RELIGION AND THE DIGITAL AGE: THE INTERSECTION OF FAITH AND TECHNOLOGY

Kenneth Osarodion Osarumwense, PhD

Department of Christian Religious Studies, Faculty of Arts and Education, Benson Idahosa University, Benin City. kosarumwense@biu.edu.ng

Abstract

This study explores the intersection of religion and the digital age, focusing on how faith and technology converge to reshape religious practices, and identity. The digital age has dramatically altered the way individuals interact, access religious content, and practice their faith, leading to the emergence of virtual congregations and new forms of religious expression. This study aims to examine the implications of these changes, particularly the challenges they pose to traditional notions of religious authority and interpretations. The research employs a phenomenological approach, combining interviews with religious leaders and followers to understand the impact of digital technology on religious practices. Key findings reveal that while technology has expanded the scope of religious practices – such as online worship services, virtual pilgrimages, digital prayers – there are concerns about the erosion of traditional religious practices and the loss of spiritual depth. Additionally, the study highlights questions regarding the nature of religious authorities and the authenticity of religious experience in online spaces. Based on these findings, the study recommends that religious leaders and institutions invest in digital literacy program to help their followers navigate the ethical use of technology in the digital age. Furthermore, it suggests that religious organizations develop digital resources, including online courses and videos, to provide continued spiritual guidance and support to their communities.

Keywords: Faith, Religious Leaders, Technology, Virtual Worship.

Introduction

Throughout history, the relationship between science and religion has been marked by periods of dialogue on cooperation and conflicts. Critics of religion argued that science and religion are fundamentally incompatible. The science-religion dialogue continues with many biblical scholars and scientist seeking to integrate scientific and religious perspectives. Efforts to reconcile science and religion emerged with scholars exploring areas like theology and science such as seen in this conference reimagining humanities and sciences in a digital age. The sudden outbreak of Covid 19 Pandemic indeed forced many organisations and institutions to shift from their traditional worship to online services, a shift made possible by embracing products of advanced technologies (Ukagba, Obi and Nwankwor, 2013). This intersection has given rise to new forms of worship, online prayers, evangelism and digital pilgrimages and practices (Irene, 2022). Thus, religion; traditional worship and liturgical practices becoming obsolete as the church being relegated to mere social gathering.

Indeed, Religion has been largely skeptical about the trend of modernism and its influence on culture, whether Christian or Islamic culture. Decades ago, Pastor

Kumuyi, a Nigerian and the General Overseer of Deeper Life Bible Church once announced to his congregation that television was the 'devil's box' and should not be found or entertained in their homes as believers (Irene, 2022). There were also pastors in Nigeria who vowed never to own a mobile phone at its advent in Nigeria, insinuating that it must be connected to "the beast'; hence it function the way it does. Pastor Chris Oyakhilome, a Nigerian Tele-Evangelist and General Overseer of Believers World (a.k.a Christ Embassy), for instance, once disclosed that 'the 5G network that was launched around 2020 was a major cause of the 2019/2020 pandemic known as the coronavirus (Chiluwa, 2013)). Contrarily, the sudden outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic forced many countries, businesses, religious and civil organizations to shift from traditional to online services (Osarumwense, 2023). The shift was made possible by embracing the products of advanced technological development. Africans are no exception from this drift to the digital world, though religious and preserving their cultural heritage at all levels, yet gradually adapt to this trend of the digital world. Thus, the doctrine of the traditional religious life of the Christians that was examined and expounded by the early church in all aspects (theological, historical canonical…etc), is now considered obsolete through the adoption of new technologies in the church services, which do not pertain to the nature and purpose of the institute (church) which of its own has lost it meaning and impact of a general assemblies of brethren are of no further assistance to the Christian faith. Adopting these new technologies has its merits and demerits. In northern Nigeria for instance, Islam has been the symbol fostering fellowship and prayers in the mosque and generating political cohesion across ethnic boundaries. Likewise in southern Nigeria, where Christians come together either in local churches or through ecumenical bodies to pray, worship, and thank God through personal contact to discuss evangelical and theological principles that govern the religious life of its members, incorporated into the church, and apt and accurate formulation. As a consequence of this unity, the legitimate desire to get to know other Christians better in faith and their ecclesial and liturgical life may lead some people to form more specifically ecumenical groups or take part in already existing ones. It is desired that this togetherness spring from friendly and fraternal personal contact with Christians from various communities of faith. Dialogue is carried out in different church services through spontaneous or unstructured ways in each group to educate the believers on Christian doctrines (Osarumwense, 2023). It is precisely here that the dynamism proper to each Christian faith finds its spiritual growth. Today, a lot of critical but fundamental questions about the basis of digital religion are drawn from religious academic discourse. These questions bother on the implications of the basis of digital religion. It is in view of these critical questions that this study seeks to find out if digital technologies used by the church to propagate her message or reach out to the wider world are also 'born again'. Will Christ also redeem digital technologies used by the church to propagate the gospel at the end of age? How do digital technologies influence religious rituals and practices? What are the implications of these technologies on the Christian faith? These and more beg for clarification.

Virtual Ecclesiology and Liturgical Practices (Real and Virtual Congregation)

The three major world religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) not only adopt the new technologies in propagating their message but also communicate and reach out to their congregation daily on the internet but also adhere to and maintain cyberspace as agents of transmission (Chiluwa, 2013). This means that religion is influenced by digital facilities to propagate her gospel and make disciples. Based on theological discourse, the study is viewed to contrast these real and virtual congregations on ecclesiological and liturgical practices, in such a way that it perceives a dichotomy between these two congregations. However, Katherine, (2020) is of the view that most theological accounts from the internet are undergirded and lack spiritual efficacy since they rely solely on binaries to function. According to Katherine's analysis, the tendency to view things in binary opposition, rather than acknowledging nuances and complexities since, the digitally mediated interactions through the internet could draw people away from what is real that is, the mystical union with Jesus Christ, the exalted Head of the Church, and somehow does not involve bodies or other kinds of materiality such as virtual objects, input systems for interaction and networked system etc. Based on these, many theologians argue that digitally mediated congregational events can never measure up to their physical or tangible environment counterparts. They too observed that such digital mediated religious events   might even lure people away from God's presence.

Nord, (2011), contrarily views the virtual congregation as a continuation of the real physical church, a consequence of the fact that being itself is mediated. Citing passages in Scripture that describe revelations of God and the nature of reality as mediated, Nord (2011) argues that there is no such thing as "an unmediated experience with reality". While this position is common among some biblical scholars who specialize in digital media and religion but not yet common in the field of homiletics. As such, the ontological approach is still more common among homiletics, dismissing digitally mediated churches on a presumed fear of the Christian faith, arguably unjustified, and raising a dichotomy between the real and virtual congregation.

Cressman, (2021), asserts that "the reasons we preach and the components that constitute a sermon are unaffected by the medium. The word of God is transmitted just as efficiently whether told as a story in ancient times, read silently in a bible in hundred years ago, or listened to in a podcast today". For Cressman, the core components and purposes of a sermon that is to liberate the believer's faith to praise, gratitude, thanksgiving, and action are not dependent on the medium. The message-oriented approach focuses on human agency, with the result of being a medium that is made invisible and relegated to a bit part of the preaching event. Ontological standpoint, investigating the causal relationships between entities and objects as well as the role of agency, Sigmon (2017) emphasized the close connection between the word and the table, as elaborate of the 20th Century theological thinking, which ensnared digitally mediated church, as well as transcribing well-trodden discussions

about theological ontology and real presence into the new key of online communion. Often, this results in digitally mediated religious practices being dismissed as unreal and disembodied. Powery (2016) considered the advantages and challenges of online ministration, in he fears the 'loss of incarnational teachings of Jesus Christ" as a real risk. Referencing the doctrine of the incarnation, he contrasts 'real and virtual church', indicating that real human bodies, as opposed to virtual realities and bodies, are essential for the teaching ministry of Jesus as the word incarnate of God.

Digital Religion and Evangelism

Digital religion is religion as a digitalized phenomenon, encompassing digital worship and digital piety. As a novel phenomenon, digital religion has its merits and reasons for distrust. Now, this religion that once saw science as an adversary turning it into something irrelevant, while science embraces new technologies. The Covid-19 pandemic, which started in 2020, led to a reduction of physical human contact, moved religion to the virtual space and erased the digital divide within the religious world (Miller, Mundey, and Hill, 2019). Indeed, one of the ways digital evangelism has impacted traditional religious practices is through the blurring of geographical and cultural boundaries. In this direction, digital tools such as social media and mobile applications have enabled religious organizations to reach out to individuals from different parts of the world despite their cultural backgrounds (Davies, 2019). This has created a more diverse and global community of believers, despite questions about its implications on cultural identity in religious practice among biblical scholars. On this note, Hurtins, (2020) asserts that Christians may face cyber-bullying and online harassment, particularly if they express their faith online or engage in evangelism. Digital evangelism may erode traditional religious practices such as physical community and social interaction. Yet, digital tools have allowed for increased communication and engagement even though they may not provide the same level of personal interaction and community building that is associated with traditional religious practices (Davies, 2019). Thus, while digital evangelism has allowed religious organizations to reach a wider audience and engage with individuals in new and innovative ways, it has disrupted traditional practices and raised concerns about the impact on religious identity and community (Davies, 2019). Despite these, digital evangelism has also impacted how religious information is disseminated and consumed. Traditional religious practices involve sacred texts and in-person teachings, but digital evangelism has made religious information more readily available through digital platforms such as podcasts, videos, and e-books (Davies, 2019). This has though allowed individuals to consume religious content on their terms and at their own pace but raised questions about the authenticity and authority of digital religious information.

It is commonplace that the main theme of Acts is the work of the Holy Spirit and that He is the supreme agent in the Christian mission. Yet this is the very factor that is most often forgotten in assessing the conversion of the early Church. The church received the spirit not for its selfish secret enjoyment but to enable it to bear witness

for Christ (1 Cor. 2:14). Every initiative in evangelism either digital or internet forum should follow suit as recorded in Acts as the initiative of the Holy Spirit. According to Acts (1:8) where the world mission is ad numbered, up to the Roman imprisonment of Paul at the end of the which enables the gospel to be heard freely in the capital, each new advance is inaugurated by the Lord the Spirit. It is the Spirit, the gift of the ascended Jesus, who fills and signally uses the disciples on the Day of Pentecost, likewise Peter before the Sanhedrin, Stephen at Jerusalem, and Philip with the eunuch (Barrett, 2019). It is the Spirit who drives Paul out on his mission, and prompts him in where best to exercise it (Acts 6), it is the Spirit who leads Peter to evangelize Cornelius, and Paul to Antioch Church to evangelism the heathen in the first missionary journey (Acts 13).

Digital Technology on Traditional Pilgrimages and Practices

Many Christians go on pilgrimage, whether to Jerusalem, Rome, Europe, or some other destination, but few think hard about it from the perspective of their faith. Examination of pilgrimage in the Old and New Testaments provides a ground for reflecting on pilgrimage theologically. A pilgrimage is a journey to a special or holy place as a way of making an impact on one's life with the revelation of God associated with that place (Nord, 2011). Pilgrimage is by no means confined to Christianity and Islamic religion as it is common among other religions and in secular life. In the Old Testament, pilgrimage to Jerusalem became mandatory once Israel was settled in the land of Canaan. Mount Zion in Jerusalem was where God lived among the Israelites, his 'address' as it were, and regular pilgrimage to Jerusalem was a vital way of embedding within Israelite consciousness of their identity as the people of Yahweh. This is wonderfully captured in Psalm 84:5: 'Blessed are those whose strength is in you, in whose heart are the highways to Zion.' The dynamic of pilgrimage to Jerusalem is evoked, for example, in the Psalms of Ascent. Psalms 120–34 share the title 'A song of ascent, most probably because they are a 'pilgrim hymnal' for use by pilgrims en route to Jerusalem. It is moving to imagine pilgrims walking to Jerusalem and thinking, 'I lift my eyes to the hills – from where will my help come? My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth (Psalm 121:1). Within Christianity there is a long tradition of pilgrimage. Indeed, at present, while mainline church's pilgrimage to Europe is in decline, the opposite is true of Christian pilgrimage. Western Europe's six thousand-plus pilgrimage sites generate some 60 to 70 million religiously motivated visits each year (Nord, 2011). Some of these visitors were from North America, total visitors at these shrines each year exceeds 100 million. Indeed, the late twentieth century is, therefore, the latest epoch in a dynamic pattern of rise and decline in enthusiasm for pilgrimage that has characterized the European Christian tradition for nearly 2000 years (Nord, 2011).

Historically, the Christian reasons for pilgrimage, in general, can be summarized as the quest for relics, the desire for blessings, and the determination to fulfill a vow (Davies, 1979). In the case of Christian journeys to historical, Palestine in particular, the blessings desired included seeing the very places where Jesus taught and worked

(understood in a historical sense), confirming the Gospel accounts, arriving at a better understanding of the Bible in general, and a devotional yearning to touch the ground made sacred by Jesus, and to stand somehow in his presence. This last form of motivation is of a personal rather than a historical nature and corresponds to an ancient Christian perception that a journey of faith is a strong healing for all kinds of spiritual ills. The historical study of Christian pilgrimage in its various forms rests on meticulous documentation of primary sources reporting actual journeys. For over a century (since 1887), The Palestine Pilgrims' Text Society encouraged the systematic collection of pilgrims' records, from the fourth century, (Aubrey, 1971). The rise of virtual pilgrimages has led to a decline in traditional pilgrimage practices, potentially eroding cultural and spiritual heritage. This may depersonalize the pilgrimage experience, reducing the opportunity for face-to-face interactions and meaningful connections, prioritizing profit over spiritual significance. According to Chiluwa, (2013), virtual pilgrimage may lack the authenticity and emotional resonance of traditional pilgrimage experience.

The Impact of Digital Technology on Christian Beliefs and Practice
Technology has given Christianity a voice to reach a worldwide audience. Social media and online platforms have enabled Christians to connect globally, fostering a sense of community and shared faith through online church services, virtual prayer meetings, and digital liturgies. Some Christian leaders and churches have recently embraced digital technologies by completely creating a truly digital church experience and replicating traditional religious practices (Davies, 2013). Others have integrated digital capabilities with the traditional face-to-face experience, especially during the 2019/2020 pandemic, when churches were forced to adopt the use of digital technology as a primary source of facilitating their ministry. Some faith-based organizations were slow to adopt such new technologies and such reluctance may be interpreted as whether such digital communities or environments support biblical or theological ideas. Several schools of thought among biblical scholars are of the view that a digital church captures the doctrinal connotations to be considered a faith community while some consider the impacts of such new technologies on the growth of the church. The view of Cressman corroborates the expression that digital technology is of great impact, it is needed everywhere and the Church is not exceptional. This fact should strike a meaningful note in the hearts of every Christian in the global world. The response should be demonstrated in having church leaders who will identify themselves professionally to tackle the challenging ethical issues and enormous dimensions posed on the Church in this media-invaded world. However, the significant impacts of digital church cannot be over-emphasized as it provides new opportunities for evangelism and outreach, enabling Christians to share their faith with others through social media, online forums, and digital missionaries. While appraising this significance in reaching out to a wider audience, ethical consideration must be followed because the use of internet facilities for church programs may alter the spread of misinformation and disinformation about Christianity, potentially leading to confusion and misinformation among believers

and non-believers alike. According to (Hurtins, 2020) digital technology can be a distraction from spiritual practices and a source of addiction, potentially undermining Christian values and principles. Sigmon, (2017) asserts that technology on Christian practices has led to a reinterpretation of traditional Christian beliefs, with some embracing new perspectives on issues like sexuality, gender, and social justice. Today, Religion has found its way into the digital space. Digital religion, worship, and piety are becoming more conspicuous than ever in Christianity in Nigeria. This reality has raised a great deal of questions concerning the compatibility of religion and cyberspace. The moral and community aspects of religion have also been somewhat thwarted and the academic study of religion became even more complex.

Ethics of Religious Practices and Technology

The use of technology brings positive impacts and ethical challenges. These challenges range from: **Theological and Philosophical Challenges.**
(i) Reinterpreting traditional beliefs: It challenges traditional religious beliefs and practices, requiring reinterpretation and re-evaluation (ii) Rethinking sacred space and time: it blurs the boundaries between sacred and profane spaces and between traditional notions of time and space. (iii) Re-examining authority and interpretation: digital technologies raise questions about authority and interpretation in religious contexts, particularly regarding online religious content.

Social and Cultural Challenges

(i) Digital divides and inequality: it can exacerbate existing social and economic inequalities, limiting access to digital religious resources and communities. (ii) Cultural homogenization: it can contribute to cultural homogenization, threatening the diversity of religious traditions and practices.

Ethical Challenges

Digital technologies raise concerns about sensitive religious information, confession, marital issues, and others, etc. Ethics in technological practice refers to norms of moral behaviour that must be upheld to avoid harming others (Davies, 2019). Studies show that religious beliefs influence religious character, and character strengthening can be done through religious education. Ethical use of technology helps to avoid abuse and strengthens religious character. Building a religious community through online platforms is also effective for increasing engagement and avoiding the misuse of technology. Ethical education about the use of technology must be instilled from an early age for the younger generation to use technology responsibly. Strengthening the religious character of believers must be an integral part of religious education. Integrating ethics and strengthening religious character will create a society that is responsible, cultured, and solid ethical awareness in this digital era.

Theoretical Framework
Actor-Network Theory (ANT)

This theory was developed by science and technology studies (STS) scholars Bruno Latour, Michael Callon, and John Law (1987), who viewed the world as a network of interconnected human and non-human actors. It examines the relationship between humans, technology, and other actors in shaping communication processes. One of the concepts from this theory is that organizational communication has put to the greatest use of nonhuman agency. This has been recognized through acknowledged roles of technology in organizational settings, and through a broader recognition that agency is not limited to human beings, but is shared with and among others. ANT is an outlined socio-material approach from which the study draws its understanding of digitally mediated religious practices. Though, it has its origin from studies in science and technology, it has recently been employed in several fields adjacent to homiletics to analyse various religious practices, including the fields of theology and pastoral learning (Reite, 2015). The study takes a similar approach, using ANT as a theoretical approach since it provides several salutatory benefits to the field of homiletics and also to digitally mediated religious practice, a lacuna in literature that this paper intends to fill.

According to Latour and his colleagues, the world consists of bits and pieces that are ordered and connected in various ways, but which are often invisible and taken for granted. The processes of acquiring knowledge and the generation of "facts" are, as the theory indicates 'black-boxed' meaning it is hidden (Latour, 1987). The establishment of Christian doctrines is no exception. Once doctrines are approved as ecclesial and orthodox, the controversies that led to their establishment, including the sometimes ugly interactions between ecclesial actors in the process of agreeing, tend to be quickly forgotten (Kaufman and Idestrom 2018). In the doctrine of the Trinity for instance, many attendant councils, treatises, and bitterly contested arguments behind its formalization in the historical record were not widely known by your average contemporary Christians, or taught in a given local parish. An actor also called a "mediator" in ANT terminology, is "anything that does modify a state of affairs by making a difference" (Latour, 1987). Actors "transform, translate, distort, and modify the meaning or the elements they are supposed to carry. Moreover, they are not left unchanged by the process. The importance of translators and mediators surfaces again in the work of Idestrom (2018), describes how doctrines are embodied in the practices of local church life, such as the Eucharist, and how these embodiments serve as mediators in Christian tradition. These doctrinal embodiments carry the Christian tradition into new networks and situations, with neither the doctrines themselves, nor the Christian tradition, left unchanged by the process. The opposite of actors/mediators would be so-called intermediaries—empty vessels, that only transport meaning or message, leaving no impact on the message and remaining themselves unchanged by it.

Conclusion

The study explored the state of religion in the digital age; unveiling the present intersection of faith and technology. From the study, it is clear that the intersection of faith and technology presents both opportunities and challenges. The digital age has given rise to new forms of worship, including online prayer services, virtual pilgrimages, and digital rituals. Younger generations are influenced by these digital devices; giving individual the opportunity to express and negotiate their faith and identity. In addition to the unfolding ideas on innovative technologies towards bridging the existing inequalities and highlighting the need for greater accessibilities and inclusivity, theologians are concerned with the questions about the authority of these technologies and their roles in religious context while opting for critical thinking and discernment. Religious communities must navigate the tension between preserving traditional practices and innovative technologies. It is essential to approach the intersection of faith and technology with a critical, nuanced and inclusive perspective, recognizing both the opportunities and challenges that this intersection presents.

Recommendations

The study recommends that:

(i) Religious leaders should develop critical thinking skills to evaluate online religious content and identify credible sources to avoid misinformation. (ii) Religious leaders should instil in their followers the practice of digital mindfulness and potential digital impact on mental and spiritual well-being. (ii) Intersection of faith and technology should foster understanding and cooperation among diverse religious communities. (iv) Religious seminars, workshops and faith message presentations on ethical issues about the usage of digital technologies should be introduced to members, to avoid online embarrassment on sensitive matters that may cause religious conflicts.

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