvantage of Christians who do not have the same access to these media houses. Fresh in our memories is the recent political crises in Jos which degenerated to a religious conflict.

M.A. Bidmos, in the work *"Constraints Against Inter-Faith Co-existence in Nigeria. Identification and Resolution".* Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC), Inter-faith Seminar, Towards Religious Harmony and Understanding for the Promotion of Peace, Unity and National Development, Ekiti State Chapter, Ado Ekiti, 2nd March, 2007, (Bidmos: 2007:51-52) says that

> Concerning religious affairs in Nigeria, it may be necessary to redefine the role of the Mass media practitioners, particularly in terms of what events they will find newsworthy. Experience has shown that the Mass media reports, news analysis and features are capable of playing a positive or negative role in the relationship between Muslims and Christians depending on the intention and orientation of the journalist concerned. More often than not, the reactions of the Muslims to Christian's actions or vice-versa are determined by the Mass media reports….

The Formation of News Experts in Reporting of Religious Affairs

The formation of News experts in reporting of religious affairs is very crucial in promoting Interreligious Dialogue and relations among the different World Religions most especially in Nigeria. The point here is that, the media Practitioners who will be reporting religious issues in Nigeria should have basic background knowledge of religions or religious issues. This will help the individuals to know how to present their reports in a way that it will help to promote effective dialogue between men of faiths in Nigeria. (Ajijola, 1992:11) points out that:

> Through the Nigerian Interreligious Dialogue Council (NIREC), the adherents of the two dominant religions in Nigeria could study their respective revealed books to know the best way to achieve peace in the land. Hence, …all the causes of communal religious tension which is now escalating into violence and making many of the Muslims and Christians, particularly in the northern State isolated and fearful of their future must be adequately discussed if they are to be diffused. Efforts should be made in such discussions to find the causes and effects of inter-communal violence and viable solution found. The findings of such a panel and each participant's perspectives should be broadcast on radio and television, and published in Newspapers.

In this regard, it is important that the adherents and leaders of the three religions in Nigeria should make it a priority to train their members who are media practitioners and who are interested in reporting religious affairs in the tenets of their faiths and basic knowledge of the other two religions in Nigeria so that they could be in a better way to project the ideal image of their different religions to the World. In this understanding (Bidmos, 2006: 113-114) suggests that:

> The nature of discussion demands that the dialoguers are sufficiently informed in theology, philosophy of Religion, modern languages of theology such as the ones that have currency in a particular locality. Also needed is a specialized knowledge of Religion –related matters to allow for a free flowing discussion among dialoguers. Every participant must be adequately conversant with the comparative study of religion. With special reference to Islam and Christianity, for instance, the participants must be aware of the common denominators

> between Islam and Christianity as well as the points of divergence. The participants should be capable of making easy reference to the Qur'an and the Bible the two holy scriptures of Islam and Christianity. To cover with confidence, the areas highlighted above, a first University degree will be the basis or minimum qualification while a higher degree will be an asset.

The points of emphasis at this point is that these trained media experts would be in a better way to correct anyone that portrays the religions in wrong ways. These individuals should be chosen from media men who are living and convinced member of the different religions. (Fitzgerald,2001:245) presents the fact that:

> In a section dealing with obstacles to interreligious dialogue, the document Dialogue and Proclamation lists as one of these 'insufficient knowledge and understanding of the beliefs and practices of other religions, leading to a lack of appreciation for their significance and at times even to misrepresentation.' It is thus obvious that such an obstacle can only be overcome by acquiring the necessary knowledge and, paraphrasing St Paul, we might say, but it will never be acquired unless it is provided (cf., Rom 10:14) Hence the role of the universities and higher institutes of learning to provide sound instruction on the different religions of the world….
>
> In today's religiously pluralistic world, where Christians are bound to meet the followers of other religions, concern for an adequate knowledge of these religions cannot be confined to so-called 'mission countries'. Those who are training ministers in the Church, whether they be clerics or lay people, and wherever they may be destined to work, will need at least to be initiated into the beliefs and practices of other religions… These experts have to be formed, and that is where the university comes in… [thus] there would be the need to provide well-structured courses on different religions.

Positive Presentation of the Biblical and Qur'anic Provisions

The Holy Bible is the book that guides the Christians in their Christian living. The Holy Qur'an also guides the activities of the Muslims in their faith. It is good that the media practitioners are encouraged to explain the contents of the Holy Qur'an in a way that it will not results in violence among the adherents of the religions. The explanation and interpretation of the contents of the religious books especially in those areas that concerns those who do not belong to the religion should be done in a way that peaceful co-existence of the people of people of faiths will be sustained. (Musa,2003:21) presents an ugly scenario in Nigeria which is as a result of the interpretation of a religious text in the following words:

> From April 22-26, 1991 ...a religious fracas engulfed Bauchi State when the tension, which had been building up between Christians and Muslims in the State exploded. The riot was triggered off by a controversy between Christians and Muslims over who could use a public abattoir for slaughtering animals. Moslems claimed that only the meat slaughtered by them was clean enough for public consumption [according to the provisions of their Qur'an]. Christians on the other hand, are infidels and should not be allowed to contaminate meat meant for public by slaughtering animals. This act was still festering when on April 20, 1991 a Muslim boy bought roasted meat (suya) from a Christian boy and refused to pay

> after he had been accosted by another fanatical Muslim who told him that he was eating a contaminated meat because it was slaughtered by a Christian. When the little boy who hawked the suya insisted that the Muslim should pay his money he was beaten up. The scuffle that followed immediately gave vent to the anger that had been bottled up over the abattoir issue. By the time the riot was quelled, it had spread from Tafawa Balewa Local Government where it started to Darazo Ningi and Toro Local Government and Bauchi town. Hundreds of lives including four policemen were killed in the riot. In Bauchi town 28 Christian Churches and many houses and other property belonging to Christians were burnt.

Reporting the Positive Contributions of Religion

In the same vein, one important area by which the media practitioners could be effective is that the tool of the media should be directed at redefining the place of religion in the contemporary society. One greatest problem that could be perceived today is that contemporary media had often engaged in negative portrayal of religion(s) in a way that religions are no longer attractive to contemporary societies. In this case the positive values of religion are no longer emphasized while the negative behaviours of religious people are exaggerated to the detriment of the religious values. The contributions of religions in the past, present and future are relegated while the few lapses in the religion people are celebrated on daily basis. The contemporary man has been mentally colonized to see little positive values in religions through the secularized media. Today, there is the need for mental decolonization of the contemporary society so that modern man can be helped to appreciate the positive aspects of the different religions better. The contributions of religion in the past, present and future should be exhumed and celebrated on daily basis.

Media Practitioners are to use the Proper Titles for Religious Leaders in their News Reports

It is of great importance to point out the need for media practitioners to learn to use and address religious men by the titles that they are accorded in their different religions/denominations. It is also important to emphasize that a non-recognition of the correct titles of religious leaders could cause some tensions and mis-understanding. In a better treatment of this topic, it is good to cite an instance where Bishop Hassan Kukah, the Catholic Bishop of Sokoto was wrongly addressed as “Reverend Father,” a title for Catholic Clerics that are not Bishops in the Catholic Church. Many Catholics in the country rose to condemn the wrong use of Reverend Father for the Bishop and called on the media outfits to retract the news piece and address him with the right title. One of the online reactions to the news is quoted as follows; “Most Reverend Matthew Hassan Kukah is the correct and official title for the Catholic Bishop of the Diocese of Sokoto. Referring to him as "Father" or "Reverend Father" is inaccurate and considered an ecclesiastical demotion by the Catholic faithful, as his elevated rank is Bishop.”

The position here is clear and calls for a proper study before a Christian religious leader is addressed. It is of importance to point out that the leaders of these different Christian denominations have their different titles and designations. However, the religious leaders will be pleased that they should be known and addressed with the different titles with which they have been ordained or appointed into the different offices in the Churches. Hence, if for example a Muslim news reporter decides to address a Male religious leader as ‘Mr.’ without

the recognition of the titles, it could be understood as an attack on the Christian denominations or the religious leader involved. This will surely lead to a setback in interreligious relations. In Islam, there are also different titles for the religious leaders in the religion the different leaders in Islam will also frown at a situation where their titles are overlooked when addressing them.

Education on the Constitutional Provisions on Freedom of Religion

In order to ensure effective interreligious relations, the media Practitioners are to inform and educate the populace on the constitutional provisions on the rights of every individual among the populace on the choice of religion. The populace is to understand that the natural law confers some rights on every human being. Hence, freedom to choose and practice the religion of one choice is part of the natural law. The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 as amended, section 38, subsection 1 contains the fundamental human rights of Nigerians. The Constitutions says that "every person shall be entitled to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom (either alone or in community with others, and in public or in private) to manifest and propagate his religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice and observance" The education and information of the constitutionally provisions on the fundamental rights of the every individual from the media practitioners will help many to know of their rights to choose and be able to make informed decisions of their choice of religions. It will also help many to bear in mind that they can embrace a religion of their choice without compulsion to embrace another religion.

Conclusion

It has been justified that Interreligious Dialogue is an important area of the pluralistic society since the different organs of the society needs to ensure that there is mutual co-existence between people of faiths in the world, most especially between Christians, Muslims and adherents of African Traditional Religion in Nigeria. However, the media practitioners who are the human organs controlling the means of Mass Communication are to ensure that they are properly trained in religious related matters so that they could educate, inform and entertain the public in a way that the relations among people of faith in Nigeria could be sustained through Interreligious Dialogue.

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