

EXPLORING THE POTENTIAL OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IN FOSTERING RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE IN NIGERIA

Evaristus Ifeanacho, PhD
Department of Religion and Human Relations
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka
eo.ifeanacho@unizik.edu.ng
08139035530

Abstract

Diversity of religious beliefs has often times given rise to obvious manifestations of intolerance. Such is evident in the friction that sporadically ensues between the adherents of one religion and another; or even in-fighting between adherents of the same religion. Diversity thus generates a downside. However, one notes that recent technological advancement continues to ceaselessly influence human activities in all its ramifications. The effect no doubt has made positive inroads on human affairs but not without some downsides. Recently, digital technology has graduated to the different forms of Artificial Intelligence (AI). The resultant effect is that AI-powered technology has continued to impact on every aspect of human affair – economy, healthcare, education, industry, and even religion etc. This research explored how the use of AI-powered technology could ameliorate tendencies towards religious intolerance engendered by diversity in Nigeria. The research discovered that although the usual tradition of Christian religion is gradually being affected, it on the other hand has continued to generate e-worship that makes official worship not to be confined to a place, thereby minimizing chances of conflict. The researcher through qualitative method tries to unearth the bond of communion that has a natural settlement in the inner recesses of man's being. The research exposes the inner content of AI, and how its use has positively impacted on intolerance, and takes a critical look on the whole content.

Keywords: Religion, religious diversity, interreligious Dialogue, tolerance, Artificial Intelligence (AI)

Introduction

Nature is naturally founded on diversity. Even from the time of creation God not only promoted but also saw the obvious necessity of diversity through the creation of male and female, light and darkness, night and day and a string of others. Therefore, the population of the universe, in its human and animal kingdoms, is thanks to that diversity which anthropomorphically speaking was thought out and realized by God. More so, diversity also abounds in the area of science and technology. One can think of anode and cathode in the context of Electrical Engineering; plus and minus in Mathematics, demand and supply in Economics and a tapestry of others. Unfortunately, man whose nature is founded on diversity in the diverse aspects of his being turns around at times to manifest inimical disposition towards diversity encountered in the everydayness of his existence especially in his religious sphere.

Undoubtedly, man has a natural inclination towards the supernatural Being. This is evident on the fact that apart from his genetic patrimony that is hereditary and takes account of his traits, there is also the spiritual patrimony that is concerned with his yearning for the divine. Hence, man desires to commune with God or any other name he chooses to call it, through his religion and within his/her own geographical circumscription. This is evident in his transcendent desire to commune with God or any other name he chooses to call it, through his religion. There is therefore a bond of communion that has a natural settlement in the inner recesses of his being. This communion which is symptomatic of his inner spiritual yearning is manifested in his personal assent towards God. That is what is called faith.

Consequent upon the fact that as many as there are men, almost so many are there religious desires; there is therefore a string of beliefs. Such mosaic of beliefs that would have engendered real beauty of communion and peaceful coexistence, lamentably oftentimes relapses into violent outburst which bespeaks of intolerance. We ordinarily think of faith as a veritable source of comfort, harmony, love and understanding, and rightly so; but according to Obama (2008:29) in his reflection on the American situation, we regrettably “find our expressions of faith sowing divisions; we believe ourselves to be

tolerant people even as racial, religious and cultural tensions roil the landscape. And instead of resolving these tensions or mediating these conflicts, our politics fans them, exploits them, and drives us further apart.”

Based on these obvious facts, we shall make a literary excursus into the inner fabrics of religious diversity so as to enable us exhume the gains therein when tolerance is properly imbibed, and chisel out uncompromising areas that generate rebuttable discord in man’s relationship with man.

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Religion and tolerance: diverse nuances

Religion when taken from its noun form *religio* denotes a sense of conscientiousness, devotedness, scrupulousness, or felt obligation. Its verbal form has three nuances: Cicero presents it as *relegere* which means “to read again, or go over a text” and so indicate a sense of a body of law and custom that demands careful study and transmission. Next is *re-ligare* which one of the early Christian writers Lactantius present as meaning “to bind, tie, fasten.” In the words of Lactantius (1994), “We are bound and tied to God by this chain of piety; from which religion itself received its name...” (Divine Institutes 4,28). The third nuance as presented by Augustine is *re-eligere*, meaning “to choose again.” It conceives religion as being the recovery of the link with God that was torn asunder by sin. It is against that backdrop of *re-ligare* that religion is seen to express the bond of relationship between man and God. It bespeaks of a sense of obligation to the Divine which demands a free assent. However, this obligation has no monopolistic tendency that forces everyone to a particular belief system. On the contrary, each person freely seeks and gives assent without any coercion to a religious conviction that appeals to him. To that effect, the search for truth in any religion must be carried out in a manner that synchronizes with appropriate and unbounded respect to the dignity of the human person and his social nature. This assent to the truth of any religion has to pass through the vehicle “free enquiry with the help of teaching or instruction, communication and dialogue. It is by these means that men share with each other the truth they have discovered, or think they have discovered...moreover, it is by personal assent that men must adhere to the truth they have discovered” (Declaration on human freedom: n.3). This free enquiry founded on balanced reasoning culminates in free choice. Consequent upon this fact, “to deny man the free exercise of religion in society, when the just requirements of public order are observed, is to do injustice to the human person and to the very order established by God for men.” (Vatican II, Declaration on Religious Freedom n.3)

Based on this foundation of freedom in the expression of religious conviction, it becomes obvious that there will be a harvest of religious beliefs each struggling for recognition. Worst still, the struggle hinges on the fact that adherents of one religion consider the religious belief of others as false or immoral. This kind of denigration could at times generate friction, or even sow the seed of violence. It is against this backdrop that Clark (2000:630) makes a clarion call for tolerance and presents it the cultivated disposition to subdue our natural inclination to distance, reject or persecute others whose beliefs and practices differ from our own. The tolerant person is, rather, disposed to recognize the other as an object of inestimable worth.

The spirit of tolerance helps in appreciating the richness of the mosaic of religious beliefs and reaping the fruits therein. It smacks of endurance which disposes one to recognize the other as principally a human person; and therefore an object of inestimable value. In that vein, divergence in beliefs and practices ought not tamper with this incalculable worth of the person. Diversity helps us to challenge our position, make constant review and evaluation in order to make positive and durable decisions for the future. Otherwise, the tendency may be to wallow redundantly in repeated errors and outmoded ideas. In fact, John Paul II (2001) affirms that “only an overall vision of both the elements of unity and the elements of diversity makes it possible to understand and interpret the full truth of every human culture” which includes the religious culture. It is only through tolerance which entails accommodation of the others’ credo that peaceful cohabitation could be harnessed and appreciated.

In recent time, with the upsurge of religious pluralism, the call for the expunging of religious intolerance and inject a tolerant spirit becomes as pressing as it is crucial. The realization of this desire demands that the spirituality of each religion has to permeate the inner fabrics of the members; and thus change their hateful way of viewing the religious beliefs of others. Based on that, credence is laid to the fact that “every generation has the task of engaging anew in the arduous search for the right way to order human affairs” (Benedict XVI, 2007) to which religious beliefs are included.

Armed with this reassuring hope, we make haste to explore into some elements that can help in unveiling some veritable ways of gathering obvious prospects of peace amidst divergences of religious beliefs.

Reason: the epicentre of tolerance

Right human action is guided by sound reasoning. It is the gift of reason that underscores human dignity and separates man from the rest of the animals. “It is in accordance with their dignity that all men, because they are persons, that is, being endowed with reason and free will and therefore bearing personal responsibility, are both impelled by their nature and bound by a moral obligation to seek the truth, especially religious truth” (Vatican II, *Dignitatis humanae*, n.2).

Therefore, it is reason founded on truth that propels man to seek God in the right direction; and ought also to guide those who lead others to faith. It is the same reason that shapes man’s desire towards the appreciation of values in others be it religious or otherwise. Even in the expression of his religious conviction, the faculty of reason plays a vital role. Otherwise faith could easily relapse into fideism, piety into religious fundamentalism; reckless massacre of innocent citizens could be fanatically interpreted as doing the will of God. In that token, Benedict XVI (2006) affirms that “whoever would lead someone to faith needs ... to reason properly, without violence and threats...” It is only through proper use of reason that one could self-consciously evaluate his beliefs, attitudes, traditions, and aim at freely changing them when they become odious to mutual co-existence. Reason must therefore not be incapable of dialoguing with human culture, especially religion. When such dialogue is initiated and gainfully explored into through proper application of reason, freedom of religion and conscience is promoted, human rights are respected, commitment to resistance of terrorism is heightened, justice and peace are promoted, and overall social harmony is realized. However, such desirable harmony calls for a practicable culture of democracy.

Right to religion: Avoidance of violence

Article 18 of *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, upholds that, “everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.” Implicitly this freedom involves respecting the freedom of worship of others. More so, any form of coercion or imposition regarding conversion to a religious belief has to be absolutely discountenanced. “Truth can be imposed only with the force of truth itself, which penetrates the mind both gently and powerfully” (Vatican II, Declaration on Religious freedom n.1). There is the obvious need of dialogue which will help to promote mutual understanding and nip from the bud all forms of religious fundamentalism. Such dialogue according to John Paul II (2000) definitely “leads to a recognition of diversity and opens the mind to the mutual acceptance and genuine collaboration demanded by the human family's basic vocation to unity.” In this manner, violence is eliminated.

Undoubtedly, violence is totally incongruous with the nature of God. Faith goes with reason and not with force. Therefore “...man’s response to God by faith ought to be free, and that therefore nobody is to be forced to embrace the faith against his will.” (Vatican II, *Declaration on religious Freedom*, n.10). In recent time, digital technology has experienced a gargantuan leap from analogue to digital and now into artificial intelligence.

Unravelling the basics of Artificial Intelligence

According to Encyclopedia Britannica (2023) artificial intelligence is “the ability of a digital computer or computer-controlled robot to perform tasks commonly associated with intelligent beings.” As described by Copeland (2024), it is the general category that refers to all machines or software capable of performing tasks commonly associated with intelligent beings, including learning, reasoning, problem solving, perception, and using language. It more so has to do with the whole system of computers as well as programming which can perform mental work (Schroer 2023). Artificial intelligence basically involves machine learning. Machine learning coined by Arthur Samuel is a branch of artificial intelligence in which a computer “learns” how to do its task by analyzing either a set of training data or its success and failures in prior iterations of its task or both. It actually focuses on the using data and algorithms to enable AI to imitate the way that humans learn, gradually improving its accuracy (<https://www.ibm.com/topics/machine-learning>). For example, a text recognition program using machine learning might be “trained” with a set of millions of examples of text. In observing the data, the machine will learn the patterns that make certain letters so that it can recognize those letters in different fonts, handwriting, or other applications.

Machine learning is of two kinds namely supervised and unsupervised machine learning. According to Jaudet (2022) supervised machine learning begins with humans defining categories and “coaching” an algorithm toward correct solutions and pattern recognition by tagging training data with correct solutions. It uses labeled datasets to train algorithms to predict outcomes and recognize patterns. Most common examples: Google uses the human inputs we give to its reCAPTCHA program (e.g., those puzzles that test if you are human by asking you to “find the boxes with crosswalks or traffic lights in this picture”). On the contrary, unsupervised machine learning discovers its own patterns (without human coaching or input) within a given data set and then utilizes those patterns to solve problems. It is important to know that there are different levels of Artificial intelligence namely Artificial Narrow Intelligence (ANI), Artificial General Intelligence (AGI), and Artificial Super Intelligence (ASI).

Artificial narrow intelligence or Weak AI refers to systems which are specialized in solving one or a few problems within the same domain and can perform individual, automated, and repetitive tasks. These applications are “narrow” in that computational intelligence is used for a very specific task or set of tasks. In fact, ANI is presently the only type of artificial intelligence that exists in public use today. It is used in numerous areas, such as Email spam filters / social media monitoring tools for dangerous content, internet searching, online shopping and advertising, digital personal assistants, machine translation, smart homes, cities, and infrastructure, security features in cars, autonomous vehicles, navigation, cybersecurity, as well as healthcare, transportation, manufacturing, agriculture, and public administration (Jambrek 2024:77).

Artificial General Intelligence (AGI) also referred to as Strong or Deep AI is the ability of an intelligent system to understand or learn any intellectual task that a human being can understand. The goal of general artificial intelligence is to create systems that would be able to understand the world like any other human being and provide solutions to the problems they face. The goal is to create humanoid machines (robots) that would become capable of self-control, self-adjustment, and self-understanding (Jambrek 2024:78). However, AGI remains to a great extent theoretical. Artificial general intelligence (AGI), or strong AI—that is, artificial intelligence that aims to duplicate human intellectual abilities—remains controversial and out of reach. (<https://www.britannica.com/technology/artificial-intelligence/Is-artificial-general-intelligence-AGI-possible>). Such humanoid robotic form is highly unlikely without radical technological advancements. The reality is that AGI will more likely take the form of vast datacenters or be distributed across networks of computers.

Artificial Super Intelligence (ASI) is the third level of AI development. It is a hypothetical software-based artificial intelligence (AI) system with an intellectual scope beyond human intelligence. At the most fundamental level, this super intelligent AI has cutting-edge cognitive functions and highly developed thinking skills more advanced than any human (<https://www.ibm.com/topics/artificial-superintelligence>)

All in all, CHatGPT summed up Artificial Intelligence as thus:

ANI represents specialized artificial intelligence for specific tasks, AGI denotes general intelligence with human-like abilities, while ASI is a hypothetical superior intelligence that could surpass the best human minds in all areas. It is important to note that we are currently in the ANI phase, while AGI and ASI are still theoretical concepts that pose challenges and questions for the future development of artificial intelligence (Jambrek 2024:81).

Challenges of religious intolerance

Religious intolerance usually gives rise to diverse forms of conflict which sometimes culminate in violent conflicts. Some of such challenges arising from religious intolerance include:

a. Political challenge: Owing to the multi-ethnic and multi-religious composition of Nigeria, and the attendant inability to harness the beauty of such diversity, the country has time and time again relapsed into crises fomented by religious beliefs. For Nigeria to guarantee desired positively progressive development, peace co-existence and national security has to be guaranteed. Evidently, such harmonious co-existence has remained a wishful thinking because the nation has continued unabatedly to experience violent religious conflicts with political colorations. Religion in Nigeria especially as it concerns Christians and Muslims in Nigerian has most often served the detestable role of being the agent of destabilization instead peace. It is as unfortunate as it is despicable.

b. Social challenge: Social cohesion remains a vital force for peaceful co-existence in a country. It is usually founded on mutual trust and social inclusivity. When religious intolerance creeps in through diversity of religions, there is fear and distrust. Therefore, the most evident social challenge of religious intolerance is that it has successfully bred suspicion and lack of mutual understanding owing to the fact that proper understanding between Christians and Muslims has not been effectively addressed. Sequel to that, it has often generated skirmishes. Based on that, such gross display of intolerance between Christians and Muslims, and obvious lack of religious understanding and respect for one another's belief has always remained a cog in the wheel of progress, social development and a safe society. The onus lies on the Muslims and Christians to embrace the spirit of tolerance and unity. Such healthy atmosphere will surely engender positive social change.

c. Economic insecurity: There is no doubting the fact that religious intolerance has pervaded almost every sector of Nigeria's economy. Generally, as enthused Apuwabi (2018:325) crisis breeds insecurity, discrimination, mutual distrust and slow economic development. This is the case in Nigeria where in addition to gratuitous killings and maiming of thousands of persons properties worth billions of naira have been destroyed. Certainly, these huge losses have deprived the nation of needed manpower and services for the growth of its wobbling economy. Citizens are deprived their means of sustenance to arson and wanton destruction of properties.

Owing to this recurrent religious crises, the Ezirim (2021) maintains that economic stability of this country has greatly suffered an untold set back due the reoccurrence of religious conflicts that have taken place over a period of time now. It is not only lives that are being lost, but sources of livelihood, goods etc, are being destroyed or carted away, leaving victims economically handicapped. Violent religious intolerance and the conflicts thereof with their attendant effects also make investors to relocate their businesses to other peaceful areas that are safe haven for their growth. Owing to religious conflicts, many businesses have been constantly stifled in Nigeria.

d. Destruction of lives and properties: According to Ezirim (2021), one of the greatest harm of religious intolerance in Nigeria is the fact that it has left our country with extraordinary loss of lives. In fact, religious crises sponsored and nourished by intolerance, more especially between the Christians and Muslims has degenerated to an alarming stage. In the same vein, violent conflicts precipitated by religious intolerance have often resulted to set back on infrastructure. It is always a case of indirect promotion of retrogression. Social infrastructures like schools, hospitals, health facilities/centres, etc. are often time the target of destruction. In most cases, the task of rebuilding destroyed properties becomes the daunting task of both the Federal and State governments.

Artificial intelligence in religion: towards ameliorating religious intolerance

Artificial intelligence has pervaded all the nooks and crannies of human activities. It is particularly being experienced in the religious sphere. In fact, Jambrek (2024) affirms that,

Christians constantly encounter AI systems and tools, and it is nearly impossible to avoid them. Some of these systems and tools are highly useful and improve our lives, while others are created for entertainment and pleasure. Yet others are designed for gathering and distributing information for various known and unknown purposes. This confronts Christians with a multitude of challenges in their relationship with artificial intelligence, ranging from God's blessings to direct rebellion against God (p.81).

In fact, religious intolerance that is now and again experienced between religions that have different or even opposing beliefs could gradually be reduced through the use of artificial intelligence. Religious intolerance is most often manifested through religious violence like burning down of places of worship, physical attack on worshippers etc. Since AI offers the end-users of mobile apps and computer software to have a religious experience on demand, wherever they are and whenever they want to (Frackiewicz 2023), it will limit person to person contact that could generate friction. There is no time or space constraint. Via speedy search of metadata and digital media, AI brings information and communication in a nanosecond to our fingertips (Khan 2022). This is the benefit of accessibility. In this way such mayhem could be gradually eradicated. More so, AI's role within Interreligious dialogue involves elevating mutual comprehension and communication among individuals representing diverse religious traditions (Ashraf 2022). Again, according to Cheong (2020), AI's capabilities in data processing, pattern recognition, and insights generation offer a promising solution to address biases, misunderstandings, and communication barriers.

Nevertheless, AI holds substantial promise in facilitating conversations across belief systems, contributing to a more inclusive and empathetic world. AI's influence extends to addressing conflicts and promoting cooperation among individuals of different faiths. AI's evolving role in Interreligious Dialogue presents significant potential for improving cross-cultural understanding and effective communication among individuals from diverse religious backgrounds. While concerns about AI's algorithmic accuracy and neutrality are valid (Benanti 2023). AI should be seen as a complementary tool to human interaction in these dialogues. Despite these concerns, AI's capacity to promote inclusivity and foster dialogue across belief systems represents a promising step toward a more empathetic and harmonious world (Andriansyah 2023).

It is important to note that, AI plays a crucial role in language translation and interpretation, making it a valuable tool for facilitating effective communication between individuals from diverse religious backgrounds. (Jacoba, R.C. (2023:381). By recognizing the significance of AI-powered translation and interpretation tools in breaking down language barriers and enabling effective communication between people of different faiths, Jacoba (2023:384) maintains that we can appreciate how AI can serve as a powerful asset in fostering interreligious understanding and dialogue.”

World religions can benefit from adopting successful practices especially in the adoption a practical approach toward AI innovations. In fact, by connecting diverse individuals and facilitating information exchange, social media has the potential to alleviate conflicts arising from religious differences. To maximize its positive impact, users need skills to analyze, understand, and evaluate content and avoid biases (Amirfarhangi 2020).

The use of AI in interreligious dialogue encourages disintermediation. The trend of disintermediation calls to an end practice of intermediation. It calls for direct communication. We can access a musician's work directly without going through record labels as in the past. Religious leaders can preach their homily without going through intermediaries. Writers can publish their work without having a publisher. People can use the internet to sell things or even rent out their home to tourists without going through an agent. (Le Duc, A. (2020).

Jacoba (2023) insists that AI's potential contributions to Interreligious dialogue can be far-reaching and diverse, if maximized creatively and carefully. It can act as a bridge builder, helping to overcome linguistic barriers through language translation and interpretation. AI-driven text and sentiment analysis

can empower stakeholders to delve deeper into religious discussions, unearthing nuanced emotional undercurrents and identifying potential areas of tension. Furthermore, he rightly observed that the age of algorithms presents an unprecedented opportunity to cultivate harmony among different faith communities. AI's transformative capabilities in ID offer the potential to break down barriers, encourage understanding, and facilitate conversations that transcend religious divides. (Jacoba, R.C. (2023:394).

We are in an age of screenification. In the words of Le Duc (2020), in such an age, a screen is gradually replacing everything that used to appear on paper (newspapers, magazines, restaurant menus). Screens with touch buttons will replace what used to be knobs and dials. Screens will replace display boards, billboards, and information boards. They can also serve as replacements for paintings and photographs hung on the wall so that a screen depicting a beautiful natural scenery can be hung on your apartment window that when open has a view of the neighbor's brick wall. In the same way, screen will enhance interreligious dialogue and thus minimize conflicts.

Conclusion and recommendations

From the foregoing, it is evident that religion plays a vital role in communal existence. It creates a spiritual bond between man and the Divine. But unfortunately, in the expression of religious beliefs tension and conflicts could arise on account of intolerance. As a result of that, sometimes the cumulus of violence descends in some areas. Such mayhem is a contradiction of the peaceful coexistence that ought to be propagated by different religious beliefs. There is need to call for an urgent change of mentality whereby fear will be replaced with trust, discrimination with respect, enmity with friendliness, confrontation with dialogue and healthy encounter. We are therefore challenged to seek a transformation of the culture of intolerance and suspicion to a culture of mutual understanding and dialogue. That will in the long run generate peace and fraternal love.

The onus falls on all of us to consistently but tirelessly use our different religions as instruments for promoting peace and inculcating the spirit of tolerance. The research discovers that the use of AI can enhance interreligious dialogue and by so doing reduce religious conflicts. There is no gainsaying the fact that the use of AI in religious communities and in religious practices portends great potential, all the same AI must be used carefully and adequate attention has to be paid to the attendant risks which could include the denigration of person-to-person contact that plays a vital role in the practice of one's religion and inhuman relationship in general. Summarily, it is imperative to acknowledge concerns regarding the accuracy and neutrality of AI algorithms, necessitating that AI should be perceived as a supplementary tool, not a replacement for human interaction in these dialogues.

Recommendations

1. There is need to create further awareness of the use of AI in order to maximize its usefulness Interreligious dialogue.
2. AI-powered technology can be employed in language translation and interpretation is very important in order to help in overcoming linguistic barriers.
3. AI has to be employed by religious organizations for data analysis which can help in assessing the success of interreligious dialogue.
4. There is need to develop AI-powered educational tools that can promote interreligious understanding like language translation apps, chatbots that can facilitate interreligious discussions.
5. There is need to create platforms or networks that use AI to connect individuals or organizations interested in ID.

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