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BALANCING THE ETHICS OF RELIGIOUS AND SOCIAL LIFESTYLES IN THE UNIVERSITY OF IBADAN AS A CASE STUDY

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Abstract

This study examines the interplay between religious and social lifestyles among students at the University of Ibadan, addressing concerns about imbalance that may hinder holistic development. The problem lies in excessive commitment to Christian campus fellowships, which, while promoting spiritual, moral, and emotional growth, can limit participation in broader social, academic, and extracurricular activities. The study focuses on Christian students' religious practices and general social engagements, highlighting patterns, causes, and consequences of the religious-social imbalance. Data were collected through interviews with fellowship members and non-members, observation of religious and social activities, and review of fellowship documents. Findings reveal characteristics such as intensive devotional routines, narrow social networks, and heightened moral caution that affect social integration, ethical flexibility, and professional preparedness. Recommendations include structured time management, inclusive fellowship programming, peer mentorship, interfaith dialogue, and institutional support to harmonise spiritual and social engagement, fostering balanced ethical, social, and professional development.

Keywords: Balancing ethics, Campus fellowship participation, Religious lifestyle, Social lifestyle, University of Ibadan

Introduction

Many scholars, including Astin et al. (2010), Ugwu and Chukwuma (2021), and Bryant and Astin (2008), have noted that during students' formative years in universities, they are frequently introduced to a wide range of religious fellowships on campus. Astin et al. (2010) emphasise that first-year students, in particular, often engage in spiritual discussions and faith-based activities through these groups, which help foster a sense of belonging and emotional stability amid the challenges of academic transition. In a similar vein, Ugwu and Chukwuma (2021) observe the strong presence of Christian fellowships in Nigerian universities, such as the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, where these groups function as important entry points for prayer, moral guidance, and psychosocial support. Bryant and Astin (2008) further associate participation in such fellowships with students' emotional, moral, and spiritual development during college.

While this early exposure to religious life contributes significantly to students' holistic formation, it also raises concerns about the potential imbalance between intense religious involvement and healthy academic and social engagement. In some cases, excessive commitment to fellowship activities may limit students' interaction with the broader campus community, thereby constraining their social networks and overall university experience. It is this gap between strong religious participation and balanced academic-social development that the present study seeks to address. The imbalance is so noticeable in favour of a robust, balanced lifestyle for students at the University of Ibadan.

In light of this, this paper examines the concept of lifestyle among Nigerian university students, the characteristics of Christian students' religious lifestyles at the University of Ibadan, and the general social lifestyles of students at the university. It provides a situational report on the religious-social imbalance, including its characteristics, causes, and social and ethical effects. It offers recommendations to promote balanced ethical values in students' religious and social lives. (Ayantayo, 2024)

Methodology

We collected information through interviews with students who are members of Christian campus fellowships and with those who are Christian but not Muslim, to avoid overgeneralizing based on my faith, from which I can generate firsthand

information. In addition, data were gathered from fellowship banners, leaflets outlining weekly activities, pamphlets, and church documents, with a focus on students' participation in both religious and social activities on campus. Christian religious activities observed included daily chapel services at the Chapel of the Resurrection, Sunday worship services at campus chapels and fellowship centres, weekly fellowship meetings conducted by groups such as CASOR UI, Bible study sessions, youth forums, and prayer groups (e.g., Tuesday Bible study and Friday youth meetings), and religious retreats or spiritual conventions organized by campus fellowships throughout the academic session.

Data were also captured from various students' social engagements, including inter-hall sports competitions, cultural nights and talent showcases, drama and music performances, debate sessions organised by student societies, and student-led community service or volunteer projects. These social activities provided opportunities for networking, leadership development, teamwork, and exposure to diverse perspectives, thereby cultivating personal, moral, and interpersonal competencies while engaging meaningfully with the University of Ibadan community.

What is a lifestyle in the context of Nigerian University students?

Lifestyles represent the patterned ways individuals organise their daily choices, habits, priorities, and values within broader social, cultural, and institutional influences. Generally speaking, lifestyle encompasses study routines, peer relationships, health practices, leisure patterns, digital engagement, and spiritual commitments. In this paper, we conceptualise lifestyle from the social, ethical, religious, and psychological perspectives, drawing on key scholarly insights to highlight its multidimensional nature. Scholars such as Bourdieu (1984) define lifestyle as a manifestation of habitus—enduring dispositions shaped by social structures that guide practices and tastes—while Giddens (1991) views it as a reflexive project of self-identity amid modernity's uncertainties (Bourdieu, 1984; Giddens, 1991). This underscores the role of lifestyle in everyday agency across domains. (Ayantayo, 2019)

From a social perspective, lifestyle reflects shared norms, expectations, and behavioural patterns that influence interpersonal relationships, group affiliation, and social integration. For university students, this involves navigating peer networks, religious fellowships, academic communities, and digital platforms.

Chaney (1996) extends this by describing lifestyle as a "bundle of material practices" that links consumption, leisure, and social positioning, often amplified across diverse cultural settings such as Nigeria's communal societies (Chaney, 1996).

From an ethical standpoint, lifestyle embodies the moral frameworks that guide decision-making, self-discipline, and the prioritisation of values. Ethical lifestyle formation requires students to balance personal freedoms with academic obligations, social responsibilities, and long-term goals. For instance, students are challenged to manage religious enthusiasm, entertainment, and digital consumption without compromising academic performance or personal integrity. In this sense, ethical lifestyle choices function as safeguards against moral compromise, academic misconduct, and erosion of self-regulation, aligning with Veblen's (1899) critique of conspicuous consumption as an ethical tension in status-driven behaviours (Veblen, 1899/1970).

From a religious perspective, lifestyle involves aligning daily conduct with faith-based principles, moral teachings, and spiritual disciplines. Within Nigerian university settings, Christian and Islamic fellowships often promote lifestyles centred on prayer, moral restraint, service, and faith-informed routines. (Ayantayo, 2020) When practised in moderation, such religious engagement can enhance character formation, purpose, and emotional stability, as Paloutzian (1996) argues in linking religious involvement to holistic lifestyle orientations that foster virtue ethics (Paloutzian, 1996).

From a psychological perspective, lifestyle reflects processes of identity construction, emotional regulation, stress management, and personal resilience. University students often face academic pressure, social comparison, and uncertainty about the future, making lifestyle choices central to coping and well-being. Healthy routines—such as balanced social engagement, disciplined study habits, and constructive spiritual practices—can serve as buffers against anxiety and burnout, consistent with Ryff's (1989) model of psychological well-being through purposeful lifestyles (Ryff, 1989).

Characteristics of Religious Lifestyles of Christian Students at the University of Ibadan

For emphasis and in the context of our discussion, Religious lifestyle refers to the observable ways in which faith informs daily practices, social interactions, values,

and identity (Smith, 2020). Among Christian students at the University of Ibadan (UI), religious lifestyle manifests in distinctive spiritual, social, and moral behaviours that shape both personal life and campus engagement. Drawing on studies in student religiosity and contextualising them within UI's Christian community, this essay highlights key characteristics of Christian students' religious lifestyles, illustrated with 10 concrete examples.

A defining feature of the religious lifestyle of Christian students at UI is daily devotional practice. Christian students often begin or end their day with prayer and scripture reading, using the Bible as a guide for moral decision-making (Johnson, 2019). For example, a second-year Mass Communication student starts her morning with 30 minutes of prayer and Bible reading before attending lectures. Another example is a final-year Biology student who listens to recorded devotional sermons during his commute to campus.

Closely related to personal devotion is the prominence of communal worship. UI hosts multiple Christian fellowships, such as the Fellowship of Christian University Students (FOCUS) and weekly Campus Ministry gatherings. According to Adeboye (2022), communal worship fosters spiritual bonding and accountability among students. For example, on Tuesday evenings, more than 50 Christian students gather at the UI Chapel for Bible study and praise sessions. *Similarly*, every Sunday, a group of UI students attends the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) branch service in Ibadan, emphasising collective thanksgiving.

Christian students at UI also demonstrate a service-oriented lifestyle, anchored in compassion and community outreach. Participation in charity events and volunteerism reflects Christlike values prioritised by these students (Green & Baker, 2021). *For example*, a UI Christian fellowship organised an outreach in December 2025, distributing food and hygiene kits to local communities in Sango-Ota. *Another example* was a fundraising campaign where students collected funds to support orphans in Ibadan, showcasing altruism as a lived expression of faith. The integration of faith into academic life characterises how Christian students relate their studies to a spiritual calling. Many students view academic success not solely as personal achievement but as stewardship of God-given gifts (Smith, 2020). *For example*, a Christian Law student regularly dedicates exam-preparation time to prayer and reflection, believing that spiritual readiness enhances academic performance. *In another instance*, a UI Engineering student led a prayer group

focused on ethical challenges in technical professions, linking faith and professional aspirations.

Religious teachings often inform moral conduct and lifestyle choices among Christian students. Christian students at UI tend to adopt lifestyles that prioritise chastity, honesty, and integrity, differentiating them from peers who may not share similar faith commitments (Johnson, 2019). *For example*, one student spokesperson for a Christian fellowship reported that group members commit to abstaining from casual sexual relationships during their undergraduate years. *Another example* involved a student rejecting exam malpractice and instead choosing to retake assessments, citing faith-based principles of honesty.

The practice of accountability and mentorship within Christian circles further shapes student lifestyles. Senior Christian students often mentor juniors, encouraging spiritual growth and discipline (Adeboye, 2022). *For example*, a fourth-year History student mentors first-year students through weekly check-ins and shared reflections on scripture. Another example is the senior fellowship leaders' retreat on leadership and spiritual maturity, held on the UI campus in April 2025.

Christian students also express their religious identity through the arts and culture. Music, drama, and spoken word are common ways to express faith on campus (Green & Baker, 2021). *For example*, Christian students performed a gospel musical at UI's 2025 Orientation Week to welcome new students with uplifting messages. *Another example* was a campus poetry night where Christian themes of hope and redemption were central.

A significant characteristic of their religious lifestyle is interpersonal support grounded in faith. Christian students often rely on faith-based peer networks to navigate emotional challenges and academic stress (Smith, 2020). *For example*, during final exams in December 2025, a group of Christian students organised daily prayer walks around the UI main library. *Another example* includes informal prayer circles initiated during periods of collective anxiety, such as exam results day.

Christian lifestyles at UI also reflect adaptive engagement with broader campus society, in which students integrate their faith while participating respectfully in secular spaces. Rather than isolating themselves, many Christian students collaborate with peers from diverse backgrounds on clubs and academic projects.

For example, Christian UI students partnered with a secular environmental club in March 2025 to plant trees, highlighting shared values of stewardship. *Another example* involved Christian students serving on student government committees, advocating for ethical standards in campus policies.

From the foregoing, we can conclude that the religious lifestyle of Christian students at the University of Ibadan is multifaceted, encompassing personal devotion, communal worship, service, moral conduct, integrating faith into academic life, mentorship, cultural expression, and adaptive social engagement. These characteristics are shaped by both personal belief and communal reinforcement, reflecting a dynamic interplay between faith and student life. Through daily practices and lived examples, Christian students at UI embody a lifestyle that both sustains their spiritual identity and contributes to broader campus life.

Characteristics of Social Lifestyles of Students at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria

University life extends far beyond academic demands, embracing vibrant social engagements that mould students' identities, interpersonal abilities, and holistic well-being. At the University of Ibadan (UI), these lifestyles manifest through extracurricular clubs, peer networks, recreational spots, community service, and interactive public spaces. Such dynamics promote social cohesion and personal development throughout the undergraduate journey (Astin, 1999).

A hallmark of UI students' social life is robust involvement in student organisations and clubs. University policy actively promotes these groups to enrich cultural and social vitality and to bridge diverse academic fields (University of Ibadan, n.d.). Notable examples include the Sigma Club and Literary and Debating Society, which convene weekly for debates, competitions, and discussions. The Embassy Club, meanwhile, facilitates global exchanges through cultural nights that draw participants from across the faculties. These activities expand social capital while honing leadership, teamwork, and communication skills (Kuzu, 2021; Okafor & Adebayo, 2023).

Peer networking across diverse backgrounds further defines this social fabric. Studies highlight how such connections aid adaptation and well-being in university settings (Jusri & Lechner, 2024). During UI's 2026 orientation week, icebreaker sessions united first-year students from different departments.

Similarly, a February 2026 campus picnic brought students from Science, Arts, and Education faculties together for shared meals and games, cultivating inter-faculty bonds.

Recreational hangouts provide essential outlets for relaxation and spontaneity. Heritage Park is a favoured venue for evening picnics, photos, and gatherings, while the Westside near Zik Hall hosts afternoon chats, music, and leisure (Hidden Campus Hangouts, n.d.). These spaces nurture informal connections and a palpable sense of community.

Sports and recreational clubs inject energy into social life, offering team sports such as soccer and basketball, as well as tennis and swimming (University of Ibadan Sports Council, n.d.). A March 2026 intramural soccer match on the UI football pitch united multi-faculty competitors and spectators. Likewise, a mixed volleyball tournament in November 2025 sparked new friendships amid the thrill of play, reinforcing teamwork and shared identity.

Student governance amplifies social engagement through advocacy and event planning. The Students' Union Government (SUG) orchestrates debates, talent shows, and welfare initiatives. March 2026's Student Week featured SUG-led comedy nights and performances that packed venues. Monthly student council meetings also foster departmental collaboration on campus improvements, instilling civic engagement and responsibility.

Volunteering extends social ties into the wider community. In December 2025, UI students joined an Agbowo clean-up drive; in January 2026, others supported a literacy program in Aleshinloye by reading to children on weekends. These efforts build networks and civic awareness. Campus media enriches interactions, with Diamond FM 101.1 airing music, commentary, and student narratives. A January 2026 evening talk show featured discussions on campus trends, while a February 2026 student podcast interviewed leaders to amplify dialogue.

Entertainment and cultural events cap the social spectrum. April 2025's theatre showcase prompted post-performance socialising, and March 2026's jazz night at the Student Union Building fused music, dance, and camaraderie. Digital platforms like WhatsApp and Instagram sustain connectivity, organising hikes (e.g., January 2026 study treks) and clean-ups (e.g., March 2026 via Facebook events). They seamlessly blend physical and virtual social spheres. The above suggests that UI students' social lives—fueled by clubs, networks, recreation,

sports, governance, service, media, events, and digital tools—cultivate a sense of belonging, build skills, and foster enduring bonds within Nigeria’s premier university milieu.

Situational Report on Religious-Social Imbalance Among Students at the University of Ibadan

Based on experience and observation, it is evident that some students at the University of Ibadan (UI) experience an imbalance between their religious and social lives. Ideally, a well-rounded university experience harmonises academic responsibilities with social interaction, extracurricular involvement, and community engagement. However, for some students, religious commitment often takes precedence over broader social participation, leading to a noticeable disconnect from campus life. This imbalance between spiritual devotion and social engagement is evident in specific behavioural patterns and relational dynamics among students, shaping both their interpersonal relationships and their overall university experience.

Characteristics of the Imbalance

This imbalance is characterised by distinct behavioural patterns, restricted peer networks, and relational dynamics that influence both personal growth and campus cohesion (Astin et al., 2003). Understanding these patterns, their underlying causes, and the consequences they produce is critical for fostering a balanced university environment that nurtures spiritual, social, and ethical development. This is evident in behavioural withdrawal from campus events, as some Students deeply committed to religious activities often skip Orientation Week picnics, inter-hall sports competitions, cultural nights, and talent showcases to attend prayer vigils, fellowships, or devotional programs (B. Abimbola, personal interview, November 12, 2024). This selective avoidance of mixed-gender or secular activities reflects a conscious separation from wider peer networks and limits exposure to diverse social experiences. Such withdrawal diminishes students’ sense of belonging and reduces opportunities to cultivate interpersonal and collaborative skills essential for academic and personal growth (Law et al., 2023). Based on observations and a look at the signboards and banners of some of the camp’s religious fellowship centres, we notice a prevalence of **overloaded religious timetables**. Students frequently structure their days around daily Bible studies, fasting periods, evangelistic outreach, and religious meetings, which often conflict with academic clubs, debates, casual meetups, or group assignments.

Oka First-year students, eager for acceptance within faith communities, may adopt these rigorous schedules early in their university life (S. Faith, personal interview, November 10, 2024). While this fosters spiritual identity, it often leads to exhaustion, curtails participation in extracurricular activities, and narrows overall engagement with campus life (Haq et al., 2025).

Another characteristic is what can be called “narrowed social circles,” which is closer to what Carstensen’s Socioemotional Selectivity Theory (SST) emphasises, a situation where individuals age or perceive limited time, they prioritise close, meaningful relationships and gradually reduce peripheral contacts, resulting in smaller but emotionally richer social networks (Carstensen, 1995). According to a recent interview, some students limit friendships primarily to co-religionists, avoiding peers of different ethnic, denominational, or non-religious backgrounds (B. Ogungbemi, personal communication, November 12, 2024). This insularity fosters echo chambers in which spiritual commitment is equated with maturity, inhibiting academic collaboration and networking, which are essential for resilience and teamwork (Law et al., 2023). In our estimation, by privileging religious homogeneity over diversity, these students inadvertently reduce their exposure to UI’s pluralistic social environment.

Heightened moral caution is another defining feature, exemplified by students avoiding social contexts perceived as ethically risky, such as parties involving alcohol, dances, or romantic encounters, to safeguard personal purity. Although this vigilance supports ethical conduct, it restricts informal socialisation and recreational engagement, diminishing life satisfaction and weakening campus belonging (Astin et al., 2003). Over time, these practices can foster rigidity in moral outlook and reduce tolerance for alternative lifestyles, complicating interactions with peers from different backgrounds.

Causes of the imbalance

Several factors contribute to the observed imbalance between religious commitment and social engagement among university students. **First**, doctrinal teachings in many campus fellowships often portray secular activities—such as attending parties, participating in clubs, or engaging in entertainment—as spiritually risky, prompting students to prioritise religious obligations over broader social participation. For example, some students at the University of Ibadan have reported avoiding cultural night events or student union activities because they perceive these as distractions from spiritual growth (Astin et al.,

2003). **Second**, the influence of peers and leadership within fellowships fosters “set-apart” identities, in which withdrawing from social interaction is seen as a mark of spiritual maturity. (S. Jesutoowo, personal interview, March 2025). This is evident among groups of students who dedicate their weekends exclusively to prayer meetings or religious retreats, often foregoing friendships outside their fellowship (Haq et al., 2025). **Third**, scheduling conflicts between religious observances and campus events, combined with fear of moral compromise, further discourage engagement in extracurricular activities. For instance, students have reported missing interdepartmental sports tournaments, club meetings, and even lectures that coincide with religious conventions or fasting periods, reinforcing social isolation (Law et al., 2023). On the whole, it is arguable that these factors shape a campus culture in which spiritual dedication can inadvertently limit students’ broader social interactions, affecting their integration into the wider university community.

The Social and Ethical Effects of the Imbalance

Within the scope of this study at the University of Ibadan (UI), the imbalance arising from excessive religious focus among students is examined from social and ethical perspectives. Humans, as inherently social beings, must engage in communal interactions; failure to do so can lead to antisocial tendencies, social withdrawal, and difficulties integrating into society (Mbiti, 1969; Durkheim, 1997). Ethically, individuals are compelled to lead balanced lives anchored in moral principles, exemplifying upright conduct in both personal and collective spheres. Neglecting ethical engagement undermines personal integrity, erodes social responsibility, and fractures communal cohesion, underscoring the interdependence of social and ethical maturation in human existence. Among UI students, this manifests socially through diminished life satisfaction, constricted interpersonal networks, and impeded academic collaboration. Ethically, undue emphasis on religious obligations may foster moral rigidity, curtail tolerance, and undermine virtues such as empathy and inclusivity. Professionally, curtailed networking undermines career resilience, depriving students of avenues to hone leadership and teamwork competencies (Law et al., 2023).

At UI, these dynamics intensify amid academic rigours and vibrant campus communalism. Socially, undergraduates who prioritise religious pursuits over peer engagement risk isolation, which resonates with Mbiti’s communal ethos and Durkheim cautions against anomie arising from frayed social ties. Hostel

dissatisfaction and relational distrust exacerbate this, yielding relational strains despite pockets of housing adequacy, while competitive academics amplify isolation across diverse student cohorts. Ethically, immersion in religious enclaves risks entrenching inflexibility, impeding the ethical breadth vital to multi-faith harmony, and fostering virtues that sustain coexistence. Professionally, such insularity curtails networking, foreclosing the cultivation of leadership essential for post-graduation fortitude and communal solidarity.

Recommendations for Addressing Religious-Social Imbalance Among University of Ibadan Students

The phenomenon of religious-social imbalance among students at the University of Ibadan (UI) highlights a critical challenge: students' spiritual commitment often supersedes broader social engagement, affecting interpersonal relationships, ethical flexibility, and professional preparedness. While religious devotion is essential for personal growth, overemphasis on faith-based activities at the expense of social participation can hinder holistic development. Addressing this imbalance requires a multifaceted approach involving students, campus religious organisations, university authorities, and peer networks.

First, students should be guided to integrate spiritual, social, and academic dimensions in a balanced manner. Research indicates that engagement in diverse social and extracurricular activities promotes interpersonal, cognitive, and ethical development (Astin et al., 2003). At UI, students can benefit from workshops, seminars, and mentorship programs that teach effective time management and structured scheduling, enabling them to participate in campus events, clubs, interdepartmental competitions, and informal social gatherings while maintaining religious commitments. Such guidance will foster a sense of belonging, strengthen peer relationships, and enhance personal resilience.

Second, campus religious fellowships and leaders must adopt inclusive approaches that encourage social engagement alongside spiritual growth. Haq, Ogunleye, and Bello (2025) observe that excessive involvement in fellowship activities can narrow students' social circles, limiting exposure to diverse perspectives. Fellowship leaders can mitigate this by integrating faith-based programs with collaborative service projects, cultural exchanges, and interfaith dialogue initiatives. Framing social participation as an extension of ethical and spiritual development encourages students to cultivate broader social networks,

enhancing empathy, tolerance, and teamwork skills while preserving spiritual identity.

Third, university authorities and student affairs units should provide structural support to harmonise religious and social activities. Law, Akinyemi, and Eze (2023) note that scheduling conflicts between religious observances and campus events exacerbate social isolation. Flexible scheduling of major university activities and deliberate planning of extracurricular programs can reduce clashes with religious practices. Additionally, creating forums for inter-fellowship collaboration—such as joint community service initiatives, leadership retreats, or academic competitions—can foster social engagement while reinforcing spiritual values. Institutional support conveys the message that spiritual dedication and social integration are complementary, rather than mutually exclusive, aspects of student life.

Fourth, strengthening peer support systems is essential to counter relational narrowing and moral rigidity. Carstensen's (1995) Socioemotional Selectivity Theory demonstrates that individuals often limit interactions to emotionally close contacts, which, among UI students, manifests as insular networks concentrated around co-religionists. Mentorship programs that pair students from different faiths or facilitate peer-led social mixers can broaden relational exposure, reduce echo chambers, and cultivate virtues such as empathy, tolerance, and collaboration. Encouraging dialogue and cooperative projects across religious, ethnic, and cultural lines fosters ethical flexibility and equips students to navigate complex social scenarios without compromising their spiritual principles.

Fifth, awareness of the psychosocial and ethical consequences of religious-social imbalance should be raised among students. Mbiti (1969) and Durkheim (1997) emphasise the inherently social nature of humans and the risks of isolation, including diminished life satisfaction, moral inflexibility, and weakened communal cohesion. Counselling services, orientation programs, and awareness campaigns can sensitise students to the long-term impact of privileging spiritual activities over social engagement. Highlighting case studies, testimonials, and experiential learning opportunities will help students recognise that balanced engagement enhances both spiritual growth and overall well-being.

Finally, fostering a culture of pluralism, ethical inclusivity, and collaborative engagement is crucial for a holistic university experience. Promoting student-led clubs, interfaith forums, and multidisciplinary projects reinforces the idea that ethical and moral development extends beyond religious participation. By valuing diversity in social interaction and encouraging respectful dialogue, the university can cultivate graduates who are spiritually grounded, socially competent, and professionally resilient.

Concluding Remarks

We want to submit that addressing the religious-social imbalance at the University of Ibadan requires coordinated action at the personal, institutional, and peer levels. Students must learn to harmonise spiritual devotion with social participation; religious fellowships should promote inclusive engagement; university policies must reduce structural conflicts; peer networks should be broadened; and awareness of psychosocial consequences must be heightened. Through these strategies, UI can foster holistic student development, ensuring that spiritual growth complements social, ethical, and professional competencies. Such interventions will enhance students' interpersonal relationships, moral maturity, and post-graduation preparedness, contributing to a cohesive, resilient, and ethically grounded university community.

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DEVELOPMENT OF RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY IN THE DIGITAL AGE IN A CHRISTIAN CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

Existing scholarly works have focused on the necessity of the physical gathering of the church assembly, as prescribed in the Christian Holy Bible, from the past to the present. Little attention has been given to another prophecy that says “knowledge shall increase” in the latter age, and we do not know how it will increase until we begin to witness the discoveries of the digital age and ICT. Therefore, this paper examined the relevance of digitalisation to the development of religion in the modern century and the challenges of spirituality in the face of non-physical gathering. Using social and historical approaches, this paper examines the prospects and opportunities that digitalisation offers for religion beyond physical gatherings. Findings revealed the challenges attached to the digitalization of worship at close range and the dangers this portends to the deep spirituality of the faithful, included health hazards to the eyes and ears due to overstay with telecommunication gadgets such as laptops, androids and use of iPods; lack of internet network connections, leading to the breaking of the service and domestic chores causing distractions at home during the service among others. In conclusion, it is recommended that digital means be used, but overdependence on them should be avoided when distance can be covered.

I. Introduction

Every age sees one development or another for the betterment of humanity. This development spans agriculture and education, health, politics, law and order, and religion, among others. The Renaissance and the rise of reason and empiricism were unforgettable periods in human history. The Industrial Revolution of the eighteenth century was another epoch of development in human history. Religion has been a point of reference in all human endeavours, discussions, debates and existence. It has been referred to as a stubborn entity that refuses to leave man. It has surfaced in many areas of human life and provided support and pillars in the face of life's many challenges and realities. Whenever there are changes and developments in human endeavours, life and circumstances do not remain the same, no matter how stubborn the entity or institution is.

The present age, the twenty-first century, is another age entirely, marked by digitalisation and Information and Communication Technology. This has turned the world into a global village, making it possible for people to reach and contact one another in a jiffy and without much difficulty, even from far-off locations. The incursion of ICT and digitalisation into almost all areas of life also affects the religious and spiritual lives of adherents. The conventional ways of doing things in the religious sector will never remain the same due to the introduction of ICT and digitalisation of things across the globe. The positive effects of digitalization on religion and spirituality could not be underrated but commended as part of the knowledge that will increase in the latter days according to the prophecy of Daniel (cf. Dan. 12:4). This is what this paper would like to explore to see the pros and cons of the knowledge of digital on the development of religion and spirituality in the digital age.

II. History of Incursion of the Digital Age in the Twenty-First Century

It is worth noting that the age of digitalisation began in the mid-1950s with the introduction of the computer system¹. The inventors aim to make it easier for people to interact with others and to change the normal trends in work systems, communication, shopping and marketing, banking, trading, exchange, health, sports and games, and entertainment, among others. It could not be affirmed if religion was part of their target, but along the way, religion was brought in, and it has never remained the same. Digitalisation is the process of uploading all possible

¹ 1 <https://base22.com-the history of digitalisation>. Retrieved on Sunday, 18th June, 2023.

things to digital formats and information systems so that people can access them digitally.

Claims abound as to the origins and originators of digitalisation among scholars. One traced its origin as far back as 1679, when Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz.² developed the first-ever binary system and wrote a book titled *Explanation of Binary Systems* in 1703 to help people understand it. Claude Shannon, a mathematician, is also known as the father of digitalisation, having laid the foundations of digital communication in his 1948 book *A Mathematical Theory of Communication*.³ The digital era converted analogue technology to a digital format. Other scientists, such as Claude Shannon, an MIT student, based his

Master's thesis on developing and using digital circuits with the aid of Boolean Algebra Law, which led to the development of telecommunication. This is referred to as the brain behind telephone routing digital technology.

Outstanding achievements and final success were realised in the 1950s after numerous attempts and contributions by scientists. In 1938, Alec Reeves's contribution to digitalisation led to the development of Pulse Code Modulation (PCM) technology. This led to effective and successful voice calls in the telecommunications industry. The calculating machine, discovered in 1940 by John V. Atanasoff and his friend Clifford Berry, was another milestone in the world of digitalisation. 1943 was another pivotal year when the first digital voice transmission, popularly known as SIGSALLY, was invented and used by troops during the Second World War to communicate.⁴ Various stages emerged as scientists put in more effort to digitalise our world across telecommunications, the economy, education, virtual environments, record-keeping and storage, accounting, management systems, information tracing and retrieval, telescopes, health management, transportation, and more.

As religion is one of the pillars on which the world rests, it cannot be divorced from the influence of digitalisation. Conservatives in the early 1980s objected to certain modern technologies, such as watching television, perhaps because of their perceived distractions and other unfathomable reasons. Today, no one can deny the positive influence of digitalisation on the religion and spirituality of the adherents of various religious sects and denominations.

² Ibid.

³ https://www.exelatech.com/blog/brief-history-digitalization?language_content_entity=en.

⁴ https://www.exelatech.com/blog/brief-history-digitalization?language_content_entity=en.

III. Importance of Religion to Society in the 21st Century

Many have indeed referred to religion as a “stubborn” entity.⁵ that refuses to leave man alone. Man has many reasons to revert to religion and lean on it due to its significant role in society. As a crucial phenomenon in human society, it is often regarded as a social pillar. Émile Durkheim rightly puts it this way, “If religion had given birth to all that is essential in society, it is because the idea of the society is the soul of religion”.⁶ Even though he claimed that religion was not divinely or supernaturally inspired but a product of society, he appreciated its role. As quoted by Bellah,⁷ Durkheim believes that the primary function of religion is to excite, maintain, or recreate certain mental states in adherents.

As a social institution, religion provides a platform for social gathering and socialisation. Interactions among people, especially those of the same faith, foster a sense of cohesion and unity when they are together. Whether for communication, teaching, study, or sharing tenets among themselves or with others, religion provides a sense of togetherness and belonging for adherents.

Many people have found purposes for their existence on earth through the instrumentality of religion. The ultimate questions of life that cannot be answered by other means of human

Endeavours have been solved by religion. These questions include: Where did I come from? Who am I? Why am I here? Where am I going after this life? Man has found meaning in their life and existence through religion. As a point of reference in life, religion has provided answers to life’s questions and issues of spiritual realities. Succours and comforts have been offered to man in the face of risks, losses, sickness, mourning and even death. Man cannot help but be confronted with these realities of life. As Bonk rightly observes, at every level of life and in many dimensions of time and space, living creatures, including human beings, are either instinctively or self-consciously aware of the precariousness of their situation as transients on Earth...⁸

⁵ Alabi, David O. *Introduction to the Study of Religion: A Lecture Handout Revised edition*. Ikeji: Joseph Ayo Babalola University, 2023, p. 2

⁶ ⁵⁶Bellah, Robert N. (1973). <https://web.pdx.edu-tothm-> Durkheim on Religion-Portland State University 1973, p. 191. Retrieved on Sunday, 18th June, 2023

⁷ *ibid*

⁸ Bonk, Jonathan J. “Religion and Security in Africa: A Christian Perspective”, in *Religion and Security Issues: Proceedings of 2013 Biennial International Religious Studies Conference*. Edited

Reality of life dawns on all men at the tunnel of life, which is death, to show that man does not have a permanent abode here on earth. In the end, religion offers hope and a future to people.⁹

Besides the inaccurate figures of the number of religions on earth¹⁰ Every religion desires to be known and developed by its adherents on earth. Despite the orthodoxy and conservatism of a religious sect, it seeks to deepen its spirituality. Experience has convinced us that no religion is static; it is flawed and does not grow; extinction is inevitable. Some religious sects dwelt on their conservatism until they realised that the “evolutionary” elements are found in all human endeavours, growth, development, innovation, creativity, life systems, health, and that religion cannot be excluded. The digital age has been in place for many years, and its influence on religion cannot be denied.

IV. Influence of Digitalisation on Religion and Spirituality

Digitalisation is an era that will endure for as long as humanity exists. As long as religion remains, it cannot be divulged or separated from digitalisation. There has been a paradigm shift in the world of religion since the introduction of digitalisation. In the Mesopotamian world, ancient people tried to invent items that would provide convenience and storage. This led to the invention written materials such as stelaes, made of stones, papyrus from Egypt, stone tablets, the Coffin Texts, Egyptian Execrations Texts, kings list, genealogies and family tests, diplomatic corresponding, Tell-el-Amarna texts, the cuneiform letters of Akkadian language,¹¹ hieroglyphically, there are some writings surrounding the activities in the temples of the ancient people and the rest showed the ways people had the understanding of preservations, storages and retrieval of their information, achievements, successes, genealogies and experience for the posterity and future sake. All these could be alluded to as hard “digitalised” copies of information of the ancient Near Eastern people.

by Ayantayo, Jacob Kehinde and Fatokun, Samson Adetunji. Ibadan: Department of Religious Studies, University of Ibadan, p. 2.

⁹ Alabi, David O. Introduction to the Study of Religion, p.4

¹⁰ Bonk, Jonathan J. “Religion and Security in Africa: A Christian Perspective”, in *Religion and Security Issues: Proceedings of 2013 Biennial International Religious Studies Conference*, p. 3.

¹¹ For further discussion on the ways ancient people in the Mesopotamian world preserved and stored their information for future purposes see Harrison, R. K. Old Testament Times, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers Inc. 1970, pp. 3-28.

Tides of affairs have changed for the modern religious man through digitalised methods of storing and retrieving information. The enormous ways of storing and preserving materials, disseminating information, and conducting economic, educational, and telecommunication activities today would greatly surprise ancient man if he were brought back to this world. The struggles of religious men in producing stone tablets, animal skins, and leafy papyrus have been eliminated by digitalisation. The influence of this age of digitalisation on religion has brought about definite changes.

a. **Digital Age and Mass Production of e-Sacred Books**

The age of handwriting with an ink pen on papyrus, scrolls, animal skins, or chiselled stone to inscribe religious epics, stories, and prophecies has passed. Even with the invention of the printing press during the 18th-century Industrial Revolution, the digital age of the 21st century is incomparable. The scribes of yesteryears did their best within the limits of their time, but today religion is moving faster than before, aided by digitalisation. With the introduction of digitalisation, religion has found wings to thrive far better than before. The production of religious sacred Scriptures has been made possible by mass-scale electronic copies. Whether it is the Holy Bible of Christianity, the Holy Quran of Islam, the sacred Book of Hinduism, Shinto, or Taoism, digitalisation has enabled mass production that can reach adherents with ease.

b. **Rate of Sales of e-Devotional Books**

Besides the Holy Scriptures of these religions, devotional books written by their leaders, prophets, teachers, and commentators on the tenets, doctrines, practices, and traditions of each are readily available online. The rate of sales of e-books and religious devotional books is reported to be faster and easier than buying from conventional bookshops. With the introduction of e-currencies, Bitcoin, introduced in 2008 as a digital, decentralised, and cashless currency, makes it easier to purchase goods and other materials. Thus, saving the risks of going to the markets and not finding what one desires.

It is reported that Amazon sells books online more than in physical stores due to digitalisation.¹² In turn, this has positive effects on the economies of religious sects and denominations.

c. **Publicity and Advertisement of Religious Activities through Digitalisation**

Gradually, the notion of printing hard copies of posters is being challenged by digitalised advertising for religious activities. Local radio and television adverts are still used to reach locals, especially middle-aged people, but the largest youth segment prefers e-advertising. With the aid of iPods, mobile phones, and numerous online apps such as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, WhatsApp, and more, religious publicity and advertising are increasing through digitalisation. This has changed the face of religious advertisements across the globe. Many people can now be reached and are aware of what is going on around them. This has helped people learn more and become more aware of the many denominations around them. New entrants to neighbourhoods can now find branches of their religious sects and denominations nearby through digital advertisements. This has advanced the religion.

d. **Quick Dissemination of Religious and Administrative Information**

In the ancient world, people disseminated information through messengers who had to trek or run to deliver the king's messages. When some animals were domesticated, they assisted with transportation, running errands, and disseminating information. Today, it is a thing of the past when it comes to disseminating information about religious matters. Digitalisation has greatly eased the dissemination of information about religious matters. The bottlenecks in passing administrative and religious prophecies, teachings, Bible Study outlines, Sunday messages, and revival preaching to the faithful have been reduced through digitalisation, enabling greater precision and speed. Among Christians, this has helped control some excesses and heretical teachings in many local assemblies under the denominations' headquarters. A recorded message can be requested from the headquarters to review specific teachings and cross-check the depth levels of the ministers' teachings under the headquarters. Incorrect recitations of any Sacred Scriptures can be corrected when they are

¹² <https://base22.com-the-history-of-digitalisation>. Retrieved on Sunday, 18th June, 2023.

recorded digitally. This is an excellent development for religion in the 21st century.

e. **Gathering of Religious Information from e-Sources**

Wisdom is a universal phenomenon and cuts across nations, tongues, peoples, languages and tribes. Digitalisation has enabled significant development for religion, the faithful, non-faithful, leaders, and the laity. A preacher who can use electronic devices can search for the information he needs without necessarily leaving his parish. Bible Concordances, Dictionaries, Language Lexicons, and textbooks on any subject can be easily sourced from websites. Religious teachings and ideas that are difficult for some people can be addressed through a digitalised online tool. The soft copy of almost everything has been stored in the space and religion, and its teachings and practices benefit from this. Making reading easier and making online information accessible and free to some extent contribute to the development of religion.

f. **Transference of Architectural Designs of Sacred Temples**

A keen observer would notice that some religious sects and denominations share a similar architectural pattern in the design of their places of worship. For instance, the auditoria of Christ Apostolic Church, Deeper Life Bible Church, Gospel Faith Mission International, and Jehovah's Witnesses, among others, look almost the same across the nation. Nearly all the mosques are built with obelisks pointing to the skies, and *Iledi* of the Reformed Ogboni Fraternity are almost the same. Before the introduction of digitalised designs, they looked alike. It is now possible to transfer the architectural designs of sacred temples to local assemblies using digital technology. The altar patterns, vestry designs, entrances, the pulpit and pews, and the vicarage, among others, can be standardised from headquarters to look alike across the nation or the globe through digitalisation.

g. **Global Reach of Members and Non-Members**

Religion has been aided in its development by digitalised global missions, missionary activities, evangelistic campaigns, and revivals. In the early 1980s, Deeper Life Bible Church, for instance, used audio recordings and print media to disseminate the church's messages. The use of fliers and posters helped the church grow. Early in the 2000s, the church switched to online transmissions of her message, requiring a code to access them. Today, *Global Crusade with Kumuyi* is the new trend of reaching other

branches, faithful and non-members. The Living Faith Church, popularly known as Winners' Chapel, is using digital transmission to reach its members and others, especially during the Annual Shiloh International Conference. Many other Christian sects and denominations now use digital transmissions to reach both the members and non-members with their messages. According to Ajigbotoluwa, Christ Apostolic Church, Nigeria and Overseas, now transmits all its national conference proceedings online.¹³ As Asokeji submits, all the President of the mission's messages and any other special talks are transmitted live online.¹⁴ This is an excellent development for the church as a denomination.

h. Attachments to Headquarters/Mission and Control

Every leader of a religious sect or denomination wants total allegiance, control, and loyalty from them. This was not possible to a great extent before the era of digitalisation. To a large extent, this has been reduced through digitalisation. Some local assemblies have seceded from the headquarters due to distance and selfish ambitions of the local leaders. It has now become difficult for them to do so with the age of digitalisation, where they can be monitored appropriately. The whole major service, bible Study, midweek service and revivals can be monitored and recorded.

The annual programmes of major denominations such as Prayer Retreats for Men, Women, Singles Brothers and Sisters in Ikeji-Arakeji, organized by the Evangelistic Outreach of the Christ Apostolic Church, Nigerian and Overseas; the monthly Holy Ghost Night of the Redeemed Christian Church of God at Lagos expressway, Nigeria, the Bible Study and Hour of Truth of the Deeper Life Bible Church are transmitted on-line to reach many among others. Other religious sects are following the same trends in the digital age.

¹³ Ajigbotoluwa, John, Head, Technical Department of the Christ Apostolic Church, Nigeria and Overseas, General Secretariat, Anlugbua, Basorun, Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria, 2023. The author of this paper, Alabi, David O. is also a career minister in the church and he is a living witness of this during the national conferences of the denomination at Ikeji-Arakeji, Osun State, Nigeria.

¹⁴ Asokeji, T.D., a Special Assistant to the President, Pastor Samuel O. Oladele, Christ Apostolic Church, Nigeria and Overseas, General Secretariat, Anlugbua, Basorun, Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria, 2023.

i. **Indestructibility of Sacred Scriptures**

One significant development the digital age has brought to religion is the fact that the sacred books are permanently stored and cannot be destroyed by any religious fanatics as a result of religious crises. Religious hatred that led to the destruction of sacred Scriptures of some religions has gone forever since the digital e-copies are stored in the cloud for storage and reading. If the sacred scriptures can be preserved, the religion has a future and potential more than before. For instance, the Holy Bible has been translated into over languages and digitised. Many other religious scriptures have followed the same step. This has enhanced the development of religion.

V. **Development of Religion and Spirituality in the Digital Age**

A new surprise indeed! A conservative religious man might have opposed preaching over the internet or using an e-Bible in the pulpit. Still, it is the order of the day now.

- (a). **Message Studies and Delivery Made Easy:** Preparations of messages/sermons are enriched with the aid of digitalisation for the preachers. The use of concordance, dictionaries and the myths surrounding them have been unravelled. The message can be recorded and sent to those who are not in the service. Religious messages are avenues to propagate the gospel and the tenets of the sects, and they have helped many sects increase the impact of their messages and deepen followers' spirituality. After the service, conference, and seminars, attendees and non-attendees can listen to the message again. The danger of becoming a copycat preacher or teacher associated with this approach must be avoided.
- (b) **Preservation of Revival Messages:** Many inspiring messages have been lost in history due to a lack of proper storage and preservation. Especially in Africa, great revivalists and preachers have not preserved their messages for posterity. For instance, the great crusade and evangelistic messages of Prophet Moses Tunolase Orimolade and Apostle Joseph Ayo Babalola were lost, and no trace of these messages remains, save for the preaching of Evangelist T.L. Osborn at Race Course, Ibadan, in 1957. It was only T.L. Osborn's preaching that was recorded on film at the time. Teaching messages, preaching, conference talks, seminars, symposia, and share-and-care discussions have now been digitally recorded and preserved for present and future use. The followers who attend these occasions can buy

for themselves and for other non-members to listen to and benefit from the messages. The spirituality of members has been lifted by this method in the 21st century.

- (c) **Creation of More Cells and House Fellowship:** Digitalisation has made it possible to create more cells and increase House Fellowship for the convenience of members. Bible Studies, prayer meetings, and the proliferation of new church branches have increased because the church, in particular, has embraced digital means. The New Testament approach of “Churches at Houses” is further enhanced as the people gather together to worship. The church remained boundless even during COVID-19, offering digital worship and sustaining members' spiritual lives.
- (d). **Open Access to Mass Evangelism:** Various religious sects and denominations have used physical contacts to reach non-faithful, and there have been many results. In the early years of the propagation and spread of these sects' gospel or teachings, physical contact, road transportation, and extensive preparations and expenditures were made to achieve their goals. Today, digitalisation has changed these old methods. For instance, Pastors' Conference of the Christ Apostolic Church and other national and international conferences, Global Crusade with Kumuyi, Shiloh at Canaan Land of The Living Faith Church, Holy Ghost Congress of the Redeemed Christian Church of God, among others, are now digitally accessible and are on the internet for anyone to access for their spirituality.
- (e). **Blessings to the Unreached People through Digital Evangelism:** People outside the church and/or the unreached can now be reached through digital means. This is a significant way of development and spirituality that members of various religions currently experience.
- (f). **Reaching the Difficult Areas Through Digital Means:** The gospel and religious teaching of sects and denominations can now be easily passed across to the people in the difficult areas to reach with the gospel. Christianity, in particular, has not been able to penetrate the problematic areas in the Middle East and Asia. There are pockets of evangelism in these areas, but not as expected. The digital age has helped Christianity grow, albeit slowly, in these problematic areas, and on-the-ground missionaries and evangelists are doing their best so far.

- (f). **Religious Provision for the Unborn Generation:** One of the benefits of the digital age is its storage, preservation and retrieval of information in a jiffy. The storage of information for future use has been made possible by digital electronics. Digitalisation has aided the religion and spirituality of adherents by making it easier for future generations to learn the teachings, doctrines, and practices of sects and denominations, and to access edifying messages that can deepen their spirituality. Young and upcoming generations will find some things to fall upon
- (g) **Historical Religious Records:** Record keeping and information storage have been significant challenges for people from antiquity. With what little they could do, they preserved much information for posterity in pots, on irons, swords, stelae, monuments, stones, walls, tablets, and other materials. Modern man has overcome this hurdle through digital means. The future of religion is bright for posterity through digital means, such as preserving historical religious records.
- (h). **Multiplicity of Local Assemblies:** Digitalisation of religious teaching, preaching and evangelism has the potential of multiplying the number of new assemblies of sects and denominations. COVID-19 experience and the digitalised means of worship have created many local assemblies and turned out to be blessings in disguise for religion. Members whose homes are far from the existing main assemblies have found relief through digitalised worship. Christian worship cannot be the same after the COVID-19 experience, and exposure to digital worship systems has benefited the church and religion generally.
- (i). **Developed Spirituality of Members:** It was surprising that those who felt they could not be leaders of a group of church have turned out to be local assemblies' leaders of newly established assemblies. As new church assemblies sprang up, there was a need for leaders over them. The spirituality that was hidden in the lives of many potential and prospective leaders was brought out and displayed. Through digital worship, under-shepherds have learned to go deeper and enhance their spirituality because of the responsibilities placed on them.

VI. Conclusion

It has been demonstrated that digitalisation and religion are not mutually exclusive. Rather, digitalisation has greatly influenced the progress and development of religion and spirituality through many means. Easy access to the

gospel messages, tenets and beliefs of a sect or denomination, and to locally and nationally organised campaigns, conferences, workshops, and seminars is made possible for both adherents and non-adherents. Members who felt they could not be leaders or were lost in the congregation before now found themselves under leaders of new assemblies that sprang up sporadically due to digitalised worship systems. Hence, their spirituality has been uplifted. They can now prepare messages for their audience with the aid of digitalisation and free access to many devotional books, concordances, dictionaries, commentaries, and religious works by many authors.

However, some dangers or drawbacks of digitalisation can be identified and addressed. Equating a physical or on-ground system of worship with digitalised worship is not the same. The danger of feeling like watching a Television programme or any video show is very much at hand when people sit before a receiver, watching and listening to a religious service. Besides, the domestic distractions during the worship session are another issue to be cautious about. Nursing mothers and children can be a distraction during worship via an electronic system. The clouds and loss of network waves during the worship hours are challenges, especially in developing areas like Nigeria. In many cases, digitalised forms of worship lack physical contact and social interaction among members. It leaves no room for warm greetings among members of the same denomination. The lack of opportunity to ask questions and receive clear answers for a proper understanding of what is shared is a bane of the digital age during worship sessions. This can, in turn, lead to a heretical interpretation of the preacher's teachings. Addiction to television sets, iPods, mobile phones and other devices in the name of watching and listening to religious messages could be dangerous to children and youths when they are expected to be serious with their academics.

With all the attendant challenges of the digital age, it can be said that digitalisation has significantly aided the development of religion and spirituality among adherents by promoting easy access to religious facts, records, messages, and communication, as well as the storage and retrieval of religious messages and documents.

YAHWEH'S SATIRICAL COMMENTARY ON JONAH'S PREJUDICE: A REMEDY FOR BIGOTRY IN RELIGIOUS SOCIAL MEDIA DISCOURSE IN SOUTHWEST NIGERIA

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Abstract

Yahweh's satirical critique of Jonah's bigotry in Jonah 4:5-11 reflects Jonah's struggle with divine compassion toward Nineveh, mirroring the challenges faced by many religious adherents in Southwest Nigeria, where the spread of inflammatory online narratives often intensifies deep-rooted prejudices. This misuse of social media among followers of Christianity, Islam, and African traditional religions has exacerbated bigotry, threatening social cohesion and mutual understanding across the region of Yorubaland. While existing literature frequently emphasises the role of social media in fostering global connectivity, it often neglects the harmful impact of hate speech, especially in the religious contexts of Yorubaland. This research aims to fill that gap by examining the repercussions of detrimental narratives within Yoruba communities that have historically coexisted harmoniously. By analysing these narratives through a reader-response lens and connecting them to Yahweh's insights regarding Jonah's biases, this study emphasises the urgent need for empathetic communication in interfaith dialogue. Preliminary findings suggest that the rising tensions fuelled by social media stress the pressing need for religious leaders to adopt respectful communication strategies. Furthermore, government agencies must take a proactive role in regulating online religious discourse. Ultimately, this research advocates for a reevaluation of how religious messages are conveyed, promoting love and tolerance as foundational principles essential for fostering social harmony in an increasingly interconnected society.

Keywords: Satire, Bigotry, Commentary, Social media, Yoruba.

Word: Count 218

Introduction

This study examines the narrator's voice in the book of Jonah,¹⁵ Analysing the literary portrayal of Jehovah, the God of Israel, and Jonah, an Israelite prophet, as 'dramatis personae' in an ancient drama.¹⁶ This portrayal serves as a satirical critique of the xenophobic treatment of other races in the Near Eastern communities during the post-exilic period, highlighting the ongoing relevance of such narratives in today's socio-religious context.¹⁷

The existing literature often overlooks the influence of the narrator's voice on the interpretation of the text, particularly concerning the satirical elements that critique religious exclusivism and bigotry among the Yoruba people of the Southwestern states, namely, Lagos, Ogun, Oyo, Ondo, Osun, Ekiti, and part of Kwara.

This research is particularly relevant to theological scholars, biblical researchers, religious leaders, and students interested in biblical studies and socio-religious issues in Nigeria. The primary aim of this study is to evaluate Yahweh's satirical critique of Jonah's prejudice as He conveys His message to the Ninevites in Jonah 4:1-11. Grasping Yahweh's reasoning behind this depiction is crucial for confronting the alarming trends of ethnic and religious bigotry, such as the burning of sacred scriptures on social media, the use of abusive language regarding religious founders and leaders, and the ideological misinterpretation of religious texts for conversion. These issues seem particularly prevalent among contemporary religious practitioners in Nigeria, especially within the Yoruba community of the Southwestern states. The rising divisiveness among Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religion in this region highlights the urgent need for this investigation.

The research focuses explicitly on Jonah 4:1-11, which is treated as a literary genre, a performing art, or a drama. This approach justifies the study by enabling a nuanced analysis of the artistic forms employed in biblical narratives. Moreover, examining the narrator's voice sheds light on how different interpretations can either challenge or perpetuate exclusivist attitudes and communal divisions.

¹⁵ Bach, Alice. *Observations on Characterisation in the Bible*. Ed. Alice Bach. *Women in the Hebrew Bible: A Reader*. Routledge, 2013, pp. 351-356.

¹⁶ Leon, Cecile. "Jonah: A Bible Skit Using Highlights from the Book of Jonah." <https://www.teacherspayteachers.com/Product/JONAH-A-Bible-skit-using-highlights-from-the-book-of-Jonah>.

¹⁷ Jemielity, Thomas. *Satire and the Hebrew Prophets*. Westminster/John Knox, 1992, pp. 1-16

The significance of this study lies in its potential to offer insights that could significantly mitigate the arbitrary use of social media by religious leaders, whose messages sometimes exacerbate ethnic and religious tensions. By revealing the satirical nature of Jehovah's critique of Jonah's bigotry, this research can contribute to an understanding of the destructive impact of religious exclusivism on community relations among the Yoruba and pave the way for more harmonious socio-religious dynamics.

Data collection will employ an exegetical approach to critically analyse the biblical text, thereby identifying key literary criticisms and insights from contemporary scholarship. Utilising the theoretical framework of narrative analysis established by Philips Long, which treats texts as literature and draws on modern literary criticism, the study will situate the Old Testament within a literary-genre context.¹⁸ Additionally, the reader's perspective, as highlighted by Bach, focuses on what the reader makes of the text by paying close attention to the narrator's voice.¹⁹ By focusing on these elements and their implications, this research aims to fill a vital gap in the current literature and foster a deeper understanding of the socio-religious dynamics affecting the Yoruba people in contemporary Nigeria.

The Summary of Jonah 4:5-11

In Jonah 4, the prophet Jonah expresses his anger towards God for showing mercy to the people of Nineveh, the Assyrian city notorious for its wickedness. Despite Jonah's initial prophecy of destruction, God spares Nineveh, prompting Jonah's deep frustration and desire for death instead of witnessing their forgiveness. To teach Jonah a lesson about compassion, God causes a plant to grow for shade, only to later send a worm to wither it. Exposed to the harsh sun, Jonah becomes even more miserable. God seizes this moment to confront Jonah, questioning his right to be angry over the loss of the plant, which he did not create, while failing to recognise the importance of the lives of Nineveh's inhabitants, whom God cares for deeply. The chapter ends with God posing a thought-provoking question to Jonah about the legitimacy of his anger regarding Nineveh's fate.

¹⁸ Long, V. Philips. *The Reign and Rejection of King Saul: A Case for Literary and Theological Coherence*. SBL Dissertation Series, 1989, p. 118

¹⁹ Bach, 354-356

The Function of Satire in the Book of Jonah: A Critical Analysis

The Oxford Dictionary defines satire as the strategic use of humour, irony, exaggeration, and ridicule to expose, correct, or critique ignorance, societal behaviours, or moral vices, particularly in contemporary politics and current affairs.²⁰ The Longman Active Study Dictionary elaborates on this definition by illustrating satire as a humorous means of depicting a person or a political entity as absurd, thereby encouraging the audience to acknowledge their failings.²¹ Furthermore, the Cambridge Dictionary presents satire as a method for humorously criticising individuals or ideas, especially with the intent of articulating a political statement, or as a literary work that employs such stylistic techniques.²²

In a thorough investigation of scholarly literature, the researcher sought to determine the conclusive meaning of satire as it pertains to the Book of Jonah. Biblical scholars have offered a range of interpretations, resulting in a division of opinion on whether the entire Book of Jonah is satirical or merely contains satirical elements. Wolff defines satire as “derision with the purpose of annihilation,” while Burrows characterises it as “a caricature in words.”²³ Klooster describes its function as a “parody” that mocks an internal target, namely the character Jonah, even though satire typically addresses an external subject.²⁴ Conversely, Mark posits that a text can be classified as satire if it targets itself, either directly or indirectly. He contends that satire encompasses a range of narrative techniques and elements, including distortions, humour, fantastical situations, absurdities, ironies, ridicule, parody, and rhetorical features, which should predominate in the work.²⁵

²⁰ “Dictionary Definitions from Oxford Languages.” Satire. Google, viewed 6 July 2023. https://www.google.com/search?q=satire+meaning&authuser=0&andsxsr=AB5stBj0kkjevYvZc6TfJh9bmJw6_HO4DA%3A1688644114639&source=hp&dei=Eqq.

²¹ Longman Active Study Dictionary, 5th Edition. 2010, s.v. “Satire.”

²² Cambridge Dictionary. S.V. “Satire.” Cambridge University Press and Assessment, 2023. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/learner-english/satire>.

²³ Wolff, Hans Walter. *Obadiah and Jonah: A Commentary*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986), 84-161

²⁴ Burrows, Millar. “The Literary Category of the Book of Jonah.” *Translating and Understanding the Old Testament: Essays in Honour of Herbert Gordon May*. Ed. Herbert G. May, Harry Thomas Frank, and W. L. Reed. Abingdon Press, 1970, pp. 80-107.

²⁵ Klooster, Mark. “The Literary Genre of the Book of Jonah: An Evaluation of the Genre Classifications of the Book of Jonah and Their Hermeneutical Implications.” pp. 38-46. https://www.academia.edu/44204800/The_Literary_Genre_of_the_Book_of_Jonah/PDF

After a comprehensive examination of the perspectives mentioned above, the researcher has arrived at a significant conclusion. The Book of Jonah indeed embodies a form of satire characterised by various narrative components. The text employs parody by focusing on Jonah's character while simultaneously addressing moral and social issues beyond the narrative, particularly through the Ninevites as symbols of broader humanity. The text further mocks the dramatic personae, especially Jonah himself, employing caricature to emphasise the Prophet Jonah's follies. This representation likely reflects societal characteristics rather than individual traits. The researcher's analysis reveals that the Book of Jonah is a reflection of comedic or traumatic literature, employing the concept of tragic laughter to contextualise the exilic experiences of its characters, thereby forming a basis for the Israelites' animosity towards their neighbours and God's desire to extend salvation to them.²⁶

Nevertheless, the researcher identifies a scholarly dichotomy between narrative scholars and traditional theologians regarding the interpretation of the text. Narrative-critical scholars argue that the Book of Jonah should be regarded as a distinct literary genre, characterising Jonah as a narrative figure. Bewer contends that a historical Jonah would not overtly satirise himself in a manner that casts him in an unfavourable light, suggesting instead that he would prefer anonymity as the author or act as a satirist critiquing himself within the narrative.²⁷ In contrast, traditional theologians assert that Jonah was a historical figure endowed with divine authority by Jehovah to convey the message encapsulated in the Book of Jonah while simultaneously engaging in self-satire. Thus, the researcher posits that the satirised Jonah, conceived as a historical persona, emerges in the text's critical interpretation as literary fiction. This portrayal addresses the profound issue of prophetic attitudes of bigotry toward individuals of differing ethnic and religious backgrounds, as well as the disdain for the possibility that the Prophet could extend Yahweh's salvation to such groups.

²⁶ Buss, M. J. "Tragedy and Comedy in Hosea." *Semeia*, no. 32, 1984.

²⁷ Bewer, J. A. *Jonah*: Edinburgh, T. and T. Clark, 1912, pp.1-2

The Structural Analysis of Jonah 4:1-11

A critical examination of the narrative structure in Jonah 4:1-11 highlights Jehovah's use of satire through literary forms resembling a playlet or skit.²⁸ The primary characters in this dramatic presentation include Yahweh, Jonah, the sailors, the Ninevites, and nature; however, the episode in chapter 4:1-11 focuses solely on Jehovah, Jonah, and nature, presenting a dialogue-driven drama that intensifies the interaction between Yahweh and Jonah the Prophet.²⁹

In satirical literature, Jehovah is portrayed as the narrator or narrative voice, while Jonah represents a prophetic circle of defiant clerics in Israelite history. These clerics were expected to convey Jehovah's love for the redemption of all peoples within a pluralistic religious landscape. However, for political, religious, and cultural reasons, they chose to favour the complete annihilation of those whom they were meant to save through Yahweh's message of love and peace.³⁰

A close analysis of Jonah 4:1-4 reveals that this passage serves as a postscript to verses 5-11, which contain Yahweh's satirical critique of Jonah's bigotry, as seen in the playlet itself. The opening verses illuminate the theological motivations behind Jonah's refusal to deliver Yahweh's message to the Ninevites, and they also reveal Jonah's actions and emotions, which reflect his prejudice against them.

Narrative Analysis of Yahweh's Satirical Commentary on Jonah's Religious Prejudice in Jonah 4:1-11

In chapter 4, verse 1a, the Hebrew words וַיֵּרָע (way·yê-ra), meaning 'and displeased', and רָעָה (ra'a'), meaning 'terribly', describe Jonah's intense displeasure over Jehovah's kindness to the Ninevites.³¹ The first term acts as a cognate accusative to the second, highlighting their semantic link. וַיֵּרָע (way·yê-ra) combines the conjunctive waw (ו) with the verb רָעָה (ra'a'), in the Qal Consecutive imperfect form, while רָעָה (ra'ah) is a feminine singular adjective, emphasising Jonah's intense negativity.

²⁸ Collins, J.J. "Introduction: Towards the Morphology of a Genre," UK: Semeia, 1979, pp. 1-4

²⁹ Ted and Lee, The Creation Chronicles, 1-4, chrome extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://cdn.tedandcompany.com/w/PDF accessed on 5th, Nov.2023

³⁰ Lovelace, Jason. An Exegesis of Jonah 4:5-11, Academia 2019, pp.3-5 https://www.academia.edu/45453953/An_Exegesis_of_Jonah_4_5_11/PDF Accessed on 11th, Nov. 2023

³¹ Echols, Charles L. "Reading Jonah: A Guide To The Hebrew Text", *Academia*, 2013, pp. 71 https://www.academia.edu/5446068/Reading_Jonah_A_Guide_to_the_Hebrew_Text.PDF.

Accessed on 3rd, Nov. 2023

This choice of language implies that Jonah perceived the kindness shown by Jehovah to the Ninevites after their repentance as ‘a great evil’, ‘abominable’, or ‘simply uncalled for’. This interpretation helps to explain Jonah’s anger in verse 1b, where the verbal root *חָרָה* (*kharah*), meaning “to burn”, is used, mirroring the description of Jehovah’s anger in chapter 3:9, before the Ninevites’ repentance. Moving to verse 2, the Hebrew verb *פָּלַל* (*palal*) indicates that Jonah prayed.³² While the verb can also mean ‘to judge’ in other contexts, its placement within the narrative suggests that, although Jonah was in a posture of prayer, his displeasure and intense anger could have led to a verbal outburst condemning what he regarded as both ‘religiously uncalled for’ and ‘racially unacceptable’.

The NET2 Bible Commentary notes that there is a possibility Jonah was critiquing Jehovah’s kindness toward the Ninevites internally while in a prayerful state, as there is no textual evidence in previous chapters indicating Jonah verbally expressed grievances to God, contrary to the portrayal in the KJV translation of *הָלוֹא־זֶה דְּבָרִי* (“was not this my word or saying”). Modern translations suggest interpretations such as “This is what I feared” (NEB), “It is just as I feared” (REB), “I knew from the very beginning” (CEV), and “this is just what I thought” (NET2).³³ In verse 2c, the phrase *יָדַעְתִּי* (*yā·da ‘·tī*), meaning ‘I knew’, refers to Jonah’s theological understanding of God, acknowledging that He is “gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in mercy, and one who relents concerning threatened judgment.” This acknowledgement aligns with the subsequent narrative’s developments.

In verse 3, Jonah’s plea, “O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live” (KJV), highlights his frustration and internal conflict. Theological interpretations suggest Jonah’s request reflects his unwillingness to face criticism for advocating mercy towards enemies of his faith. This desire indicates a commitment to the prevailing religious views of the time, which held that Jehovah would not grant such a request in times of distress. Verse 4 challenges the validity of Jonah’s perspective on the Ninevites. The satirical criticism of Jonah’s bigotry, as presented in the narrative, is communicated through a dialogue between Jonah and Jehovah. This dialogue begins with verses 5-11, where Jonah constructs a booth over himself in the East of Nineveh and waits to see the city’s fate. The narrative raises the question of why Jehovah made a plant to grow over

³² Ibid,33

³³ The Net 2 Bible, 2nd Ed., s.v. “Comment on Jonah 4:2c”

Jonah's head in verse 6 if Jonah had already created a booth for his shelter. The term for Jonah's booth, סֹכָה (suk-kāh), denotes various structures, including a booth, a pavilion, a tabernacle, or a tent. In the narrative, Jonah's booth is described as a temporary hut made of branches and leaves and may not fully protect him from the elements.³⁴ Yahweh's response can be viewed as an expression of concern for Jonah's comfort and the inadequacy of Jonah's shelter. The Hebrew word קִיָּיִן (qiyqayown) is translated as 'a plant' (ESV), 'a gourd' (KJV), and 'a little plant' (NET2). The actual name was not specified, but was identified in Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown's Commentary as a 'castor oil plant'. This provision serves to shield Jonah from the sun's heat while he waits for Jehovah's judgment on Nineveh.³⁵

The researcher identified connections among verses 6a, 7a, and 8a; 6b and 7b; and 8c, 9b, and 3b. In verses 6a, 7a, and 8a, the satirical elements show how "God prepared a gourd," "a worm," and "a vehement east wind," illustrating that Jehovah can use any means to bring about submission. This reflects the Ninevites' repentance in chapter 3:5-10, aided by Jonah's strong message. Additionally, verse 6b shows Jonah's joy over a plant provided by Yahweh for shade, but this joy is fleeting, as indicated in verse 7b when the plant is quickly taken away. Jonah mistakenly thought Yahweh would support his wish to destroy the Ninevites. The repeated phrase "I would rather die than live" in verse 8c reflects his extreme distress, linking back to verse 3b. This may indicate a group of Jewish nationalists willing to die for their beliefs, similar to Jonah's actions. His fainting in verse 8 illustrates his strong opposition to other religions and his commitment to his beliefs, even at high personal cost.³⁶

The dialogue in verse 9 shows Jonah's frustration when the plant providing him shade was taken away, agreeing that his anger was justified. The Hebrew word for Jonah's intense anger, קָרָה (kharah), highlights his strong emotions. His anger arose from Yahweh's decision to save the Ninevites, whom he wished to see punished, and the loss of his comforting plant, portraying him as self-centred and irritable.³⁷ The contrast between Jonah's anger and God's anger is notable. In chapter 4:9, the same Hebrew word, קָרָה (kharah), describes both their anger and their anger for different reasons. The King of Nineveh believed evil should repent,

³⁴ Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary vs "Jonah's booth was סֹכָה (suk-kāh) in Jonah 4:6"

³⁵ Ibid

³⁶ Klooster, 40-50

³⁷ Echols, 84

and God's anger subsided once the Ninevites acknowledged their wrongs. Verses 10-11 highlight God's care for His creation, including the Ninevites and their children. In contrast, Jonah's anger stemmed more from personal discomfort than concern for others.

Findings on the Narrative Analysis of Jonah 4:1-11

1. The satirical criticism highlights how Jonah's religious emotionalism clouded his theological reasoning, with terms like *וִירָע* (displeased) and *רָעָע* (terribly) indicating that Jonah viewed Jehovah's love for humanity as evil, despite his sound theology in Jonah 3:9 and 4:2.
2. Jonah's anger in verse 1 is contrasted with Jehovah's in Chapter 3:9, where repentance leads to divine mercy, questioning Jonah's justification for his anger in 4:1, 4, and 9, showcasing God's love that allows for repentance, unlike Jonah's desire for judgment.
3. Jonah's prayer in verse 2 reflects his self-interest rather than God's will.
4. The narrative illustrates Jonah's extremism in verses 3 and 8, where he prefers death over adjusting his erratic behaviour despite his theological knowledge.
5. Jehovah's critique from verses 5 to 11 depicts Jonah as a religious extremist who takes pleasure in destruction.
6. Jehovah offers Jonah a path to rehabilitation through sound theological education.

The Bigoted Use of Social Media Platforms by Religious Practitioners in Yoruba Land

The benefits of social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and others are vast and significant. These platforms have revolutionised communication, enabling individuals to connect, share ideas, and engage in discourse across geographical and cultural boundaries. This study does not aim to diminish the positive attributes of social media within the southwest region of Nigeria, specifically in Yoruba land, where these tools can foster community and dialogue.

However, in recent times, the activities of religious practitioners in southwest Nigeria have taken a decidedly contentious turn. Utilising social media to promote their faiths, these individuals often operate under the influence of strong religious

sentiments, leading to a surge in hostility and division within the region.³⁸ Yoruba land is characterised by a rich history and heritage of spiritual practices, predominantly encompassing the African Traditional Religion known as “Iseese” (meaning “What originated with time”) or “Abalaye” (translating to “What is met on earth”). This region also hosts two major, often competing, religious traditions: Islam and Christianity.³⁹

Daramola’s assessment of the positive and negative impacts of both Islam and Christianity on the Yoruba people reveals a historical precedent where these faiths coexisted harmoniously alongside Iseese. There was a period during which adherents of all three religions shared cultural traits and showed mutual respect; Daramola affirmed that this was a wilful commitment to promoting peace and cooperation in society.⁴⁰

Nonetheless, Adelakun identifies several factors contributing to the recent volatility in the southwest. Firstly, traditional Yoruba religious practitioners harbour suspicions that Yoruba Muslims, along with their Hausa/Fulani counterparts, might conspire to exert control over Yoruba land. The historical takeover of Ilorin in the 1800s by Fulani warriors following the assassination of Afonja remains a poignant and often-cited example of these fears.⁴¹ Secondly, there exists a perception of intolerance among some Muslim groups toward Christianity. This development stems from the early educational advantages historically afforded to Christians, which granted them greater societal prominence in Nigeria. On the other hand, Christians have grown increasingly defensive over the political dominance exercised by Muslims, a situation exacerbated by military regimes led predominantly by Muslim leaders who tended to favour Islamic interests in governance.⁴²

³⁸ Lawal, Manzoor, et al. Islam, Social Media and the Fallacy of Religious Proselytisation in Yorubaland. Research Gate online Journal, chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/file:///C:/Users/USER/Downloads/NASRED

³⁹ Janson, Marloes. Crossing Religious Boundaries: Islam, Christianity, and 'Yoruba Religion' in Lagos, Nigeria. United Kingdom, Cambridge University Press, 2021. pp.3-6

⁴⁰ Daramola, Yomi. Indigenous Voices in the Music Performances of Contemporary Christian and Muslim Missions (ed) David O. Ogungbile. African Indigenous Religious Traditions in Local and Global Contexts: Perspectives on Nigeria, a Festschrift in Honour of Jacob K. Olupona. (Nigeria: Malthouse Press Ltd, 2015, p. 163

⁴¹ Adelakun, Abimbola. “Yoruba Muslims vs Yoruba Christians” Punch, 11th November 2021, <https://punchng.com/yoruba-muslims-vs-yoruba-christians/>

⁴² Taiwo, M. T., and Taiwo, V. O. (2020). Religion Sectarianism in Yoruba Land and Threats to Its Millennial Tribal Union. Randwick International of Social Science Journal, 1 no 2, 2020, pp. 165-173. <https://doi.org/10.47175/rissj.v1i2.41>

Research by Matthew T. Taiwo and Victor O. Taiwo highlights the alarming influx of religious extremists and activists into the southwest, whose activities threaten to undermine the traditionally strong kinship ties among the Yoruba people, irrespective of their religious affiliations.⁴³ The implications of this backdrop are profound, particularly for the conduct of prominent social media influencers such as Mallam Yusuf Adepoju and Ustaz Jamiu Adegunwa, both Islamic clerics, and Adegbola Abdulazeez, known as Tani Olorun, an advocate for traditional Yoruba religion. Other notable figures include Adelana Adekunle Solomon, widely recognised as Oba Solomon Agbaye, and Evangelist Ezekiel Noah, both church preachers. These influencers have used social media not just for religious promotion but as platforms for confrontational rhetoric, a trend that is contributing to the escalation of tensions.

The researcher personally observed that their interactions reveal a pattern of antagonism, in which open challenges are issued with the explicit intent to discredit one another's faith. These religious practitioners often misinterpret and manipulate texts from each other's scriptures to undermine the foundational beliefs of rival faiths. Such hostile exchanges have led to the public denigration and destruction of religious symbols and texts. Clerics and traditional leaders across faiths have been subjected to verbal abuse and derogation, further inflaming tensions. Additionally, there have been alarming instances of issued threats against individuals, alongside ongoing litigation that pits Christians, Muslims, and practitioners of Iseese against one another in the highly charged and often toxic arena of social media.

This escalating situation urgently calls for attention and intervention. It is imperative to promote interfaith dialogue and foster understanding among the diverse religious communities within Yoruba land. Immediate action is necessary to prevent further escalation of tensions and to restore harmony.

Solutions to the Bigoted Use of Social Media by Religious Practitioners in the Southwest, Nigeria

1. Promoting Respectful Dialogue: The narrative surrounding Yahweh's use of satire in ancient times exemplifies the possibility of a society where individuals voluntarily embraced faith without the use of coercive tactics

⁴³ Ibid

by practitioners. Therefore, leaders within Christianity, Islam, and the Iseese faith must educate their followers about the importance of refraining from abusive language and condemnation of other belief systems during their online outreach. There should be a concerted effort to discourage imposing religious views on others. Furthermore, national and state orientation agencies, as key players in shaping public opinion, ought to engage with social media influencers, providing them with guidelines and best practices for conveying their messages in a manner conducive to the pluralistic society of Southwest Yorubaland.

2. **Acknowledging Diverse Theologies:** The satirical playlet recounting the interactions between Israelites and the Ninevites underscores the recognition of a Supreme Being by ancient religious communities. Religious practitioners on social media need to show respect for the diverse theistic traditions of the African populace in this region, irrespective of the variations in their interpretations.
3. **Emphasising Universal Love and Redemption:** The core message illustrated in Jonah 4:1-11 highlights Jehovah's overarching love for all humanity and the theme of redemption. Consequently, religious practitioners and preachers active on social media platforms in Southwest Yorubaland must eliminate any traces of racist agendas or ethnic biases from their messages. Their primary focus should consistently revolve around the theme of human redemption.
4. **Monitoring Radicalising Content:** Jehovah's satirical critique of Jonah's prejudices was aimed at a subset of prophets who were inciting the Israelites against other cultures in the Levant. Hence, it is vital for relevant government authorities to closely monitor the activities of religious extremists on social media platforms who seek to instigate division within the community.
5. **Countering Exclusivism with Inclusivity:** An analysis of Jonah 4:1-11 reveals that Jonah's delivery of Jehovah's message contained elements of bigotry and exclusiveness towards the Ninevites. In a pluralistic Hellenistic context, Jehovah's satirical critique condemned the Israelite ideologies that promoted exclusivity in matters of salvation. Instead, it demonstrates Jehovah's intent of universal inclusion – appealing for all humanity to be saved. Hence, religious practitioners and preachers must

undergo training to emphasise the importance of promoting inclusivity rather than exclusivity within public discourse.

6. **Establishing Rehabilitation Facilities:** The provision of shelter to Jonah illustrates God's desire to rehabilitate individuals with extremist views in an environment characterised by care and understanding. The Nigerian government, in collaboration with religious institutions, should urgently establish facilities to train religious practitioners to communicate their beliefs appropriately on social media. This initiative should include licensing preachers who seek to utilise social media for religious outreach. Unlicensed practitioners should face sanctions, and any licensed influencers who act irresponsibly online should face legal penalties.

Conclusion

This paper critically examined Jehovah's satirical denunciation of Jonah's prejudices in his communication of divine messages to the Ninevites, highlighting that Jonah's actions stemmed from racial and political animus. The satirical narrative effectively illuminated Jehovah's redemptive love for all humanity, transcending geographical and cultural divides. Promoting respect for diverse beliefs and fostering inclusive dialogue make a more tolerant religious landscape in Southwest Nigeria evident. Both governmental and religious institutions must take proactive measures to educate and regulate social media use among religious practitioners, thereby mitigating bigotry and fostering unity and understanding across faiths. This foundational shift not only promotes coexistence but also aligns religious discourse with the core tenets of love and acceptance inherent in most faith traditions.

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ETHICAL ISSUES IN THE DIGITALISATION OF EVANGELISM IN CHRISTIANITY

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Abstract

The digitalisation of evangelism in Christianity has revolutionised the way the Gospel message is shared and engaged with in the modern era. However, alongside the opportunities digital tools and platforms offer, ethical issues have emerged that need careful attention. This paper examines the ethical issues in the digitalisation of evangelism in Christianity. The digitalisation of evangelism in Christianity has revolutionised the way the Gospel message is shared and engaged with in the modern era. It has provided unprecedented opportunities to reach a global audience, foster meaningful interactions, and promote the Christian faith. However, along with these opportunities, ethical issues have emerged that require careful consideration and adherence to ethical principles. Therefore, privacy and data collection, authenticity and deception, online harassment, inclusivity and diversity, digital addiction, online discernment and discourse, and financial transparency are among the key ethical issues that need to be addressed in digital evangelism. Respecting individuals' privacy rights, maintaining authenticity and transparency, promoting inclusivity, fostering healthy online discourse, and ensuring responsible stewardship of resources are essential ethical practices. Therefore, Christian organisations, churches, and individuals engaged in digital evangelism should establish ethical guidelines and regularly evaluate their practices to ensure ethical integrity. These guidelines should address issues such as privacy, authenticity, inclusivity, online behaviour, and financial transparency.

Keywords: Ethical issues, digitalisation, evangelism, Christianity

Introduction

The digital revolution has profoundly impacted various aspects of human life, including religion and spirituality. In Christianity, the practice of evangelism, which involves sharing the message of the Gospel and inviting others to embrace the faith, has also undergone a significant transformation with the advent of digitalisation. Digital tools and platforms, such as social media, websites, podcasts, and mobile applications, have opened new avenues for Christian evangelists to reach a global audience and engage with individuals on a massive scale. However, this digitalisation of evangelism raises a range of ethical questions that demand careful examination.

Ethical issues in the digitalisation of evangelism span a broad spectrum, including privacy, authenticity, automation, online harassment, and inclusivity. The rapid advancement of technology has raised questions about the responsible use of personal data in targeted evangelism efforts and the need for transparency and consent (Ammerman and Williams, 2018). Moreover, the ease of online communication has introduced challenges in maintaining authenticity and integrity, as deceptive practices and false representations can undermine trust and credibility in digital evangelism. The integration of automation and artificial intelligence (AI) in evangelistic efforts also calls for ethical deliberation to strike a balance between efficient processes and the importance of genuine human interactions.

Furthermore, the digital realm is not immune to issues such as online harassment and abuse, which can adversely affect individuals participating in or being exposed to digital evangelism. Ensuring respectful, empathetic communication online is crucial to maintaining a safe and inclusive environment for evangelistic activities (Campbell, 2017). Additionally, the digital divide and accessibility concerns must be addressed to ensure equal access to digital resources and opportunities for all, regardless of socioeconomic or geographical constraints.

To navigate these ethical challenges, it is imperative to establish clear guidelines and best practices for digital evangelism. Such guidelines should be developed collaboratively by Christian organisations, theologians, and digital experts, taking into account the unique nature of digital spaces and the complexities they present. Moreover, comprehensive training and education on ethical digital practices should be provided to evangelists, equipping them with the knowledge and skills to engage responsibly and ethically in the digital realm (Heidi, 2013). Additionally, fostering a culture of accountability and promoting collaboration among digital evangelism stakeholders can help address and mitigate ethical concerns effectively.

As the digitalisation of evangelism continues to reshape the landscape of Christian outreach, it is crucial to critically examine and address the ethical issues arising from this transformation. By incorporating ethical considerations into the digital evangelism practices, Christians can ensure that the core values and principles of their faith are upheld in the digital realm (Heim, 2008). Responsible and ethical engagement in digital evangelism not only promotes trust and credibility but also supports the overarching mission of spreading the Gospel message to a broader audience.

Concept of Ethical Issues

Ethical issues are situations that arise from moral conflicts that must be addressed. Thus, ethical issues tend to interfere with a society's principles. According to Velasquez et al. (2015), ethical issues are complex, contentious moral dilemmas that arise across various domains of human activity, requiring careful consideration and judgment about what is right, just, and morally acceptable. These issues often involve conflicts among values, principles, or interests, and they require individuals or organisations to navigate ethical frameworks and standards to guide their decision-making and actions.

Ethical issues are moral challenges that arise in various contexts and require individuals or groups to make decisions and take actions that align with principles of right and wrong, fairness, and justice. These issues often involve dilemmas in which different values or interests come into conflict, necessitating thoughtful ethical analysis and decision-making (Hoffman et al., 2014).

Concept of Digitalisation

Digitalisation refers to the process of using digital technologies and platforms to transform analogue information, systems, or processes into digital formats, enabling the storage, manipulation, and exchange of data electronically (Westerman et al., 2014). It involves integrating digital tools, techniques, and technologies to enhance efficiency, accessibility, and connectivity across various aspects of human activities.

Digitalisation is the process of using digital technologies to transform traditional analogue systems, processes, or information into digital formats. It involves adopting digital tools, platforms, and strategies to enable efficient data storage, analysis, communication, and collaboration, thereby improving productivity and innovation (World Economic Forum, 2016). Digitalisation is the integration of

digital technologies into various aspects of human life, including business, communication, and everyday activities. It involves using digital tools, software, and systems to capture, process, transmit, and store data, thereby increasing automation, connectivity, and efficiency across diverse domains.

Concept of Evangelism

In Christianity, evangelism or witnessing is the act of preaching the gospel to share the message and teachings of Jesus Christ. Evangelism also refers to the act of sharing and proclaiming the Christian Gospel message to convert individuals to the Christian faith and foster spiritual growth (Balmer, 2013). It involves communicating the teachings, values, and beliefs of Christianity to others and inviting them to embrace Jesus Christ as their Saviour and follow the principles of the faith.

Christians who specialise in evangelism are often called evangelists, whether they work in their home communities or serve as missionaries in the field. However, some Christian traditions refer to such people as missionaries in either case. Some Christian traditions consider evangelists to hold a leadership role; they may preach at large gatherings or serve in governance roles. In addition, Christian groups that encourage evangelism are sometimes called evangelistic or evangelist groups.

Digitalisation of Evangelism in Christianity

The digitalisation of evangelism in Christianity refers to the integration of digital technologies and platforms into the practice of sharing the Gospel and engaging with individuals online. It involves leveraging digital tools such as websites, social media, mobile applications, online streaming, and virtual communities to reach a global audience, facilitate meaningful interactions, and promote the Christian faith (Campbell, 2017). The digitalisation of evangelism has opened new avenues for Christian organisations, churches, and individuals to spread the Gospel beyond physical boundaries and to connect with people who may not have been reached through traditional means. It has enabled the dissemination of biblical teachings, testimonies, worship experiences, and Christian resources at a scale and speed previously unimaginable.

Through digital platforms, evangelists can share sermons, Bible studies, devotionals, and other faith-based content that individuals with internet access can access anytime, anywhere. Social media platforms enable Christians to engage in conversations, address spiritual questions, and offer support to seekers and believers alike (Cheong and Huang, 2011). Online communities and virtual

gatherings provide spaces for worship, prayer, and fellowship, creating a sense of belonging for those who may not have access to in-person church gatherings.

Moreover, digitalisation has enabled targeted, personalised approaches to evangelism. Using data analytics and digital marketing techniques, evangelistic messages can be tailored to specific demographics or individual interests, increasing their relevance and resonance. Digital tools also enable real-time feedback and engagement measurement, allowing evangelists to assess the impact of their efforts and adapt their strategies accordingly (Garner and Pym, 2012). However, the digitalisation of evangelism also presents unique ethical considerations and challenges. Privacy concerns, data collection, authenticity, automation, and inclusivity are among the ethical issues that need to be carefully navigated in the digital space. Ensuring the responsible use of personal data, maintaining authenticity in messaging, addressing the risks of deceptive practices, and promoting respectful and inclusive communication are essential in upholding ethical standards in digital evangelism.

Digital Tools and Platforms Used in Evangelism:

The digital revolution has provided numerous tools and platforms that have transformed the landscape of Christian evangelism. These digital tools and platforms have enabled Christian organisations and individuals to reach a global audience, engage in meaningful interactions, and share the Gospel message effectively. According to Heim (2008), the following are some key digital tools and platforms used in evangelism:

1. **Websites:** Websites serve as central hubs for churches, ministries, and Christian organisations to provide information about their mission, activities, beliefs, and resources. They often include features such as sermon archives, blogs, event calendars, and online giving options, enabling individuals to access Christian content and engage with the community.
2. **Social Media:** Social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube have become powerful tools for evangelism. They allow Christians to share inspirational quotes, Bible verses, and testimonies, and engage in conversations about faith. Live streaming services enable the broadcast of sermons and events to a broader audience in real time.
3. **Mobile Applications:** Mobile apps offer a convenient way to access Christian content, devotionals, Bible study materials, and worship

resources. These apps often include features like daily devotionals, Bible reading plans, prayer guides, and audio/video content, providing a personalised and interactive experience.

4. **Podcasts:** Podcasts have gained popularity as a platform for delivering audio content, including sermons, Bible teachings, discussions, and interviews. They offer on-demand access to content, making them a convenient resource for individuals seeking spiritual nourishment.
5. **Online Streaming and Webinars:** With the rise of streaming platforms, churches and ministries can broadcast live services, conferences, and events, enabling individuals to participate remotely. Webinars and online workshops provide opportunities for in-depth teaching, training, and discipleship.
6. **Virtual Communities:** Online communities and forums allow believers to connect, share experiences, seek guidance, and foster fellowship. These platforms provide spaces for individuals to interact, discuss spiritual matters, ask questions, and receive support from a broader Christian community.
7. **E-books and Digital Publications:** The availability of e-books and digital publications has made Christian literature more accessible. Individuals can access a wide range of Christian books, Bible translations, devotionals, and theological resources in digital formats, enhancing study and discipleship.

It is important to note that while digital tools and platforms offer significant opportunities for evangelism, they should be used responsibly and in line with ethical guidelines to ensure authenticity, privacy, and inclusive engagement.

Ethical Issues in Digitalisation of Evangelism

The digitalisation of evangelism in Christianity has introduced new ethical considerations that must be carefully navigated. While digital tools and platforms offer opportunities to reach a global audience and engage individuals in meaningful ways, they also pose ethical challenges that must be addressed (Brown, 2014). Here are some key ethical issues in digital evangelism:

1. **Privacy and Data Collection:** Digital evangelism often involves collecting and utilising personal data, such as email addresses, demographics, and user behaviour, for communication and targeted outreach. Respecting individuals' privacy rights, obtaining informed consent, and ensuring the

secure handling of personal information are essential ethical considerations in digital evangelism.

2. **Authenticity and Deception:** With the digital landscape, there is a risk of deceptive practices, including the creation of fake accounts, misleading content, or manipulated testimonies. Maintaining authenticity, truthfulness, and transparency in digital evangelism is crucial to building trust and credibility among the audience.
3. **Online Harassment and Bullying:** Digital platforms can be susceptible to online harassment, cyberbullying, and trolling. Ethical guidelines should be followed to ensure that digital evangelism is conducted with respect, kindness, and sensitivity, creating a safe and supportive environment for all participants.
4. **Inclusivity and Diversity:** Digital evangelism should be inclusive and respectful of diverse perspectives, cultures, and backgrounds. It is important to avoid discriminatory language, biases, or exclusionary practices that may alienate or marginalise specific individuals or groups.
5. **Digital Addiction and Overconsumption:** The use of digital platforms for evangelism should be mindful of individuals' well-being and the potential adverse effects of excessive screen time, digital addiction, and information overload. Balancing the use of digital tools with offline engagement and personal interactions is an ethical consideration to promote holistic spiritual growth.
6. **Online Discernment and Discourse:** Digital evangelism should foster healthy and respectful online discourse, promoting critical thinking, open dialogue, and constructive engagement. Ethical guidelines should encourage Christians to engage thoughtfully, avoiding divisive or disrespectful behaviour that may undermine the Christian witness.
7. **Financial Transparency:** When digital evangelism involves financial transactions, such as online donations or purchases of resources, ensuring transparency, accountability, and responsible stewardship of funds is an ethical imperative.

It is crucial for Christian organisations, churches, and individuals engaged in digital evangelism to establish ethical guidelines, adhere to them, and regularly evaluate their practices to ensure ethical integrity and maintain the highest standards of conduct.

Conclusion

The digitalisation of evangelism in Christianity has revolutionised the way the Gospel message is shared and engaged with in the modern era. It has provided unprecedented opportunities to reach a global audience, foster meaningful interactions, and promote the Christian faith. However, along with these opportunities, ethical issues have emerged that require careful consideration and adherence to ethical principles. Therefore, privacy and data collection, authenticity and deception, online harassment, inclusivity and diversity, digital addiction, online discernment and discourse, and financial transparency are among the key ethical issues that need to be addressed in digital evangelism. Respecting individuals' privacy rights, maintaining authenticity and transparency, promoting inclusivity, fostering healthy online discourse, and ensuring responsible stewardship of resources are essential ethical practices. Therefore, the digitalisation of evangelism presents both great opportunities and ethical challenges, and Christians need to approach it with wisdom, discernment, and a commitment to upholding ethical values as they spread the message of love, hope, and redemption found in Christianity.

Recommendations

The following recommendations arising from the research are proffered.

1. Christian organisations, churches, and individuals engaged in digital evangelism should establish ethical guidelines and regularly evaluate their practices to ensure ethical integrity. These guidelines should address issues such as privacy, authenticity, inclusivity, online behaviour, and financial transparency.
2. Christian organisations, churches, and individuals should maintain a high standard of authenticity in digital evangelism efforts. Avoid deceptive practices such as fake accounts or manipulated testimonies. Be transparent about motives, intentions, and any potential conflicts of interest.

3. People should embrace diversity and ensure that digital evangelism efforts are inclusive and respectful of different perspectives, cultures, and backgrounds. Avoid discriminatory language or practices that may alienate or marginalise individuals or groups.
4. Churches should encourage thoughtful and respectful engagement in digital conversations. Foster open dialogue, critical thinking, and constructive discussions while avoiding divisive or disrespectful behaviour. Promote unity and understanding within the online community.

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DIGITALISATION: A VERITABLE TOOL FOR CHURCH GROWTH IN NIGERIA

BY

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Abstract

Digitalisation in religion is essential to keep up with the twenty-first century, which has made the world a global village. Social media, as a digital technology, is essential for church expansion and growth. It is an obvious fact that social media, in all its ramifications, has become a channel to reach the globe simultaneously, with a remarkable impact through evangelism, crusades, revival programmes, religious conferences, workshops, etc., as a promoter of their religious faith and beliefs. Churches or denominations that are not digital are limited in their operations, they have few followers and are very fanatical because their members are not exposed to other religious faiths. The digital aspect of the church has impacted the socio-economic, socio-political, socio-religious and socio-cultural life of the global world. Evangelism is indispensable to the church because it is a command from Christ to make disciples who will continue to propagate the gospel. This research examines digitalisation as a concept, conceptualises the Church and church growth, and addresses the positive and negative impacts of digitalisation on church growth in Nigeria. This research used an analytical method and utilised books, journals, and internet sources, and recommends, among other things, that all churches be social media compliant to evangelise the entire globe rather than limiting their messages to those around them.

Key Words: Digitalisation, Church, Growth, Media, Communication.

Introduction

Church can be said to be people whom the Father has redeemed, the Son renewed, and the Holy Spirit has transformed. In a nutshell, the church is seen as people engaged in the redeeming work of Jesus on the cross. The growth of the church has been the ultimate goal since the days of Christ, Christianity's founder. During his time, Jesus spoke more about the church's growth and advancement. This is made clear in his statement to Apostle Peter in (Matthew 16:18) “for you are Peter, and on this rock, I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it”. Due to the importance of the growth of the church and the kingdom at large, the disciples of Jesus were saddled with the task of evangelism, the act of preaching the good news to every living human in order to win them from the gross darkness of the world into the marvellous light of God. However, church growth is the progress in numerical strength, financial and structural development.

In the early church, the apostles and disciples recorded success in their evangelism, though it was marked by labour and difficulties. Many Christian missionaries faced persecution to ensure the gospel spread, and their constant travel left many of them weary and tired. Some of them encountered horrific and breathtaking experiences during their mission work to ensure the church's growth. A good example was the Apostle Paul, who encountered many shipwrecks (2 Corinthians 11:25). A dangerous snake also bit him on one occasion (Acts 28:3), and he and Barnabas escaped being stoned at Lystra (Acts 14:5). On several occasions, they were beaten and thrown into prison (Acts 16:23).

It is important to note that the growth of the church is one of the reasons why God gave the fivefold ministry to man (Ephesians 4:11-12), “and to some he gave Apostles, Prophets, Evangelists, Shepherds (pastors) and Teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ”. Now, the baton for advancing the church's growth has passed to contemporary Christians in a generation of technology and science. It is our duty to promote church growth as our predecessors did through digitalisation.

Digitalisation is the use of social media to ease manual labour. When social media is utilised properly, it will promote the church. Through social media such as radio and television, ministers now embrace technology to disseminate the gospel. Social media makes individuals more individualistic and more reliant on entertainment, which reduces the church's spirituality. Churches are using

Facebook, Twitter, and other popular social media platforms as they adopt technology.

An X-Ray of Digitalisation as a Concept

Due to the rapid advances in science and technology, almost every aspect of human life has been digitalised. Evans (2012) states that the world is becoming a global village every day. People are abandoning traditional ways of doing things in favour of scientific methods. It is no secret that the internet has become a second home for many of our youth and adults. Being a Christian who is saddled with the task of evangelism, which in turn will lead to the advancement of the church, we are therefore expected to reach out to these people following the trend of the present generation (which is social media).

Digitalisation is the use of the internet to create or share information and ideas. It promotes online social networks by connecting a user's profile with others. Also, "it has become a big part of the lives of individuals. The power of mass media has become so strong that its undoubtedly significant role in the world today stays beyond any questions" (Bartleby, 2016, p. 19). There is no doubt that social media have gained wider acceptance and usability and are becoming among the most important communication tools among people (Badmos, 2014).

Social media users are often linked to desktops, laptops, or download services that offer social media functionality for their mobile devices (e.g., smartphones and tablets). Digitalisation differs from paper-based media (e.g., magazines and newspapers) and traditional electronic media such as television and radio broadcasting (Lewis, 2016).

Digitalisation involves the transmission of information. This contrasts with traditional media (one source for many receivers), such as newspapers and radio stations. Social media platforms with over 100 million registered users include Facebook, YouTube, WeChat, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, WhatsApp, Telegram, and others.

So many denominations are struggling to adapt to the information age. Digitalisation is really a challenge to churches, especially the orthodox churches, as the (traditional) means, that is, pulpit, one-to-one and family visitation, have become a lifestyle. In this period of the information revolution, people should not be surprised that many traditional methods are abandoned (Comiskey, 1985).

Conceptual Definition of the Church

The church is the elect of God before the world was formed, those for whom Christ died, those transformed by the inner working of the Holy Spirit of God. They have been created anew in Christ and principally live as a unified body. The church always meets to worship God. The church is a builder of one another's faith. Testimonies are consistently offered to God so the world can appreciate goodness. The church has a particular mission that no other organisation in the world is commissioned to do. To them is given the treasure of the Gospel, and the task of disseminating that treasure in our cosmic environs. The church finds actual communication in worshipers, meetings, presbyteries, and assemblies (Palmer, 2008).

The church aims to present lost souls to Jesus. The church uses traditional methods to reach its members, such as church declarations and sending missionaries to the field. The desire of the church people is oriented towards a deeper Christocentric relationship. Of course, churches expect a significant number of worshippers at their services, offer classes, and involve people in cell groups, as reaching a wider audience with "The Message" is imperative (McKinney, 2014). Palmer (2008, p.22) under the revelation of God did say that:

The most significant issue facing the church in the twentieth century concerns its definition of its own nature and mission. While the church through the ages has repeatedly defined the triune nature of God, the full authority of scripture, and the person and work of Christ, it has not yet reached an adequate resolution of the problems involved in its own self-definition.

One apparent result of this failure of self-definition is widespread disagreement across almost every segment of the church. If the church does not understand its duty, it cannot call for the unification of purpose. Observations that may help resolve divergent views are essential.

At this point, may I carefully define the term "church" as the ekklesia, from the Greek? It speaks of the "called out ones", or more specifically, the "Ones called together". God has chosen to call out his people from the world to be separated and for a divine mission. It is God's local assembly of His people.

Conceptual Analysis of Church Growth

Church growth is the progressive increase in all areas of denominational worship that positively impact the human environment and God's kingdom, with reference to numerical growth (soul winning), economic growth, structural expansion, and increased theological knowledge, etc. It is also seen in the light of the progressive shift from an analogue pattern to a digital way of worship. In the definition above, church growth encompasses all aspects of any denomination. It must be spiritually, physically (structurally), numerically (soul-winning), and economically driven by digitalisation. It must impact the human environment to support human capacity development and empowerment. Church growth must affect all aspects, but more especially, in the area of regeneration of the soul as well as transformation of the assemblies of God's people.

Sibani (2008) posits that the announcement of the gospel by the church should be indeed and word. It is only when the church grows in its willingness to operate within the restrictions of God's purpose for its existence that it will be able to give proper attention to her unique mission. The church is expected to provide impetus for members in their massive efforts to evangelise the world for Christ. This mission affects the social, economic, political, and educational structures of the world today. Christian political organisations should direct their energies towards making the State conform to God's intention for the State. A Christian social group advocates for social justice among men. In a Christian educational organisation, Christ is the central focus of its teachings and doctrine

Positive Impacts of Digitalisation on Church Growth in Nigeria

Promotes Inter-communication among Members:

Social media is a valuable tool for members to interact with one another. Through social media, Churches popularise their weekly activities, sermons are accessed online, and church members can view photos from the most recent event, regardless of where they are. With the above ideas, social media has changed the meaning of 'local church' via expanding avenues for worship. Church expansion is made possible as digitalisation and community outreach rapidly increase through virtual and physical worlds. Successful churches on social media employ digitally savvy youth. (McKinney, 2014).

Digitalisation allows the church to reach a wide variety of people (McKinney, 2014). Digitalisation has disseminated the gospel and created mobile churches, bringing them within reach of every individual. (White and Simas, 2008). To meet the needs of a variety of markets, churches need to remain faithful to their teaching and theology while adapting to a rapidly evolving society and environment (Nicky, 2019).

It is time churches use social media to connect with their members by broadcasting upcoming events, sharing specific information, and identifying the best times to post on these sites (McKinney, 2014).

As conduits of communication, the media have become the primary source of religious ideas, in particular in the form of banal religion. As a medium, the media mould religious imaginations in accordance with the genres of popular culture and cultural environments. The media have taken over many of the social functions of institutionalised religions, providing both moral and spiritual guidance and a sense of community (Harvard, 2008).

Churches that are not digitally inclined find it very difficult to be in touch with their members, especially the aged, the sick, and very busy members who are businessmen. Some churches are using Facebook and other social media platforms to stay in touch with their members (Lewis, 2016). In the contemporary era, streaming services are invaluable for reaching many people simultaneously. Digitalisation promotes weekly bulletin information, such as prayer requests, Bible study, and upcoming events, including Vacation Bible School.

Circulating Information to Many:

One of the fundamental reasons churches adopt digital systems is to do more with less funding. Besides communicating event-oriented content, churches need digitalisation to get their message out and encourage open discourse. This is achievable through several approaches, such as tweeting a daily message or Bible verse, broadcasting regularly scheduled podcasts, uploading videos of sermons or other spiritual teachings, and sharing blogs written by the minister or other church leaders.

The above methods of disseminating church information make the church relevant to its members. Churches that fail to embrace the technology may be seen as obsolete in the modern era. Students in the digital era are all native speakers of the

digital language of computers and the internet. Those who were not born into the digital world have become fascinated by and have adopted it; they are considered digital immigrants (Prensky, 2001). Social media is now an important way to publicise forthcoming programmes within the church. According to McKinney (2014),

Today, statistics show that of the 7 billion people in the world, 2.5 billion are on social media. That is 35% of the world's population. If ministers are not present on this platform, how can they serve and minister to the billions of people who congregate there?

Reaching new members and generating income has been made possible through the utilisation of social media. Also, churches that use social media for evangelism sometimes tread a dangerous line, because unidentified users can infiltrate online communications, prompting churches to spend resources on surveillance and, at times, remove content from their sites.

Generate Interesting Sites to Attract New Members/Followers:

Cites are created to reward users who like or retweet. The church has set a goal to reward users for their activities. According to Mandy (2020), to retain new users on their social media pages, churches usually post important programmes to engage them and keep them. Facebook provides most churches with the opportunity to reach many interest groups worldwide and to encourage the ministry of young people. The group is managed mainly by ministers, youth ministers, or senior church leadership to prevent mismanagement.

A well-known church organisation called "Focus on the Family", led by James Dobson, created an outreach division called the Digital Engagement Centre (DEC). They focus on providing immediate online communication to those experiencing challenges at home and on offering solutions. The "listening software" constantly searches blogs and public media/platforms for persons desiring advice on domestic challenges. The operator tries to assist anyone who needs their services at any time.

Aid Financial Assistance for the Church:

In contemporary Churches, several avenues for raising funds for financial assistance are essential, especially during the pandemic. The digital platform is now essential for fundraising, as churches upload their account details so members

and sponsors can pay. Several churches compel their members to pay tithes and offerings, sow seeds, and make monetary donations for church projects. Funds are raised for crusades, mission trips, youth and marriage seminars, church building, and the purchase of an evangelism bus, among other things.

Digitalisation Educates/Discipling People for Christ:

If the church is internet-compliant, she will reach out to many people, since billions are on social media and ready to learn. It means discipling people and attracting authentic followers who are ready to continue the church's vision. Several Bible schools, theological seminaries, and educational programmes are available online, and those who enrol in them are certified. The effectiveness of this platform in educating people cannot be overemphasised, as digital education is producing graduates in several fields worldwide.

Digitalisation Helps Convey the Vision of the Ministry:

God's given vision has the capacity to promote, establish His kingdom and enhance societal development. This ministry's vision can expand through social media. The main aim of social media is to convey messages and businesses, especially in ministry, to a larger group of people simultaneously at high speed. The church's vision can be strategically communicated through digital channels so more people can engage with it and bring it to fruition. Through digitalisation, the church will present its vision visually and actively, making it more appealing, motivating, and impactful. On multiple websites, software, channels, and apps, one can find the church's and ministry's vision and mission statements.

Digitalisation Improves Ministry Event Attendance:

In the modern era, it has become imperative for churches to adapt to digitalisation for growth. People follow consistent, good content from ministry events. Consistent sharing of church programmes on social media will attract more followers and drive growth. Consistent posting and uploading of church itineraries and events will help direct people to the right participants, ensuring they are reached (Evans, 2012).

Due to health or family challenges, busy schedules, trips, and other factors, many people often miss services for long periods. Social media helps them avoid missing out, as messages, events, and more are accessible from the comfort of their homes and keep them in touch with the ministry. Bassey (2002) avers that when church adherents are absent, they can still participate in church events if the service is live-streamed or recorded, which helps maintain continuity of learning and mentorship.

Negative Impacts of Digitalisation on the Church

While the importance of social media to the church cannot be overstated, some problems call its practical use into question. Some of these challenges include:

Surface Interactions/Artificial Relationships:

Interactions by the church on digital bases are very superficial. Many church members will not be detailed in their conversations because they are not digitally savvy, especially older members. Only a few of the aged are found on Facebook, WhatsApp, etc. Meetings held on social media will have low attendance due to poor network coverage, limited data, and a lack of smartphones with internet access. Sherry (2011) observes, “On social-networking sites such as Facebook, we think we will be presenting ourselves, but our profile ends up as somebody else—often the fantasy of whom we want to be” (p.153). Social media can make one feel less connected, rather than more connected, because interpersonal fellowship is missing.

Lack of Physical Presence:

According to Sherry (2011), “People readily admit they would rather leave a voicemail or send an email than talk face-to-face.... The new technologies allow us to ‘dial own’ human contact, to titrate its nature and extent” (p.15). Ironically, one of Christianity’s earliest enemies was Gnosticism, as they hold that the physical world is inherently evil and that salvation is essentially a release from the physical body. Hebrews 10:25 says, “Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching.”

Low Commitment/Accountability:

One of the striking features of Facebook-style communication is the limitation on the audience, mode, and style of disseminating information. Katz (2022) avers that the control and period, strength, and number of persons on Facebook are limited. The Christian life and genuine Christian relationships do not work as well on Facebook as they do in person. The church is saddled with the responsibilities towards others. How can one account for a member who is only seen on social media? How can the church understand the level of his/her spirituality? Will it be fair to say that a social media member is financially committed?

Pollution/Nudity:

Social media has been a source of pollution for many church members, especially the youth. Most church youth dress in a very seductive way and appear in church, which, in some cases, has led to compromise among pastors and leaders. They expose vital parts of their bodies and call it fashion and style. All of these are caused by social media exposure and pollution, as young people are quick to adopt what is evil and trending rather than what can edify (Holton and Mary, 2011).

The orthodox churches are gradually experiencing a mass exodus of youths from their denomination due to rigid conformity to 'the old-time religion', which is at variance with modern religious practices. Chastity and modesty are expected of the church. Today, nudity and all forms of immoral acts are found in contemporary churches because the messages from the pulpit are "come just as you are, "God does not look at your physical appearance but the heart", prosperity messages over salvation messages, etc.

Create Lack of Respect for Authority and Advocacy for Equality:

Social media encourages equality and a lack of submission to authority and overseers because they are not under a pastor/minister providing pastoral oversight. Digitalisation allows anyone to publicly criticise the church's sermons and activities, which may lead to scandal and damage its reputation. Digitalisation creates space for both church members and non-members to criticise the church's authority and leadership openly.

Recommendations

To ensure the safety of the youth online, it is strongly recommended that:

1. Church planting and mission can be effective if adequate usage of the internet is made to advertise and sensitise the globe to their visions and goals.
2. Since fraudsters have been using church platforms to exploit and rob members, the church should devise an alternative way of raising funds rather than using social media.
3. They should have adequate and effective online protection laws, as there are so many mobile churches all over.
4. Christian parents should, as a matter of urgency, monitor the activities of their children/wards on the mass media, as it is a fast medium for pollution and corrupt practices.

5. The government should place a ban on websites that cannot edify the youths for a good moral lifestyle, but place exposure to the negativity of mass media.

Conclusion

Digitalisation has extensively promoted the church by making its goods and services, sermons, and activities available to the public as a form of advertising. Because appropriate laws are not in place to protect the church from exposure to the mass media, fraudsters have robbed many members. The church must channel its activities through the mass media to achieve positive results, while the advent of mass media has been a veritable tool that aids ministers in spreading God's word. It also helps promote programmes on different platforms, Such as Television, Radio, Facebook, WhatsApp, etc. Through mass media, messages are sent across these platforms, consistently transforming people's lives. Devotionals and ministry materials, such as books and messages, are downloaded and read, and they can be seen as an expansion of the kingdom and as a driver of church growth.

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