



INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE IN 21ST CENTURY AFRICA: THE ROLE OF DIGITAL COMMUNICATION

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Abstract

Religious pluralism has been a defining feature of African societies, particularly within African traditional religions, where multiple deities were worshipped without conflict. Before Western incursion, this pluralism did not necessitate interreligious dialogue, as mutual respect among different faiths fostered peaceful coexistence. However, the arrival of Christianity and Islam in Africa, particularly in Nigeria, has intensified the need for interfaith dialogue. The tension between these two religions has often led to conflict, violence, and the politicization of religion. In response, various efforts have been made to promote peaceful cohabitation through dialogue, though these initiatives have faced significant challenges. In the 21st century, the multiplicity of faiths and the rise of digital communication tools offer new opportunities for fostering effective interreligious dialogue. This paper seeks to explore these possibilities, focusing on two central questions: What does interreligious dialogue look like in the 21st century? How can digital communication tools facilitate more effective dialogue between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria? Through critical descriptive analysis, this study draws on secondary sources—such as online journals, books, and scholarly articles—to argue that digital communication tools provide a promising avenue for promoting constructive engagement and understanding between Nigeria's major religious communities.

Keywords: Interreligious Dialogue, Religious Pluralism, Digital Communication.

Introduction

Religion plays a central role in the life of an African, permeating both political and social spheres, thus shaping their entire worldview. Before the advent of Western influences, Africans had established systems of worship, though these were diverse and not unified under a single set of beliefs or a common supernatural entity. While broadly categorized as an African traditional religion, the diversity within this religious framework is significant. For example, among the Yoruba people of Nigeria, different deities such as Ogun and Ifa were venerated by various groups. Despite this plurality of faiths, interreligious dialogue was never considered necessary in pre-colonial African societies. This absence of conflict arose from a mutual respect for differing beliefs, where each religious sect functioned independently without interference. Moreover, cooperation across different religious groups in communal and traditional responsibilities was not uncommon, reflecting a harmonious co-existence. As Adiele (1993, as cited in Adetunbi, 2021)



aptly observes, this peaceful pluralism allowed for an organized and functional social structure despite religious differences. In his words:

Before the arrival of foreign religions (Islam and Christianity), Nigerians were practising their indigenous faith. At that period, Nigerians witnessed relative peace despite the various sects and denominations within the religion. For instance, among the Yoruba people of western Nigeria, there were sects such as Ifa worshipers, Ogun worshipers, Sango worshipers, Orunmila worshipers, etc. Among the Igbo of eastern Nigeria, there were also sects such as worshipers of Ala, Amadioha, Mmuo, etc. In the northern part, among the Hausa people, there were sects such as the bori cult and other traditional worshipers. As there was little or no internal rift to contend with, the adherents and the entire populace then, enjoyed religious harmony (p.25).

Expanding on this point, Adetunbi (2021) highlights that the mutual understanding among diverse religious groups in pre-colonial Nigeria fostered a harmonious interaction across different faiths. A notable example of this is interfaith marriage, which was common and unproblematic despite religious differences. For instance, families of Sango worshippers could marry into families of Ogun worshippers, and the religious difference did not present a barrier. Furthermore, people of various faiths, regardless of their religious backgrounds, would come together to celebrate with newlyweds and their families, signifying a broader communal acceptance. This spirit of religious humanism extended beyond marriage. Festivals, whether annual town-wide celebrations or specific to one religious sect, provided an opportunity for community-wide participation. During annual festivals, all sons and daughters of the town, irrespective of their religious affiliations, would attend in full ceremonial attire to honour the king, who served as the central figure in these celebrations. The king would offer prayers for his subjects, both local and in the diaspora, and engage in discussions aimed at advancing the town's development. These festivals also functioned as a forum for conflict resolution, wherein disputes among community members were settled, followed by communal feasting. These practices reinforced a sense of unity and strengthened bonds of brotherhood, further enhancing the social fabric of pre-colonial African societies. Adetunbi (2021) argues that it was this religious tolerance that underpinned the harmony experienced in African communities dominated by indigenous religious practices during the pre-colonial era.

However, this peaceful coexistence was disrupted with the arrival of Christianity and Islam, which were introduced through Western incursion. These foreign religions brought with them a sense of religious superiority, viewing African traditional religions as inferior and in need of eradication. Despite both Christianity and Islam advocating love, they were embroiled in constant rivalry, each vying for religious supremacy. This friction manifested in the pejorative terms used to describe one another's beliefs. For example, African traditional religions were often dismissed as "paganism," "idolatry," "fetishism," or "ancestor worship" by both Christians and Muslims. Similarly, Christians referred to Muslims as "unbelievers," while Muslims labelled Christians as "Kafir" (infidels). This derogatory language and the accompanying religious intolerance have severely impacted the religious landscape and social interactions in contemporary Nigeria, creating deep divisions (Adetunbi, 2021).



Religious conflicts have become a deeply ingrained issue in Nigeria, with frequent clashes between the two major religions—Christianity and Islam—often stemming from perceived slights or doctrinal disagreements. These tensions have resulted in violent confrontations, leading to significant loss of life and widespread property damage. Tragically, religious freedom in certain parts of the country remains restricted, with Christians, for example, unable to freely preach in the northern regions. A poignant illustration of this hostility is the insurgency of Boko Haram, an Islamic militant group committed to the Islamization of northern Nigeria, which has carried out numerous violent attacks, particularly targeting non-Muslims. Moreover, the recurrent killings in Maiduguri, Sokoto, Kano, and Southern Kaduna, all under the guise of religious motivations, further highlight the volatile nature of religious relations in the country (Adetunbi, 2021). Adding complexity to this situation is the politicization of religious intolerance. Politicians have often exploited the already fragile religious and tribal divides to advance their political ambitions, worsening the overall instability. Despite these challenges, ongoing efforts have been made to foster dialogue between Christian and Muslim communities to promote peaceful coexistence. Achieving this, however, has proven extremely difficult.

In the 21st century, the rapid rise of digital communication presents new opportunities for improving interreligious dialogue. Both Christianity and Islam have integrated digital tools into their efforts to spread their respective messages, utilizing these platforms for proselytization and evangelization. This paper argues that digital communication offers a promising pathway for more effective and inclusive interreligious dialogue in Nigeria. Accordingly, the study poses two central questions: What does interreligious dialogue look like in the 21st century? How can digital communication facilitate improved interreligious dialogue in Nigeria? Using a critical descriptive approach and drawing on secondary sources such as online journals, books, and articles, this paper demonstrates that digital tools hold significant potential for fostering more constructive dialogue between the country's two dominant religions—Christianity and Islam.

A historical overview of religion in Nigeria: Christian and Islamic Religion

Islam entered Nigeria through the northern borders, predating Christianity by several centuries. Metuh (1985) contends that Islam arrived in Northern Nigeria approximately five to six hundred years before Christianity, with Enwerem (1995) placing its arrival between 1000 A.D. and 1100 A.D. Initially, Islam made contact with Bornu in northeastern Nigeria, eventually spreading across the Hausa States by the 14th and 15th centuries (Trimingham 1962). Ekeopara (1996) suggests that early Islamic propagation primarily targeted urban populations, particularly the upper class, for economic, social, and political benefits. However, it was only during Uthman Dan Fodio's jihad that Islam truly permeated Northern Nigeria, spreading forcefully across the region. According to Ekeopara (1996), Islam in Northern Nigeria took on a more aggressive form around 1750 A.D., becoming intolerant of traditional religious systems. By this time, the Jihadists sought to eliminate all remnants of indigenous customs intertwined with Islam, using military might rather than peaceful conversion to subdue non-believers. Historical records indicate that following their military conquests, the Jihadists swiftly established Islamic law and governance to secure their dominance.



In contrast, Christianity's introduction to Nigeria unfolded in three distinct phases. The first phase traces Christianity's arrival to the 15th century, with Benin and Warri in the Niger Delta emerging as early centers of missionary activity. The Portuguese Roman Catholic Mission is recognized as the first Christian missionary presence in Nigeria, arriving in Benin in 1485 at the invitation of Oba Uzolua and later, in 1514, by Oba Esigie, both kings of Benin (Agha 1999; Tasie 1978). Njoku (1980) confirms that Roman Catholics were the earliest Christian missionaries to Southern Nigeria. By 1487, the Portuguese, having already established trade relations with Benin, sent missionaries to Benin City and Old Warri. However, despite initial enthusiasm, these early missions struggled under harsh conditions. Over time, the missions to Benin and Warri faltered due to the limited number of missionaries and the waning interest of the Obas and their people. Historical accounts suggest that the early attempts to introduce Christianity in Benin were unsuccessful largely because "the Kings of Benin City remained strongly attached to their indigenous religion" (Baur 2009, p.75). This juxtaposition of Islam's militant spread through the North and Christianity's more tentative introduction through southern Nigeria highlights the complex religious dynamics that would later shape Nigeria's cultural and political landscape.

The second phase of Christian missionary activity in Nigeria, during the 16th century under Oba Esigie, experienced limited success. Oba Esigie and many of his chiefs were baptized, practising Christianity in a manner that suited their cultural and personal preferences. Churches were built, but the Christian influence remained largely confined to the royal court. Although details regarding the extent of the Benin mission's spread are sparse, historical evidence such as crucifixes, statues, and Catholic emblems discovered within the royal court years later indicate some degree of success. Njoku (1980) reports that when the British arrived in Warri in 1897, they encountered people adorned with rosary beads resembling those of Roman Catholics. Additionally, the Olu of the Jekris (Itshekris) wore a silver crown with a cross, a gift from the King of Portugal, along with garments and chaplets associated with Catholicism. Christianity's second phase of expansion in Nigeria is marked by its penetration through Western Nigeria. By 1841, Lagos had developed into a notorious slave market under King Kosoko, who spearheaded the trade (Dike 1957). Following Kosoko's deportation by the British, missionary efforts intensified in Yoruba land. Among the earliest missions in the region were the Wesleyan Methodist Mission and the Church Missionary Society (C.M.S.), represented by Reverend Thomas Birch Freeman and Catechist Henry Townsend in 1842. One of the most notable converts was Samuel Ajayi Crowther, a Yoruba man who, after being freed from slavery in Sierra Leone, became instrumental in spreading the gospel among his people (Oduyoye 1969).

The Christian mission to Calabar, in southeastern Nigeria, began in 1846, with the Scottish Presbyterian Mission leading the evangelization of the Efik people. Essien Ukpabio, a native of Creek Town, became the first convert and was baptized by Reverend Hope Waddle, the pioneer missionary to Calabar, who had previously worked in Ethiopia. Mary Slessor and other missionaries later joined the efforts to spread Christianity in the region. King Eyo Honesty of Creek Town played a key role in assisting the missionaries in planting Christianity in Calabar, which ultimately spread to other parts of the former Eastern Region (Ajayi 1965; Kalu 1978). According to Ajah (1994), Christianity reached Eastern Nigeria primarily through two



routes: one from Western Nigeria via the Lagos area, and the other through seaports in the eastern part of the country. The Calabar mission became a crucial hub for missionary activities that eventually extended Christianity's reach throughout southeastern Nigeria. This phase of Christian expansion laid the groundwork for the establishment of Christianity in Eastern Nigeria, contributing significantly to the region's religious transformation.

The third phase of Christian missionary efforts in Nigeria began in 1885 with the arrival of Irish missionaries in Onitsha, located on the Lower Niger. Interestingly, this mission was initially intended for Lokoja, as the missionaries' primary goal was to establish the Upper Niger Mission. This shift in destination is often considered providential, as it allowed the missionaries to establish a strong presence in Onitsha instead. The missionary team was led by Father Joseph Lutz, a French Alsatian priest who had previously served for over ten years in Sierra Leone. His experience and dynamic approach to evangelism made him an ideal leader for the mission. Accompanying him were Father Johan Horne, a newly ordained priest, and two brothers, Hermas and Jean-Gotto, both of whom had previously worked at the St. Coeur de Marie station (Metuh & Ejizu, 1985:12). This phase marked a critical period in the spread of Christianity in southeastern Nigeria, especially in the Igbo-speaking regions, where the missionaries encountered a vibrant indigenous culture and traditional religious practices. The mission's success in Onitsha laid the foundation for future missionary activities and the eventual expansion of Christianity throughout the Lower Niger region.

An Overview of Religious Intolerance in Nigeria

Religious intolerance in Nigeria can be traced to the legacy left behind by foreign missionaries (Nelson & Babale, 2022). The introduction of Islam and Christianity into the country disrupted the previously harmonious socio-religious environment of Nigerian communities, fostering an atmosphere of intolerance and antagonism (Atoi 2016; Atoi 2019). As Uzoma (2004) explains, the arrival of these two religions led to religious hostility and social unrest, a significant shift from the previously peaceful coexistence. This conflict began when foreign missionaries described African religious traditions in pejorative terms, using labels like "primitive," "savage," "paganism," "heathenism," "idolatry," and "fetishism." This derogatory stance encouraged adherents of Christianity and Islam to demonize African religious worldviews, resulting in the destruction of sacred vessels, vestments, altars, and shrines associated with African Indigenous Religion (Atoi 2019; Atoi et al 2019). Reflecting on this development, Idowu (1973) argues that it is both wrong and offensive to refer to any living religion in such negative terms. Similarly, Ubrurhe (2000) observes that Christians and Muslims have historically shown disdain for African traditional religious beliefs and practices, often leading to the destruction of sacred symbols and images associated with those beliefs. This religious contempt not only harmed traditional African religions but also set the stage for the ongoing religious conflicts and tensions that persist in Nigeria today.

Religious intolerance in Nigeria occurs not only between different religious traditions but also within the same faith tradition, between sects or denominations (Nelson & Babale, 2022). Ubrurhe (2000) highlights how Christian denominations have often criticized each other, using songs, indoctrination, and emphasis on doctrinal weaknesses to undermine their counterparts. For



instance, in Urhobo land, Catholicism, which arrived later, condemned the doctrines of the Anglican Church. Similarly, the rivalry between Catholic and Protestant missionaries among the Igbo between 1857 and 1914 had a negative impact, fostering religious intolerance. This intra-faith tension worsened with the rise of neo-Pentecostalism (Nelson & Babale, 2022), which is characterized by its radical approach to Christian doctrine. Neo-Pentecostal churches tend to be more militant in their evangelistic activities, adopting an aggressive proselytizing style and a highly intolerant attitude towards those they consider “unbelievers.”

Islamic sects have also exhibited internal intolerance. Various fundamentalist groups within Islam have often been hostile to other Islamic factions, straining relationships between different groups (Uzoma 2004). One significant example is the Maitatsine movement, which emerged in the 1980s under the leadership of Muhammadu Marwa. Marwa, a radical Qur’anic teacher, rejected many mainstream Islamic beliefs and practices. His sect waged violent campaigns against other Muslims, particularly in Kano, targeting those they considered non-believers (Ubrurhe 2000). Marwa’s fundamentalist views extended beyond religion, as he vehemently opposed modernization and Western influences. He criticized technologies such as radios, wristwatches, and automobiles, considering those who used these items as “hell-bound pagans” (Falola 1998). This pattern of intra-religious intolerance has contributed significantly to Nigeria’s broader landscape of religious conflict, fueling both inter- and intra-faith antagonisms.

Religious intolerance in Nigeria has also affected its tertiary institutions, particularly since the 1980s (Nelson & Babale, 2022). One notable example is the violent clash between Christian and Muslim students in Kafanchan, Kaduna State, which erupted on 6th March 1987. What began as a minor misunderstanding between the two groups of students at the College of Education escalated into large-scale violence, resulting in the destruction of lives and property. This conflict soon spread beyond the institution, affecting other parts of the country. According to Kukah (1993), the immediate cause of the violence was allegedly a Christian preacher’s use of Qur’anic verses to delegitimize Islam while claiming that salvation could only be found in Christianity (Gofwen, 2004).

Another significant cause of religious intolerance has been the issue of sharia law. Since its reintroduction in 1999 by some northern state governors, beginning with Zamfara State, there has been a sharp increase in religious tensions. The implementation of sharia law, which regulates the social conduct of citizens, has been a major source of conflict, particularly in northern Nigeria where there are both Muslim and non-Muslim populations. Gellar (2007) notes that the imposition of sharia law on all citizens in these regions has sparked inter-religious strife. In more recent times, the rise of the Boko Haram sect has become the most prominent and dangerous manifestation of religious intolerance in Nigeria. This Islamic fundamentalist group has sought to impose sharia law across the country and has a particular disdain for secular education and government establishments (Onuoha, 2010). Boko Haram’s violent actions, which target both Muslims and non-Muslims, threaten the unity of the Nigerian state (Alkali et al., 2012). Their campaign of terror underscores the deepening religious divisions in the country.



Within Christianity, hostility between Catholic and Pentecostal denominations has persisted, reaching its height when some Christian sects or denominations began to refer to themselves as 'living or holy churches,' implicitly branding other churches as 'dead or unholy.' This distinction suggests that the latter should be rejected because they supposedly lack the spiritual light to guide people toward salvation (Haaga & Ngbea, 2023). This sectarian tension extends beyond Christianity, as fanatical Christian groups often direct their fervor toward other religions as well. While these groups may not actively attack or burn mosques, they have been known to destroy shrines, fell sacred trees, and even kill African traditional religious priests, citing biblical passages such as the injunction against suffering a witch to live (Haaga & Ngbea, 2023).

Fanaticism within the three major religious traditions in Nigeria—Christianity, Islam, and African traditional religions—has negatively impacted the freedom of thought, conscience, and religion (Udofia & Uduigwomen, 2022). Okwueze & Kanu (2003, in Haaga & Ngbea, 2023) highlight various instances of religious abuse, such as the Maitatsine sect's violent attacks in the 1980s. In predominantly Muslim areas, Muslims have often prevented Christians from preaching or spreading their faith, which has led to riots and deaths in some cases. The denial of religious freedom, a fundamental human right, often arises during conflicts over beliefs, doctrines, and practices, as well as struggles for power, control of resources, land, political influence, and authority (Dzurgba, 2010). These tensions not only reflect theological disagreements but also represent a struggle for social, political, and territorial dominance among religious groups.

Towards an Understanding of Inter-Religious Dialogue

The term "dialogue" is derived from the Greek word *dia-logos*, meaning "through word," which essentially translates to "talking together" or "conversation." Interreligious dialogue refers specifically to discussions between individuals of different faiths or religious traditions. At its core, interreligious dialogue is characterized by an encounter between individuals who adhere to distinct faith traditions, taking place in an atmosphere of mutual trust and acceptance (Olagunju, 2013). Ariarajah (2002) posits that interfaith dialogue serves not only to inform participants about each other's beliefs but also to allow individuals to rediscover vital aspects of their own faith traditions. This dialogue is recognized for its potential to dismantle historical prejudices and enmities, creating new opportunities for collaborative efforts aimed at the common good. Ultimately, interreligious dialogue represents a discourse between two or more religious organizations, fostering a deeper understanding of the tenets of each faith and promoting peaceful coexistence among their practitioners.

According to the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (2007, as cited in Olagunju, 2013), dialogue can be understood in various ways. Firstly, at a purely human level, it involves reciprocal communication that leads toward a common goal or, at a deeper level, fosters interpersonal communion. Secondly, dialogue is viewed as an attitude of respect and friendship that should permeate all activities associated with the Church's evangelizing mission, a notion aptly referred to as "the spirit of dialogue" (p.37). Lastly, in the context of religious plurality, dialogue encompasses "all positive and constructive interreligious relations with individuals and communities of other faiths directed at mutual understanding and enrichment" (p.37), grounded in



adherence to truth and respect for freedom. This understanding of dialogue includes both witnessing and the exploration of each participant's religious convictions.

Francis (1997, in Olagunju, 2013) emphasizes the nature of interreligious dialogue and its necessity in multicultural and pluralistic contexts like Africa. He observes that:

Interreligious dialogue is neither a study of world religions (a theological reflection on religions) nor a comparative study of creeds and doctrines, although such studies are important and useful. Interreligious dialogue is not a scientific debate between experts in religions, because no one tries establishing what is right or wrong. It is also not a box of pre-established and pre-determined laws from which solutions can be drawn at any moment. In other words, it is not a forum of conflict resolution, though someone might find the truth of the matter. It is not an effort to persuade the other to embrace one's own religion since conversion from one religion to another must be free. It can be viewed as conversion –Christians and non-Christians to God. It is not a forum where differences in doctrines and practices are considered as obstacles, therefore they should be ignored and thrown away and it is not a simple exchange of information about each other's religious beliefs (p.37).

Furthermore, he emphasizes that the primary objective of interreligious dialogue is the pursuit of peace rather than conversion, a principle particularly relevant in the African context. While conversion to either faith is not excluded, it must occur freely. He provides a clear illustration of what interreligious dialogue entails, stating that, above all, it represents an attitude one adopts or the various perspectives available for understanding other religions. He articulates this sentiment as follows:

An attitude could be defined as the manner of his acting or his thinking; one's disposition, opinion or mental set. Some believe that all other religions are false except theirs. Some others assert that each religion is the appropriate expression of its own culture. Still, others think that all religions are the same. So people may have different attitudes towards other religions. Here are the most well-known: rationalism, Romanticism, relativism, exclusivism, dialectic, re-conception, tolerance, dialogue, Catholicism and presence. The attitude of African Christians towards other religions these last decades is of special concern because the future of Africa that should be shaped in a way that promotes harmony for the avoidance of religious conflicts partly depends on this (p.38)

In light of the aforementioned points, it is essential to recognize that interreligious dialogue can be effective when individuals from diverse religious backgrounds engage with one another in an environment characterized by freedom and openness, allowing each participant the opportunity to listen to and comprehend the perspectives of the others.

Previous Attempts at Interreligious Dialogue in Nigeria

Efforts have been made by various governments to promote interreligious dialogue in Nigeria, recognizing that dialogue is a vital social imperative for fostering a peaceful society. Furthermore,



it is essential for the harmonious coexistence of people from diverse faith backgrounds. Prior to the digital era, this model of interfaith dialogue primarily involved face-to-face interactions (Muhammad & Hidayah, 2023). In 1987, President Babangida's administration initiated the first national interfaith dialogue, bringing together twelve representatives from both Christianity and Islam (ACRA Act, 1987, in Achus, 2022). However, this body proved ineffective, with Igwara (2007, in Achus, 2022) noting that it did not achieve significant success. The religious conflicts that erupted in 1999 led President Obasanjo to establish the Nigerian Inter-Religious Council (NIREC) at the national level (McGarvey, 2009, in Achus, 2022). The sectarian violence in northern Nigeria has deepened religious divisions, highlighting the urgent need for initiatives that rebuild trust among the populace, a goal championed by interfaith advocates (Kukah & McGarvey, 2013, in Achus, 2022).

These religious conflicts have resulted in significant economic, political, and social repercussions for Nigeria. Consequently, religious organizations have become actively involved in peace building efforts, helping to resolve various forms of conflict. A notable example is the collaboration between two former adversaries and religious leaders, Pastor James Wuye and Imam Muhammad Ashafa. Once leaders of opposing factions within their communities, they now utilize their religious teachings to foster peace in Nigeria and other parts of Africa (Griswold, 2010). According to Little (2007, in Achus, 2022), Wuye, who led a Christian youth militia, was involved in the death of Imam Ashafa's spiritual mentor, which escalated their rivalry. During a confrontation, Wuye lost his right hand due to an attack from Ashafa's militia. Their paths crossed again at a UNICEF immunization program in 1995, where a mutual friend urged them to unite for the nation's sake. After several discussions, both leaders reconciled and expressed regret for their past actions. Ashafa reflected, "We planted the seed of genocide and we used the scripture to do that" (Griswold, 2010, p. 67). Their reconciliation led to the establishment of the Interfaith Mediation Center (IMC) in Kaduna, which has played a significant role in promoting interfaith education in Nigeria (Griswold, 2010).

In an interview with the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs at Georgetown University, Achus (2022) quoted Bishop Joshua Idowu-Fearon, a proponent of interfaith dialogue in northern Nigeria. Idowu-Fearon highlighted that the Anglican approach to Christian-Muslim relations is grounded in "Generous Love," a booklet outlining the theological rationale for engaging with Muslim neighbours. He emphasized the importance of educating fellow Christians about Islam and the necessity of promoting understanding and grace to coexist peacefully. To further this mission, Idowu-Fearon founded "Bridge Builders," an interfaith organization within the Anglican Diocese of Kaduna. His efforts in fostering interfaith dialogue were recognized in 2013 when the Archbishop of Canterbury awarded him the Cross of St. Augustine. The Archbishop noted that Idowu-Fearon had worked tirelessly on Christian-Muslim relations, demonstrating extraordinary courage and vision in often challenging circumstances (Achus, 2022, p. 14).

According to Nwachukwu (2024), there is currently evidence of both local and international partnerships at the governmental level, as well as interfaith and intercultural efforts aimed at promoting religious dialogue in Nigeria. While many observers view Nigeria's religiosity as a source of conflict and a potential weakness, Nwachukwu argues that religion can also serve as a



strength for conflict resolution and a means to manage and resolve disputes. For instance, a delegation from the International Dialogue Centre (KAICIID) visited Nigeria in 2015 during Muhammadu Buhari's presidency to explore opportunities for expanding peacebuilding initiatives through interreligious dialogue. The delegation, led by KAICIID Deputy Secretary General for External Relations Ambassador Alvaro Albacete and Senior Adviser Professor Mohammed Abu-Nimer, included Ambassador Yahaya Lawal and Dr. Dodik Ariyanto from the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). They met with over 20 senior religious leaders, government officials, and civil society representatives during a week-long visit to Abuja. This effort was supported by the OIC and KAICIID's local partner, the Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution (IPCR). Ambassador Albacete stated that KAICIID aims to collaborate with international and civil society partners to enhance interreligious dialogue in Nigeria, affirming their commitment to implement both short- and long-term activities that contribute to peace and social cohesion in the country (KAICIID, 2023, in Nwachukwu, 2024).

The history of inter-religious dialogue in Nigeria would be incomplete without acknowledging the contributions of prominent religious leaders from various denominations and faiths. Notably, former Catholic Cardinal of Abuja, His Eminence John Onaiyekan, has been a consistent advocate for peaceful coexistence among the Nigerian populace. He has frequently spoken out against the tensions between different religions in Nigeria and emphasized the urgent need for dialogue. In one of his speeches, he expressed, "My hope was for Nigerians to look beyond Boko Haram being Muslim and see it as a threat for the whole country, regardless of any affiliations" (Nwachukwu, 2024, p. 28).

Another significant figure in promoting religious dialogue is His Eminence, the Sultan of Sokoto, who has welcomed and actively supported calls for religious harmony. He has highlighted the crucial role of timely intervention by international organizations in fostering inter-religious dialogue, stating, "What we have to do is to save humanity from itself. Churches and mosques of all kinds are places of worship, not of hatred and distrust" (Nwachukwu, 2024, p. 28). Additionally, the late Prelate of the Methodist Church and former President of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), Sunday Mbang, was a prominent advocate for peaceful coexistence among religious groups. Political leaders, such as former Nigerian Military Lt. Colonel Yakubu Gowon, who leads the Nigeria Prays Group, also played significant roles in promoting inter-religious dialogue and understanding.

An Overview of Digital Communications: Social media

Digital communication technology encompasses a wide range of tools, systems, and platforms designed to enable information exchange across distances. This includes physical devices such as smart phones, tablets, and computers, alongside software and applications like email, social media, instant messaging, and video conferencing tools (Walther, 2012). In the context of this paper, our primary focus is on social media.

In contemporary discourse, social media has emerged as a powerful force in communication, acting as a catalyst for the integration of a diverse global community into what has been referred



to as a "global village." Within academic discussions, there is a spectrum of definitions that illuminate the multifaceted nature of social media. Leavey (2013) offers a nuanced interpretation, describing social media as a dynamic social structure composed of interconnected nodes representing individuals or entities. These nodes are interconnected through various forms of interdependencies, which may include shared values, ideas, financial transactions, social affiliations such as friendship or kinship, as well as instances of discord or commercial exchange. Conversely, the Institute for Prospective Technological Studies (2008) provides a more focused definition, characterizing social media, or social networking sites, as online platforms that facilitate a variety of interactions, communications, and collaborations among users. These digital spaces function as virtual arenas where individuals come together to connect, share information, collaborate on projects, and engage in social interactions. According to their definition:

on a basic technological level, combine social networking, a list of contacts and a profile. They are distinct from other applications in the way they support people's presentation of themselves, externalisation of data, new ways of community formation, and bottom-up activities. They are also distinguished by their ease of use and their reorganisation of Internet geography (p.35)

These definitional perspectives highlight the complex nature of social media, presenting it as both a structural framework for interpersonal connections and a technological medium that promotes connectivity and interaction across global contexts. Among the various definitions of social media, the framework articulated by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) is particularly aligned with the objectives of this study. They describe social media as a constellation of Internet-based applications that are founded on the ideological and technological principles of Web 2.0, enabling the creation and exchange of user-generated content. A key distinguishing feature of social media is its interactivity and inclusivity. Unlike traditional media, which is characterized by one-way communication, social media fosters an interactive environment that allows for limitless two-way exchanges among users. Additionally, its inclusive nature surpasses the rigid centralized gate keeping mechanisms typical of traditional media, inviting participation from individuals across diverse demographics (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010).

Central to the concept of social media, as elaborated by Bhanye et al. (2023), are its various manifestations, which include Internet forums, microblogging platforms, podcasts, social networking sites, bookmarking platforms, wikis, social curation sites, and weblogs. Examples of widely used social media platforms include Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn, blogs, MySpace, and other interactive websites (Bhanye et al., 2023). Notably, social media platforms lack stringent institutional gate keeping mechanisms, providing users with considerable freedom to publish content that may not always align with societal norms or ethical standards (Bhanye et al., 2023). Furthermore, most social media platforms operate on a non-commercial basis, thus attracting a wide-ranging user base worldwide. The accessibility of these platforms, often free of charge, further enhances their popularity, as users need only internet connectivity and registration to engage with various social media channels (Bhanye et al., 2023).



Overall, social media embodies a dynamic environment for interaction and relationship-building, distinguished by its informality and accessibility. Its popularity arises from its pervasive presence across various platforms, including laptops, net books, personal computers (PCs), tablet computers, and smart phones (Dominick, 2012). In recent decades, advancements in these technologies have progressed rapidly, fundamentally altering the landscape of both personal and professional communication. The widespread adoption of the internet, mobile networks, and digital platforms has transformed how individuals connect, share information, and maintain relationships (Walther, 2012). These technological advancements have significantly impacted religious dynamics, as various faiths have migrated some of their activities to social media platforms.

Social Media and Africa

Africa's contemporary internet landscape is defined by a rapidly expanding market, which has now surpassed half a billion subscribers, outpacing the North American demographic (Bhanye et al., 2023). Essoungou (2010) emphasizes Africa's remarkable growth, marked by swift and innovative adoption of mobile and internet technologies. This growth is mirrored in the exponential rise of social media platforms across the continent, with Galal (2022) reporting that social media users exceeded 384 million by 2022. As of 2022, internet penetration in Africa reached approximately 47%, a substantial increase from just 9% in 2010 (Galal, 2022). However, there are notable regional disparities in social media usage: Northern Africa leads with a usage rate of 56%, followed by Southern Africa at 45%, while Central Africa trails significantly with just 8% (Galal, 2022). Among various platforms, WhatsApp is particularly popular in Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa, whereas Facebook predominates in Egypt and Morocco. Facebook itself, a global social media leader, has seen substantial growth in Africa, with 271 million users in 2022 and projections suggesting this number will rise to over 377 million by 2025 (Galal, 2022). Additionally, YouTube and Twitter command impressive user bases, with approximately 180 million and 24 million users, respectively.

Recent data from March 2024, as highlighted by Shewale (2024), details the regional distribution of social media users in Africa: North Africa accounts for 166.18 million users, West Africa 105.91 million, East Africa 80.82 million, Southern Africa 44.71 million, and Central Africa 24.71 million. On a global scale, social media usage encompasses 5.17 billion individuals, representing 63% of the world's population, with an impressive 85% of mobile phone users actively engaging with these platforms (Shewale, 2024). The average social media user interacts with approximately 6.6 platforms and spends around 2 hours and 24 minutes daily on social media activities (Shewale, 2024).

These statistics underscore the argument presented in this paper, affirming the significant potential of social media to enhance religious dialogue. With the widespread adoption of social media as a primary communication medium and its expansive user base both in Africa and globally, it can be effectively leveraged to foster interfaith dialogues. Its ubiquity and interactivity position it as a powerful tool for facilitating conversations among diverse religious groups. Accordingly, the



following section of this paper will outline the various ways in which social media can contribute to interreligious dialogue in the 21st century.

Social media as an instrument for Interreligious Dialogue

Dialogue serves as an essential mechanism for fostering peaceful coexistence among individuals of diverse faith affiliations. Historically, interfaith dialogue was conducted through face-to-face interactions (Muhammad & Hidayah, 2023). However, in the 21st century, advancements in science and technology have transformed the world into a global village, giving rise to digital communication technologies, such as smart phones, and interactive platforms like social media. Today, social media has become a crucial means of communication, both globally and within Africa, as previously discussed.

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 further solidified the role of social media in daily life. Organizations, institutions, and religious communities, regardless of their prior conservatism, had to pivot towards digital communication tools and various social platforms to maintain their operations. Nearly four years post-COVID-19, social media has established an enduring presence in people's lives. Given the prevalence of smart phones across Africa and the increasing number of users on social media platforms, social media has the potential to serve as an effective instrument for enhancing interreligious dialogue among Nigeria's diverse religious communities.

Unlike traditional face-to-face dialogue, which often requires significant time and is typically limited to a select few participants, social media can democratize interreligious dialogue by creating opportunities for broader engagement. The interactive nature of platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, and YouTube offers a viable avenue for fostering interfaith discussions. These platforms can facilitate meaningful conversations by bringing together a wide audience, particularly young people, who are often catalysts for religious violence, allowing them to engage openly about their beliefs. Initiatives such as Facebook Live, Twitter Spaces, and YouTube broadcasts can serve as effective venues for these discussions. A notable example of this approach is seen in Indonesia, where Deddy Corbuzier, a prominent figure and convert, leveraged his YouTube channel for interfaith dialogue during Ramadan 1444 H. His program, titled “Login,” invited young interfaith representatives to engage in discussions about religious and diversity issues, attracting an impressive 80 million viewers (Muhammad & Hidayah, 2023). Muhammad and Hidayah (2023) provide a detailed account of this event, highlighting its significance in promoting interreligious dialogue.

As of Ramadan 1444 H (2023 M), Deddy Corbuzier utilised his podcast to create a special segment discussing interfaith and interreligious harmony themes. He named the segment “Log In at Close the Door”. Despite the name “Login”, which in contemporary terms is understood as “entering Islam”, this program has no element of a deliberate effort to invite or even force people to convert to Islam. As Corbuzier said, “This program is not to influence non-Muslims to embrace Islam (Islamisation) but rather to straighten out each religious understanding that is frequently misunderstood while celebrating harmony in the



diversity of religions and beliefs”. Login Program airs exclusively every night at 20:20 WIB during Ramadan. A total of 30 episodes have aired, with millions of people tuning in to watch each one. Habib Jafar, one of the program’s speakers, even stated that more than 80 million people had seen the program until the last episode (109).

Similar to Nigeria, Indonesia is home to a rich tapestry of religious beliefs, with six officially recognized religions. The Login Program served as a platform for dialogue among representatives of these faiths, including Islam, Catholicism, Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism, and even Satanism (Muhammad & Hidayah, 2023).

Muhammad and Hidayah (2023), referencing Soraya and Mualimin (2022), detail the program’s structure, noting that nine speakers were invited to represent their respective religions and viewpoints. The first speaker, Habib Jafar Husein Al-Hadar, commonly known as Habib Jafar, is a millennial Muslim preacher renowned for his kind, tolerant, and straightforward preaching style. His approach, infused with love, has made him one of the most prominent preachers in Indonesia (Soraya & Mualimin, 2022; Muhammad & Hidayah, 2023). The second speaker, Leonardo Arya, known as Onad, is a young Catholic who transitioned from being a musician to a comedian (Nikmah, 2023; Muhammad & Hidayah, 2023). Both Habib Jafar and Onad appear consistently throughout the episodes, serving as key figures in the Login Program.

The third speaker, Pastor Yerry Pattinasarany, is a Christian pastor recognized for his compassionate and non-judgmental approach. He actively preaches on social media platforms, including YouTube, notably in the “Domba Tersesat” segment alongside comedian Coki Pardede (Jannah, 2022; Muhammad & Hidayah, 2024). Pastor Yerry featured in the 13th and 27th episodes of the Login Program (Corbuzier, 2023; Muhammad & Hidayah, 2023). The fourth speaker, Bante Dhira Phunno, represents the Theravada Buddhist Center and is engaged in interfaith and humanitarian activities. He participated in the 15th episode of the Login Program (Corbuzier, 2023b; Muhammad & Hidayah, 2023). Fifth is Boris Thompson Manulang, also known as Boris Bokir, a popular stand-up comedian of Batak Christian descent. He has made two appearances on the Login Program, specifically in the 21st and 24th episodes (Corbuzier, 2023c; Muhammad & Hidayah, 2023).

The sixth speaker, Ronny Imanuel, also referred to as Mongol, is a comedian from Manado who once identified with a Satanic belief system. He was featured in the 22nd episode of the program (Corbuzier, 2023d; Muhammad & Hidayah, 2023). The seventh speaker, Romo Reinaldo Antoni, is a Catholic priest who participated in the 26th episode (Corbuzier, 2023e; Muhammad & Hidayah, 2023). The eighth speaker, Bli Aryakamandanu, is a Hindu leader from Bali, who appeared in the 28th episode (Corbuzier, 2023f; Muhammad & Hidayah, 2023). Finally, the ninth speaker, Causing Aldi Destian, represented Confucianism and appeared in the 29th episode of the Login Program (Corbuzier, 2023g; Muhammad & Hidayah, 2023). Through this diverse representation, the Login Program illustrates an effective means by which social media can foster interreligious dialogue, providing a platform for individuals of different faiths to engage in meaningful conversations and share their perspectives.



Moreover, various social media platforms can serve as effective venues for generating content that highlights the positive activities of Nigeria's major religions. In this age of content creation, the ability to promote interfaith understanding becomes an invaluable tool for fostering dialogue. By showcasing the unity among diverse religious sects and dismantling prevailing negative stereotypes and narrow narratives, social media can play a pivotal role in transforming perceptions. This approach is especially beneficial for unlettered audiences who have often been exposed to reductive portrayals of other religions. Such content can illuminate the positive aspects of different faiths, fostering greater empathy and understanding. This dynamic engagement facilitates a broadening of perspectives and knowledge about various religious traditions, ultimately enriching interfaith dialogue.

Interfaith dialogue can take various forms, and social media has democratized this discourse, making it accessible to individuals regardless of their educational background. The challenge lies in identifying the most suitable form of dialogue for the specific context. When the appropriate format is employed, it can lead to more effective and enduring outcomes. The interactive nature of social media enables the implementation of diverse types of dialogues. Below are several classifications of dialogue as outlined by Olagunju (2013), along with ways in which social media can enhance their effectiveness:

Dialogue of life: Often referred to as “unarticulated dialogue,” encompasses the spontaneous interactions and relationships that occur among individuals of different religious backgrounds in everyday settings. This dialogue unfolds naturally in our homes, families, communities, schools, towns, and cities, fostering connections through routine activities. Many significant exchanges and experiences arise when we coexist, collaborate, visit, and learn alongside people of varying faiths. The interactive nature of social media is particularly conducive to nurturing this kind of dialogue. Social media platforms facilitate the formation of communities centered around shared interests, allowing users to connect with like-minded individuals easily. By following accounts that resonate with their beliefs, engaging in meaningful discussions, and participating in various online groups, users can cultivate a culture of understanding and acceptance. Thus, social media serves as a powerful catalyst for promoting the dialogue of life, enabling individuals to forge connections and engage in conversations that reflect their diverse backgrounds and experiences.

Social dialogue: Cardinal Arinze describes this phenomenon as “dialogue of action,” which occurs when individuals from different religious backgrounds collaborate on joint initiatives aimed at achieving a common good or addressing shared concerns. Examples of such projects include constructing infrastructure like roads and bridges, establishing hospitals, or creating educational centers. Collaborative organizations comprised of Christians and Muslims often engage in efforts to promote human rights and combat diseases, highlighting the potential for interfaith cooperation. Social media has played a pivotal role in facilitating this form of dialogue. It has enabled the rise of social media activism in Nigeria, evidenced by movements such as the End SARS protest in 2020, which sought to address police brutality, and the OBIdient political movement that emerged in 2022 in the lead-up to the 2023 General Elections, advocating for good governance and policies that prioritize the welfare of citizens. These initiatives were largely organized and mobilized through social media platforms, where Nigerians—regardless of their religious or tribal



affiliations—came together united by common objectives. The dialogue that initiated these movements thrived in the digital space, demonstrating how social media can transcend traditional barriers and foster collective action for social change.

Dialogue of experts: In this context, specialists or theologians from various religious backgrounds engage in a dialogue characterized by active listening and thoughtful presentation of their respective doctrines, beliefs, and practices. This dialogue is not self-protective; instead, it emphasizes clarity and openness as participants seek to identify commonalities and acknowledge differences among their faiths. By leveraging scientific advancements and technology, these theologians aim to reach a consensus that enables them to collaboratively address the challenges of the modern world. Social media platforms significantly facilitate this type of dialogue. Tools such as Zoom, Google Meet, Twitter Spaces, and Facebook Live have exponentially increased the opportunities for these conversations to occur with greater frequency and ease. This digital infrastructure saves both time and costs that would typically be associated with organizing physical meetings, allowing for more efficient and accessible interfaith discussions. The ability to convene virtually fosters a richer exchange of ideas and perspectives, enhancing the potential for meaningful dialogue in a contemporary context.

Dialogue of experience: In this context, specialists or theologians from various religious backgrounds engage in a dialogue characterized by active listening and thoughtful presentation of their respective doctrines, beliefs, and practices. This dialogue is not self-protective; instead, it emphasizes clarity and openness as participants seek to identify commonalities and acknowledge differences among their faiths. By leveraging scientific advancements and technology, these theologians aim to reach a consensus that enables them to collaboratively address the challenges of the modern world. Social media platforms significantly facilitate this type of dialogue. Tools such as Zoom, Google Meet, Twitter Spaces, and Facebook Live have exponentially increased the opportunities for these conversations to occur with greater frequency and ease. This digital infrastructure saves both time and costs that would typically be associated with organizing physical meetings, allowing for more efficient and accessible interfaith discussions. The ability to convene virtually fosters a richer exchange of ideas and perspectives, enhancing the potential for meaningful dialogue in a contemporary context. Buttressing this, Olagunju (2013) notes that:

In the dialogue of intellectual exchange faith is seeking understanding and theologians and religious scholars grapple many times with issues that cut across religious lines. Often the insights in one tradition are absolutized. In order to further a more adequate understanding one needs also an exchange at the intellectual level in order to see the deeper meaning with rituals, customs and symbols. This must accompany a deeper search for insight, where one seeks to reach the Absolute beyond even if one never reaches the final truth. In the dialogue of spiritual experience, an attempt is made to share in one another's search for experiencing God. Going into that kind of dialogue one reads the other religious sources as spiritual documents. This activity aims to discern God's presence and action. Prayer and meditation can be shared and this can be experienced as liberating. The dialogue of common action can happen at different levels. Common human and spiritual values can be promoted but



also alliances can be formed at the political and socioeconomic levels to transform the human community (pp.46-47).

Religions universally share the aim of creating a more just world. While the approaches to achieving this objective often invite debate, conducting these discussions with mutual respect and a genuine understanding of one another's foundational beliefs is essential for formulating sustainable solutions to urgent societal challenges (Olagunju, 2013). As highlighted earlier, social media platforms provide a rich environment for these crucial conversations, enabling Nigeria's major religions to engage in meaningful and impactful dialogue. The interactive and accessible nature of social media allows diverse faith communities to collaborate, exchange viewpoints, and strive toward shared objectives, ultimately fostering a more equitable society.

Conclusion

Indeed, social media is not without its challenges. It can be exploited by any religion to disseminate misinformation or maliciously distort facts, often becoming a platform for verbal attacks where adherents disparage one another. Nevertheless, this does not diminish the role of social media as a vital instrument for fostering interreligious dialogue. The platform itself is neutral; it is the manner in which it is utilized that determines its impact—whether beneficial or detrimental. The interactive nature of social media allows it to serve as an effective conduit for facilitating various religious interactions. Since interreligious dialogue centers on meaningful discussions about beliefs and the pursuit of common ground, social media can provide pathways for different faiths to explore and appreciate the commendable, unique, and even intriguing aspects of one another's traditions. As Olagunju (2013) observes, while conflicting religious truth claims may arise, they should be viewed within a broader context. Regular dialogue is crucial, given that religions shape and organize our lives, offering meaning, fostering community, and facilitating liberation. What is needed is an open and honest exchange about how each tradition contributes to order, community, meaning, and liberation (Olagunju, 2013). In such dialogues, we come to realize that we have constructed the very barriers and bridges that make it challenging to engage with those on the other side. Social media presents a unique opportunity for conversations that promote understanding, allowing us to recognize each other and see beyond the confines of our individual faiths.

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IGWEBUIKE: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities

Vol. 11. No. 1, (2025)

ISSN: 2488- 9210 (Print) 2504-9038 (Online)

**Dept of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Tansian University
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Indexed: Academic Journals Online, Google Scholar, Igwebuike Research Institute

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