

Exploring Religion as a Tool of Nigeria’s Public Diplomacy

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Abstract

On April 26, 2016, former United States Secretary of State, John Kerr, emphasized the link between religion and foreign policy. He underscored how religion can have either a positive or a destabilizing influence on world affairs. Religion today remains deeply consequential, affecting the values, actions, choices, and worldview of people in every walk of life on every continent. This paper argues that religion, which is often considered a cultural element of soft power, has become an inevitable and important factor in the furtherance of public diplomacy goals in this day and age. It conceptualizes religious institutions as non-state public diplomacy actors. To this end, the influence of religion on Nigeria’s relations with the international community is examined. The study also examined the global engagement efforts of Nigeria’s religious institutions and how they can be better utilized as a constructive instrument for the country’s public diplomacy.

Keywords: Nigeria and Religion; Public diplomacy; Religion; Soft power

1. Introduction

Religion continues to hold significant influence in today’s world, impacting individuals’ values, actions, choices, and worldviews across all continents. Its pervasive presence is undeniable, shaping the way people perceive and interact with the world around them. It is a significant source of basic value orientation for individuals and groups of people in developed and developing countries, and this can have social and political connotations. Smith (1994: 13) notes that “the surest way to the heart of a people is through their faith”. This rings true, especially in most African countries. Mbiti (1991) asserts that Africans are notoriously religious. He notes that religion is so deeply ingrained in every aspect of life that it cannot be easily isolated. This is particularly evident in Nigeria, where religion permeates virtually all facets of Nigerian society, from birth to death. Though, interestingly, Nigeria’s Constitution defines the country as a secular state as the country did not adopt a state religion, most Nigerians identify with at least one of the three major religions (Christianity, Islam and Traditional) predominant in the country.

This paper highlights the crucial role of religion in international relations. Thomas (2005) highlights three ways by which religion, in the form of religious traditions or movements, can impact international relations. Firstly, it can either promote or help resolve international conflicts. Secondly, it can affect international society's norms, values, and institutions. Lastly, it can influence a country's foreign policy. The influence of religion on international relations cannot be underestimated. It has the potential to shape the course of global events and impact the lives of millions of people.

In other words, religious actors and institutions can wield what Joseph Nye (2004) describes as 'soft power'. Soft power refers to the ability of a country to influence others through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion or military might. A country's soft power is often promoted through public diplomacy, which is an instrument of foreign policy. Public diplomacy is defined by Djerejian (2003:13) as the promotion of the country's interests through worldwide information, engagement, and influence or the ability to attract what you want instead of using force or inducement. A country's soft power stems from the appeal of its culture, political ideals, and policies (Nye, 2004: 12). Soft power is, thus, promoted through public and intangible resources such as culture, ideas, ideology, and institutions. According to Jödicke (2018), soft power is grounded in intersubjective communication as a means of engaging other members of the international society in cross-border exchange and influencing their perceptions and discourses. In essence, public diplomacy is a major tool of soft power, and this was acknowledged in diplomatic practice long before the current discussion on public diplomacy (Melissen, 2005).

One of the objectives of a country's foreign policy is the protection of national prestige and, by extension, the projection of a positive image in the international community. Religion, as a cultural element of soft power, plays a crucial role in shaping the strategic considerations of foreign policy. It serves as a powerful tool for enhancing a country's attractiveness and projecting a positive image on the global stage. The cultural, symbolic, and emotional dimensions of religion provide a strong basis for this attractiveness. It creates a sense of cultural proximity, friendship, and mutual understanding, which are essential for building strong diplomatic ties. These perceptions are continuously shaped by a complex interplay of emotions, values, customs, and symbols, making religion one of the most significant cultural factors that can be leveraged for promoting a country's positive image.

Though often seen as a source of conflict, this paper argues that religion has become an inevitable and important factor in international relations in this day and age, and religious institutions play an important role in international engagement between nations and foreign publics. Yet, religion as a resource for public diplomacy has not been fully exploited by Nigeria. Therefore, conceptualizing religious actors and institutions as non-state public diplomacy actors, this paper examines the potential of religion in the promotion of Nigeria's soft power in its relations with the international community. It examines the global engagement efforts and potential of Nigeria's religious institutions and how they can be better utilized as a constructive instrument for the country's public diplomacy. It is believed that Nigeria can utilize the potential of the country's religious institutions to promote communication and dialogue with other peoples and increase the nation's soft power and international voice.

Soft Power, Public Diplomacy, and Religion

Three concepts are crucial to this paper: soft power, public diplomacy, and religion. Soft power is a concept attributed to an American scholar, Joseph Samuel Nye. Nye (2004: 5) defines power as the "ability to affect others to achieve desired outcomes". He distinguishes between two kinds of power in international relations: hard and soft power. Nye (2011:11) defines hard power as "the ability to make others act in ways that are contrary to their initial preferences and strategies." This is the ability to coerce others by using threats and inducements (sometimes known as "sticks" and "carrots"). Military

intervention, coercive diplomacy, and economic sanctions are all forms of hard power that rely heavily on actual power resources such as armed forces or economic means. It is the ability to force another entity into acting in ways that that thing would not have performed otherwise. Soft power, on the other hand, is the ability to persuade “others to want the outcomes that you want” (Nye, 2004: 5), and especially “the ability to achieve goals through attraction rather than coercion” (Nye, 2004: x). In essence, exercising soft power relies on persuasion, or the ability to convince by argument, and on the ability to attract:

If I am persuaded to go along with your purposes without any explicit threat or exchange taking place – in short, if my behaviour is determined by an observable but intangible attraction – soft power is at work. Soft power uses a different type of currency – not force, not money – to engender cooperation. It uses an attraction to shared values, and the justness and duty of contributing to the achievement of those values (Nye, 2004: 12).

Thus, in contrast to hard power’s coercive nature, soft power refers to the employment of positive attraction and persuasion to achieve foreign policy goals. It is the power of attractive ideas, capable of persuading people to act in a certain way. Soft power avoids the usual foreign policy weapons of carrot and stick, instead pursuing influence through network development, captivating narrative communication, international rule-making, and drawing on the resources that make a country naturally appealing to the rest of the world. Principally, soft power gets its legitimacy from a country’s ideals, institutions, and foreign policies. Education, arts, print and mass media, film, poetry, literature, architecture, sports, food, non-governmental organizations, science and technology, innovation capacity, tourism and so on, are all sources of soft power. Soft power develops from a blend of these aspects and provides insight into a country’s cultural richness and social capital.

Thus, public diplomacy is a platform for the implementation of soft power. The effectiveness of a country’s public diplomacy is defined as much by its soft power capacity as by the integrity and efficacy of its policies. Soft power, which is based on a “value-based” concept of power, shows how much a country is regarded as appealing and deserving of being recognized as an example for others.

Then, what is public diplomacy? Edmund Gullion, a former American diplomat and Dean of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, coined the term, public diplomacy, in the mid-1960s, and its practice became most firmly identified with the United States in the decades that followed (Melissen, 2005). Against the backdrop of the Cold War, public efforts focused on presenting the American way of life to international audiences.

Originally, public diplomacy refers to state-driven endeavours including academic exchanges, cultural gatherings, and broadcasting to foreign audiences (Semetko, Kolmer, and Schatz, 2011). This was due to the widely held belief that only states engaged in conducting such activities. This influenced the initial definitions of the concept. For instance, Tuch (1990: 3-4) defines it as “a government’s process of communication with foreign publics in an attempt to bring about an understanding of its nation’s ideas and ideals, its institutions and culture, as well as its national goals and policies”. On his part, Dutta-Bergman (2006: 104) notes that,

Public diplomacy involves the communication of a government to the people of another nation with the goal of influencing the image of the sender nation. To the extent that public diplomacy attempts to influence the perceptions and opinions of the members of the target state with respect to the image of the source (nation), it embodies a form of public relations.

Smyth (2001) describes it as an instrument that national governments use to mobilize intangible resources to attract the masses of another country, and not solely their state representatives. They draw such attraction and enticement through broadcasting, educational and cultural exchange programmes, public information, and political action.

However, in recent times, the public diplomacy perspective has developed beyond this to include activities that are beyond state actors. Public diplomacy, according to Gregory (2011: 353), is a tool used by states, associations of states, and some sub-state and non-state actors to understand cultures, attitudes, and behaviour; build and manage relationships; and influence attitudes and mobilize actions to further their interests and values.

In the same vein, Pantoja (2018) avers that public diplomacy now involves the participation of state and non-state actors because foreign affairs ministries and secretaries deal directly with non-state actors. Such non-state actors include non-governmental organizations and institutions, multinational corporations, industry associations and international organizations, which may contribute to certain programmes that promote mutual interests and enhance the name of the country they represent. To promote new challenges that diplomats had previously overlooked, these non-state actors have also evolved into partners and stakeholders of governments. Fitzpatrick (2010: 198) is of the view that regardless of how one feels about whether public diplomacy is primarily a government function or includes non-state actors, it is true that non-state actors are now more involved in efforts to shape the perception of countries by foreign publics and therefore the need for the attention of public diplomacy professionals.

It is also important to emphasize that public diplomacy is targeted at the foreign public. Malone (1988: 1) notes that “public diplomacy aims to influence citizens of other countries to achieve a positive attitude to one’s country”. In the same vein, Seib (2009: vii) notes that the most striking feature of public diplomacy is “direct contact with foreign publics rather than foreign government”.

This brings us to the concept of religion. Religion, like most concepts, does not have a universally accepted definition. As Greil (2009: 136) puts it, “It seems safe to assert that no consensus on a definition of religion has been reached and that no consensus is likely to be reached in the foreseeable future”. Nonetheless, scholars offer definitions of what they perceive religion to be. To Koenig (2009), religion comprises beliefs, practices and rituals that are related to the sacred, to God, to the mystical or the supernatural, while to Metuh (1992:11), religion is an institutionalized system of signs, doctrines, principles, and customs centred on the interactions between men in society and with God. Geertz (1973: 90) defines religion as a system of symbols that acts to establish strong, pervasive, and enduring moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and cloaking the conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.

Also, Lincoln (2003) defines religion as a set of collectively held spiritual beliefs articulated in a discourse, perpetuated and interpreted by institutions, communities, and associated practices. Schuurman (2011) argues that religion is of integral importance as it concerns the deepest root of human existence and integrates human life into a coherent whole. To Fox and Sandler (2004:176-7), religion has a variety of functions in people’s lives: it provides people with worldviews and ideals, as well as identity and legitimacy, and it is “connected with formal institutions.” Thus, religion serves as a source of world views and values that “give a guide to the correct living” in addition to being a part of one’s complex identity (i.e., one’s socially affected and culturally built image of self) (Warner and Walker, 2011: 120).

It is, therefore, quite interesting that some social scientists and political observers had expected religion to disappear from public life and politics. Nineteenth-century theorists, including Auguste Comte, Emile

Durkheim, Ferdinand Toennies, Max Weber, Karl Marx and several contemporary social scientists promoting secularization theory have assumed that modernization has brought about increasing secularization of society, thereby expecting religion to wither as modernity advances. Thus, as modernization swept across the globe, religion would, conversely, lose its grip on culture. To them, any sway religion might continue to hold over individuals would eventually be transformed, for instance, into forms of privatized belief, where religion would become merely a personal matter anchored in individual consciousness, rather than remain a collective force with mobilizing potential for social change (Sahliyah, 1990).

Despite the widespread belief that modernization would diminish the political significance of religion and weaken individual attachment to religious values, this has not been the case. In fact, a significant number of people around the world still identify themselves as followers of various religious traditions, including Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and others. As a result, religion remains a crucial institution that continues to shape people's lives, societies, and politics on a global scale.

While accurate data on the prevalence of religion is difficult to obtain, it is clear that religion continues to play a significant role in the lives of many individuals. This is particularly true in regions where religion has historically been a central aspect of cultural identity and social organization. Despite the many changes brought about by modernization, religion has proven to be a resilient force that continues to shape the world in profound ways.

Hence, given the enduring importance of religion, it is essential for policymakers, scholars, and other stakeholders to understand its role in contemporary society. By recognizing the continued significance of religion, we can better appreciate the complex ways in which it shapes our world and work to promote greater understanding and cooperation across religious and cultural divides (Loskota and Flory, 2013).

Religious institutions, leaders, and followers are a crucial part of the global public that public diplomacy aims to engage and partner with. It is not necessarily that religion has undergone a fundamental transformation, but rather that there is a heightened awareness of its longstanding existence. This is why diplomats and public officials are increasingly recognizing the impact of religion and its potential to shape international relations.

Religion is, therefore, a vital part of the societal fabric and even defines some countries. Despite the troubled relations between religion and politics, religion is frequently utilized as a means to engage with foreign publics. Loskota and Flory (2013) note that religion plays a significant role in international relations, with several countries leveraging it as a means of projecting soft power, which is a tool of public diplomacy. Furthermore, Haynes (2008) opines that actors in foreign policy, whether they are secular or religious, use religion as a force to pursue certain goals. He also avers that not only states but also some non-state religious actors use religion as a multidimensional and different power resource.

Several countries use religion as part of their public diplomacy efforts in the international community. These countries often leverage their religious heritage, values, and institutions to promote their national interests, establish cultural ties, and foster relationships with other countries. Let us examine some examples.

Saudi Arabia is widely recognized for its use of Islam as a soft power tool. The country's economic, political, and religious influence in the Muslim world is largely due to its control over Mecca and Medina, the holiest cities in Islam. Saudi Arabia organizes the annual Hajj pilgrimage, which brings millions of Muslims from around the world to Mecca and provides a platform for the country to showcase its power

and influence. Saudi Arabia contributions also played a major role in the World Muslim League, a religious propagation agency founded in 1962 with its headquarters in Mecca (Haynes, 2021). Also, the kingdom is highly influential in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, a global body comprising 57 member states, with 48 being Muslim-majority countries. The country sponsors various Islamic TV channels, radio stations, and charitable foundations around the world. In addition, it finances religious schools around the world and provides scholarships to students who study in its Islamic universities.

Iran, a Shia Muslim-dominated country, also uses religion as a tool for soft power projection. It has consistently backed Shia groups and sects in neighbouring Arab countries, including Lebanon's Hezbollah, Iraq's Badr Organization, and Yemen's Houthis. Iran's religious influence is not merely restricted to Shia Islam but also extends to an intellectual inquisition for other Muslim sects. The country also operates several Shia pilgrimage sites.

Singapore, despite its small size, has used religion as a soft power tool effectively. The country promotes religious tolerance and diversity through its Inter-Religious Organisation (IRO), which facilitates interfaith dialogue and collaboration. Singapore also markets itself as a religious tourism destination, attracting millions of visitors annually to its mosques, temples, and churches. In 2017, the country hosted the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Interfaith Forum, bringing together leaders of different faiths to discuss and promote interfaith harmony and cooperation.

India, a nation with a Hindu-majority population, has effectively leveraged its soft power through religion. With a rich cultural and religious heritage, India boasts several prominent pilgrimage sites that attract millions of visitors annually. These include the Golden Temple in Amritsar, the Kashi Vishwanath Temple in Varanasi, and the Ajmer Sharif Dargah in Ajmer. In a bid to further boost tourism, the Indian government has taken steps to ease visa regulations for citizens from the East African region. This move aims to attract more visitors and create a tourist circuit that enables them to explore a series of prominent historical and cultural sites associated with the life of Gautama Buddha (Ganguly, 2020). In 2014, India succeeded in getting June 21 recognised by the United Nations as the International Day of Yoga. In conjunction with yoga, the country also promotes Ayurvedic (alternative medicine system) tourism as part of its soft power strategy. Indian religious practices, including yoga and Ayurveda, have gained popularity globally, with several countries hosting yoga sessions and promoting Ayurvedic remedies. Thus, by capitalizing on its religious and cultural heritage, India has successfully positioned itself as a top destination for spiritual and cultural tourism. This has not only helped to boost the country's economy but has also enabled visitors to experience the rich history and traditions of this vibrant nation.

The United States of America, though a secular state, has a significant Christian population, and religion plays a role in its public diplomacy efforts. American presidents frequently reference their Christian faith in speeches and engage in religious activities during their terms. The U.S. government also supports various faith-based initiatives and organizations that engage in humanitarian work globally, emphasizing American values and beliefs. The United States has utilized religious diplomacy to build alliances and exert influence, particularly in regions with Christian majorities or significant Christian communities. Faith-based organizations and missionary groups from the U.S. engage in humanitarian work and promote Christian values abroad, indirectly contributing to the nation's soft power.

Israel is another country that wields religion as a tool for public diplomacy. Although the state of Israel is well known for its hard power assets, it is starting to attract scholarly interest as a soft power state, particularly in light of its reputation as the birthplace of Christianity. Thus, Israel is a pilgrimage destination for the vast number of Christians who wish to reconnect with their spiritual experience of the

location of their Messiah's birth. The state of Israel continues to exploit pilgrimage to its holy sites to leverage its soft power resources to sell and boost its reputation among other countries.

Furthermore, as the spiritual and administrative headquarters of the Roman Catholic Church, the Vatican City is one of the most prominent examples of a Christian country using religion as soft power. The Pope, as the leader of the Catholic Church, wields significant influence and engages in diplomatic efforts to promote peace, social justice, and human rights globally. The Vatican maintains diplomatic relations with numerous countries and participates in international organizations, such as the United Nations, to advocate for its moral and religious perspectives. The Vatican also has a vast diplomatic network that helps to facilitate the resolution of conflicts.

In Africa, some countries also leverage religion as a soft power tool of public diplomacy. Countries such as Algeria, Egypt, and Morocco have capitalized on their significant religious landmarks, such as mosques and holy sites, to attract religious tourists. These visitors come to experience the country's religious history and to engage with fellow believers. This influx of people not only feeds the tourist industry but also helps to build relationships between countries that share the same religion, leading to increased cooperation and understanding. For example, religious public diplomacy has been critical in advancing Morocco's interests, boosting soft power, and amplifying its voice on the international scene. The country's King, Mohammed VI, has been working to increase its influence in Africa by leveraging its Islamic heritage. Through the establishment of religious institutions and cultural centres, Moroccan soft power is disseminated to countries like Senegal, Mali, and Gabon. Its approach to promoting Islam as a moderate, tolerant, and peaceful religion has helped to foster cooperation and mutual understanding. Furthermore, Morocco offers to construct mosques in some African countries such as Senegal, Niger, Benin, and Guinea. Mohammed VI has symbolically offered copies of the Koran to be distributed around the country's mosques during recent visits to African neighbouring countries.

In addition, many African countries have recognized the need for religious harmony and have encouraged dialogue between different faiths. Interfaith dialogue provides a platform for people of different religious backgrounds to come together and discuss issues that affect their communities. This dialogue promotes understanding, tolerance, and mutual respect, further strengthening the bonds between different peoples and nations, and creating a shared vision of peace and development.

In essence, the use of soft power can be successful if elements of culture such as religion are integral to the planning and implementation of public diplomacy. Buttressing this line of thought, Marshall and Farr (2009) aver that religious influence on culture, particularly political culture, must be acknowledged for public diplomacy to be effective. The largest influences on both an individual's and a community's lives are religious beliefs, which shape many people's worldviews. This type of public diplomacy encompasses multiple mechanisms of cooperation between the state and religious organizations, as well as the use of religious institutions' international activities, the use of religious ideas and symbols (with their appropriate interpretations, so that they agree with the current political objectives), and the use of religion as diplomatic leverage in negotiations with other states. All these measures are aimed at pursuing a pragmatically defined national interest.

Public diplomacy is, thus, important when it comes to promoting the image of a country. In today's modern society, maintaining a favourable public image and reputation ranks highly on any nation's government agenda. Today, all nations strive to maintain a positive reputation abroad since public opinion in other countries influences a nation's reputation. The main factors influencing a nation's international reputation are the policies it implements to advance its interests.

Theoretical Framework

This paper hinges on liberal internationalism articulated by Robert Keohane (1984). As a theory of international relations, liberal internationalism holds that international cooperation between states is feasible and sustainable and that such cooperation can reduce conflict and competition. It presumes that domestic and international institutions play central roles in facilitating cooperation and peace between states. Highlighting the role of these institutions in facilitating cooperation between states, it takes into account transnational advocacy networks in seeking to explain outcomes in international relations (Haynes, 2021).

According to Burchill (2005: 64–6), liberal internationalism is based on four key premises:

- International stability and order require building and upholding appropriately consensual international institutions and norms.
- Building and sustaining relevant international institutions and norms are core aspects of an international society aiming to bring ‘peace and prosperity to all’.
- To achieve this goal, it is necessary to discover, cultivate and implement shared values that help achieve this aim.
- States are no longer automatically the primary actor in world politics in every context and in relation to every issue.

In essence, from a liberal standpoint, international relations encompass more than just state-to-state interactions. It involves transnational relations, which refer to the connections between individuals, groups, and organizations from various countries. This perspective recognizes the importance of understanding the complex web of relationships that exist in the international arena. By acknowledging the significance of transnational relations, we can better appreciate the diverse perspectives and interests that shape global affairs.

Thus, the liberal institutional theory points to the fact that there are numerous channels of contact that connect countries and societies. In certain instances, these channels include religious actors who possess the ability to exert soft power, thereby influencing both policymaking and implementation. Liberal internationalists generally acknowledge the potential and actual significance of religious actors in the realm of International Relations, particularly in relation to specific concerns and outcomes. These assessments also recognize the ability of soft power to impact international outcomes in specific circumstances.

In today’s interconnected world, it is essential to recognize the role that religious actors can play in shaping international relations. By leveraging their soft power, these actors can influence decision-making processes and outcomes. Liberal internationalists understand the importance of engaging with religious actors to address specific concerns and achieve desired outcomes. This recognition of the potential impact of religious actors on international relations is a crucial step towards building a more inclusive and effective global community.

Nigeria and Religion

Religion constitutes an inextricable part of the Nigerian society. It is inextricably woven into the cloth of cultural life. All areas of life are permeated by religious belief, which gives them purpose and significance. There is a religious observance associated with practically every type of activity, including family gatherings, baby naming ceremonies, funerals, fishing, and trading. Thus, it is not out of place to describe Nigeria as a country of ‘religious’ peoples. Many Nigerians turn to religion or spirituality as a major resource in their quest for understanding their complex world and existence. It also acts as a solution to a variety of existential issues they face daily.

Religious identities in Nigeria are usually classified into three – Christian, Muslim and Traditional or indigenous religions. These can be divided into sub-categories, denominations or sects. The Christian religion is made up of the Catholics, Anglican, Baptist, Methodist, the Evangelical Church of West Africa, the Seventh Day Adventists, the Jehovah’s Witnesses, The Apostolic Faith, and several “home-grown,” “white garment” (Aladura and Celestial) churches and several Pentecostal denominations.

With several domestic and foreign branches, Nigeria is home to some of the fast-growing Pentecostal denominations in the world. Examples include the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), Deeper Life Bible Church, Mountain of Fire and Miracles (MFM) and the Living Faith Church Worldwide, also known as Winners Chapel. Additionally, there are numerous Orthodox and Pentecostal congregations and denominations in Nigeria that have a profound social impact on both their members and the general populace. The Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN), and the Catholic Bishops Conference are among the leading Christian organizations.

Also, the Islamic religion comprises various Muslims sects and denominations, including the Ahmadiyya, Sanusiyya, Tijanniyya, and Quadriyya. The Jamaatu Nasril Islam (JNI) and the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (SCIA) are two umbrella groups that work to promote Islam.

For the traditional or indigenous religion, which existed before the advent of Christianity and Islam, various ethnic groups in Nigeria have their peculiar beliefs and modes of worship. The adherents worship God through many gods or divinities. For instance, the Igbo also have a pantheon of smaller deities in addition to their belief in a great God who is transcendental and incomprehensible (Okeke, Ibenwa, and Okeke, 2017). The actions of these minor deities are directly related to and entwined with Igbo daily life. They firmly think that these deities guard them and govern their actions and worldview. Among the Yoruba, the traditional worshippers believe in Olodumare (God) and Orunmila, the harbinger of the divine messages from Olodumare, which is revealed through the Ifa corpus. The Yoruba also worship deities including Ogun, Sango, Oya, Osun and Esu.

It is important to note, however, that while religion can provide individuals with guidance, comfort, and a sense of community, Nigeria has faced various challenges related to religion. Religious conflicts have plagued the country for years, leading to numerous deaths and displacement of families. Many religious groups have also been accused of promoting extremism, intolerance, and violence, which have caused further ethnic, social, and political tensions, often leading to conflict. Nevertheless, this paper avers that when harnessed positively, religion can contribute to social cohesion, promote ethical values, and foster community development in Nigeria. Also, the country can leverage the positive aspects of religion to enhance its public diplomacy efforts.

Boosting Nigeria's Soft Power through Religion

Nigeria can boost its soft power and the promotion of a positive image for the country through two important tools: Faith-Based Organizations and Religious Tourism.

Faith-Based Organizations (FBOs)

A faith-based organization is defined by Berger (2003) as a formal organization whose identity and mission are self-consciously derived from the teachings of one or more religious or spiritual traditions. This organization works to promote and realize collectively articulated ideas about the public good at the national or international level. At the local level, faith-based organizations can be divided into at least four different types: religious congregations, groups or initiatives supported by congregations, incorporated non-profits that are separate from congregations or affiliated with them, and neighbourhood and regional interfaith coalitions (Goldsmith, Eimicke and Pineda, 2006).

Apart from the countless worship houses and centres in Nigeria that fit into these four categories, some of the FBOs operating in the country include the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), Christian Rural and Urban Development Association of Nigeria, Christian Foundation for Social Justice and Equity, Freedom Foundation, Christian Aid, Nigerian Federation of Catholic Students (NFCs), Young Women's Christian Association of Nigeria (YWCAN), Nigeria Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (SCIA), Justice, Development and Peace Commission, Nasrul-Lahi-Il-Faithi Society of Nigeria (NASFAT), Muslim/Christian Inter-Faith Mediation Centre, Christian Health Association of Nigeria, Catholic Youth Organization of Nigeria (CYON), Muslim Students Society (MSS), National Council of Muslim Youths Organisations (NACOMYO), Federation of Muslim Women Associations of Nigeria (FOMWAN), Muslim Sisters Organisation (MSO), Usman Bin Affan Islamic Trust Fund and Project Hope.

These FBOs provide some social services, including education and health care, are usually involved in community development initiatives, and they have local and international relevance. Their activities and programmes can help showcase Nigeria's commitment to social welfare and improve its image. For instance, the RCCG has carved out a niche for itself in terms of its public function, social significance, and local-global influence in Africa and beyond, which is best conveyed by its demographic distribution rather than just its vertical and horizontal expansion. The RCCG challenges obstacles to development and civic involvement in addition to making significant contributions to social capital that bridge, bond, and link. Its houses of worship are not just places of worship; they are also sites of social interaction where discussions about politics, business, music, home cultures, education, and other forms of interactions take place. These places frequently cross socio-ethnic, racial, class, gender, and generational lines. People from various backgrounds come into contact with one another, engage in activities together, and often depend on one another. These make it easier for people to connect and develop bridges between local and global networking trends, new types of associations, and shared community efforts (Adogame, 2016).

According to a report in the *Nigerian Compass Magazine* of January 15, 2010, the RCCG was one of the first religious organizations to donate help and relief efforts after the horrific earthquake that left the majority of Haiti in ruins. When many African and Western countries were still debating whether and how to respond to the emergency, the press revealed that RCCG North America donated \$50,000 to Haiti with the General Overseer's consent (Adogame 2016). The international community recognizes the importance of humanitarian efforts, and countries that have FBOs that are active in disaster relief can acquire a positive image from this.

Also, some of these places of worship and organizations are connected internationally and have access to funding from foreign donor organizations like DFID, UNDP, World Bank, and SIDA, particularly in relation to development initiatives like education, health, poverty alleviation, and community development in Nigeria. Thus, through their schools, colleges, vocational training facilities, seminaries, and universities, FBOs in Nigeria offer health and educational services. They are prominent owners of real estate, including sacred towns and prayer camps that occupy thousands of hectares of land. They also own economic institutions including bookshops, hotels, banks, insurance, mass media, and ICT enterprises. Their real estate holdings also include the property on which their hospitals, schools, and orphanages are located (Olarinmoye, 2014). Thus, their activities and visibility can be of benefit to the image of Nigeria in the international arena

Secondly, the FBOs can help to boost the country's image by fostering interfaith dialogue and harmony. These can be through organizing forums, seminars, and other events that promote dialogue and understanding among people of different beliefs. By these, they would project Nigeria as a tolerant and diverse society that appreciates religious pluralism. This can help to project a positive image of the country as a global leader in fostering interfaith harmony. In addition, their effort to build bridges between different faiths can help reduce tensions and conflicts, leading to a more positive image for Nigeria.

Thirdly, the FBOs can aid in the preservation of a country's cultural heritage. They are frequently involved in the restoration of historical sites and monuments, the promotion of traditional arts and crafts, and the preservation of indigenous knowledge. This can serve to promote and attract tourists by showcasing the country's rich cultural heritage.

Governments can work with faith-based organizations to boost a country's image in several ways. These include:

1. **Collaboration:** Governments can collaborate with faith-based organizations to launch joint campaigns that promote the country's cultural and religious heritage. These campaigns can highlight the country's historic sites, festivals, and other cultural events that are of interest to tourists.
2. **Community outreach:** Faith-based organizations often have deep roots in local communities, and governments can leverage these relationships to improve the country's image. By partnering with faith-based organizations, governments can engage with local communities and build goodwill through various community outreach programmes.
3. **Social media:** Governments can work with faith-based organizations to leverage social media to promote the country's image. This includes creating content that showcases the country's religious and cultural heritage and sharing it on social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.
4. **Hosting events:** Governments can partner with faith-based organizations to host international conferences, meetings, and other events that promote the country's image. These events can bring together experts, scholars, and other stakeholders from around the world, raising the profile of the country and its religious and cultural heritage.
5. **Providing funding and resources to FBOs:** Governments can provide funding and resources to FBOs to carry out their activities. This can include initiatives such as providing food and shelter for the homeless, healthcare services, education, and job training. These programmes can help

improve the quality of life for people in the country and give a positive image of the government's commitment to social justice.

6. **Supporting interfaith dialogue:** Governments can work with faith-based organizations to promote interfaith dialogue and cooperation. This includes hosting interfaith events, such as conferences, workshops, and seminars. Such initiatives can help to promote peace and harmony among different religious groups in the country and give a positive image of the government's commitment to religious tolerance and diversity.
7. **Engaging FBOs in international diplomacy:** FBOs often have networks and relationships with international organizations and other countries. The government can leverage these relationships by engaging FBOs in international diplomacy efforts, promoting the country's image and interests abroad. Government can support religious leaders in their efforts to promote peace and understanding and work with faith-based organizations to address global issues such as poverty, climate change, and human rights. This can be done through initiatives such as interfaith.
8. **Encouraging FBOs to participate in international conferences:** Governments can encourage FBOs to participate in international conferences related to their areas of expertise. This can help to showcase the country's strengths in different areas and create a positive image of the country as a leader in various fields.

Religious Tourism

Another means by which Nigeria can project a positive image to the international community is through religious tourism. Religious travel and tourism provide a unique platform for global conversation. As Molz (2010) notes, tourism is a political and cultural activity that facilitates cultural exchange and serves as a means of public diplomacy. The tourist's passport symbolizes the complex interplay between politics and culture, making tourism an essential factor in strengthening a nation's soft power. By linking individuals and locations and introducing tourists to other cultures, tourism helps to express the cultural and governmental characteristics that make a nation commendable.

Inbound tourism is often considered an important indicator of a country's soft power. It not only generates economic benefits but also promotes cultural understanding and fosters positive relationships between nations. Religious travel and tourism, in particular, offer a unique opportunity to showcase a country's cultural heritage and religious diversity, which can be a powerful tool for promoting interfaith dialogue and understanding.

In essence, religious travel and tourism have the potential to be a powerful force for global conversation and cultural exchange. By leveraging the soft power of tourism, nations can promote their cultural and religious heritage, foster positive relationships with other nations, and promote interfaith dialogue and understanding.

Travelling for religious or spiritual reasons, also known as spiritual tourism or faith-based tourism, includes going on pilgrimages, visiting holy places, travelling for work or worship, and participating in crusades, retreats, conventions, and rallies. Although religious travel is primarily undertaken for worship, there are other compelling reasons for embarking on such a journey. These include:

- **Gratitude and Confession:** In times of personal crisis, many individuals seek guidance from a higher power. For those who adhere to traditional religious practices, expressing gratitude to their

deity at a shrine is a common way to acknowledge overcoming adversity. Alternatively, some may embark on religious travel as a means of seeking atonement for past transgressions. By visiting a sacred site, they hope to connect with their higher power and seek forgiveness for any perceived wrongdoing that may have contributed to their current struggles.

- **Spiritual Salvation:** Undertaking a pilgrimage is widely considered a manifestation of devoutness across numerous cultures. This belief is especially prominent among Hindus, who embark on journeys to sacred destinations to accrue spiritual merits for their faith. In contrast, Buddhists view visits to holy sites as a crucial initial step towards attaining enlightenment. Additionally, a significant number of elderly individuals embark on religious expeditions to seek reconciliation with the Supreme Being before their passing.
- **Celebrating Religious Events:** Many individuals commemorate significant religious holidays by visiting a sacred location, provided they have the financial means to do so. These occurrences are referenced in holy texts and are often re-enacted during religious festivities as a way of honouring their significance.
- **Communicating with other Believers:** Religious trips offer a unique opportunity for individuals to connect with fellow believers. In today's modern world, these trips serve as a means to strengthen one's religious convictions by fellowshiping with others of similar beliefs.

While the majority of religious tourists are believers looking for spiritual comfort or to strengthen their religious convictions, some non-believers are drawn to holy sites, churches, mosques, synagogues, and other places of worship for their cultural significance, architectural significance, aesthetic beauty, or historic value rather than for their religious significance. Although they may practice religion, atheists do not primarily travel for religious reasons. Marine-Roig (2015: 26) asserts that religious tourism does not necessarily refer to travel made solely for the purpose of engaging in religious activity. Many secular travellers who want to participate in the religious experience associated with those holy locations may be drawn by the historical and cultural aspects of the destinations as well.

In Nigeria, religious tourism can be classified into two distinct categories. The first category is domestic or local religious tourism, which involves followers participating in or attending religious events within the country. The second category, which can be further divided into two, is tourism with an international focus. This type of tourism involves Nigerians travelling abroad for religious purposes or hosting visitors from other nations who come to Nigeria to fulfil their religious duties or seek comfort in the wonders of the numerous Catholic, Protestant, and Pentecostal adorations, apparitions, and crusade programmes. Additionally, visitors may also visit different groves and shrines.

Basically, religious tourism is practised by all three of Nigeria's main religions. Nigeria's numerous and extensive Christian festivals, programmes, and events draw visitors from abroad. There are a variety of feast days and events, including crusades, seminars, conferences, retreats, the Cathedraic, and pastoral visits by bishops that cater to the main religious interests of travellers in Catholic communities. Other religious tourist sites include the National Mosque in Abuja, Sheik Alimi Mosque in Ilorin, the Awhum Monastery in Enugu State and the Aokpe Marian Apparition Ground in Benue State.

Numerous events and programmes in the protestant and Pentecostal churches draw visitors from outside the country that promote religious tourism. For instance, the All Anglican Clergy Conference and Regular Synods of the Anglican Communion both support religious travel. Additionally, churches host crusades, festivals, and seminars that have helped Nigeria become the top destination for religious tourism. For instance, the Living Faith Chapel (Winners Chapel) has an annual festival called Shiloh, The Redeemed Church of God (RCCG) has a monthly Holy Ghost Service and the annual Holy Ghost Congress, House on the Rock has a yearly festival known as The Experience. The Deeper Life Bible Church (DLBC) holds

a Retreat every year, likewise, The Apostolic Faith Church also holds its annual camp meeting at Igbesa, Ogun State in August, which attracts delegates from within the country, West and Central Africa and from other countries of the World.

Also, the Celestial Church of Christ (CCC) holds its annual Christmas festival and convocation at Imeko on December 25 of each year. At Christmas, thousands of Celestial Christians from Nigeria and other nations travel to Imeko in Ogun State as a destination of pilgrimage. The chance to be anointed, which can only be done by the church pastor and usually only at Imeko, is a significant aspect of the journey. These Christian events celebrations, lectures, retreats, and many others, attract foreign tourists as well as Nigerians from Nigeria and the diaspora, and serve as potentials for religious tourism (Umejei, 2009).

The Durbar celebration, which has a long history dating back to a time when the Emirate (state) in the north utilized horses in battle, is a significant holiday with religious significance. Each town, region, and household of nobility was required to provide a regiment for the Emirate's defence during this time. The various regiments were invited by the military heads of the Emirate once or twice a year for a Durbar (military parade) for the Emir and his chiefs. Regiments would demonstrate their horsemanship, level of battle readiness, and allegiance to the Emirate during the parade. These days, Durbar is a feast held in honour of foreign heads of state and at the conclusion of the two most important Muslim holidays, Id-el Fitri and Ide-el Kabir (commemorating Prophet Ibrahim sacrificing a ram instead of his son). It takes place in several cities of Nigeria including Kano, Katsina, Sokoto, Zazzau, Bauchi and Bida, Katsina Durbar festival is one of the most magnificent and spectacular festivals in Nigeria (Okon, 2018).

Community rites performed in remembrance of certain regional deities are becoming more globalized in the traditional religion. Worshipers host several annual festivals that draw visitors and followers from all over the world. As a result, these ritual events have changed from being centred solely on ethnicity to one with a global audience and participation, offering tremendous potential for religious tourism in Nigeria. One of these is the Osun-Oshogbo festival. The exhilaration it has enjoyed among devotees is due to the belief that the Osun river goddess holds power over prosperity and fertility, which many have found potent. Thus, one of the most anticipated cultural celebrations for most expatriates is the Osun-Oshogbo festival.

Also, the Agbarha people of Warri, in Delta State, commemorate their cultural history through the Idju Iwhurie Festival, also known as the Agbassa Juju Festival, in the Niger Delta (Umejei, 2009). The festival's origins can be traced back to Iwhurie, a war-like god. With a display of machetes and regalia, it has been commemorated for decades. The glitz and bravery on exhibit by the locals make the Agbassa Juju festival one to witness. The Iri Ji Festival, which the Igbo people of Nigeria observe to certify the new yam for consumption, has evolved into a cultural heritage that enjoys an international reputation. Even foreigners participate in the festival, and corporate organizations struggle to support it to align themselves with the Ndi Igbo pride.

The Leboku rites Festival in Calabar, the Yakurr New Yam Festival, the Igue Festival in Benin City, and the Eyo Festival in Lagos are other events that have gained international attention and should be promoted. Other festivals that can draw international attention include the Ebe festival in Ajaokuta, the Ogun festival in Ondo, and the Oronna festival in Ilaro.

There are several ways by which the government can work with religious organizations to promote religious tourism. These include:

1. **Developing partnerships:** The government can develop partnerships with religious organizations and groups to promote religious tourism. This can involve working with them to create marketing campaigns, promotional materials, and events that promote religious tourism. Government can also provide funding or financial assistance to help them promote their religious sites and attract tourists.
2. **Offering incentives:** Governments can offer incentives to religious organizations that promote religious tourism. This can include tax reliefs, funding for events, and grants to help organizations develop their tourism offerings.
3. **Providing infrastructure:** Governments can provide infrastructure to support religious tourism. This can include building roads, hotels, and other facilities that can support tourists visiting religious sites. The government should also build new supportive infrastructure and renovate old ones to meet international standards.
4. **Providing information and resources:** The government can provide information and resources to religious organizations to help them better understand the needs and preferences of tourists. This could include data on visitor demographics, trends in travel behaviour, and best practices for marketing and promotion.
5. **Creating tourism routes:** Governments can create tourism routes that connect different religious sites. This can make it easier for tourists to plan their trips and ensure that they visit all the sites they are interested in.
6. **Providing training:** Governments can provide training to religious organizations on how to promote religious tourism. This can include training in marketing, customer service, hospitality, and other key skills needed to attract tourists.
7. **Ensuring safety:** Governments can ensure the safety of tourists visiting religious sites. This can involve providing security measures, such as police patrols and CCTV cameras, and ensuring that infrastructure is up to standard. If outsiders are anticipated to use the nation's religious facilities, sufficient security is crucial.

Apart from helping to boost the country's image in the international community, religious tourism will help in generating revenue as well as employment for Nigerians in various areas including transportation, lodging, catering/restaurants, and so on, thereby raising the host population's standard of living and income.

2. Conclusion

One of the most crucial duties of actors in international relations, particularly states, in the modern world, is fostering a positive image. The promotion of a state's favourable reputation depends heavily on public diplomacy. As a result of globalization, states are now part of a new world where cooperation among the world's peoples depends on communication, information, and culture (Lord, 2006: 15). One can argue that the informational aspect of public diplomacy can only be truly successful when there is an existing relationship that lends credibility to the material being communicated. This results from familiarity with the other's culture. This information is intended to promote more international cooperation by encouraging foreigners to have favourable perceptions of the nation's people, culture, and policies.

It is impossible to overstate the significance of religion in culture. A nation's deployment of soft power can be effective if cultural components like religion are incorporated into the formulation and execution of public diplomacy. One of the strongest human emotions is religious sentiment, which has a huge potential to be transformed into a potent soft power tool through the effective use of public diplomacy (Seib, 2013). Religious organizations are a valuable resource for public diplomacy. Therefore, it is imperative to use the extraordinary potential of Nigeria's three main religions as a force for projecting a favourable image of the nation abroad.

Nigeria has fully integrated into a global cosmos in terms of religion thanks to the spread of Nigerian religions in almost every region of the planet. For instance, the cultures of Brazil, Cuba, and Haiti are influenced by the Nigerian diaspora, which has contributed to the emergence of African-derived religions like Santeria, Candomble, Vodun, and Yoruba-Orisa traditions across the Americas. Millions of followers of Yoruba and Santeria religious practices continue to be drawn by the growth of groupings of Orisa practitioners outside of West Africa in the 20th and 21st centuries (Silva, 2021).

Additionally, the growth of virtual-based religiosity, in which a large number of Orisa and Ifa priests exist, operate, and communicate with both their current and potential clients as well as the general public through their websites, using digital devices and other forms of technologies, has been a defining feature of the expansion of indigenous Nigerian religions in the US and Europe. In the context of globalization, Nigerian churches are also important because they represent multinational ministries and groupings with global consequences in addition to being a distinctive manifestation of African Christianity (Adogame, 2010).

Essentially, therefore, religion can be a powerful tool for Nigeria's public diplomacy. By promoting interfaith dialogue, and cultural exchanges, and leveraging its religious institutions and leaders, Nigeria can showcase its religious diversity and cultural heritage to the world. to project Nigeria's image abroad through public diplomacy. Thus, the Nigerian government must create a favourable climate for religious institutions to realize their full potential.

The Nigerian government must work with religious organizations to promote religious tourism and create a positive impact on the economy, while also promoting cultural and religious understanding. As the country continues to develop its tourism industry, it is essential to focus on promoting religious tourism and creating an enabling environment for religious tourists to visit and explore the country's numerous religious sites. As noted by Lee and Ayhan (2015), states can utilize non-state actors' capacity for public diplomacy if state agencies make their channels open for opportunities for collaboration (passive partnerships) and/or if they engage non-state actors for collaboration (active partnerships).

In essence, religion serves as a bridge between nations, fostering a sense of shared values and beliefs that transcend geographical boundaries. As such, it is a critical component of any foreign policy strategy aimed at building lasting relationships with other countries. By recognizing the importance of religion in shaping global perceptions, countries can harness its power to promote their interests and enhance their standing in the international community.

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