The Role of Theological Librarians in Fostering Interfaith Dialogue in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT: In contemporary Nigeria, which is characterized by a religiously diverse population, fostering interfaith dialogue has become increasingly important. With their vast knowledge of religious texts and traditions, theological librarians play a crucial role in promoting interfaith understanding and cooperation. This paper explores the role of theological librarians in fostering interfaith dialogue in Nigeria. The paper employs document analysis, examining various relevant sources, including academic articles, books, and reports. The paper concludes that theological librarians can ensure their libraries have comprehensive collections of resources on interfaith dialogue, including books, articles, and multimedia materials. They can also organize these resources to make them easily accessible to researchers and practitioners. Theological librarians can provide research support to scholars and practitioners who are working on interfaith dialogue projects. This can include conducting literature searches, identifying relevant resources, and providing access to specialized materials. By engaging in these activities, theological librarians can play a vital role in fostering interfaith dialogue in Nigeria. Their work can help to promote understanding, respect, and cooperation between people of different faiths.

Religion is a process of faith that can influence how government is run and how each believer behaves. It is a search for significance in ways that are associated with the sacred and found in a religious model of scriptural beliefs. In addition, many families and communities nationwide depend heavily on their religious beliefs and values in their day-to-day activities (Omotosho 2014, 133–151). Almost all religious traditions and human values, including social justice, peace, and the pursuit of peaceful coexistence, have been acknowledged by notable figures and society's founders as essential components of a society's belief system. One important criterion for an activity to be classified as interreligious is the participants' representation of religious diversity. Numerous factors, including religious institutions and all aspects of agency, play a part in religious practice (Basedau, Pfeiffer, and Vüllers 2016, 226–255). No matter what causes the disagreement or who is involved, there is always room for communication, despite how powerful or troublesome interreligious conflict may seem. Therefore, dialogue is essential to settling any kind of conflict.

Understanding human existence requires dialogue. It serves as both an end in and of itself and a means. It matters because people always communicate with one another (Labilam 2016, 54). Respect, esteem, and the bravery to approach another as a neighbor are greatly influenced by the discourse of daily life between followers of the two religions. Without communication, the world descends into conflict, tension, hatred, and isolation (Umaru 2013; Ghibanu 2018). According to Toki, Gambari, and Hadi (2015, 104–116), dialogue needs to occur in an environment that fosters trust and is prepared for harmony. Dialogue in daily activities is the most common discussion type, because people connect daily (Umaru 2013). However, dialogue can be conducted in various ways depending on the situation, including interfaith or interreligious dialogue.

In various societies, interfaith discourse can support laws that uphold and advance minority rights and multiculturalism. To promote tolerance, interreligious discussion can also be a helpful
strategy. Dialogue across religions recognizes that all faiths have common needs, experiences, and desires (Omotosho 2014). The idea that interreligious conversation can be an essential ecumenical method for promoting peace among various religious groups within a political society is becoming increasingly prevalent globally (Toki, Gambari, and Hadi 2015, 104–116).

Due to their educational and professional experiences, library and information science professionals provide socially conscious services. This seems to justify the need to advocate for librarians to play a positive role in the anticipated changes in society. It is necessary to investigate the possibility of using library and information services to promote interreligious dialogue in society. This suggests that library and information professionals are vital in fostering interreligious discussion within any community, particularly in regions where religious conflicts are likely to arise. Based on this premise, the study sought to support programs for interreligious dialogue and advocate for using libraries and information services to reduce religious disputes. This study aims to address the rationale behind interfaith dialogue initiatives, assess the different roles librarians and information scientists can play in advancing these initiatives, examine the obstacles to using library and information services as tools to reduce religious disputes and advance interfaith dialogue, and make recommendations based on the research findings. In this study, the document analysis approach was used. Literature pertinent to the investigation was located, analyzed, and assessed. Conclusions were reached through a literature survey as well as formal and semiformal brainstorming sessions with professionals in the field.

INTERFAITH DIALOGUE IN NIGERIA

Interfaith dialogue is an increasingly significant dimension of present-day societies, including Nigeria (Lehmann 2020, 238). Nigeria has a significant population of Christians and Muslims, and interfaith dialogue initiatives have successfully promoted peaceful coexistence between adherents of the two major faiths (United States Institute of Peace 2004, 1). Interfaith dialogue aims at mutual understanding, not competing, and at problem-solving, not proselytizing (United States Institute of Peace 2004). Interfaith dialogue can serve a wide range of more specific objectives, including conflict resolution, understanding the roles of faith-based communities in conflict reduction and management, and promoting religious tolerance and peaceful coexistence.

Interfaith dialogue is not intended to be a debate but a means of religious cooperation (Lehmann 2020, 238–241). Interfaith dialogue is a feature of our times, and theological librarians can play a crucial role in promoting religious tolerance and understanding by providing access to resources that promote interfaith dialogue (Pratt 2020, 180–200). Theological librarianship can support interfaith dialogue initiatives by providing access to resources that promote religious tolerance and understanding (Igbokwe et al. 2019, 7). The role of theological librarians in promoting interfaith dialogue in Nigeria is significant, and this paper explores how theological librarianship can support interfaith dialogue initiatives in Nigeria.

Successes and challenges both characterize the current state of interfaith dialogue in Nigeria. Interfaith dialogue and mediation have existed for a long time in Nigeria, and they have successfully promoted peaceful coexistence among the adherents of the various faiths in the country (Isola 2014). The Interfaith Preaching Regulatory Council in Kaduna State has issued statements promoting interfaith dialogue (Office of International Religious Freedom 2022). The Nigerian government has also promoted interfaith dialogue at the state and local levels (Office of International Religious Freedom 2022). The U.S. Consulate General Lagos, and visiting U.S. government officials have raised issues around freedom of religion issues as well as the role of religious leaders in peace-building
and social trust (Office of International Religious Freedom 2022). The embassy has also funded peace-building programs in conflict-prone states such as Kaduna State (Office of International Religious Freedom 2022).

However, interfaith dialogue in Nigeria faces several challenges. One challenge is the lack of focus, as all parties must be clear on any conversation's goals for the interfaith dialogue to succeed (Hoya Paxa 2014). Another challenge is the volatile interfaith relationship among Nigerian citizens that has often fostered violence (Isola 2014). The spread of Islamic fundamentalism across the world and the resulting global conflict from the activities of militant Islamic extremists are bound to fuel more interreligious conflicts in Nigeria (Isola 2014). The current Nigerian constitution refers to the “indigenes” of states, leading to interreligious tensions (World Council of Churches 2012).

Despite the challenges, interfaith dialogue initiatives will continue in Nigeria for a long time because of the importance of promoting peaceful coexistence among the adherents of the various faiths in the country (Isola 2014). The role of theological librarians in promoting interfaith dialogue in Nigeria is significant, and they can play a crucial role in promoting religious tolerance and understanding by providing access to resources that promote interfaith dialogue (World Council of Churches 2012).

Several interfaith dialogue initiatives in Nigeria have successfully promoted peaceful coexistence among adherents of the various faiths in the country. Here are some examples:

1) Interfaith Council of 50 Muslim and Christian Members: The Interfaith Council of 50 Muslim and Christian Members (IFC50) is a nongovernmental organization (NGO) based in Nigeria. It was founded in 1999 by fifty Muslim and Christian leaders to promote peace and understanding between the two communities. The IFC50’s mission in Nigeria is to promote interfaith dialogue and understanding between Muslims and Christians, prevent and resolve conflict between Muslims and Christians, and promote peace and social cohesion (Egwu 2019).

2) The Kukah Centre: The Kukah Centre is an NGO based in Abuja, Nigeria. It was founded in 2016 by Matthew Hassan Kukah, a Catholic bishop and outspoken critic of the Nigerian government. The center aims to promote peace, justice, and development in Nigeria through interfaith dialogue, leadership development, and memory preservation. The Kukah Centre has been praised for promoting peace and reconciliation in Nigeria. It has been honored by several awards, including the Nigeria National Human Rights Award and the Mattie J.T. Stepanek Peacemaker Award (Eteng 2021).

3) Interfaith Conflict Mediation Mechanisms and Peacebuilding in Nigeria: This initiative aims to review some of the interfaith peacebuilding efforts for reducing and managing religious conflicts in Nigeria and assessing how these efforts have been facilitating peaceful relationships among diverse religious groups in the country (Isola 2014).

4) KAICIID Dialogue Centre: The International Dialogue Centre (KAICIID) is an intergovernmental organization that promotes dialogue and understanding between people of different faiths and cultures. It was founded in 2012 by a group of countries from around the world, including Saudi Arabia, Spain, and the United States. KAICIID works to build bridges between religious communities, counter the abuse of religion to justify violence and conflict, and promote peace and social cohesion. It does this through various programs, including training programs for interfaith dialogue facilitators, support for local peacebuilding initiatives, and production of resources on interfaith dialogue (Kaiciid Dialogue Center n.d.).

5) Interfaith Mediation Centre: The Interfaith Mediation Centre was cofounded by an imam and a pastor who were formerly at odds. Imam Muhammad Ashafa and Pastor James Wuye, two religious leaders in Nigeria, once commanded rival armed groups engaged in combat between
Muslims and Christians. However, in the end, they made up and cooperated to advance harmony and understanding among their communities. The center they founded strives to avert violence and settle disputes via discussion and mediation. They have received honors for their efforts, such as the UN Intercultural Mediation Award and the Mattie J. T. Stepanek Peacemaker Award. Their narrative is a potent illustration of how peace and reconciliation are possible even in severe conflicts (Piereder 2014, 71–85).

These initiatives have successfully promoted peaceful coexistence among the adherents of the various faiths in Nigeria. They have provided a forum for interreligious dialogue, promoted conversations among followers and leaders of different faiths, and facilitated peaceful relationships among diverse religious groups in the country.

THEOLOGICAL LIBRARIANSHIP AND INTERFAITH DIALOGUE: INFORMATION DISSEMINATION

Libraries have always played a significant part in the country's advancement, so it makes sense that they would lead the present national security movement. Recent research has shown that a lack of sufficient or impartial information plays a significant role in a majority of violent confrontations. This seems to be the case as conflicts can arise from a lack of knowledge and information. The term “genocide” was first used on the African continent in Rwanda in 1994. Evidence suggests that the media, particularly Rwandan radio station Radio Télévision Libre Mille-Collines (RTLMC), played a detrimental role in indoctrinating Hutus against Tutsis. Kwaghga, Tion, and Terwase observe that as the Hutu State's machinery, RTLMC attempted to portray Tutsis as demons who must be killed from the face of the earth, and in an endeavor to wipe out the Tutsis, Hutus themselves experienced one of the most massive refugee crises on the African continent (2018, 7–9; Aboh and Abu 2019, 74).

Kwaghga, Tion, and Terwase (2018, 7–9), citing Laloo, maintain that communication and information sharing are requirements similar to other fundamental human wants. People have a right to the free flow of information because it improves education, knowledge, and learning, and allows them to actively engage in society's social, political, and economic processes. Thus, early warning information is necessary for every country to significantly impact conflict prevention, and crisis resolution. An early warning system's ability to promptly identify possible conflicts is essential, but for it to be effective, early political action must also be taken. Such vigilance emphasizes how prescient an early warning system can be. Thus, early warning should be viewed as a tool for preparedness, prevention, and crisis reduction rather than as a goal unto itself. The effectiveness of this tool depends on having a defined process for gathering, analyzing, and exchanging information (Laloo 2002, 3–5).

Facts on the subject should be included in early warning information. To understand the ramifications of entering a crisis, dissemination of some of this early warning information—including the Internet, community radio, television, video conferencing, voice-over-Internet protocol (VoIP), email, print media, and reference services—is crucial. Those who can act constructively may be the first to receive this knowledge. This usually refers to the government and other entities, like the United Nations Security Council and media or religious institutions, that will probably engage immediately to avert an impending catastrophe. Incorporating library resources and events—talk shows, symposiums, library week, book exhibitions, book fairs, and mobile libraries in rural regions—libraries, information centers, and librarians can strategically disseminate information. If there had been sufficient communication between fighting communities and peacemakers before the outbreak of hostilities, it is thought that some past conflicts may have been prevented. Stated
differently, the occurrence of crises would have been prevented if there were universally accessible channels of communication.

An early warning system’s ability to promptly identify possible conflicts is essential, but for it to be effective, early political action must also be taken (Echezona 2007, 143–152). Early warning information is necessary for every country to have a significant impact on peace promotion, crisis prevention, and crisis resolution. In any civilization, unrestricted access to information is crucial as its lack contributes to crises. According to Echezona, Ozioko, and Ugwuanyi (2011, 98–106), libraries and information services play a crucial role in facilitating unrestricted access to vital information resources for economic and cultural growth. Effective information sharing via the Internet and libraries makes people and leaders aware of possible crises and their sources, developments, effects, and solutions.

The library can collaborate with any media source, such as television and radio, for propaganda in which a group’s philosophy and ideas are presented to effectively intervene during a crisis. Internet, community radio, television video conferencing, email, print media, and reference services are some early information tools through which libraries can raise awareness of impending problems. Libraries can collaborate with NGOs to organize outreach programs for the distribution of informative materials, as well as host and publicize lectures and talks to stimulate discussion among participants and encourage them to take simple steps to promote peace and resolve crises (Igbokwe et al. 2019, 7).

CHALLENGES THEOLOGICAL LIBRARIANS FACE IN PROMOTING INTERFAITH DIALOGUE IN NIGERIA

Promoting interfaith dialogue in Nigeria is a complex and challenging endeavor, and theological librarians play a crucial role in facilitating this dialogue. However, they face several significant challenges in their efforts to foster understanding and cooperation among different religious communities in the country:

- Religious tensions: Nigeria has a history of religious tensions and conflicts, often fueled by misunderstandings and misinterpretations of religious texts. Theological librarians must navigate this landscape carefully to avoid exacerbating tensions while promoting dialogue (Ezegbobelu 2009).

- Limited resources: Many theological libraries in Nigeria operate with limited budgets and resources. Acquiring diverse religious texts and resources from different faith traditions can be challenging, making providing comprehensive materials for interfaith research and study difficult.

- Access to information: Access to information, especially in rural areas, can be limited. Theological librarians may struggle to provide equal access to resources for individuals from various faiths, particularly in regions with poor infrastructure.

- Low perception of librarians’ roles in society: There is a low perception of librarians’ roles in society, making it difficult for theological librarians to effectively promote interfaith dialogue. This may be due to a need for more awareness of the roles of librarians in promoting interfaith dialogue or a lack of recognition of the importance of interfaith dialogue (Igbokwe et al. 2019, 8).

- Sensitivity to cultural context: Promoting interfaith dialogue in Nigeria requires a deep understanding of the cultural and religious nuances in the country. Theological librarians must be sensitive to local customs and traditions while introducing resources from other faith traditions.
Lack of education: Nigeria’s people may have limited awareness and education about interfaith dialogue and religious diversity. Theological librarians may need to take on educational roles, providing workshops and training to promote understanding.

Security concerns: In some areas of Nigeria, security concerns hinder efforts to promote interfaith dialogue. Libraries and librarians may face safety issues when dealing with sensitive religious topics or materials.

Resistance to change: Traditional beliefs and practices may be deeply ingrained in Nigerian society. Some individuals and groups may resist interfaith dialogue initiatives, viewing them as a threat to their religious identity.

Political interference: Religious issues are often intertwined with politics in Nigeria. Theological librarians may encounter political interference or pressure when attempting to promote interfaith dialogue, potentially limiting their efforts.

Lack of institutional support: Theological librarians may not always receive adequate support from their institutions or religious organizations. Without support, developing and sustaining interfaith dialogue programs and initiatives may be challenging.

Language barriers: Nigeria is a linguistically diverse country with hundreds of languages spoken. Language barriers may hinder effective communication and the sharing of interfaith resources.

To overcome these challenges, theological librarians in Nigeria may engage in various strategies. These include collaborating with interfaith organizations, seeking external funding for interfaith initiatives, providing education and awareness programs, and developing collections that reflect Nigeria’s religious diversity. It is also essential for theological librarians to approach their work with sensitivity, respect, and a commitment to building bridges of understanding among various religious communities.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, theological librarians in Nigeria play a crucial role in promoting interfaith dialogue by providing access to resources that promote religious tolerance and understanding. Theological libraries have successfully promoted interfaith dialogue by providing access to materials for academic study, offering meeting places for interfaith dialogue, documenting religious conflicts, sharing experiences and best practices, and changing the nature of interfaith dialogue. However, theological librarians in Nigeria face several challenges in promoting interfaith dialogue, including a lack of focus, religious conflicts, low perception of librarians’ roles in society, lack of partnership drive among librarians, and political interference. Despite these challenges, theological librarians in Nigeria will continue to play a significant role in promoting interfaith dialogue and contributing to peaceful coexistence among adherents of the various faiths in the country.

REFERENCES


