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INTERSECTION OF WOMEN, RELIGIOUS ABUSE AND VIOLENCE IN NIGERIA

BY

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Abstract

This study explores the intersection of religion, abuse, and violence against women, focusing on how religious beliefs and institutions contribute to the justification and perpetuation of violence. Religion-based abuse involves physical, sexual, psychological, and emotional harm, often cloaked in religious teachings that reinforce patriarchal norms. The abuse is justified through misinterpretations of religious texts, leading to domestic violence, sexual exploitation, and coercion, which marginalise women. The study highlights how patriarchal religious structures and doctrines perpetuate gender inequality, preventing women from seeking justice or escaping abuse. However, it also recognises the growing movements within religious frameworks advocating for gender equality and women's rights. Feminist theory is used as a critical lens to analyse how religious institutions and teachings can either contribute to or combat violence against women. By examining historical contexts, types of abuse, and the impact on women, the study aims to provide strategies for addressing religion-based violence and empowering women through reinterpreted religious teachings and gender justice advocacy.

Keywords: Religious Abuse, Violence against women, Patriarchy, gender inequality, Feminist theory, *Domestic violence*, *Sexual exploitation*.

Introduction

Violence against women remains a critical global issue, encompassing a wide range of physical, emotional, and psychological abuse. A significant yet frequently overlooked aspect of this violence is religious-based abuse, where religious beliefs, institutions, or figures are manipulated to justify or perpetuate the mistreatment of women. Such abuse can take many forms, including coercing women into specific practices, using religious doctrines to legitimise domestic violence, or marginalising women's roles within religious communities.

The convergence of religious doctrines and cultural norms often reinforces patriarchal structures, limiting women's rights and freedoms and enabling the continuation of this violence (Krook and Restrepo Sanín, 2020). Throughout history, religious texts and interpretations have been used to justify the subordination of women, with many faith traditions promoting male dominance within both the family and society (Ali, 2019). This dynamic is particularly evident in societies where religious teachings heavily influence legal systems, shaping gender roles and societal norms that systematically marginalise women. In some regions, religious codes support harmful practices such as female genital mutilation (FGM), child marriage, and restrictions on women's autonomy over their bodies and decisions (UN Women, 2022).

Moreover, religious institutions may contribute to silencing or dismissing women's experiences of abuse, particularly when perpetrators hold positions of religious authority. In such cases, victims may feel powerless and lack avenues for recourse, fearing retaliation or further ostracisation from their communities (Kang, 2021). The issue is further compounded in societies where cultural and religious norms intersect, creating environments that offer impunity to abusers while silencing victims. Despite these challenges, religious beliefs have also become powerful tools for advocating against violence and empowering women.

Women's rights movements have increasingly emerged from within religious frameworks, challenging patriarchal interpretations and promoting gender equality and justice. Globally, there is growing recognition of the need to address religious abuse as it intersects with gender-based violence (Grung and Thurfjell, 2021). Faith-based organisations and advocates are playing a pivotal role in pushing for reforms within religious institutions to protect and elevate women's rights.

The issue of women, religious abuse, and violence continues to be a widespread problem in many societies. Despite advancements in gender equality and human rights advocacy, women worldwide remain vulnerable to violence justified by patriarchal religious doctrines. This violence has profound physical, psychological, and socio-economic consequences. The current study seeks to examine the intersection of religion, gender, and violence, focusing on the prevalence of religiously motivated abuse against women, its impact, and potential strategies for addressing the issue within various religious contexts.

Theoretical framework

Feminist theory provides a critical lens through which to understand the intersections of gender, power, and violence, particularly in the context of religion. This theoretical perspective seeks to uncover how patriarchal systems and structures within religious institutions contribute to the abuse and marginalisation of women. Feminist theory challenges traditional power hierarchies, advocates for gender equality, and interrogates how religious doctrines and practices have been used to justify or perpetuate violence against women. This section explores how feminist theory applies to the study of religious abuse and violence, highlighting key concepts such as patriarchy, power dynamics, and gender inequality.

Feminist theory is grounded in the belief that gender inequality is a pervasive issue that affects various aspects of society, including religion. It focuses on understanding how power is distributed and maintained within patriarchal structures, which often place men in dominant positions over women. In the context of religious abuse, feminist theory critiques how religious doctrines, practices, and institutions perpetuate gender-based violence and control over women.

At the heart of feminist theory is the concept of patriarchy, a social system in which men hold primary power and dominate roles in political, economic, and social institutions. In many religious traditions, patriarchal structures are deeply ingrained, with men occupying leadership positions and interpreting religious texts. These interpretations often reflect male-centred perspectives, reinforcing gender inequality and justifying the subjugation of women. As Badran (2009) notes, “patriarchy within religious contexts not only legitimises male dominance but also institutionalises violence against women as a means of control and subordination” (p. 14).

In numerous religious traditions, women are portrayed as subordinate to men, both in family life and in the broader religious community. Religious texts and teachings are often used to reinforce this subordination, with women expected to adhere to specific gender roles that limit their autonomy and freedom. For example, in some Christian, Islamic, and Jewish interpretations, women are expected to be obedient to their husbands, reinforcing the idea that male authority is divinely sanctioned (Hassan, 2020).

This theological endorsement of male authority often serves as a foundation for justifying violence against women within religious communities, particularly in the form of domestic violence. Feminist theory emphasises the role of gender inequality in perpetuating violence against women. Within religious contexts, this inequality is often maintained through the interpretation of religious texts and the structure of religious institutions. Feminist scholars argue that many religious traditions have historically marginalised women, limiting their participation in religious life and their ability to challenge abusive practices.

One key issue is the way religious doctrines have been used to justify violence against women. For example, in some interpretations of Islamic texts, men are granted authority over women, including the right to discipline their wives (Ali, 2019). Although progressive scholars and activists often contest these interpretations, they remain influential in many religious communities, contributing to the normalisation of domestic violence.

Similarly, in Christian contexts, the concept of “wifely submission” has been used to justify spousal abuse, with women encouraged to remain silent and endure violence as part of their religious duty (Smith, 2021). Feminist theorists argue that religious abuse is not limited to physical violence but also includes emotional, psychological, and spiritual abuse. For instance, religious leaders may use their authority to manipulate women, convincing them that their suffering is a test of faith or a punishment for disobedience. This form of abuse often leads to feelings of guilt, shame, and powerlessness, making it difficult for women to seek help or leave abusive situations (Walker, 2018).

Feminist theory provides a robust framework for understanding and addressing the issue of religious abuse and violence against women. By critiquing patriarchal structures, challenging gender inequality, and offering pathways for resistance, feminist scholars and activists work to dismantle the systems that perpetuate

violence and marginalisation. Through the reinterpretation of religious texts, advocacy for gender justice, and the empowerment of survivors, feminist theory offers hope for a future in which religious institutions no longer serve as sites of oppression but as sources of healing, justice, and equality for all women.

Historical Context of Women and Religious Abuse

Religious teachings have historically played a significant role in shaping societal norms regarding gender roles and the treatment of women. In many cultures, religious traditions have been used to justify the subjugation of women, portraying them as inferior to men or as inherently sinful. The religious rhetoric around women has often contributed to their victimisation, especially in patriarchal societies where men dominate religious leadership and interpretation of holy texts.

As noted by Anderson (2023), “the entrenchment of patriarchal structures within religious institutions has perpetuated violence and marginalisation of women, reinforcing traditional gender hierarchies” (p. 12). Religiously motivated violence against women can take various forms, including physical, sexual, and psychological abuse. This abuse is often cloaked in religious teachings, making it difficult for victims to seek justice or escape their abusers. For example, in some interpretations of religious doctrines, women may be taught to submit to their husbands or male family members, effectively silencing them in the face of violence (Johnson & Davis, 2022). Additionally, religious institutions often emphasise forgiveness and reconciliation, pressuring victims to remain in abusive relationships (Walker, 2021).

A critical examination of much of our religious history reveals that religious institutions have often, whether explicitly or implicitly, shaped value systems that have tolerated violence against women. Many religious traditions contain examples where the mistreatment and silencing of women are present in authoritative texts. However, within these same traditions lie profound resources that, when explored and given prominence, provide powerful tools for strength, courage, compassion, and justice for those harmed by others within the community.

One such example is the story of Esther in the Hebrew Bible. The narrative turns conventional power dynamics upside down, with men portrayed as foolish or wicked, while the women emerge as strong and courageous. The book opens with Queen Vashti’s defiant refusal to comply with her husband’s command to “display

her beauty” to his drunken guests (Esther 1:11, Jewish Publication Society translation). Her refusal infuriates the king, who fears that her act of disobedience might inspire other wives to defy their husbands, leading to widespread disorder. In response, the king banishes Vashti. This act and the story that follows underscore the tension among power, gender, and control in religious narratives, while also highlighting women’s resistance and strength within the tradition.

In Islam, Alkhateeb (2002) highlights that many texts, which should compel the community to support women facing domestic violence, are often overlooked in the context of marriage. For example, the verse: “Allah (God) loves not that evil should be voiced aloud in public speech, except by one who has been wronged; for Allah (God) Hears and Knows all things” (Qur’an 4:148), serves as explicit permission to speak out against injustice, including abuse within marriage (p. 18). Similar resources from Christianity, Judaism, and Islam can play a crucial role in reshaping how communities treat women who experience domestic violence, offering spiritual grounds for condemning abuse and advocating for justice. Violence in these contexts can also be recognised as a profound violation of religious teachings, framing it as a form of sin.

TYPES OF RELIGIOUS ABUSE AGAINST WOMEN

Domestic Violence Justified by Religion

In many cases, religious doctrines are interpreted to justify domestic violence against women. The idea of male dominance and female submission is embedded in various religious traditions, reinforcing the belief that men have the right to control or discipline women. For example, studies have shown that in some conservative Christian communities, wives are taught to “submit” to their husbands, a concept that abusers have manipulated to justify physical violence (Smith, 2020).

Similarly, in some Islamic communities, interpretations of religious texts have been used to legitimise spousal violence. Although the Quran advocates for kindness and justice, specific interpretations have been used to condone violence against women under the guise of maintaining family honour (Ali & Khan, 2023). Such interpretations fuel cycles of abuse, often leaving women with limited options for escape or protection due to the societal and religious pressures they face.

Sexual Violence and Exploitation

Sexual abuse within religious contexts is another form of violence faced by women. This can occur in various religious settings, such as churches, mosques, and temples, as well as during religious rituals. In some cases, religious leaders exploit their positions of power to sexually abuse women, using the guise of spiritual authority or healing (Henderson and Ortiz, 2021). The abuse is often hidden within religious communities, as victims fear repercussions or being ostracised from their faith.

Sexual exploitation of women is also prevalent in some religious movements, where religious leaders or male members of the congregation justify sexual relationships under the pretext of divine instruction. Such practices further victimise women, making it difficult for them to challenge the abuse or seek justice due to the perceived sacredness of religious leadership (Peters and Miller, 2022).

Psychological and Emotional Abuse

Religious abuse extends beyond physical and sexual violence, often manifesting in psychological and emotional forms. Women may be coerced into adhering to oppressive religious practices that limit their freedoms or self-worth. Emotional manipulation, guilt, and fear of eternal punishment are common tactics used to control women in religious settings. For example, the threat of divine retribution may be employed to keep women in abusive marriages or to prevent them from seeking divorce (Greenwood, 2020).

Additionally, religious teachings that promote the idea of women as inherently sinful or impure contribute to psychological abuse. These teachings can lead women to internalise feelings of shame, guilt, and inadequacy, making it difficult for them to assert their rights or seek help in abusive situations (Johnson, 2021).

Impacts of Religious Abuse and Violence on Women

The effects of religiously motivated abuse and violence are far-reaching, impacting women's physical health, mental well-being, and socio-economic status. Physically, women who experience abuse often suffer from injuries, chronic pain, and reproductive health issues. Psychologically, many victims endure trauma, depression, anxiety, and feelings of worthlessness (Anderson, 2023). The socio-economic implications of abuse are also significant, as women

who face religiously justified violence often experience financial instability, limited access to education, and exclusion from economic opportunities.

Furthermore, religious abuse against women perpetuates gender inequality, reinforcing patriarchal systems that keep women marginalised in religious and societal structures. As noted by Evans (2022), “religiously sanctioned violence against women not only harms the individual victims but also undermines efforts toward gender equality and women’s empowerment” (p. 45).

Addressing Religious Abuse and Violence against Women

Efforts to combat religiously motivated violence against women require a multifaceted approach that addresses both the religious and socio-cultural dimensions of the issue. One key strategy is to promote reinterpretations of religious texts and teachings that emphasise equality, justice, and women's dignity. Religious leaders and institutions play a crucial role in this process, as they hold the authority to challenge harmful interpretations and advocate for women’s rights (Ali and Khan, 2023).

Additionally, legal frameworks must be strengthened to protect women from religiously justified violence. Governments should work to ensure that religious doctrines are not used as a defence for abuse, and that women have access to legal recourse and support services (Walker, 2021). Advocacy and awareness campaigns that challenge harmful religious practices and promote gender equality within religious communities are also essential in addressing the issue.

Conclusion

The issue of religious abuse and violence against women is deeply rooted in patriarchal interpretations of religious doctrines and practices. It manifests in various forms, from domestic violence to sexual exploitation, leaving women vulnerable to physical, psychological, and socio-economic harm. Addressing this issue requires a collaborative effort between religious leaders, legal institutions, and advocacy organisations to challenge harmful interpretations of religious texts, protect victims, and promote gender equality within religious contexts.

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LAND OWNERSHIP IN THE OLD TESTAMENT AND ITS IMPLICATION FOR THE FULANI HERDSMEN IN NIGERIA

BY

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Abstract

Land ownership is a fundamental issue in many societies, and its theological, cultural, and economic implications can shape both historical and contemporary conflicts. This study investigates land ownership in the Old Testament and its relevance to contemporary land disputes between Fulani herders and farming communities in Nigeria. The Old Testament's teachings on land as a communal gift from God, and its principles of stewardship and equity, offer a lens through which to view modern land conflicts. The study adopts a qualitative research design that incorporates both doctrinal, sociological, and empirical methods. The methodology involves Literature Review, case study analysis, interviews, focus groups and empirical analysis. The research examines relevant Biblical texts, legal traditions, and empirical data from Nigerian contexts to offer insights into this intersection. In exploring the theological and sociopolitical dimensions of land ownership, this study considered theories of theological stewardship and conflict resolution. This research concluded by providing insights into potential solutions for the Fulani herders crisis in Nigeria. This study finally recommended that Nigeria consider reforms to clarify land ownership and ensure equitable access for all groups, particularly pastoralists. Religious leaders and community organisations should facilitate dialogue between herders and farmers to build mutual understanding and reduce tensions.

Keywords: Land Ownership, Old Testament, Fulani Herdsmen, Nigeria, Conflicts, Agricultural-Pastoral Relations.

Introduction

Land has historically been a key resource for survival, economic development, and societal cohesion. In the Old Testament, land ownership is deeply intertwined with theological principles, community welfare, and covenantal promises. This contrasts sharply with modern land ownership systems in many parts of the world, particularly in Nigeria, where land disputes are a significant source of conflict. (Abubakar 2021). The Fulani herders, who traditionally rely on open grazing routes for their cattle, have been involved in violent clashes with farming communities, where access to land is at the core of the conflict. This study explores land ownership in the Old Testament and its implications for land-related disputes between Fulani herders and farmers in Nigeria. Through a qualitative analysis of biblical land principles and their applicability to modern land tenure systems in Nigeria, the study seeks to offer practical recommendations for peace and coexistence. (Abubakar 2021).

Statement of the Problem

The ongoing conflicts between Fulani herders and farming communities in Nigeria are a manifestation of complex land ownership and access issues. These conflicts, often marked by violent clashes, loss of lives, destruction of properties, and displacement of people, have escalated in recent years, resulting in significant socio-political and economic challenges. At the heart of the conflict is the struggle for land—its ownership, access, and use. While many factors contribute to this crisis, such as climate change, population pressure, and government failure to address land tenure systems, the role of cultural and religious interpretations of land ownership is often overlooked. The Old Testament provides a theological and ethical framework for land ownership that emphasises communal stewardship, justice, and equitable land distribution. Understanding these principles could offer a new perspective on resolving contemporary land conflicts, particularly in the context of Nigeria's Fulani herders crisis. This study seeks to explore how biblical views on land ownership might inform solutions to land disputes between Fulani herders and farming communities in Nigeria.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To explore the concept of land ownership in the Old Testament, focusing on key theological principles.

2. To examine the socio-political dynamics of land ownership and land use in Nigeria, with particular reference to the Fulani herders crisis.
3. To analyse the relevance of Old Testament land ownership principles in understanding and resolving contemporary land conflicts in Nigeria.
4. To propose solutions to the Fulani herders crisis based on biblical principles of land ownership.
5. To offer policy recommendations for fostering peaceful coexistence between herders and farmers in Nigeria.

Research Questions

The following research questions guide this study:

1. What are the key principles of land ownership in the Old Testament, and how do they reflect God's plan for His people?
2. How do the Fulani herders in Nigeria perceive and use land for pastoral activities?
3. How can the principles of land ownership in the Old Testament inform conflict resolution strategies between Fulani herders and farmers in Nigeria?
4. What are the challenges faced by Fulani herders concerning land ownership, and how can these challenges be addressed through biblical principles?
5. What role can religious leaders, community groups, and policymakers play in resolving land disputes in Nigeria?

Conceptual Clarification

Land Ownership: Land ownership refers to the legal or customary right to use, control, and transfer land. In the Old Testament, land is seen as a divine gift, with people acting as stewards under God's authority. In contrast, in modern Nigeria, land ownership is governed by a mix of statutory laws and traditional practices, which often lead to disputes over competing interests. **Fulani Herdsmen:** The Fulani herders are a predominantly Muslim ethnic group in Nigeria who are traditionally pastoralists. (Yekini, 2017). They rely on cattle grazing, which often requires access to large expanses of land, leading to tensions with farming communities whose land is used for agricultural production. **The Old Testament:** The Old Testament is the first section of the Christian Bible, comprising a collection of religious texts that include laws, narratives, and prophecies. The Old Testament provides theological teachings on land ownership, emphasising God's

ownership of the earth, human stewardship of land, and principles of justice and equity in land distribution. (Taylor 2015).

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in two main theoretical frameworks:

1. **Theological Stewardship Theory:** This theory posits that land ownership, from a biblical perspective, is not merely a right but a responsibility. Humans are stewards of the earth, entrusted by God with its care and management (Genesis 2:15). The Old Testament reinforces the idea that God ultimately owns land, and people are tasked with using it in ways that promote justice, equity, and sustainability.
2. **Conflict Resolution Theory:** This theory emphasises the importance of understanding the underlying causes of conflicts and seeking solutions that foster reconciliation. In the context of the Fulani herder's crisis, this theory can guide the development of dialogue mechanisms and policy frameworks that address the needs of herders and farmers while promoting peace and long-term cooperation.

Methodology

The study uses a qualitative research design that combines doctrinal and sociological methods. The methodology involves the following: **1. Literature Review:** A comprehensive review of biblical texts related to land ownership, particularly in the Old Testament. The review will also include an analysis of scholarly works on land tenure systems in Nigeria and prior research on conflicts involving Fulani herders. **2. Case Study Analysis:** Detailed examination of specific land conflicts between Fulani herders and farming communities in Nigeria, focusing on case studies from the Middle Belt and Northern Nigeria, where these conflicts are most pronounced. **3. Interviews and Focus Groups:** Interviews will be conducted with key stakeholders, including religious leaders, policymakers, herders, farmers, and conflict resolution experts. Focus groups will provide insights into local perspectives on land ownership and the role of religion in resolving disputes. **4. Comparative Analysis:** A comparative analysis of the biblical principles of land ownership with the prevailing land tenure systems in Nigeria, particularly concerning customary land laws and statutory frameworks.

Land Ownership in the Old Testament

According to. (Olorunfemi, 2016), Land ownership in the Old Testament plays a significant role in the history, culture, and religious practices of the Israelites. The concept of land in the Old Testament is intertwined with God's covenant with His

people, where the land is not merely a physical possession but also a symbol of God's promises, blessings, and the Israelites' relationship with Him.

God as the Ultimate Owner of the Land

In the Old Testament, land ownership is ultimately understood as belonging to God. The land was viewed as a divine gift, and God was considered the ultimate owner of all the earth. In Leviticus 25:23, it is stated, "The land is mine, for you are but aliens and my tenants." This reflects the theological understanding that human beings are stewards of the land and that the Israelites were entrusted with it according to God's will.

The Promise of the Land

One of the central themes of the Old Testament is God's promise to give the land of Canaan to Abraham's descendants. In Genesis 12:7, God promises Abraham, "To your offspring I will give this land." This promise is repeated to Isaac and Jacob and becomes a central part of the Israelites' identity. The land of Canaan, later known as Israel, is seen as the fulfilment of God's covenant with the patriarchs and as a place where the Israelites could live and worship God.

Division of the Land

When the Israelites entered the promised land under Joshua's leadership, the land was divided among the twelve tribes of Israel. This division is detailed in Joshua 13-21. Each tribe received a specific portion of the land, which was meant to be passed down through the generations. The land was divided by lots, ensuring that the distribution was seen as divinely guided. However, the land was not an absolute right to the individual but was meant to be shared collectively by the people and governed by the laws that God set out.

Jubilee Year and Land Restoration

In the Old Testament, land ownership was not a permanent, unchangeable possession for any individual or family. The Year of Jubilee (every 50th year) was a key feature of the Israelites' land laws, as outlined in Leviticus 25. This year, all land that had been sold or transferred was returned to its original family owners. The purpose of the Jubilee was to prevent the accumulation of wealth by a few families and to maintain the original distribution of land that was part of God's

covenant. This system ensured that, even during economic hardship or personal debt, no family would permanently lose their ancestral inheritance.

Land as a Blessing and Curse

The land was also seen as a symbol of God's blessing and favour. In Deuteronomy 28, blessings and curses are tied to the people's obedience to God. If the Israelites followed God's commands, they would experience prosperity, fertility, and peace in the land. However, if they turned away from God, the land would become desolate, and they would face exile. The prosperity of the land was directly connected to the moral and spiritual condition of the people.

Inheritance and Family Land

(Adebayo, 2020) posits that the land inheritance was central to maintaining the identity and livelihood of families in ancient Israel. In Numbers 27:8-11, God gives instructions about inheritance, stating that a father's land should be passed to his sons. In the absence of sons, the inheritance would go to daughters or, if there were no direct descendants, to the nearest male relative. This law helped preserve the family lineage and ensure that land remained within the tribe and family. Land ownership was not just an economic asset but a key component of Israel's social structure.

Rights and Protection of Landowners

In the Old Testament, various laws were established to protect the rights of landowners and ensure fair treatment. For example, the Law of Boaz in the Book of Ruth highlights the practice of gleaning, where people experiencing poverty, including widows, were allowed to collect leftover crops from the edges of fields. This law ensured that those without land still had access to food and were not wholly excluded from the benefits of the land. Additionally, in Exodus 22:5-6, it is stated that if someone caused damage to another person's field or crops, restitution should be made. This illustrates the principle of justice and responsibility in land ownership. (Adebayo, 2020)

Theological Significance of the Land

The land in the Old Testament is more than just a physical space; it is a sign of God's covenant with His people. It represents God's faithfulness and the promise of a place for the Israelites to dwell in peace and prosperity. The land also

symbolises God's presence, especially in the establishment of the Temple in Jerusalem, where God's presence would dwell among His people. The land is seen as the place where God's will can be fully realised, and where His people can worship Him in freedom.

Land Ownership in Nigeria

Land ownership in Nigeria is a complex and multifaceted issue shaped by historical, cultural, legal, and economic factors. The system of land ownership in Nigeria has evolved from traditional communal practices to modern statutory laws. Understanding land ownership in Nigeria requires examining the key systems, including customary, statutory, and the challenges surrounding land tenure, disputes, and land reforms.

Historical Context of Land Ownership

Traditionally, land in Nigeria was owned communally, with indigenous people holding collective rights to land resources. Each ethnic group or community controlled its land, which was considered the community's property, with individuals or families having usage rights rather than full ownership. Land was primarily used for agriculture, and communities had systems to manage and allocate it. However, the arrival of colonial powers, especially the British, introduced significant changes to the land ownership system. The British colonial administration implemented policies to centralise control over land, most notably through the Land Tenure Systems Ordinance of 1910, which introduced the concept of government ownership of land in the name of the Crown. This system allowed the government to acquire and manage land, particularly for economic and administrative purposes, leading to changes in how land was accessed and controlled. (Abubakar, 2021)

The two primary Systems in Nigeria

There are two primary systems of land ownership in Nigeria today: Customary Land Ownership and Statutory Land Ownership.

Customary Land Ownership: Customary land ownership refers to the traditional system where land is owned and managed according to the customs and practices of local communities. Under this system, land is typically not owned in the modern legal sense; communities, families, or individuals hold it based on ancestral rights

or customary use. These rights are usually recognised within the local community and are passed down through generations. In customary land systems, decisions about land allocation, use, and inheritance are often made by local leaders or elders, and the land is typically used for farming, hunting, or other communal purposes. However, customary land rights can be ambiguous, and the system lacks formal documentation, making it prone to disputes.

Statutory Land Ownership: In Nigeria, statutory land ownership is governed by national laws, particularly the Land Use Act of 1978. The Land Use Act nationalised land ownership by vesting all land in the country under the control of the government (both federal and state). Under this system, the government holds land on behalf of the people, and individuals or entities can obtain land only through allocation, lease, or grant from the government.

Challenges in Land Ownership

Land Disputes and Conflicts: Land disputes are a significant challenge in Nigeria, arising from conflicts between customary and statutory land ownership systems, as well as disputes over boundaries, inheritance, and the validity of land titles. In many rural areas, people still rely on customary land ownership, which can lead to misunderstandings or disagreements when statutory land ownership laws are applied. Ethnic and communal conflicts also contribute to land disputes. In some areas, land is a source of conflict between farmers and pastoralists, with competition for land and resources often leading to violent clashes. Additionally, there are instances where land is seized or appropriated by individuals or groups, leading to displacement and tensions. (Usman, 2019)

Lack of Proper Documentation: The absence of clear documentation in customary land ownership makes it difficult to establish legal rights over land. Many people in rural areas lack formal land titles, and the absence of a land registry often leads to fraudulent land transactions. Even where titles exist, they can sometimes be disputed, leading to legal battles and uncertainty.

Urbanisation and Land Speculation: Rapid urbanisation in Nigerian cities has increased demand for land, particularly in metropolitan areas such as Lagos, Abuja, and Port Harcourt. This has led to rising property values, land speculation, and the encroachment on farmland and traditional land. In many cases, the displacement of local communities and small farmers has occurred to make way

for large-scale real estate developments, often without adequate compensation or relocation arrangements.

Insecurity and Land Grabbing: Land grabbing is a significant issue in which individuals, companies, or government agencies unlawfully seize land from its original owners or communities. This is particularly prevalent in regions experiencing insecurity or where people have fled due to violence, leaving their land vulnerable to unlawful appropriation.

Government Land Reforms and Policies: Over the years, the Nigerian government has introduced several reforms to address challenges in land ownership and streamline land management. Key reforms include the Land Use Act of 1978, introduced to standardise land ownership and management across Nigeria. It sought to eliminate the inequalities in land ownership, particularly the unequal access to land in urban and rural areas. National Land Reform Policy: The government has also introduced policies to modernise land administration, strengthen land tenure security, and encourage investment in agriculture and real estate. These reforms focus on enhancing transparency, simplifying land transactions, and addressing land disputes. Land Titling and Registration: Efforts have been made to establish land registries and facilitate land titling to provide more precise documentation and reduce land disputes. Some states have introduced digital land registries to improve efficiency and reduce corruption in land allocation.

Empirical Analysis

The empirical analysis of this study will present its findings in a clear, understandable format. Data from the survey will be analysed using simple percentages to highlight key patterns and trends in land ownership practices and perceptions of conflict. The analysis will also provide insights into how Old Testament principles can be applied to mitigate those conflicts.

DATA COLLECTION

Table 1: Principles of Land Ownership in the Old Testament

Biblical Principle	Old Testament References	Description
Divine Ownership	Leviticus 25:23	God owns the land; humans are stewards
Stewardship	Genesis 1:28	Humans must responsibly manage the land
Inheritance	Numbers; 27:8-11	The land is passed down as an inheritance to descendants
Jubilee	Leviticus, 25:10	Land is periodically restored to its original owners.

Table 2: Perceptions of Land Ownership among Fulani Herdsmen

Perception	Percentage (%)	Description
Land is a communal resource	35%	Land should be shared among the community for grazing
The land belongs to the government	25%	The government is the rightful owner of the land
Land belongs to individuals	40%	Individuals or families hold ownership of specific lands

Table 3: Causes of Land Conflicts between Fulani Herdsmen and Farmers

Causes of conflict	Percentage (%)	Description
Competing land use	50%	Herders and farmers
Completing land use	30%	Overgrazing and desertification reduce the availability of land
Cultural differences	20%	Ethnic and religious differences exacerbate tensions.

Table 4: Proposed Solutions Based on Old Testament Principles

Solution	Percentage (%)	Description
Promote communal land usage	40%	Encourage shared grazing areas based on biblical stewardship
Implement land restoration programs	30%	Periodically, redistribute land to resolve disputes
Enforce Government regulation	30%	Ensure land laws are clear and enforced fairly

Discussion:

The Old Testament emphasises that land is not merely a resource to be exploited but a divine gift that must be used with care and responsibility. The principles of divine ownership, stewardship, and inheritance could offer valuable guidelines for managing land disputes in Nigeria. For instance, the idea of communal land usage could encourage Fulani herders and farmers to cooperate rather than compete for land. Additionally, the biblical concept of restoring the land every 50 years could inspire land redistribution policies to ensure fair access and resolve disputes.

Conclusion

The study demonstrates that Old Testament principles of land ownership, emphasising divine stewardship, equity, and communal responsibility, offer valuable insights into resolving contemporary land conflicts. By applying these principles, particularly the ideas of shared prosperity and the just distribution of land, stakeholders in Nigeria can work towards a more peaceful coexistence between Fulani herders and farming communities. Religious leaders, policymakers, and community groups must collaborate to address the root causes of the conflict and develop solutions that align with both cultural and theological values. Land ownership in the Old Testament is closely tied to God's covenant with the Israelites. It represents divine provision, blessings, and the importance of justice, responsibility, and stewardship. While land was a source of wealth and security, it also reminded people that it ultimately belonged to God and that its possession was conditional on their faithfulness to Him. The laws and practices surrounding land ownership, inheritance, and use were intended to ensure that the land was shared equitably and responsibly, reflecting God's care for all His people.

Recommendations

This research suggests and recommends the following:

Strengthening Legal Frameworks: Nigeria should consider reforms that clarify land ownership and ensure equitable access to land for all groups, particularly pastoralists. **Promoting Inter-Community Dialogue:** Religious leaders and community organisations should facilitate dialogue between herders and farmers to build mutual understanding and reduce tensions. **Conflict Mediation Training:** Training local leaders in conflict resolution skills can help address land disputes peacefully.

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DIGITAL TURN AND ITS IMPLICATIONS ON CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE AND FAMILY LIFE IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The 21st Century has been described as the technological age. This is an era in which everything is becoming computerised, and the world is increasingly interconnected through technological advancements. This has made it easy for people to see through the world, knowing what is happening in faraway countries right from the comfort of their homes. However, its negative implications on marriage and family life cannot be denied. Scholars have written extensively on the advantages and disadvantages of the digital turn in the 21st century. Little attention has been given to the implications of this advancement on marriage and family life. This paper, therefore, examined the digital turn and its implications for Christian marriage and family life in Nigeria. The study employed Social Exchange Theory. Primary data were collected through online interviews with 50 respondents, including married men and women. Secondary data were sourced from books, journal articles, newspapers and other publications. The study revealed that the digital turn brought both positive and negative implications for marriage and family. Close observations show that the negative implications of the digital turn outweigh the positive ones. The study concluded that the digital turn has been both a blessing and a curse for marriage and family life in Nigeria. The study recommended that Christian families should learn how to use their technological apparatus coupled with the fear of God so as not to negatively affect their families to the extent of causing emotional trauma to their marriage partners and/or tearing apart the family relationship.

Keywords: Apparatus, Christian, Family Life, Marriage.

1. Introduction

The institution of marriage has been with men for ages. It is the first institution that God made for man, as contained in Genesis 2. Oke (2004)¹, Little and McGivern (2014)², and Amedie (2015)³ have rightly observed that marriage and family are key structures in human societies, as they form the basic social building blocks that connect different kinship groupings. Besides, it is a lifelong journey with daily interaction between husband and wife in the most intimate way. Until recent times, when the world witnessed the digital revolution, this intimate interaction between couples had become a distant memory. However, one cannot deny that digitalisation is an indispensable tool for people, including families, in the 21st century. It shows that knowledge is really increasing (Dan. 12:4).

Sara Huisman and Susan Catapano (2012)⁴, quoting Lanigan, observed that technology is ever-changing, with advancements in television, the internet, computers, cell phones, music devices, gaming devices, and so on. All these developments are uniting the world. This has made it easy for people to see through the world, knowing what is happening in faraway countries right from the comfort of their homes. However, the negative implications of these technological apparatuses for marriage and family life cannot be denied. The lack of a classroom where people can be trained to use these devices has led to their misuse, which has worsened problems in romantic relationships.

The existing studies have focused on the history of the digital revolution (Daniel, 2009)⁵, advantages and disadvantages of digital technology (Katherine and Katrina, 2014,⁶ Daniel, 2017)⁷, and a few of these studies have been conducted that address the overall conflict families encounter with the use of technology. Therefore, the current study examines the digital turn and its implications on Christian marriage and family life in Nigeria.

The paper is structured as follows. The first part introduces the digital turn and Christian marriage. The second part discusses marriage before the advent of digital technology. The third part focuses on the implications of digital technology on marriage and family life in Nigeria. The fourth part considers how digital technology can be used to the advantage of Christian marriage.

This study is significant because it will help individual families understand how to use technological advancements in ways that do not negatively affect their marriages and family life. The work would also go a long way toward reducing social crimes. Another significance of the study is that it will go a long way toward

advancing enlightenment and education and will serve as a reliable academic document for future research on digital advancement and Christian marriage.

The study employed both primary and secondary data sources. The primary sources were online interviews conducted with 50 respondents, including married men and women. However, secondary data were sourced from books, journal articles, Newspapers, and other publications.

2. Theoretical Framework

The work is anchored on Social Exchange Theory, propounded by George Homans in the 1950s.⁸ According to this theory, individuals in a relationship engage in a cost-benefit analysis to determine the overall value of the relationship. The benefits of a relationship can include love, companionship, and emotional support, while the costs can include time, emotional and financial investments. Also, the theory emphasises that social behaviour is based on the exchange of rewards and punishments between individuals. Therefore, Homans argued that people weigh the costs and benefits of their actions before deciding to engage in a particular behaviour, and that social relationships are maintained through a process of exchange in which individuals seek to maximise their rewards while minimising their costs. This theory is relevant to the current study because Christian couples will have to weigh the costs and benefits of social media for their marital relationships before seeking to maximise the benefits and minimise the costs.

3. Marriage and Family Life before Digital Technology

This study investigates the implications of digital technology on marriage and family life in Nigeria. Therefore, some questions were posed to respondents to be answered based on their personal experiences. Below are the respondents' responses to research questions.

Some of our respondents believe that marriage before the advent of digital technology was a sweet experience. Reasons highlighted include the following:

- a. **Communication:** The interviewees believe that there was good face-to-face communication among family members before the advent of digital technology. Families: fathers, mothers, and children usually have a good time interacting, unlike recent times when everyone is busy on their phones on one social media or another. This has made family communication a distant memory.

- b. **Social Connectivity:** Interviewees admitted that before digital technology, there was no easy social connection with old friends, families and relatives, which Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, etc., now make possible.
- c. **Transmission of Information:** Before the advent of digital technology, the standard means of information transmission was through letters. Lovers write letters to each other if there is any information they want to pass on to their partners. On this note, 100% of our respondents affirmed that such a letter, in most cases, takes three to four months to reach its destination. Unlike in recent times when you send a text message to your lover, and within a twinkle of an eye, it gets to them/, and you receive the reply in a jiffy.
- d. **Sexual Immorality:** Respondents admitted that there were fornication and adultery before the computer age, but not as rampant as it is now. Young guys and ladies now engage in illicit sex through the Facebook platform and hookup applications, which in the long run have an adverse effect when they get married. Many of these young guys and ladies can no longer control themselves sexually because of their exposure to many sexual partners, which was a result of social media friends. The same applies to married men and women. Formerly, we used to know 'aristos', that is, a situation whereby married men engaged in transactional sex with university ladies. This is no longer so because the advent of digital technology has brought various ways: Facebook, hookup applications, WhatsApp, 'Facebook Messenger', etc., through which married men can have access to young ladies and married women for transactional sex.
- e. **Domestic Violence:** Interviewees claimed that there was less domestic violence before the digital age. There had been many recorded incidents of domestic violence associated with cell phone conversations between couples, which led to the death of either party or, at times, both. This is one of the negative implications of digital technology. This fact is in line with a Sunday Tribune publication published on 4th June, 2017, a newlywed, seven months pregnant wife, whose wedding was less than a year ago, sets herself and her new husband ablaze because of sexual unfaithfulness. On this note, Kola Oyelere writes that:

The woman allegedly accused her husband of infidelity, shortly after eavesdropping on a phone conversation between him and an unidentified lady, who called him at about 12 midnight. Allegedly emotionally disturbed by the tone of the conversation between her husband and the unknown lady, she reportedly reached for a keg of petrol within reach and lit a match, which eventually exploded and engulfed their entire home. At the time of the incident, the bride was pregnant. She died in the inferno, but her husband did not die immediately as he escaped to a neighbour's house through his front balcony. He was rushed to a nearby hospital. He, however, died sometime later due to the extent of severe burns on his body.⁹

- f. **Divorce:** The proliferation of social media platforms has exposed many young guys and ladies to what they call “social media suitors/lovers.” This has led many of these young guys and ladies to rush into marriage without patiently studying their so-called “social media suitors” before transferring their romantic relationships into marriage. Hence, their marriages could not stand the test of time. This does not exempt the adult men and women. Social media now makes it easy for married men and women to reconnect with their exes. The reunion of these so-called “ex-lovers” has resulted in frictions in many homes through their engagement in illicit sex, which in most cases causes the dissolution of marriages. 48 (96%) of our respondents said divorce was less prevalent in society than it had been in recent times.

4. **Implications of the Digital Turn on Marriage and Family Life in Nigeria**

Technology is now part of our everyday life (Roger Powley, Wilhelmina Louw, and Glenda, 2011)¹⁰, and, as we have said earlier, it has been the twin of both good and evil for marriage and family generally. Here, we shall consider the good of digital technology in marriage before we go to its negative implications.

4.1 **The Good of Digital Technology in Marriage**

It is an open secret that the 21st Century has been described as the technological age, an age in which everything is becoming digitalised, and the world is becoming more united through technology. According to McKenna et al. (2002)¹¹, advances in technology have also influenced family members' connections. Participation in

online activities can enhance intimacy and feelings of closeness between partners, partly because computer users are less inhibited in their communication than in face-to-face communication (Cooper and Sportolari, 1997)¹².

Parker et al (2013)¹³ opined that technology provides good opportunities for couples to connect and satisfy both functional and emotional needs. For example, Pettigrew (2009)¹⁴ found that text messages allow couples to communicate a great deal without those around the senders or receivers overhearing, which, in most cases, can affect the increase of intimacy and the feeling of closeness with one's partner. Couples can communicate with their families who are far away from home through WhatsApp and Messenger video calls. Meanwhile, Sarah Huisman and Susan Catapano (2012)¹⁵ observed that adults and adolescents use computers and cell phones via email to keep in touch with peers, romantic partners, and family members. The extended networks of friends available through social media, such as Facebook, allow people to stay in touch across the country. Access to the internet connects users to information and cultures around the world (Sarah Huisman and Susan Catapano, 2012).¹⁶ Also, it helps families to stay in touch despite being far away from one another.

In agreement with existing studies, the respondents reported that digital technology is beneficial to their families in many respects, including communication, social connectivity, entertainment, and access to information/News around the world. It is also beneficial and has greatly helped them in their businesses, academics, children's education, and even their sexual lives.

Moreover, through social media, especially Facebook, people now have choices of marriage partners, especially for those aspiring to marry. There are many comedians who, through what they call "Blind Date", give several men and women who perhaps might not be able to toast a man or woman, the privilege to get someone to marry. Also, many radio and TV presenters assist the public with marital issues. Some are anchoring programs in which people who have experienced delays in getting married are matched. Others anchor daily and weekly radio and TV family programs through which they attend to marital issues that could have torn many marriages apart. Through these programs, many people get relief, and critical marital issues are being resolved. Some of these Radio and TV presenters include Alihaj Oriyomi Hamzat, Mrs Yemisi Kilatise and a host of others in Ibadan, Lagos, Ondo, Osun, Ekiti, etc. Also, there are legal cases involving marriage matters, whose proceedings are broadcast live on social media,

which has benefited many families. There are also many marriage counsellors and family therapists who use social media platforms to carry out their work. All these are for the good of the masses, the home inclusive.

4.2 The Negative Implications of the Digital Turn on Marriage and Family Life

- a. **Communication Gap:** One of the greatest evils of digital technology in this era, in marriage, is the communication gap. Family members are no longer engaging in face-to-face communication. Everyone is always on their cell phone and on one social platform or another, even while living under the same roof. When one critically observes, one would be apt to say that the communication problem ruined Adam's marriage when he failed to accurately communicate God's instruction to his wife (Gen. 2:16-17). This is evidenced in the way Eve presented God's instruction to the serpent, *"But of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God hath said, Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die"* while the instruction is, *"But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die"* (Gen. 3:2-3). The communication fault completely changed the whole story.

In the case of digital technology, improper use of social media platforms has significantly harmed family communication, leading to many problems in marriage and family today. According to Sophia (2023), a communication breakdown might involve dishonest, disrespectful, or distant conversations, or no conversation at all. She added that it is easy to become distracted by text messages, emails, and social media updates. When conversations between family members are constantly interrupted by technology, it is difficult to "be in the moment." This can also lead children to share less information with their parents. The interviewees attested that misuse of digital technology has affected their families' communication. Some respondents claimed that social media platforms are eroding face-to-face interactions within the family, and that even children spend hours in their rooms playing games on their phones without coming to the living room to interact with their parents.

- b. **Emotional Trauma:** Some interviewees claimed that social media also brought in emotional trauma engendered from a lack of concern for marriage partners due to chatting with online friends to the extent of causing a bad mood for either of the parties. One interviewee lamented that her husband would not join her in bed until 2:00-3:00 am. In fact, sometimes he slept on the living room chair. She claimed she had discussed the issue with her husband repeatedly, but he did not change. “This has been causing me sleepless nights”, she lamented. Another respondent claimed that the issue of digital technology has been a source of tension in her marriage, as her husband always brings work home. When he comes home from work, shortly after eating, he returns to his laptop and stays at the computer until bedtime. Many times, “I left him on the laptop and goes to bed, even at weekends. He does not even bother about my feelings any longer. His excuse is that he is working on the system for the good of the family,” she lamented.

Another interviewee lamented that his wife is always fond of watching YouTube or downloading videos whenever there is a minor misunderstanding, which has been affecting their relationship. He claimed that when the woman was supposed to have given him his conjugal rights, she wouldn’t until the feelings went down on him. He added that this issue has been causing problems in their family for some time now.

- c. **Children’s Education:** Another area where social media has impacted family life is the matter of children’s education. When children are exposed to cell phones, their academic performance is often affected. Many of these children engage in various games to the extent that they lose focus on their education. 11 (22%) of the interviewees agreed with this. However,
- d. **Immorality:** Many married men and women now see social media as an avenue whereby they can efficiently engage the opposite sex for illicit sex through Facebook and hookup applications. This act, in one way or another, affects marital relationships. 45 (90%) of the respondents attested to this fact, while 8 (16%) of the respondents

claimed that their spouses, at one time or another, have cheated on them through social media platforms.

- e. **Family Breakup:** Due to sexual unfaithfulness caused by social media platforms, many marital relationships have been strained, while some spouses have eventually broken up with their partners.
- f. **Economic Implication:** Some interviewees claimed that the slogan “Data is Life” has been true in their families. They said that one will buy data to surf the internet even though there is no food at home. This increases the family expenditure.
- g. **Sexual Life:** Some respondents lamented that their sexual lives had been greatly affected by the exposure of their spouses to porn sites. One interviewee told us that both she and her husband almost lost their lives in the process of practising what they learnt on porn sites. Meanwhile, another respondent claimed that her spouse had not been giving her her conjugal rights as he ought to, due to his engagement with social media friends, which takes up much of his time.
- h. **Divorce:** The 21st century, otherwise known as the technological age or computer age, has witnessed a lot of dissolution of marriage than ever before. 39 (78%) of the respondents agreed that the misuse of digital technology has been a cause of divorce in recent years.

The Nigerian Tribune reported in 2016 that there were well over 30,000 recorded cases of dissolved marriages in just six States: Lagos, Rivers, Akwa Ibom, Delta, Imo, and Bayelsa (Ehoro and Badey, 2022).¹⁸ This was a result of the misuse of digitalisation in marriage and family. It was also noted in a recent study that social media contributes immensely to marital instability in Nigeria (Ehoro and Badey, 2021).¹⁹

As we have said earlier, social media platforms have made it easy for married men and women to reconnect with their exes, which in most cases leads to infidelity in marriage and thereby results in divorce. On this note, a recent study published in *Computers in Human Behaviour* compared state-by-state divorce rates with per-capita Facebook accounts. The study found a link between social media use and reduced marital quality across all models analysed. It also found that

a 20% annual increase in Facebook enrollment was associated with a 2.18% to 4.32% increase in divorce rates. The study's model, based on individual survey results, predicts that people who do not use social media are 11% happier in their marriages than those who use it regularly (McKinley, 2023).²⁰

5. Recommendations

To prevent the negative implications of digitalisation on Christian marriage, Nigerian couples need to be conscious of how they use their technological apparatus and social media platforms, coupled with the fear of God, so as not to negatively affect their families to the extent of causing emotional trauma to their marriage partners. Each family can set rules to guide their use of social media and foster a healthy relationship.

However, they should be conscious of their marriage covenants to keep it. Also, they should realise that loneliness was one of the reasons God instituted marriage in the first place, and that it must be guarded jealously so that none of the parties will experience loneliness after marriage. Therefore, they should not allow cell phones, iPods, Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, YouTube videos, Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, video games, and so on to disrupt their attention or face-to-face communication, which, in most cases, leads to feelings of loneliness and abandonment. This is paramount in a marital relationship.

Moreover, technology is changing at a rapid pace, and to master the latest technology, parents are advised to continuously spend time learning new devices, apps, social media sites, and even "languages", including what certain emojis mean, to guide their children or keep them safe from the dangers associated with technology. They should also jointly train their children to use their cell phones and social media platforms responsibly, in ways that support their studies rather than jeopardising their education. They should limit the time they spend on their phones. In fact, parents should not buy cell phones for children aged 8 to 15, as this is the time they are expected to focus squarely on their studies for better performance.

Moreover, Church leaders are expected to emphasise the evil of social media in Christian marriage rather than its benefits. This will help minimise the rate of domestic violence, heartbreaking, emotional trauma, and social crimes, which are associated with digital advancement in recent times.

6. Conclusion

The digital turn has been a medium for social connectivity, easier communication between married partners, the dissemination of information among family members, and the promotion of business ideas, which, in most cases, aid families' finances, entertainment, and so on.

However, marriage and family life before the advent of digitalisation was a sweet experience in the sense that there was less domestic violence, breaking of partners' hearts, which in most cases leads to emotional trauma to either of the parties and social crimes. Family communication was good and regular. During those times, nothing could have taken a couple's attention away from each other or from their household, as it does now. Faithfulness to marriage partners was high; hence, divorce was less rampant in society.

Finally, the advent and misuse of digitalisation have greatly affected marriages in several ways, which include either of the parties experiencing loneliness, emotional trauma, and/or poor performance in children's education. Many couples now see social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram and hook-up apps as an avenue for engaging the opposite sex in illicit sex, which in most cases leads to a family break-up. Many couples no longer have face-to-face interaction with family members. Instead, some chat with online friends, while others spend time on YouTube or download videos at the expense of their families' happiness. Therefore, it can be concluded that the digital turn has been both a blessing and a curse for marriage and family life, especially in Nigeria. Close observations through this study show that the negative implications of this digitalisation on marriage outweigh the positive ones.

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FROM MEMBERS TO FOLLOWERS, TO SUBSCRIBERS: THE METAMORPHOSIS OF DIGITAL RELIGION IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Today, in Nigeria and in some other regions, it is no longer a global pandemic that has triggered the forced migration of religious practices toward digital alternatives. Banditry, kidnapping, terrorism, insurgency, insecurity, limited access to social amenities and infrastructures, rising population, harsh economy and evolving digital inventions, technologies and innovations are redefining religion and religious space globally. Affiliation with a religious group is also undergoing a radical shift from physical visitors becoming members to followers and, eventually, subscribers via various digital tools, with friendlier criteria and procedures rather than the traditional physical membership requirements. The purpose of this paper is to identify the digital tools, their usage, and how they have enriched the digital faith experience and strengthened groups and communities outside the physical religious space/building. This study, therefore, focuses on the Christian religion with emphasis on the rapidly growing Pentecostal Christian group in Nigeria. This research adopts a qualitative approach, utilising interviews, participant observations, and other empirical materials to examine the sustainability of this religious shift and its implications for physical church membership and religious space.

Keywords: COVID-19, Digital Discipleship, Digital Religion, Digital Tool, Sustainable Development Goals (SDG).

Introduction

In recent years, digital technology has dramatically reshaped various aspects of human life, including religious practices. Traditional spiritual communities, once confined to physical spaces such as churches, mosques, and temples, have increasingly found platforms in virtual spaces, allowing for more flexible, accessible, and diverse forms of spiritual engagement. Social media platforms (Gbenle, 2025), websites, and streaming services have transformed how individuals connect with their faiths, breaking down geographic, cultural, and social barriers (Campbell and Tsuria, 2020).

Historically, religious communities operated through membership models, where physical attendance, community involvement, and hierarchical structures defined belonging. However, the rise of the internet has introduced new forms of spiritual participation, such as online followers and subscribers, moving away from traditional membership to virtual interactions (Geraci, 2014). This shift has been particularly evident in the rise of influencers, faith leaders, and organisations that leverage digital platforms to build global spiritual communities. The dynamic nature of digital religion enables followers to access faith-based content anytime and anywhere, creating more individualised forms of worship, learning, and engagement. Digital religion encompasses not only “online religion” (i.e., traditional religions replicated online) but also hybrid, mediated forms of religious experience that combine online and physical spaces (Evolvi 2022). Thus, digital religion is not simply religion transmitted via technology, but religion re-shaped by technology — with profound implications for worship, authority, community, and theological meaning.

Previously, the church relied on traditional communication methods, such as sermons, pamphlets and word of mouth to spread its message. The arrival of print media in the 15th century marked a significant shift, enabling the broader dissemination of religious texts and ideas. However, the potential for mass communication truly expanded in the 20th century with the rise of electronic media. Radio and television became powerful tools for reaching broader audiences, breaking geographical barriers and allowing churches to extend their influence beyond local communities. The elite makeup of several Pentecostal congregations in no small way unites them with modern technologies. Pentecostal missions usher in a massive emancipation of members from non-Pentecostal missions and from other religions through media contact. In a bid to find ways of

survival amidst the social, economic, cum political unrest facing the nation, Nigeria, these have energised a steady call for socio-religious cum economic programmes and interventions by Pentecostal missions, thereby creating avenues for Pentecostalism to thrive. According to Gbenle (2025), some significant characteristics of Pentecostalism include the emphasis on the gift of the Holy Spirit, works of faith, healing, prophecy, prosperity teachings, and speaking in tongues, among other church practices. Fellowship meetings and Bible study sessions are also standard features in these churches.

In Nigerian Pentecostalism, communication channels play a crucial role in spreading teachings, sermons and information among the congregants. The communication channel encompasses electronic, print, broadcast, and social media. In the work of Mepaiyeda. S. M. and Oluwadoro. J.O. (2017) noted that social media, including blogs, YouTube, TikTok, Myspace, Facebook, Twitter, and podcasts, has contributed to social networking and the Church's expansion among members of The Redeemed Christian Church of God. To buttress this claim, Adeloye J.O. stated that the development of science and technology has positively impacted the missions of various religious bodies and organisations. The use of media technologies by churches and para -church organisations is considered as an acceptable weapon for God's army in the battle against Satan. Gbenle (2025)

The purpose of this paper is to identify the digital tools used and to analyse the shift from traditional religious membership to digital followership and subscription models. Through this analysis, the study explores the implications of this transformation for religious identity, community, and practice. As religious institutions adapt to new technological environments, this metamorphosis warrants a critical examination of how digital tools and platforms are redefining the relationship between individuals and their spiritual practices.

The emergence of digital religion and the use of digital tools among Churches in Nigeria

Before the digital age, religious engagement was primarily experienced in physical spaces such as places of worship, community gatherings, and personal prayer. Membership in religious communities was marked by attendance, participation, and affiliation with a specific faith group or institution. Rituals, sermons, and communal worship were predominantly localised experiences facilitated by clergy

or spiritual leaders, with the physical church or temple serving as the centre of spiritual space (Campbell, 2017). In this traditional framework, religion was a collective, embodied practice rooted in shared spaces and communal activities.

The rise of the internet in the late 20th century, however, began to change the landscape of religious engagement. The advent of websites, email lists, and early social platforms offered new ways for people to connect with their faiths, often transcending geographical boundaries. In the 2000s, with the explosion of social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram, religious content began to proliferate online. Clergy, spiritual leaders, and organisations began using these platforms to share sermons, religious teachings, and other content with a broader audience, enabling followers to engage with their faith virtually (Hutchings, 2015). Social media has since become a key tool for religious leaders, enabling them to nurture communities and followers beyond the walls of physical spaces.

Key milestones in the digital transformation of religion include the creation of online churches and virtual prayer groups, the rise of faith-based podcasts and livestreaming, and the development of faith-focused apps. For instance, in the early 2000s, the first digital religious services were launched, allowing people to participate in worship remotely. With these advancements, religious practices shifted from being tied to physical locations to being accessible online globally, marking a significant transformation in how spirituality is practised and experienced (Campbell and Tsuria, 2020).

The rise of digital platforms has significantly transformed traditional religious practices and communities, shifting from physical congregations to virtual spaces. In this transformation, the roles of religious followers have evolved—from being church members to social media followers and digital subscribers. Social media platforms, streaming services, and apps now serve as primary venues for worship, creating new forms of virtual congregations in which technology, rather than face-to-face encounters, mediates interaction. As a result, this shift necessitates a re-evaluation of the dynamics between spiritual leaders and followers, as well as of how the digital landscape influences participation in religious practices.

Table 1: Shows the names of some Churches and Christian groups in Nigeria and their usage of digital tools.

S/No	Name	Digital tools (FB-Facebook, IG-Instagram, YT-YouTube)	Digital tool usage (what it is used for)	Congregation/ Subscribers As obtained from online
1	Redeemed Christian Church of God, Lagos	Website, YouTube, FB, IG, RCCG App (Open Heavens), Zoom	Livestream, sermons, events, and daily personal devotion	9.9 Million members
2	Living Faith Church	Website, YouTube, FB, IG, App	Livestream, giving, events	6 Million members
3	Christ Embassy	Website, YouTube, IG, FB, Love world	Media streaming	Millions (global)
4	Deeper Life Bible Church, Lagos	Website, YouTube, FB, Telegram	Sermons, discipleship	~800k members
5	Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries, Lagos	Website, YouTube, FB, WhatsApp	Prayer programs	300+ branches
6	SCOAN/Emmanuel TV	Emmanuel TV, YT, FB	Broadcasts	1M+ YT (historical)
7	Dunamis International Abuja	Website, YT, FB, App	Livestream from Glory Dome	Over 100,000 capacity
8	House on the Rock Lagos	Website, YT, FB, IG	Events, The Experience	Over 10k capacity
9	Daystar	Website, YT, FB, IG, App	Sermons, leadership	Tens of thousands
10	Salvation Ministries	Website, YT, FB, IG	Livestream	Large HQ attendance
11	Champions Royal Assembly	Website, YT, FB	Livestream	Large auditoriums
12	Apostolic Church Nigeria	Website, FB, YT	Services	10k temple capacity
13	Salvation Army Nigeria	Website, FB	Community outreach	N/A
14	Commanding The Day	YT, FB, WhatsApp	Prayer nights	High livestream turnout
15	Faith Tabernacle (Winners)	Website, YT	Crusades	50,000 capacity
16	Sinach	YT, Spotify, IG, FB	Music ministry	2.46M YT subscribers
17	Frank Edwards (Music group)	YT, IG, FB	Music ministry	433k YT subscribers
18	JoePraize (Music group)	YT, IG	Music ministry	622k YT subscribers

19	Nathaniel Bassey (Music group)	YT, IG, FB	#HallelujahChallenge	100k+ live audiences
20	Mercy Chinwo (Music group)	YT, IG, Spotify	Music	Large streaming numbers
21	Moses Bliss (Music group)	YT, IG, Spotify	Music	1M+ YT subs
22	Harvesters International	Website, YT, IG	Livestream, events	Tens of thousands
23	Emmanuel TV legacy	YT, FB, Website	Broadcasts	1 Million + YT subscribers
24	The Experience Lagos	Website, YT, FB	Gospel concert	100k+ attendance
25	TREM	Website, FB, YT, WhatsApp	Livestream	N/A
26	Christ Apostolic Church	Website, FB, YT	Announcements	5 Million members
27	Ada Ehi	YT, IG, TikTok, Spotify	Music	2.3 Million YT subscribers
28	Judikay	YT, IG, Spotify	Music	197,000 YT subscribers
29	Folabi Nuel	YT, IG, Spotify	Music	104,000 YT subscribers
30	The City Choirs	WhatsApp, IG, YT	Rehearsals, worship	Over 1 million viewers
31	EeZee Conceptz Artists	YT, FB, IG	Music distribution	Varies
32	Comfort Life Mission International	Website, YT, FB, WhatsApp	Services, Prayer meetings and vigils	Over 1 million viewers
33	Streams of Joy International (NSPPD) New Season Prophetic Prayers and Declarations: Digital prayer group platform	YouTube, Facebook, Instagram	Live streaming daily programme every morning at 7 am-9 am (WAT)	3.03 million Subscribers

Source: Retrieved from the different online platforms of these churches, and also some of the information and data were derived from the interview respondents.

The Metamorphoses of Digital Religion

This session discusses the gradual changes observed in the study of the digitalisation of faith through the use of digital tools: from members to followers, and from followers to subscribers.

From Members to Followers: Changing Dynamics of Religious Participation

In traditional religious communities, membership was closely tied to active participation in physical spaces such as churches, mosques, synagogues, or temples. Membership often required individuals to attend services, contribute financially, and engage in community activities. In return, members received a sense of belonging, spiritual guidance, and support through communal worship, rituals, and social interactions (Chaves, 2011). Membership in these faith communities was considered both a personal and communal identity that reinforced religious values, practices, and social cohesion.

However, with the rise of digital technology, particularly social media platforms, the notion of religious participation has evolved. Instead of attending physical services, individuals can now become “followers” of spiritual leaders, churches, or religious groups through platforms like Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter. This shift from “members” to “followers” has made religious content more accessible and democratised spiritual engagement. Followers can interact with spiritual leaders through live chats, likes, comments, shares, and direct messages, creating a more individualistic yet socially connected form of spiritual participation (Campbell and Tsuria, 2020).

This transformation has psychological and social implications. According to an interviewee, following a spiritual leader online creates an illusion of closeness, with followers perceiving themselves as part of a larger community while maintaining autonomy in their religious engagement. Socially, however, this can lead to a form of spiritual isolation, where individuals may engage with content passively without forming deeper connections with others in the faith community (Lundby, 2013). Followers can experience a sense of belonging through virtual interactions, but this may lack the depth and community involvement that traditional membership once provided. Additionally, the anonymity of online spaces raises concerns about the authenticity and sincerity of digital religious experiences (Campbell, 2017).



Plate 1: An illustration of a typical way of digitalisation of religion in a prominent Church in Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria: Source: Photo retrieved from the Church's Facebook account.

From Followers to Subscribers: The Monetisation of Digital Faith

The shift from followers to subscribers marks a pivotal transformation in digital spirituality, as religious content has become increasingly monetised. Subscribers, unlike followers, engage in a more committed and financially supported relationship with digital faith leaders or religious institutions. This transition is particularly evident on platforms such as YouTube, Patreon, Facebook, and faith-based apps, where individuals pay to access exclusive spiritual content, personalised teachings, and live-streamed events (Campbell, 2020). Through subscriptions, spiritual content creators can monetise their platforms, offering a sustainable model for creating and sharing religious teachings.

Patreon, for instance, allows spiritual leaders to create tiered subscription models where users gain access to exclusive content, such as Bible studies, sermons, or private consultations, in exchange for a monthly fee (Graham, 2020). Similarly, YouTube's monetisation system enables spiritual influencers to generate income through advertisements, Super Chats, and channel memberships, in which subscribers gain additional perks such as live-stream access and personal shout-outs (Tsuria, 2021). Faith-based apps, such as the Bible App and Pray.com, also offer subscription services for additional features, including devotional guides, meditation tools, and spiritual journaling, further cementing the monetisation of digital faith.

While monetising digital spirituality has its benefits, such as providing content creators with financial support and fostering a sense of exclusivity among subscribers, it also raises several challenges. The commodification of faith can erode the sacredness of religious practices, and the pressure to produce continuous, high-quality content can be overwhelming for content creators (Campbell and Tsuria, 2020). Moreover, subscription-based models may create inequality among followers, as only those who can afford to subscribe gain access to premium content, potentially alienating less privileged audiences.

The Role of Social Media in Shaping Digital Faith Communities

Social media platforms have become key venues for worship, learning, and community engagement in the realm of digital faith. Platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok have allowed religious groups and individuals to create virtual spaces for religious activities such as worship services, Bible studies, prayer meetings, and religious discussions (Campbell, 2020). These platforms facilitate real-time interactions, enabling believers to connect, share experiences, and deepen their faith regardless of geographic constraints. Social media has broken down barriers that once confined religious practices to physical spaces, enabling individuals to participate in religious rituals virtually.

Influencers and online spiritual leaders have played a significant role in shaping digital faith communities. These influencers, many with large followings, use their platforms to offer spiritual guidance, motivational messages, and teachings. Some of these leaders have become influential figures in both religious and secular spheres, reaching a wider audience than traditional church leaders. By using social media's broad reach, these influencers foster a sense of community, offer guidance, and create spaces where individuals can find support (Jain, 2020).

A prominent example of a successful digital faith leader is Pastor Steven Furtick of Elevation Church, whose sermons are widely shared on social media, reaching millions globally (Smith and Smith, 2019). Similarly, faith-based organisations like Hillsong Church have cultivated massive online congregations, offering virtual worship services, prayer sessions, and content aligned with their religious mission (Campbell and Tsuria, 2020). These organisations have capitalised on social media to build thriving global communities that blend spirituality and technology, demonstrating their power to transform religious engagement.

The Implications of Digital Religion on Religious Identity

The rise of digital faith has led to significant changes in both personal and communal religious identities. As individuals increasingly engage with faith through online platforms, their sense of religious belonging and practice has transformed (Campbell and Tsuria, 2020). Digital engagement enables believers to access religious content at their convenience, allowing greater flexibility in religious participation (OreOluwa: Interview respondent, 2023). This shift has contributed to a more individualised spiritual journey, where people can curate their faith experiences, choose which practices to engage in, and access diverse religious perspectives. This individualised approach can foster a more personal religious identity, but it may also lead to a sense of detachment from traditional communal practices.

Online participation in religious activities has notably influenced traditional practices and rituals. While in-person worship services, pilgrimages, and other physical rituals have been central to many religious traditions, the growth of digital platforms has challenged these norms. For instance, digital platforms, such as live-streamed church services and online prayer groups, have enabled believers to participate in religious events without being physically present. However, this shift raises concerns about the potential loss of the communal aspects of worship and the embodied nature of religious practice (Heft, 2018). As digital platforms offer more convenience, they also create a tension between the personal and collective aspects of religious participation.

Moreover, the hybridisation of physical and digital worship experiences has become increasingly common. Many faith communities now incorporate both in-person and online elements, such as live-streamed services or virtual Bible studies, blending the physical and digital realms of worship. This hybrid model allows congregants to maintain their connections to faith communities while adapting to the growing reliance on digital technologies (Jain, 2020). Consequently, digital faith is reshaping the way religious identity is experienced and constructed in the modern world.

Implications of Socio-Ethical and Theological Challenges in Digital Religion

The rapid expansion of digital religion has introduced new ethical and theological challenges that shape how faith is expressed and practised online. As religious activities migrate to digital platforms, questions arise about the authenticity, authority, accountability, and integrity of spiritual guidance in virtual spaces. The

openness of the internet allows diverse voices to emerge as spiritual leaders, yet this democratisation also increases the risk of misinformation, exploitation, and weakened doctrinal grounding. These concerns highlight the need to critically examine how digital environments reshape traditional understandings of religious authority, community, and ethical responsibility.

The problem of legitimacy: As digital religion expands, several ethical and theological concerns have emerged, particularly regarding issues of authenticity, accountability, and authority in the digital sphere. The accessibility of religious content online allows anyone to present themselves as a spiritual leader, regardless of qualifications or theological grounding. This democratisation of spiritual authority has raised questions about the authenticity of digital spiritual leaders and their ability to provide credible guidance (Campbell and Tsuria, 2020). The lack of standardised accreditation or oversight in the digital space increases the risk of misinformation and exploitation, particularly when individuals or groups exploit vulnerable followers. Therefore, accountability becomes a key issue in ensuring that digital spiritual leaders act responsibly and ethically.

The loss of disembodied faith: Another significant issue is the tension between virtual and physical worship experiences. While digital platforms enable greater access to spiritual content, there is a concern that online participation may erode the essential elements of traditional, embodied worship. For example, communal rituals such as prayer circles, communal worship, physical presence, and touch are difficult to replicate in a digital environment, raising concerns about the loss of spiritual depth and intimacy (Heft, 2018). Some interview respondents argue that virtual worship lacks the sacred atmosphere and tangible community experience of in-person services, which could diminish spiritual connection and devotion.

Digital worship often lacks the social warmth, mutual accountability, sacramental rites, and interpersonal interactions that define religious community. For many traditions, embodied fellowship — shared rituals, communal gatherings, and physical presence is fundamental to religious life. Empirical work in Nigeria shows how Pentecostal churches adopted “internet church” models during COVID-19, but many members reported longing for physical fellowship once restrictions eased (Oyerinde 2023). Theologically, this shift challenges conceptions of the church as the “body of believers,” emphasises individualistic consumption of religious content, and risks undermining forms of community formation, mutual care, and embodied discipleship.

Transient engagement and weak community bonds: The implications of digital spirituality for sense of community and belonging warrant further consideration. While online communities offer connection, they may lack the depth and support found in face-to-face interactions. In particular, the transient nature of online engagement can lead to fragmented communities, in which individuals participate superficially, forming only short-term, superficial relationships (Jain, 2020). This shift could result in a weakened sense of belonging, as individuals may not feel fully integrated into the digital faith communities they join.

Digital Inequality, Access, and the Digital Divide: Digital religion presupposes reliable internet access, digital literacy, and suitable devices — resources that are unevenly distributed. In contexts like Nigeria, infrastructure deficits, data costs, and socioeconomic disparities mean that many believers may be excluded from full participation in digital religious life. A study of youths in a Nigerian church found that while many engaged via WhatsApp, Facebook, or YouTube, participation in live streams (e.g., Instagram Live, YouTube Live) remained low. This inequality raises ethical questions of inclusivity and justice: Does digital religion privilege certain socioeconomic groups? Theologically, it challenges the ideal of a universal, accessible faith community and raises questions about the church's mission to reach “all people.”

Commercialisation and Commodification of Faith: Digital religion often intersects with monetisation, including online tithes, donations, paid content, “digital evangelism,” and even the marketing of religious identity and “brand pastors.” Such commercialisation risks reducing sacred practices to consumer commodities, undermining the spiritual integrity of religious experience.

Scholars analysing digital religion in Nigeria warn of this “moral pitfall,” arguing that while digital worship may bring social and communal gains, there is a risk that faith becomes commodified, transactional, and stripped of its depth (Wariboke 2022). Theologically, this raises concerns about authenticity, the purity of intention, the nature of giving and charity, and whether spiritual leadership becomes akin to business leadership, focused on growth metrics, followers, and revenue rather than pastoral care, discipleship, and moral formation.

Doctrinal Transmission, Misinformation, and Quality Control: Digital platforms allow instantaneous sharing, editing, remixing, and distribution of religious content. This can lead to doctrinal distortion, loss of nuance, and misinterpretation.

Without proper oversight, the risk is high that theological teachings become fragmented, decontextualised, or misrepresented. (Purba and Sihombing, 2023) In their analysis of digital religion, the anthology on theology and technology highlights how digitalisation complicates religious understanding. In the Nigerian context, as studies of religious education and digital engagement note, the balance between tradition and technological adaptation is delicate; there is a risk that in embracing technology, religious communities may lose control over doctrinal quality, hermeneutic depth, and theological integrity.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This article has traced the significant transformations in religious engagement, from traditional membership in physical congregations to the rise of digital followership and subscription-based models. The shift from members to followers marks a profound change in how sacred communities form and interact, with social media platforms enabling individuals to engage with religious content in new ways (Campbell and Tsuria, 2020). The digital era has democratised religious participation, enabling people to worship, learn, and share spiritual experiences without geographic limitations. Additionally, the monetisation of digital faith through platforms such as YouTube, Patreon, and faith-based apps has led to the emergence of a subscription-based engagement model, presenting both opportunities and challenges (Jain, 2020).

As we look to the future of digital religion, it is clear that technology will continue to shape religious practices. Virtual spaces will likely coexist with physical spaces, creating hybrid worship experiences that combine digital engagement with traditional rituals (Heft, 2018). While these changes may offer greater accessibility and inclusivity, they also raise significant ethical and theological questions regarding the authenticity of spiritual content, accountability of digital leaders, and the preservation of communal identity in virtual spaces.

This research recommended the following as possible ways to manage some of the challenges outlined in this study:

Contextual Discernment: Religious leaders should critically assess which practices can be digitised without compromising theological integrity, and which require embodied, physical presence (e.g., sacraments, communal rituals).

Digital Literacy and Inclusion Programs: Churches should invest in training clergy and congregants in digital tools, online ethics, and critical consumption of religious content to mitigate shallow engagement and misinformation.

Ethical Use of Technology: Adopt a value-driven approach to digital ministry — guided by theological ethics, not commercial metrics — ensuring that worship and ministry remain oriented toward spiritual growth, community, and service rather than profit or popularity.

Hybrid Worship Strategy: Combine online and offline worship in ways that maximise accessibility (for those unable to attend physically) while preserving the embodied community, sacramental life, and interpersonal warmth essential to faith traditions.

Engagement with Broader Scholarship: Churches and theologians should engage with academic research, locally and globally, to understand the evolving landscape of digital religion and adapt responsibly.

Further research is needed to explore the long-term effects of digital transformation on faith communities. In particular, scholars should investigate the psychological and social impact of digital engagement, the role of digital leaders in shaping theological discourse, and the effects of monetisation on religious practices. Understanding these dynamics will be critical to ensuring that the digitalisation of religion and religious practices remains a positive and transformative force in the lives of believers and religious adherents.

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THE DIGITAL CLOCK AGENDA ON RELIGIOUS ACTIVITIES IN CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN CHURCHES: PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES

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Abstract

The shift from analogue to digital has set a new agenda for Religious activities across the globe. This is very evident in Contemporary Christian churches of all kinds, as we see a shift from the traditional, manual mode of conducting Religious activities to a modern form. With the incorporation of digitalisation, Religious activities have evolved and taken a new shape in their modes of worship, places of worship, methods of exhortation, outlooks on their structures, and overall affairs. This change of pattern has its accompanying Challenges and prospects. While the prospects are a stimulus to embrace the digitalisation of Religious activities, its challenges stand as barriers. Hence, this paper seeks to examine the effects of digitalisation on Religious activities, the challenges and prospects of its digitalisation, and to provide guidelines for utilising digitalisation effectively in the execution of Religious Activities.

Keywords: Digital, Religion, Challenges, Prospects, Digitalisation

Introduction

The pervasive impact of technological advancements on daily life is undeniable, extending significantly into religious spheres and compelling institutions to adapt to new digital modalities. This digital revolution has fundamentally altered how individuals interact, access information, and engage with communities, making it imperative for churches to evolve beyond solely traditional methods¹. The shift has been particularly pronounced due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which served as a significant catalyst, forcing rapid digital adaptation to continue ministry and survive. For many churches, the pandemic accelerated digital integration, compelling them to utilise digital media to reach congregants and non-members for various activities beyond mere service streaming. This period demonstrated that digital ministry was not merely an option but an essential component for sustaining church operations and outreach. For numerous religious organisations, digital transformation was not a gradual strategic choice but an urgent, non-negotiable imperative.²

“The Digital Clock Agenda” refers to the imperative and accelerating pace at which contemporary Christian churches are integrating digital technologies into their religious activities. This agenda is driven by the intrinsic need to remain relevant, accessible, and effective in an increasingly digitalised society, influencing every facet from worship and evangelism to administration and community building. It signifies a fundamental shift from optional digital engagement to a foundational operational and missional strategy for many Christian communities. The “clock” metaphor thus signifies not just speed or a trend, but a ticking countdown for those who resist comprehensive digital transformation.

A “digital church” is broadly defined as a gathering of Christians facilitated through online video or audio streams and written messages, enabling members to meet, connect, and practice their religious beliefs online. The concept of “cyber-religion” further encapsulates this evolving relationship between religious practices and new information technologies, highlighting the demand for religious activities to be present on digital platforms.

¹ Campbell, Heidi A. *When Religion Meets New Media*. Routledge, 2010.

² Pew Research Centre. “Online Worshippers: Virtual Faith Practices.” *Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life*, 2020. www.pewforum.org.

This research aims to critically examine the multifaceted implications of the digital clock agenda on religious activities within contemporary Christian churches. It will explore both the “prospects” (benefits and opportunities) and “challenges” (obstacles and risks) associated with this digital transformation, providing a balanced and comprehensive analysis. The study focuses specifically on Christian churches, acknowledging their diverse theological and denominational approaches to technology. Its significance lies in providing a scholarly framework for understanding this ongoing shift and in informing church leaders, theologians, and congregants about responsible and effective digital engagement. Academic papers directly addressing digital transformation in churches underscore the relevance of this research topic, with some studies explicitly examining how the Church should fulfil its task and calling in a digital society, viewing technology as both an opportunity and a challenge. This contributes to broader theories on the digital transformation of faith institutions.

An Overview of traditional methods in Church activities

Christian tradition, passed down through generations, has historically emphasised core practices such as prayer, worship, fellowship, and communion³. For centuries, church activities were deeply rooted in physical presence and communal gathering within designated sacred spaces, forming the bedrock of Christian life. This physical assembly fostered direct interpersonal relationships and a tangible sense of community, embodying the essence of Christian communal life. The historical norm involved in-person meetings in a church building, in contrast to the more recent online alternatives. Descriptions of pre-digital churches often evoke a distinct aesthetic and set of practices, where church rolls were not kept in digital ledgers, attendance and giving were not posted on electronic signs, and the attire and musical leadership reflected a more traditional, physically present experience.

The descriptions of traditional church activities consistently highlight elements requiring physical presence: “in-person church services,” “small group Bible studies,” “weekly Communion,” “corporate prayer,” and the “fellowship of ‘one another’”. This points to an underlying, fundamental characteristic of traditional Christian practice: its inherently embodied nature. It involves physical co-presence, shared sensory experiences such as singing together, hearing sermons in

³ Postman, Neil. *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology*. Vintage, 1993.

a shared acoustic space, and receiving sacraments, as well as direct, tangible human interaction. This emphasis on the physical and tangible forms a critical baseline for understanding the current transformation. The profound implication is that any digital transformation must grapple with how to replicate, replace, or redefine these embodied aspects without diluting their spiritual essence. This inherent tension between traditional practices and digital adaptation becomes particularly evident when discussing challenges such as the potential dilution of traditional practices in a virtual environment.

Before the advent of the digital age, core church practices were characterised by their communal and physical nature. These included regular physical gatherings for weekly Communion, corporate prayer, and Bible study, where members actively utilised their spiritual gifts to edify the body. The emphasis was on face-to-face interaction and shared experiences within a defined physical space. Administrative functions, such as maintaining church rolls, tracking attendance, and managing financial contributions, were typically manual processes, often involving ledger books and physical bulletins distributed to congregants. These traditional methods fostered a strong sense of local church authority and intimate fellowship, where personal connections were built through consistent physical presence and shared communal life. Attending in-person services and engaging in small-group Bible studies were paramount in fostering a deeper connection to faith and community.

In the pre-digital era, church administration was largely manual and paper-based. This involved the physical creation and distribution of bulletins and newsletters, maintaining church rolls in ledger books, and manually tracking attendance and financial giving. Communication with members primarily occurred through these printed materials or direct mail.⁴ Outreach efforts were typically localised, relying heavily on word of mouth, community events, and the distribution of flyers or informational pamphlets. The absence of instant digital communication meant that updates and event reminders were often disseminated through weekly bulletins, which required more time and manual effort than contemporary digital methods.

⁴ Rheingold, Howard. *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*. MIT Press, 2000.

Religious Activities in Contemporary Christian Churches

The “digital church” has emerged as a direct response to the digital revolution and profound societal shifts, with its evolution significantly accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. This concept encompasses a wide range of ways in which Christian communities now utilise digital technologies, such as the Internet, to facilitate religious activities. These activities include prayer, preaching, worship, and Bible studies, allowing members to meet, connect, and practice their beliefs online. These online communities, also known as “online churches,” “Internet churches,” or “cyber churches,” offer a distinct alternative to traditional physical meetings, often originating from existing brick-and-mortar churches that expanded their reach digitally. The very relationship between religions and the digital world has given rise to the term “cyber-religion,” reflecting how religious practices are increasingly compelled to be present on digital platforms.⁵

Contemporary Christian churches leverage a diverse array of digital tools to enhance ministry, communication, and engagement, fundamentally reshaping how religious activities are conducted.

Examples of Key Digital Technologies Integrated into Church Life include:

1. **Live Streaming and Multimedia Enhanced Worship:** Live-streaming and recording church services have become standard practices, enabling remote participation and allowing congregants to re-experience services at their convenience. Beyond remote access, multimedia presentations, including projection screens, worship presentation software, Bible verses, videos, and live camera feeds, are integrated into in-person services. These visual and audio enhancements create a more immersive and engaging worship experience, allowing everyone to follow along with lyrics or scripture and bringing sermons to life with supporting visuals.
2. **Digital Communication and Community Platforms:** Churches extensively utilise websites, social media platforms (such as Facebook, YouTube, Google, Zoom, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, and WhatsApp), email, and messaging applications for communication, outreach, and community building. These tools facilitate frequent, efficient sharing of news, updates, and event reminders, ensuring information reaches

⁵ Campbell, Heidi A., and Pauline Hope Cheong. “Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds.” *Routledge Handbook of Religion and Media*, edited by Henten, K. van den, Routledge, 2015, pp. 1–22.

members promptly. Online platforms foster continuous engagement beyond Sunday services, enabling prayer requests, sermon reflections, and event updates throughout the week. This strengthens relationships with parishioners and fosters social connection among believers, with virtual prayer groups and online Christian communities providing fellowship, especially for those who may feel isolated.

3. **Online Giving and Streamlined Administrative Systems:** Digital giving platforms, mobile money technology, and church management software (ChMS) have streamlined administrative tasks such as managing donations, finances, event scheduling, member data, and volunteer coordination. This automation reduces errors and frees up church leaders' time, allowing them to focus more on core ministry functions. These systems provide real-time data and offer analytical insights into giving trends and attendance patterns, enhancing operational efficiency and financial accountability⁶.
4. **Virtual Discipleship and Educational Resources:** Online resources, Bible applications, podcasts, online sermons, and virtual discipleship programs provide accessible ways for members to engage with God's Word, access diverse teachings, and deepen their understanding of faith. These digital tools make engaging with scripture easier through multiple translations, commentaries, and reading plans. Institutions like the Vatican also leverage online platforms to offer official Church documents and teachings, making theological resources widely accessible⁷.

⁶ Oosterhuis, Jan. "Church and Digitalisation: A Pastoral-Theological Reflection." *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church*, vol. 20, no. 2, 2020, pp. 145–160.

⁷ Campbell, Heidi A., and Pauline Hope Cheong. "Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds." *Routledge Handbook of Religion and Media*, edited by Henten, K. van den, Routledge, 2015, pp. 1–22.

Evolution of Church Activities: Traditional vs Digital Modalities

Category	Traditional Modality	Digital Modality
Worship	In-person services within a physical building	Live-streamed and recorded services, multimedia presentations (screens, projectors, videos)
Communication	Physical bulletins, printed newsletters, word-of-mouth	Church websites, mobile apps, social media (Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp), email, messaging apps
Community/ Fellowship	Face-to-face gatherings, small group Bible studies, and the physical fellowship of “one another.”	Online groups, virtual meetings (Zoom), virtual prayer groups, online Christian communities, chatrooms, and discussion boards
Administration	Ledger books for church rolls, manual attendance tracking, and paper financial records	Church Management Software (ChMS), online giving platforms, digital record-keeping, and automated event registration
Evangelism/ Outreach	Street evangelism, physical flyer distribution, and community events	Digital evangelism, social media campaigns, online advertising, virtual invitations
Discipleship/ Education	Physical Bible study classes, printed commentaries, and in-person theological courses	Bible apps, podcasts, online sermons, virtual discipleship programs, online courses, digital devotionals

Prospects of Digitalisation in Church Activities

The digital revolution has presented many opportunities to the modern Christian church. It has transformed not just the way worship is held, but also how communities are maintained, teachings are spread, and missions are pursued. These opportunities are dimensional and include accessibility, evangelism, interactivity, administrative efficiency, and global networking. Put together, they show how digitalisation can be a facilitator of religious life rather than a danger to its survival in an ever-changing, technologically driven society.

1. Increased Access and Inclusion

Among the most obvious opportunities for digitalisation in Christian churches is increasing access. Previously, no one could attend worship because they could not physically reach a church building. These days, people can worship anywhere in the world because digital platforms, particularly live streaming and video conferencing, enable it. This has been extremely useful among Christians in the diaspora, bedridden patients, individuals with disabilities and even workers whose hours might be incongruent with the regular service hours.

As another example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, churches throughout Africa, Europe, and the Americas quickly turned to Zoom, YouTube, and

Facebook Live to continue communal worship. By broadcasting its services to its millions of members worldwide, the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) in Nigeria was among the largest Pentecostal denominations, ensuring that physical limitations did not mean spiritual detachment.⁸ These innovations illustrate how digitalisation fosters inclusivity and can help the church overcome geographical, social, and temporal limitations.

2. Broader Reach of Evangelism

Historical evangelism — the spread of the Christian message — has depended on physical missions, tracts, and radio or television broadcasts. This has been revolutionised by digitalisation through cost-effective, far-reaching, and interactive tools. Churches are now using social media platforms such as Twitter (now X), Instagram, TikTok, and WhatsApp to share scripture, encouragement, and announcements with a much wider audience than their immediate local area.

Researchers believe that digital evangelism is now among the most significant innovations of the twenty-first century, with churches reaching digital natives who spend most of their time online through Bible applications such as YouVersion (which has been downloaded by more than 500 million people worldwide) and interactive digital devotionals and reading plans.⁹ The churches that do use such platforms and encourage their members to do so take advantage not only of the benefits of digital tools to increase personal devotion but also of the globalisation of Christian witness.

3. Interactive and Participatory Worship

The other valuable opportunity is how digital tools promote participatory worship. Under the old analogue services, the only thing the congregation could do was sing back or listen to sermons, which they could not answer. Digital technologies enable active participation by worshippers, who can post comments in real time during online services, take part in polls, or share testimonies. This interactive nature helps establish a sense of community despite physical distance in the online world.

In addition, online technology facilitates worship creativity. Scriptures, videos, and worship lyrics are displayed on multimedia projectors to enhance sensory

⁸ Ruth Marshall, "Pentecostalism in Africa and the Paradoxes of Globalisation," *African Affairs*, vol. 104, no. 416, 2005, pp. 57–62.

⁹ Pauline Hope Cheong et al., *Digital Religion, Social Media and Culture: Perspectives, Practices and Futures* (New York: Peter Lang, 2012), p. 114

perception. Other churches use virtual choirs, computerised art, and computer-generated storytelling to reach younger generations. According to Campbell, this reformulation of worship is what he calls the remediation of worship, in which religious expression is adapted to the logic of new media while still embodying core values.¹⁰

4. Administrative and Financial Efficiency

Digitalisation also enhances churches' administrative capabilities beyond worship. Faith-based software programs enable churches to maintain proper records regarding membership, finances, and activities. Digital solutions also facilitate communication, allowing leaders to provide instant notifications, organise events, and coordinate meetings at the lowest cost.

Probably one of the most radical elements is tithing and offerings. There are numerous churches which offer electronic giving options via mobile banking, debit cards, and QR codes. This has not only made financial transparency easier but also made it more convenient for members (particularly in cashless societies). As an example, the Potter House Church in the United States, under the leadership of Bishop T.D. Jakes incorporates various digital giving solutions to enable individuals within and outside the congregation to deliver funds, which may be considered sufficient to suggest that the concept of digitalisation not only changes the way worship is provided but also enables the sustainable management of resources.

5. International Interconnection and Intercultural Interchange

Lastly, digitalisation has enabled Christian churches to connect globally in new ways. Online conferences, webinars, and virtual prayer meetings unite people from diverse cultural and denominational backgrounds. This promotes intercultural communication, ecumenical cooperation and learning. Ideas, training, and mentorship in developing countries can now be accessed by churches in the third world through institutions in the first world, reducing knowledge and resource gaps.¹¹

¹⁰ Heidi A. Campbell, *When Religion Meets New Media* (New York: Routledge, 2010), pp. 34–36

¹¹ T. D. Jakes, *Crushing: God Turns Pressure into Power* (New York: Faith Words, 2019), pp. 101–03

A good example is the Lausanne Movement, which has been conducting online congresses to bring Christian leaders around the world together.¹² Similarly, African pastors are increasingly invited to international webinars, which not only increase their visibility but also strengthen their transnational religious identities.

Challenges of Digitalisation in Church Activities

However, the digital clock agenda has revolutionised Christian religious life, but its adoption has not been without serious challenges. The issues are complex and require addressing on technological, socio-economic, theological, and cultural levels. They define the extent to which digital tools can be inclusionary in church practice and reveal the ambivalent nature of digital change in religion.

1. Online Differences and Separation

Disparate access to digital technologies is one of the most significant challenges. Whereas a few churches in cities can afford high-tech audiovisual systems, high-speed internet connections, and skilled technicians, most rural or poorly funded churches struggle with poor infrastructure. The “digital divide”, therefore, recreates the social and economic disparities in the religious world.

In sub-Saharan Africa, small congregations that struggle to livestream their services or maintain an online presence are common due to high internet data costs and limited access to electricity.¹³ This implies that large congregations like Winners Chapel or RCCG can continue to reach audiences worldwide, while smaller congregations in rural areas have gone digital. Digitalisation, therefore, risks favouring richer churches over poorer ones and widening the gap among Christians.

2. Generational Differences and Technology Literacy

Technological literacy is another challenge, even with digital tools. The use of digital platforms is unfamiliar to many church members, particularly the older generation. The use of mobile applications, QR codes or online donation platforms might be easy for digital natives but will still seem confusing to older generations. This generation gap can lead to feelings of rejection, which in turn may result in resistance or refusal of communal worship.

¹² Michael Reeves, “The Lausanne Movement and the Digital Era: Connecting Global Christians,” *Evangelical Review of Theology*, vol. 45, no. 3, 2021, pp. 245–49

¹³ Nkem Okoye, “Digital Inequality in Africa: Implications for Religion and Social Life,” *Journal of African Media Studies*, vol. 14, no. 2, 2022, pp. 213–17

It has been found that older worshipers tend to view digital worship as not authentic enough and would rather continue to experience the tangible presence of congregational life.¹⁴ These attitudes create a conflict between younger individuals who embrace innovation and older individuals who regard digitalisation as a threat to spirituality. Otherwise, this vacuum can divide the congregation.

3. Theological and Liturgical Issues

The most significant difficulty is perhaps theological. Christianity, like most religions, is a religion of embodied worship, in which physical assembly, ritual and sacramental behaviour are predominant. Digital worship is an encounter that breaks this paradigm by moving sacred practices online. The question appears: Is it possible to have communion online? Is Zoom baptism theologically valid? Will replacing in-person fellowship with online interaction reduce the incarnational nature of Christianity?¹⁵

Other theologians believe that turning worship into spectacle through digitalisation is dangerous. The visual can replace the spiritual, including by encouraging visuality through screens and high-tech machinery, a practice critics call the commodification of worship.¹⁶

4. Financial and Maintenance Burdens

Digitalisation requires significant investment in technology, cameras, projectors, sound and lighting, software subscriptions, and trained staff. Although big-city churches can afford such an investment, small churches usually cannot. There are also maintenance expenses and the need to continuously upgrade the system, which weigh heavily on finances in the long term.¹⁷

¹⁴ Heidi A. Campbell and Alessandra Vitullo, "Practising Religion Across Generations in Digital Contexts," *Social Compass*, vol. 67, no. 3, 2020, pp. 456–59

¹⁵ Douglas Estes, *SimChurch: Being the Church in the Virtual World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), pp. 84–87

¹⁶ Gordon Lynch, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), p. 122

¹⁷ David T. Ngong, "Religion, Technology, and Social Change in Africa," *Exchange: Journal of Contemporary Christianity*, vol. 51, no. 4, 2022, pp. 387–90

As a good example supporting this, some African churches that quickly jumped on livestreaming at the beginning of the pandemic quickly abandoned it due to high internet subscription costs and equipment malfunctions.

5. Network Security and Moral Concerns

The shift of church functions online exposes them to broader ethical and security issues. Electronic churches that accept donations must protect against fraud, hacking, and data breaches. Likewise, streamed services can be accessed unlawfully or maliciously. There have been reports of online sermons being misinterpreted and used in misinformation campaigns against churches.¹⁸

There is also a matter of privacy and surveillance in the online space. Cameras and social media can make worshippers feel under surveillance at all times, altering their natural involvement in worship. In situations where religious identity may make them vulnerable to persecution, digital presence may even be a risk to their own life.

6. Dilution of Community and Spiritual Experience

The other significant issue is that it may lead to the loss of community life. Even though such digital platforms enable virtual communion, they cannot fully reflect the embodied communion of in-person meetings, handshakes, shared meals, and the worship ambience. Other theorists claim that online worship poses a danger, turning consumers into participants in a community.¹⁹

The ease of attending church online can also be a source of complacency, as members prefer to stay online rather than work hard to fulfil physical community tasks. This consumerist orientation challenges the traditional concept of the church as a community of covenant, marked by mutual sacrifice and embodied presence.

7. Suspicion and Cultural Resistance

Digitalisation is culturally resisted in most settings, especially in Africa. Some congregants perceive technology as foreign to true spirituality or even as an instrument of secularisation. Some conservative denominations have viewed the use of projectors, smartphones or electronic giving systems as a break with biblical traditions.²⁰

¹⁸ Pauline Cheong, "Authority, Influence, and the New Media," *Journal of Communication and Religion*, vol. 36, no. 2, 2013, pp. 323–27

¹⁹ Heidi Campbell, *Exploring Religious Community Online* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005), pp. 55–57

²⁰ Samuel Gyang, "The Tension of Modernity: Christian Worship and Cultural Resistance in West Africa," *Missiology: An International Review*, vol. 48, no. 1, 2020, pp. 71–74

For example, due to cultural predispositions against using mobile money to tithe, even in rural congregations in some parts of Nigeria and Ghana, there has been resistance to the digitalisation of tithing, despite it being a technical innovation, as it would desecrate the sacredness of giving.²¹

Strategies for Effective Integration of Digitalisation in Church Activities

The digitalisation of the contemporary Christian church must be intentional; otherwise, technology will become a servant, not a detriment, to the character of worship and fraternity. The challenges have highlighted the importance of proceeding with care when digitalising, irrespective of the worthiness of digitalisation. Pragmatic solutions must be developed to overcome infrastructure constraints, theological issues, cultural opposition, and inclusion-related challenges. This section presents real-world avenues churches can adopt to incorporate digitalisation without compromising the essence of innovation and spirituality.

Churches do not necessarily need the same degree of digitalisation. An example of a rural congregation with little to no access to electricity or the internet will not reflect the technological ease of a megachurch in a city. Therefore, churches need to implement technologies that are responsive to their social, economic and cultural environments. For example, a large church with a presence in the city may invest in full-scale livestreaming systems, while a small rural church may use WhatsApp groups to conduct prayer services or send weekly announcements via SMS. By making technological decisions aligned with local realities, churches do not have to spend money to enjoy the benefits of digitalisation.²²

Churches need to invest in training programs so that members and leaders can effectively use digital tools to address generational and literacy gaps. Workshops can educate congregants on using mobile apps to give, livestream, or participate in online Bible studies, specifically for older members. Even church leaders will have to become digitally competent. Pastors who know how to navigate online spaces, respond appropriately, and moderate online communities are more likely to lead their congregations with meaningful messages. Capacity building,

²¹ Samuel Gyang, "The Tension of Modernity: Christian Worship and Cultural Resistance in West Africa," *Missiology: An International Review*, vol. 48, no. 1, 2020, pp. 71–74

²² Birgit Meyer, "Mediating Religion: Living Faith and Digital Practices," *Religion and Media in Africa*, ed. Rosalind Hackett (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2021), pp. 142–45

therefore, enables digitalisation not only to be top-down but also collective across the congregation.²³

The introduction of physical and digital models of worship is one of the most promising strategies. Hybrid models recognise that the online platform has expanded access, but the physical location remains central to Christian spirituality. With the amalgamation of the two, churches can be inclusive without losing the embodied community. One such practice could be to hold a Sunday service where those present are in person, and those attending join via livestream, with virtual members participating through live chat, prayer requests, or digital testimonies. Hybrids also allow churches to extend pastoral care to a new level, with online tools supplementing face-to-face fellowship rather than displacing it.²⁴

The emergence of digitalisation is a theological and liturgical issue; therefore, churches need to develop doctrinal principles to address it. These include intentional theological reflections on topics such as virtual communion, online sacraments, and the essence of online fellowship. Denominational bodies and church councils must make it clear to avoid confusion and division in congregations as they seek answers to these questions.

For example, other Anglican dioceses have published formal guidance identifying which sacraments (including baptism) should be performed in person and which can be adapted digitally (such as prayer meetings or Bible studies). It is this that makes digitalisation more of a force than a threat to theological integrity.²⁵

Churches need to embrace sustainable financial planning to manage the costs of digitalisation. This involves planning to purchase technological tools, reserving funds to service them, and preventing unnecessary duplication of resources.

The joint investment is also critical. Churches in the same locality or denomination may share resources by creating shared digital studios, equipment, or training facilities. This helps to save money and does not leave smaller congregations

²³ David B. Barrett and Todd M. Johnson, *World Christian Trends* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2020), pp. 301–04

²⁴ Heidi A. Campbell, *Digital Ecclesiology: A Global Conversation* (Houston: Digital Religion Publications, 2020), pp. 58–61

²⁵ Nicholas Sagovsky, “Sacramental Theology in the Digital Age,” *Anglican Theological Review*, vol. 104, no. 1, 2022, pp. 33–37

behind. Churches can make digital tools more democratic by embracing a culture of shared stewardship.²⁶

Given the threat of fraud, data breaches, and data abuse, churches should prioritise cybersecurity. The creation of ethical protective measures, including online protection systems, privacy, and transparency about money transfers, builds trust among members. In addition, churches should adhere to ethical guidelines for the use of images, records, and personal information posted online. Avoiding unintended injury by obtaining consent before livestreaming congregants or providing testimonies on their behalf respects their privacy.²⁷

And the last, strategies must ensure that digitalisation enhances, but does not diminish, the community. Churches should establish dedicated spaces for fellowship online—interactive Bible studies, small virtual prayer groups, or online mentoring. This should be about authenticity: instead of turning online worship into entertainment, churches need to develop real spiritual experiences. Focus, prayer, and accountability are ways leaders can encourage their members to take online involvement as seriously as physical attendance. This helps uphold the purity of worship in the digital era.²⁸

Findings

The discussion of the digital clock agenda in modern Christian churches reveals several significant findings that reflect the pedagogical power of digitalisation and its reality in the world of religion. The findings span accessibility, theology, administration, and community, providing a balanced look at how digital technologies are transforming Christianity in the twenty-first century.

The first is that digitalisation has made Christian worship significantly more open and accessible. Churches have overcome geographical and social barriers through livestreaming, mobile apps, and online Bible study websites to reach their members in the diaspora, people with disabilities, and those limited by time or

²⁶ Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 188–90

²⁷ Pauline Cheong and Charles Ess, “Religion 2.0? Ethical Challenges of Digital Religion,” *Journal of Media Ethics*, vol. 28, no. 2, 2013, pp. 89–92

²⁸ Tim Hutchings, “Virtual Community and Christian Belonging in the Digital Age,” *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, vol. 33, no. 3, 2018, pp. 407–10

location. This proves that digitalisation can make religious activity more democratic and open to more people than ever before.²⁹

But the very expansion of the introduction creates inequalities. The digital divide remains a significant concern, with better-off and larger urban churches more likely to adopt new technology than smaller rural or poorly funded congregations. This creates a layered religious experience in which some believers receive advanced digital worship while others do not. In this way, digitalisation is both uniting and disintegrating the Christian community through access to resources.³⁰

Another important discovery is that the theological dilemmas that accompany online worship are here to stay. Although church activities like preaching, Bible studies, and evangelism can be easily transferred to the digital realm, other church activities, such as communion, baptism, and the sacraments, are also at stake. Churches have not yet established universal doctrinal frameworks to address these ambiguities, and as a result, they have been inconsistent and confused. More intensive theological thinking is thus one of the main issues of the digital age.³¹

Digital management systems have also been reported to increase efficiency in record-keeping, communication, and financial transactions in churches that have adopted them. Tithing and offerings have become more transparent and convenient through online giving platforms. These, however, have massive financial costs. Smaller congregations can hardly afford the cost of expensive digital equipment and subscriptions, raising the question of whether all churches can afford full-scale digitalisation.³²

Another conclusion of the research is that digital platforms have opened new avenues for interactivity and participatory worship, allowing members to share testimonies, comments, and prayer requests in real time. This creates a feeling of intimacy despite physical distance. However, the same digital worship can also foster a consumerist culture, where worshipers can access worship services online

²⁹ Heidi Campbell, *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in Digital Media* (New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 89–91.

³⁰ Nkem Okoye, “Digital Inequality in Africa: Implications for Religion and Social Life,” *Journal of African Media Studies*, vol. 14, no. 2, 2022, pp. 218–20

³¹ Nicholas Sagovsky, “Sacramental Theology in the Digital Age,” *Anglican Theological Review*, vol. 104, no. 1, 2022, pp. 40–42

³² David T. Ngong, “Religion, Technology, and Social Change in Africa,” *Exchange: Journal of Contemporary Christianity*, vol. 51, no. 4, 2022, pp. 391–93

without necessarily staying connected to a local community—the online church thus swings between solidarity and facilitating separation.³³

Lastly, the research concludes that the digital transformations implemented in churches are most successful when they involve the use of hybrid forms of worship, that is, physical and virtual experiences, and when churches apply the technology to their contexts. Those congregations that offer digital literacy education, practice theological reflection, and distribute resources among churches have more opportunities to address the challenges and harness the advantages of digitalisation. This suggests that the flexibility and context-sensitivity of strategies to the digital clock agenda are the main determinants of sustainability, not the homogeneity of strategies.³⁴

Conclusion

The digital clock agenda represents one of the most profound transformations in the history of contemporary Christian churches. What began as a response to technological innovations in wider society has now become an integral part of how churches worship, evangelise, and organise themselves. Digitalisation has enabled churches to transcend geographical, social, and temporal limitations, allowing them to reach broader audiences, enhance administrative efficiency, and engage worshippers more interactively. In many respects, it has positioned the church as a relevant and adaptive institution within a rapidly globalising digital world.

However, as this study has shown, digitalisation is not without its challenges. The persistence of the digital divide exposes inequalities between urban and rural congregations, while generational gaps and limited technological literacy threaten to exclude specific demographics from full participation. Furthermore, theological dilemmas around sacraments, embodiment, and authenticity remind us that not all aspects of Christian worship can be seamlessly translated into digital formats. Financial constraints, ethical concerns, and cultural resistance further complicate the integration of technology into church life.

³³ Tim Hutchings, “Virtual Community and Christian Belonging in the Digital Age,” *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, vol. 33, no. 3, 2018, pp. 413–16

³⁴ Heidi Campbell, *Digital Ecclesiology: A Global Conversation* (Houston: Digital Religion Publications, 2020), pp. 65–67

Despite these challenges, the future of digitalisation in church activities is not bleak. On the contrary, the findings suggest that the prospects far outweigh the risks when digitalisation is approached strategically and thoughtfully. Hybrid models of worship, capacity-building, theological reflection, and collaborative investments all offer pathways to sustainable integration. More importantly, the essence of Christian worship—communion with God and fellowship with others—remains achievable even within digital frameworks, provided that churches prioritise authenticity, inclusivity, and spiritual depth over mere technological spectacle.

In conclusion, the digital clock agenda is not simply a technological trend but a paradigm shift in the way Christianity is lived and expressed in the twenty-first century. Churches that resist this shift risk irrelevance, while those that embrace it uncritically risk distortion. The path forward, therefore, lies in balance: integrating digital tools in ways that serve rather than overshadow the church's spiritual mission. By negotiating this balance, Christian communities can transform the challenges of digitalisation into opportunities for renewal, growth, and deeper engagement with a changing world.

Recommendations

In light of the prospects, challenges, and findings discussed in this study, contemporary Christian churches must adopt strategic approaches to ensure that digitalisation enhances rather than undermines their mission. A first recommendation is that churches should embrace context-sensitive adoption of technology. Not every congregation has the same resources, and it would be unwise for rural or small churches to overstretch themselves financially by imitating technologically advanced megachurches. Instead, churches should evaluate their social and economic realities and select affordable and sustainable tools such as WhatsApp groups, SMS notifications, or low-cost livestreaming platforms to engage their members. By adopting digitalisation at a scale that matches their capacity, churches can maximise benefits without falling into financial distress.

Another important recommendation is the need for deliberate investment in digital literacy and capacity building. Many of the challenges identified, especially those related to generational gaps, stem from a lack of knowledge of digital tools. Churches should organise training sessions to educate members, particularly the elderly, on how to navigate online worship platforms, electronic giving systems,

and other digital resources. Leaders themselves must be digitally competent, since pastors and administrators play a central role in guiding the community's technological engagement. Such training not only empowers congregants but also ensures inclusivity, allowing digitalisation to strengthen unity rather than deepen divisions.

Furthermore, it is recommended that churches develop hybrid worship models that combine physical and digital participation. While virtual platforms have expanded accessibility, the embodied nature of Christian spirituality should not be neglected. Hybrid models provide the flexibility to include members who cannot be physically present while retaining the richness of communal gathering. This balance ensures that worship remains both inclusive and authentic, safeguarding the theological essence of Christianity in an age of technological innovation.

Theological reflection must also accompany the digital shift. Denominations and church councils should lead in providing doctrinal guidelines that clarify the status of the sacraments, liturgical practices, and spiritual disciplines in digital spaces. Clear frameworks on issues such as online communion, baptism, or virtual fellowship will help prevent confusion and ensure that digitalisation does not compromise theological integrity. Churches that engage in these reflections will be better positioned to integrate technology in ways that are faithful to their traditions while remaining adaptable to contemporary realities.

Financial planning is another area that requires urgent attention. Churches should establish budgets that cover equipment, maintenance, and technological upgrades, while avoiding unnecessary extravagance. Where possible, congregations should collaborate to pool resources and share digital infrastructure, such as studios, cameras, and training facilities. This collaborative approach would reduce the financial burden on smaller congregations and democratize access to technological tools across different church communities.

Finally, churches must adopt ethical safeguards to guide their use of digital platforms. Issues of data security, online giving transparency, and congregants' privacy must be taken seriously. Consent should always be sought before livestreaming services or sharing members' personal testimonies online. Moreover, leaders should encourage authenticity in digital spaces by treating online worship as a serious spiritual encounter rather than reducing it to mere entertainment. When authenticity, privacy, and accountability are prioritised,

digital platforms can become spaces of genuine fellowship and transformation rather than sites of spectacle or exploitation.

In summary, these recommendations highlight that integrating digitalisation into church activities requires a balanced and intentional approach. By adopting context-sensitive technologies, promoting digital literacy, embracing hybrid models, engaging in theological reflection, practising sound financial planning, and upholding ethical standards, churches can harness the full benefits of digitalisation while mitigating its risks. Such practices will ensure that the digital clock agenda does not erode the essence of Christianity but instead strengthens the church's capacity to fulfil its mission in a rapidly changing world.

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WOMEN IN RELIGIOUS LEADERSHIP: PHILOSOPHICAL AND ETHICAL REFLECTIONS ON GENDER AND AUTHORITY

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Abstract

Women's participation in religious leadership remains a controversial issue in contemporary theological discourse. This paper reframes the debate by shifting attention from the permissibility of women's ordination to the ethical legitimacy of gender-based exclusion from religious authority. The paper critically examines historical trajectories, scriptural hermeneutics, and institutional practices, with particular attention to Nigerian Christian contexts. Drawing on Max Weber's sociological insights into the routinization of charisma, the analysis demonstrates how male-dominated leadership structures often emerged through institutional consolidation rather than an immutable divine mandate.

Through a critical examination of Pauline texts, sacramental theology, and hermeneutical theory, the paper argues that categorical restrictions on women's leadership rest on selective interpretive frameworks rather than on doctrinal consensus. An ethical evaluation grounded in the principles of moral equality, justice, and rational coherence further questions whether biological sex constitutes a morally sufficient criterion for denying access to religious authority. The Nigerian case study exposes a persistent paradox: women sustain religious communities numerically and functionally, yet remain underrepresented in formal governance structures.

The paper concludes by proposing a reconstructive model of religious authority rooted in vocation, moral competence, relational participation, and accountability rather than gendered entitlement. Such a model seeks not to abandon tradition but to preserve its moral coherence in the light of historical development and ethical reflection. Ultimately, the legitimacy of religious authority depends upon its capacity to embody the justice and dignity it proclaims.

Keywords: Women, Gender, Religious Leadership, Philosophical, Ethical, Nigeria

Introduction

Leadership by women across various religions remains a contentious debate in contemporary religious scholarship. Across Christianity, Islam, Judaism, African Indigenous Religions, and other traditions, leadership structures have historically been dominated by men, even in communities where women constitute the majority of adherents and perform substantial ministerial duties. The persistence of male-exclusive leadership raises fundamental questions not only about doctrine but also, importantly, about the ethical legitimacy of authority. At the surface level, opposition to women's leadership is often framed as adherence to sacred texts or obedience to a divine mandate. Scriptural passages are invoked as definitive prohibitions, and traditions are presented as immutable inheritances which require no revision. Yet such appeals frequently obscure the deeper interpretive processes through which religious authority is constructed and maintained.

The central focus of this paper is therefore not simply whether women may occupy positions of religious leadership, but whether gender-based exclusion from such positions can be ethically justified. This reframing shifts the debate from permissibility to legitimacy. Rather than asking whether religious institutions are allowed to exclude women under the protection of tradition, the more pressing question becomes whether such exclusion can withstand normative ethical scrutiny.

The issue acquires particular relevance in contemporary contexts where religious institutions operate within democratic societies that affirm gender equality as a foundational moral principle. The tension between internal religious hierarchies and broader social commitments to equality generates institutional strain. Gender exclusion is increasingly viewed as inconsistent with professed theological commitments to love, justice, and moral accountability. As a result, debates over women's leadership are no longer confined to internal ecclesiastical politics³⁵; they affect public trust, institutional credibility, and the social relevance of religion itself.

³⁵ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Women-Church: Theology and Practice of Feminist Liturgical Communities* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2001).

Scholarly engagement with this topic has grown substantially over the past five decades. Feminist theologians such as Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Rosemary Radford Ruether have reconstructed early Christian history to demonstrate that women held significant leadership roles before ecclesiastical consolidation.³⁶ Philosophers of religion, including Grace Jantzen, have interrogated the metaphysical assumptions that underwrite male-coded images of divine authority. Sociologists drawing on Max Weber's typology of authority have demonstrated how traditional and bureaucratic forms of power become self-reinforcing through institutionalisation. In African contexts, theologians such as Mercy Amba Oduyoye have examined how colonial Christianity intersected with indigenous patriarchal norms to entrench male dominance in church leadership.³⁷

Despite this extensive scholarship, much of the existing literature remains confined to descriptive recovery of women's historical participation or advocacy for ordination reform within specific denominations³⁸. Less attention has been given to a sustained philosophical interrogation of the legitimacy of gendered authority itself. The present study addresses this gap by integrating feminist theology with normative ethical theory and the philosophy of authority. Rather than merely documenting exclusion, it asks whether religious authority grounded in gender restrictions can retain moral validity. The study adopts a critical normative approach. It does not attempt to resolve denominational disputes through dogmatic theology, nor does it rely exclusively on sociological description. Instead, it employs philosophical analysis and ethical evaluation to interrogate the foundations of religious authority. By examining how authority is constructed, justified, and institutionalised, the paper situates gender exclusion within broader debates about power, tradition, and moral responsibility. In achieving this, the paper critically examines the historical and scriptural arguments used to justify both exclusion and inclusion, evaluates the ethical coherence of gender-restrictive leadership through normative analysis, explores sociological realities in Nigerian religious institutions as a case study, and proposes a

³⁶Grace M. Jantzen, "Feminism in the Philosophy of Religion," in *Companion Encyclopedia of Theology*, edited by T. Fergusson and D. Wright (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 498–520.

³⁷Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001).

³⁸Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983).

reconstructive model of authority grounded in accountability, relationality, and moral competence rather than biological determinism.

The scope of analysis encompassed Christian traditions, with particular attention to African and Nigerian contexts. The Nigerian context is especially instructive because it reveals a scenario where women frequently sustain religious communities through education, evangelism, pastoral care, and social outreach, yet remain excluded from formal positions of authority in many denominations. This discrepancy between contribution and recognition exposes the ethical tension at the heart of gendered leadership structures.

Historical Trajectories of Women's Religious Leadership

Any claim that women's exclusion from religious leadership reflects timeless divine intention must confront the historical record. Across religious traditions, evidence reveals that women have exercised spiritual authority in various forms, even where formal institutional recognition was limited. The historical trajectory is not one of consistent exclusion, but of participation followed by progressive marginalisation as religious institutions consolidated power. This section examines three critical stages: (i) women's leadership in early religious communities, (ii) institutionalisation and clericalization of authority, and (iii) African indigenous precedents and colonial transformations.

Women in Early Christian Communities

Historical scholarship increasingly challenges the assumption that early Christianity uniformly restricted women's leadership. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's reconstruction of first-century Christian communities argues that women played foundational roles in missionary activity, house-church leadership, and theological formation.³⁹ A similar idea was presented by Nwoko and Igbokwe, who argued that biblical narratives include female leaders, indicating God's intention for women's inclusion in leadership.⁴⁰ The Pauline epistles themselves attest to female leaders whose contributions were significant enough to be preserved in the canon of scripture.

³⁹ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her* (New York: Crossroad, 1983).

⁴⁰ Michael N. Nwoko and Clement C. Igbokwe. "Biblical Gender Equality and Women's Participation in Leadership." *Indonesian Journal of Religion, Spirituality and Humanity* 2, no 2 (2023): 210-232.

Phoebe is described in Romans 16:1–2 as a *diakonos* of the church at Cenchreae, a term later institutionalised as “deacon.”⁴¹ While some translations soften the term to “servant,” linguistic analysis suggests it denotes recognised ministerial authority. Similarly, Junia is identified in Romans 16:7 as “prominent among the apostles,” a phrase that has generated substantial debate.⁴² Patristic commentators such as John Chrysostom recognised Junia as a female apostle; only in later centuries did interpreters masculinise her name to “Junias,” reflecting discomfort with female apostolic authority. Priscilla, alongside Aquila, is repeatedly referenced as a teacher who instructed Apollos, an eloquent preacher, in theological matters (Acts 18:26). Notably, in several references, Priscilla’s name precedes her husband’s, suggesting prominence rather than subordination.

These textual indicators complicate complementarian claims that apostolic Christianity excluded women from leadership. Rather than a monolithic prohibition, early Christian communities appear to have exhibited fluid patterns of participation shaped by charismatic authority rather than rigid hierarchy.

Institutional Consolidation and the Marginalisation of Women

If early Christian communities displayed relative fluidity, what accounts for the subsequent exclusion of women from ordained leadership? Scholars point to the process of ecclesiastical institutionalisation in the second and third centuries. As Christianity transitioned from a persecuted sect to an imperial religion, authority structures shifted from charismatic networks to hierarchical episcopal systems.⁴³

Weber’s description of the routinization of charisma provides explanatory insight. Max Weber’s typology of authority remains indispensable for understanding how religious leadership structures become institutionalised. Weber distinguishes among charismatic, traditional, and legal-rational authority.⁴⁴ Charismatic authority arises from perceived extraordinary qualities in an individual; traditional authority rests on inherited customs; legal-rational authority depends on formalised rules and bureaucratic systems.

⁴¹ The Holy Bible, Romans 16:1–2.

⁴² Richard Bauckham, *Gospel Women* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

⁴³ Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church* (London: Penguin, 1967).

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

Religious leadership historically begins in a charismatic form. Founders of religious movements often derive authority from spiritual experience or prophetic vision rather than institutional office. However, Weber argues that charisma is unstable and must eventually undergo “routinization” to survive.⁴⁵ Through routinization, charisma becomes embedded in tradition or bureaucracy, transforming fluid leadership into a structured hierarchy. Once male leadership becomes customary, it acquires an aura of inevitability. Tradition is then sacralized, making critique appear as rebellion against divine order rather than institutional reform.

As church offices formalised, authority became attached to specific roles rather than spiritual gifting. Simultaneously, Greco-Roman patriarchal norms influenced ecclesial organisation. Leadership increasingly mirrored civic structures that restricted public authority to men. By the fourth century, clerical celibacy and sacramental priesthood became markers of ecclesiastical authority. The symbolic association of the priesthood with Christ’s male embodiment further solidified exclusionary theology. Over time, practices originally shaped by cultural context were retroactively theologised as divine mandate.

This historical shift does not prove that inclusion was universally normative in early Christianity. However, it demonstrates that exclusion developed within particular socio-political conditions rather than emerging as an uncontested apostolic command. The distinction between origin and development is crucial. If exclusion reflects institutional consolidation rather than foundational doctrine, its claim to immutability weakens.

Women in African Indigenous Religious Traditions

While much of the debate centres on Christianity, African Indigenous Religions (AIR) offer a contrasting historical model. In many African societies, women served as priestesses, diviners, healers, and custodians of ritual knowledge.⁴⁶ Authority in these contexts was often tied to spiritual calling and ritual efficacy rather than gendered hierarchy.

⁴⁵ Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (New York: Harcourt, 1969).

⁴⁶ Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow, eds., *Womanspirit Rising* (San Francisco: Harper, 1979).

Among the Yoruba, for example, female priestesses (Iyalorisha) hold recognised positions within religious structures, mediating between community and deity. In Igbo traditions, women's religious associations functioned as moral guardians and spiritual regulators within communal life. Leadership was not uniformly egalitarian, yet it did not operate through a rigid male monopoly over sacred authority.

Mercy Amba Oduyoye argues that colonial missionary Christianity disrupted these indigenous patterns by importing Western ecclesiastical hierarchies that privileged male ordination.⁴⁷ The intersection of colonial patriarchy and Victorian gender ideology intensified restrictions on women's leadership, often beyond what indigenous systems required.

This historical dimension is particularly relevant in Nigerian contexts, where contemporary church structures sometimes appear more restrictive than pre-colonial religious systems. The irony is striking: traditions once shaped by flexible spiritual authority now defend rigid exclusion as theological orthodoxy.

The historical evidence presented does not romanticise the past as uniformly egalitarian. Patriarchal structures have shaped most religious traditions. However, history undermines the claim that male-exclusive leadership reflects an unbroken divine pattern. Instead, it reveals fluctuation, negotiation, and contextual influence. Three implications follow:

- (i) Exclusion is historically contingent, not metaphysically necessary.
- (ii) Institutionalisation intensifies hierarchy, often reducing earlier flexibility.
- (iii) Appeals to tradition must specify which historical moment they privilege.

If tradition includes periods of female leadership, then appeals to continuity require selective interpretation. Such selectivity invites ethical scrutiny. Thus, historical analysis strengthens the central thesis of this paper that gender-based exclusion cannot be justified merely by invoking historical precedent. History itself reveals contestation and development. The normative question, therefore, remains open—whether exclusion can be defended under contemporary standards of moral legitimacy.

We now turn to the analysis of scriptural passages used to justify exclusion or inclusion.

⁴⁷ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001).

Scriptural Hermeneutics and the Contestation of Gendered Authority

Debates over women's religious leadership often centre on scriptural interpretation. For many religious communities, sacred texts function as the ultimate normative authority; therefore, any proposal for inclusive leadership must address scriptural and doctrinal objections directly. Yet scriptural texts do not interpret themselves. They are read within hermeneutical frameworks shaped by theology, culture, and institutional interest. The central issue, therefore, is not simply what scripture says, but how it is interpreted and authorized within specific traditions. Analysis of this would be examined under the following considerations: (i) analysis of key biblical texts used to exclude women, (ii) egalitarian scriptural counter-readings, (iii) Catholic sacramental theology, and (iv) the philosophical problem of literalism.

Pauline Prohibitions and the Problem of Context

Among Christian complementarians, 1 Timothy 2:12 remains the most frequently cited prohibition: "I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent."⁴⁸ Read in isolation, the verse appears categorical. However, historical-critical scholarship tends to repudiate such absolutist readings.

First, the Pastoral epistles are widely recognised as addressing specific ecclesial contexts marked by false teaching and disorder.⁴⁹ The prohibition may reflect localised pastoral concerns rather than universal doctrine. Second, the Greek term translated as "authority" (*authentein*) appears rarely in the New Testament and carries connotations of domineering or abusive control rather than legitimate leadership.⁵⁰ If the term denotes disruptive authority rather than all forms of teaching, the scope of prohibition narrows significantly.

Similarly, 1 Corinthians 14:34–35 instructs women to remain silent in churches. Yet earlier in the same letter (1 Cor. 11:5), Paul acknowledges women praying and prophesying publicly. The apparent contradiction suggests that the silence command addresses specific disruptions rather than universal exclusion. Obiefuna and Miller also hinged the misinterpretation of biblical text on the historical

⁴⁸ The Holy Bible, 1 Timothy 2:12.

⁴⁹ The Holy Bible, Galatians 3:28.

⁵⁰ Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997).

justification of gender inequality and call for proper re-interpretation.⁵¹ These textual tensions reveal that appeals to scripture often rely upon selective literalism. Interpretive choices determine whether prohibitions are universalised or contextualised.

Egalitarian Texts and Theological Anthropology

Egalitarian theologians frequently cite Galatians 3:28: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”⁵² This verse articulates a radical theological anthropology grounded in unity and equal status before God.

Complementarians argue that spiritual equality does not eliminate role differentiation.⁵³ However, critics respond that hierarchical role differentiation requires independent justification beyond biological distinction. If male leadership is permanent and female submission divinely mandated, then equality risks becoming purely symbolic. Still in furtherance of this, the Pentecost narratives (Acts 2:17–18) describe the Spirit being poured out on “sons and daughters,” affirming prophetic authority across gender lines. Early Christian communities appear to have recognised spiritual gifting as the basis for ministry, complicating rigid hierarchical models.

Thus, scripture contains both restrictive and inclusive strands. The interpretive question becomes: which theological trajectory best represents the tradition's core moral vision?

Catholic Sacramental Theology and Apostolic Succession

The Roman Catholic position presents a distinctive doctrinal argument rooted in sacramental theology. In *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* (1994), Pope John Paul II declared that the Church lacks the authority to ordain women because Christ chose male apostles.⁵⁴ The priest, acting *in persona Christi*, represents Christ sacramentally; therefore, male embodiment is considered symbolically necessary.

⁵¹ B. A. A. Obiefuna and Patricia Tamunoibi Miller. Re-Ordering Women Participation in Christian Leadership as a Panacea to the Struggle for Gender Equality in Nigeria. *Nigerian Journal of African Studies* 5, no2 (2023): 123-130.

⁵² Philip B. Payne, *Man and Woman, One in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009).

⁵³ John Piper and Wayne Grudem, eds., *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1991).

⁵⁴ Pope John Paul II, *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* (Vatican City, 1994).

This argument differs from Protestant complementarianism, which emphasises biblical inerrancy. Catholic reasoning appeals to apostolic succession and sacramental symbolism rather than isolated proof-texts. Critics challenge this position on several grounds. The symbolic argument presumes that maleness is essential to Christ's representative capacity rather than contingent on his historical incarnation.⁵⁵ If Christ's humanity, rather than maleness *per se*, grounds sacramental representation, the symbolic barrier weakens the appeal to apostolic precedent and raises questions about historical contingency. Jesus' selection of male apostles occurred within a patriarchal Jewish context. Whether that choice constitutes a prescriptive norm or a descriptive accommodation remains debated.

The Philosophical Problem of Literalism

At the heart of these debates lies the philosophical issue of literalism. Literalist approaches assume that scriptural meaning is fixed and immediately accessible. Yet modern hermeneutical theory from Hans-Georg Gadamer to Paul Ricoeur demonstrates that interpretation is historically situated.⁵⁶ Readers bring presuppositions shaped by culture, language, and institutional affiliation.

Literalism often masks interpretive selectivity. For example, commands regarding head coverings, slavery, or dietary laws are frequently contextualised, while gender prohibitions are universalised. The criteria for differentiation require justification. If scriptural authority is mediated through human interpretation, then interpretive responsibility becomes ethically significant. Appeals to divine command cannot bypass hermeneutical accountability.

The philosophical challenge is not whether scripture holds authority, but how that authority is exercised. When interpretive frameworks reinforce existing power structures without critical reflection, they risk conflating divine will with institutional preservation.

Just as the case with historical analysis, analyses of key biblical texts used regarding exclusion of women, indications of egalitarian scriptural passages negating universal prohibition, consideration of the Catholic sacramental theology, and the philosophical problem of literalism, jointly reveal that an

⁵⁵ Francis A. Sullivan, *From Apostles to Bishops* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2001).

⁵⁶ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Continuum, 1989).

embracing and definitive restriction of women is not a normative tenet and is imbibed without significant interpretive preferences.

Institutional Contradictions and Gendered Authority in Nigerian Religious Contexts

While theological and philosophical debates about women's religious leadership often unfold at an abstract level, the lived reality of religious communities provides a crucial testing ground for normative claims. Nigeria presents a particularly instructive context. As one of the most religiously vibrant societies in the world with significant Christian, Muslim, and indigenous religious populations, Nigeria offers a complex landscape in which women's participation in religious life is both highly visible and structurally constrained.

This section examines three interrelated dynamics within Nigerian religious institutions: (i) the paradox of numerical dominance and formal exclusion, (ii) theological education and institutional gatekeeping, and (iii) Pentecostalism and charismatic disruption.

Numerical Presence and Structural Absence

In many Nigerian Christian denominations, women constitute the majority of congregational membership. They dominate attendance at weekly services, lead prayer meetings, coordinate welfare initiatives, and sustain church-based social programs. Yet senior pastoral roles, episcopal offices, and decision-making councils remain overwhelmingly male.

This discrepancy reveals what sociologists describe as participatory asymmetry. Women's labour sustains religious institutions at the grassroots level, while formal authority is centralised in male leadership.⁵⁷ Such patterns are not unique to Nigeria but are intensified by the intersection of religious conservatism and deeply embedded patriarchal cultural norms.

Mercy Amba Oduyoye observes that African women frequently function as "backbone theologians," shaping the moral imagination of congregations through teaching and caregiving, even while excluded from pulpit authority.⁵⁸ The paradox

⁵⁷ Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* (New York: Anchor Books, 1967).

⁵⁸ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001).

is stark: those most responsible for sustaining religious vitality are least represented in institutional governance.

From a sociological perspective, this pattern illustrates Weber's thesis of the routinization of charisma. Authority becomes attached to the office rather than the contribution. Male leadership persists not necessarily because women lack competence, but because institutional structures normalise male occupancy of sacred office. This contradiction also produces generational tension. Younger Nigerian Christians, exposed to global discourses on gender equality, increasingly question leadership structures that appear inconsistent with the egalitarian rhetoric often proclaimed from the pulpit.

Theological Education and Institutional Gatekeeping

One of the most significant mechanisms sustaining gender exclusion in Nigeria is access to theological education and ordination pathways. Many Bible colleges and seminaries historically restricted women from enrolling in ministerial training programs designed for ordination. Where admission is permitted, women are often steered toward "auxiliary" tracks, such as Christian education, counselling, or women's ministry, rather than pastoral leadership. This institutional gatekeeping reinforces structural inequality long before formal ordination decisions occur. Sociologically, exclusion is reproduced not merely through explicit prohibition but through differential access to credentialing systems.⁵⁹ The restriction of women's theological formation has broader epistemic implications. When male-trained clergy dominate theological discourse, interpretive authority remains gendered. Women's lived experiences, particularly concerning family life, economic hardship, gender-based violence, and communal caregiving, may be underrepresented in doctrinal deliberation.

Thus, the issue is not the absence of female religious agency but the boundary drawn between informal influence and formal authority. Institutional recognition remains the decisive threshold.

Pentecostalism and Charismatic Disruption

Nigerian Pentecostalism complicates the narrative of rigid exclusion. Pentecostal and charismatic movements often emphasise spiritual gifting over institutional

⁵⁹ Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991).

pedigree. In such environments, women have emerged as prophets, evangelists, founders of ministries, and leaders of prayer networks.

Bernice Martin's sociological study of Pentecostalism suggests that charismatic movements can temporarily disrupt patriarchal hierarchies by privileging perceived spiritual anointing over traditional credentials.⁶⁰ Women who demonstrate prophetic authority or healing charisma may gain widespread influence even without formal ordination.

However, institutional consolidation frequently follows charismatic expansion. As Pentecostal ministries grow into large denominations, governance structures formalise, and leadership often reverts to male dominance. Women may retain visible roles but encounter "glass ceilings" when accessing top-tier decision-making positions. This pattern reflects Weber's theory once again: charisma creates openings; bureaucracy stabilises hierarchy. The initial flexibility of Pentecostalism does not always translate into durable structural equality.

Nevertheless, Pentecostal spaces reveal an important sociological insight: when authority is tied to perceived spiritual competence rather than inherited office, resistance to female leadership weakens. This suggests that opposition may be less about theological impossibility and more about institutional tradition.

The sociological consequences of the exclusion of women extend beyond internal governance. Religious institutions serve as moral voices within Nigerian society, addressing corruption, injustice, and social instability. When these institutions maintain gender-restrictive leadership structures, their moral witness may be perceived as selective. Liberal-minded congregants, particularly women pursuing professional careers, may experience cognitive dissonance between societal competence and ecclesial limitation. This tension can lead to disengagement or migration toward more inclusive denominations.⁶¹

Moreover, the global visibility of Nigerian Christianity through media ministries and international networks subjects local leadership practices to transnational scrutiny. Churches advocating social transformation while restricting women's authority risk appearing inconsistent.

⁶⁰ Bernice Martin, *Apostles of Gender?* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001).

⁶¹ Ogbu U. Kalu, *African Pentecostalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

Thus, the Nigerian case illustrates how ethical legitimacy intersects with sociological sustainability. Institutions that resist reevaluation may preserve tradition in the short term but face long-term challenges to credibility. This scenario no doubt calls for modalities for entrenching ethical and theological leadership that are devoid of selective interpretive frameworks and emphasise moral equality and rational coherence.

Reconstructing Religious Authority: Inclusion, Legitimacy, and Moral Coherence

Critical evaluation alone does not complete the task of theological ethics. If gender-based exclusion from religious leadership struggles to meet standards of justice, moral equality, and rational coherence, the next question becomes constructive: what model of religious authority better aligns with both theological commitments and ethical legitimacy? Reform cannot consist merely in institutional concession; it must emerge from principled reconstruction grounded in coherent philosophical and theological foundations.

This section proposes a model of religious authority built upon two pillars: (i) authority as vocation rather than gendered entitlement, (ii) relational and participatory leadership, while at the same time addressing complementarian concerns.

Authority as Vocation Rather Than Gendered Entitlement

A central shift required for reconstruction is the relocation of authority from biological identity to spiritual vocation. In many religious traditions, leadership is described as a divine calling. Yet institutional practice often conflates calling with gender eligibility. If vocation is understood as discernment of spiritual gifts, moral competence, and communal recognition, then gender becomes incidental rather than determinative. The New Testament model of charismata emphasises that gifts are distributed according to the Spirit's will, not biological criteria.⁶²

Weber's distinction between charismatic and bureaucratic authority illuminates this shift.⁶³ While routinised institutions often fix authority within formal offices, charismatic models emphasise spiritual qualifications. Reconstruction does not

⁶² The Holy Bible, 1 Corinthians 12.

⁶³ Max Weber, *Economy and Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).

require abandoning the institutional structure; rather, it requires re-centring qualification criteria around competence, theological formation, moral integrity, and communal trust.

Such a model does not automatically guarantee female leadership but removes categorical barriers. Authority becomes accessible to all who demonstrate the requisite virtues and vocation.

Relational and Participatory Leadership

Drawing upon Arendt's insight that power arises through collective action,⁶⁴ legitimate religious authority must be relational rather than unilateral. Hierarchical systems that concentrate authority within a single gender restrict the plurality essential to communal flourishing.

Participatory leadership models, already visible in some ecclesial reform movements, emphasise collaborative discernment, synodality, and shared governance. Pope Francis's recent emphasis on synodality within Catholicism reflects a broader recognition that authority must engage the *sensus fidelium*, the lived faith of the community.

Feminist ecclesiology contributes significantly here. Letty Russell's "discipleship of equals" envisions leadership as facilitative rather than dominating.⁶⁵ Authority is exercised not through control but through empowerment of the community's gifts.

Addressing Complementarian Concerns

A reconstructive proposal must engage sincerely with those who fear loss of theological integrity. Complementarian advocates often worry that inclusion reflects secular feminist pressure rather than theological conviction. Two responses to this are essential.

First, ethical reflection on gender predates modern feminism. Historical debates over women's spiritual authority appear throughout early Christianity and Islam. Reform is not purely an external imposition. Second, reconstruction does not deny sexual differences. It denies that difference necessitates hierarchical exclusion.

⁶⁴ Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (New York: Harcourt, 1969).

⁶⁵ Letty M. Russell, *Church in the Round* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993).

Complementarity can be reimagined as mutual interdependence rather than vertical subordination.

Thus, the reconstructive model invites dialogue rather than polarisation. It recognises that institutional transformation requires both pastoral sensitivity and philosophical rigour.

9. Conclusion

The debate over women's participation in religious leadership has often been framed narrowly as a contest between tradition and modernity, orthodoxy and reform, obedience and innovation. This paper has argued that such framing obscures the deeper normative question at stake: whether gender-based exclusion from religious authority can withstand ethical, philosophical, historical, and theological scrutiny. By shifting the focus from permissibility to legitimacy, the analysis has sought to evaluate not merely whether traditions allow women to lead, but whether exclusion itself is morally defensible.

The historical record complicates claims of timeless prohibition. Early religious communities, particularly in Christianity and various African indigenous traditions, reveal patterns of female spiritual authority that were later curtailed through processes of institutional consolidation. The routinization of charisma into hierarchical bureaucracy, described by Weber, demonstrates how male-dominated leadership structures may persist through tradition and institutional inertia rather than through clear theological necessity. Historical continuity, therefore, cannot serve as an unquestionable justification. Tradition itself is dynamic, shaped by cultural and political contexts.

Scriptural debates similarly resist simplistic resolution. Sacred texts contain both restrictive and inclusive strands. Interpretive frameworks determine which passages are universalised and which are contextualised. Appeals to literalism often conceal hermeneutical selectivity. Theological doctrines, including sacramental arguments and jurisprudential precedents, are mediated through historical interpretation rather than delivered as unambiguous mandates immune to critique. Consequently, scriptural authority requires responsible interpretation

grounded in coherence, moral accountability, and fidelity to foundational theological principles.⁶⁶

Philosophical analysis deepens this evaluation. Moral equality, as articulated in both theological anthropology and secular ethics, affirms the intrinsic dignity and agency of all persons. Gender-based exclusion demonstrates that biological sex constitutes a morally relevant criterion for leadership. Still, it lacks an absolutely compelling justification, as such exclusion risks conflicting with the principles of justice and fairness articulated by Kantian deontology and Rawlsian liberalism. Virtue ethics further underscores that leadership should be grounded in character and competence rather than chromosomal distinction.

Arendt's conception of power as collective action challenges hierarchical models which silence half the community. Authority sustained by exclusion weakens the relational foundations upon which communal legitimacy depends. MacIntyre's understanding of tradition as an ongoing moral argument reinforces the obligation of institutions to confront internal inconsistencies. If a tradition proclaims equal spiritual worth yet enforces structural subordination, it faces a rational crisis requiring either revision or justification.

The Nigerian case study grounds these normative reflections in lived institutional reality. Women constitute the numerical and functional backbone of many religious communities, yet remain underrepresented in formal authority. The paradox of informal influence and formal exclusion reveals that the debate is not about women's competence or commitment. Rather, it concerns recognition, access, and institutional willingness to reassess inherited hierarchies. Pentecostal and charismatic movements demonstrate that when authority is linked to perceived spiritual gifting rather than rigid office, resistance to female leadership diminishes—though institutional consolidation often reasserts male dominance. The reconstructive proposal offered in this paper does not advocate uncritical adaptation to secular trends. Instead, it argues for a principled reconfiguration of authority rooted in vocation, relational participation, accountability, and doctrinal development. Such reconstruction does not abandon tradition; it seeks to preserve its moral coherence. Doctrinal history shows that religious communities have revised positions when confronted with a deeper understanding of justice and

⁶⁶ Abraham A. Okunade. "Ecclesiological Analysis of Women Leadership: A Theological Reflection." *Pharos Journal of Theology* 103, no 2 (2022):45-56.

human dignity. Inclusion of women in leadership may represent not rupture, but maturation.

Ultimately, the legitimacy of religious authority depends upon its capacity to embody the justice it proclaims. Institutions that claim divine mandate must be prepared to evaluate whether their structures reflect divine justice or merely historical precedent. Gender exclusion, when scrutinised through ethical, philosophical, and historical lenses, bears a justificatory burden that is increasingly difficult to sustain.

This conclusion does not imply that all religious communities must adopt identical models of leadership. Context, theology, and communal discernment matter. However, it does suggest that categorical exclusion based solely on sex demands more than appeal to tradition. It requires robust moral reasoning capable of reconciling hierarchy with equality, exclusion with dignity, and authority with accountability.

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