

A SOCIOLOGICAL AND ETHICAL ANALYSIS OF DIGITAL RELIGION, WORSHIP AND PIETY IN CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIANITY IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

A SOCIOLOGICAL AND ETHICAL ANALYSIS OF DIGITAL RELIGION, WORSHIP AND PIETY IN CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIANITY IN NIGERIA

Religion has found its way to the digital space. Digital religion, worship and piety are becoming more conspicuous than ever in Christianity in Nigeria. This reality has raised a great deal of questions concerning the compatibility of religion and the cyberspace. The moral and community aspects of religion have also been somewhat thwarted and the academic study of religion became even more complex. This study interrogates the digital religion, worship and piety phenomenon in the light of Emile Durkheim's functional theory of religion and Jeremy Bentham's ethical theory, utilitarianism. This descriptive study garners data from focus group discussions, participant observation, interviews, and published literature, and adopts the inductive approach to research and analyzes data thematically. Findings show that the 2020 COVID-19 restrictions on physical contact heightened digital religion in Nigeria. A sociological and ethical analysis of the phenomenon of digital religion is instructive and reveals that digital religion is laced with a great deal of social and moral gains, as well as pitfalls. Digital religion also complicates the academic study of religion in contemporary times. To counter all these, this paper recommends, among other things, that caution should be taken in order not to make a total transition to digital religion, but rather use a hybridized form. Again, the paper recommends the deployment of rule utilitarianism in order to clearly define acceptable rules for digital religion, worship and piety, and scholars of religion should use the already available knowledge of digital methodologies to be able to better analyze the evolution of religion in contemporary times.

Keywords: Digital Religion, Worship, Piety, Christianity, Nigeria.

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INTRODUCTION

Against all odds and predictions of extinction by classical scholars, religion has remained resilient, constantly adapting to change and taking new forms and meanings. One would think that the spate and rate of digitalization in the contemporary world would herald the requiem of religion, as they seem incompatible. To retain its originality and core message, religion is largely skeptical about change, even though it cannot help entertaining it. Some decades ago, for instance, Pastor Kumuyi, a Nigerian and the General Overseer of Deeper Life Bible Church announced to his congregation that television was the devil's box and should not be found in the houses of believers (Emmanuel Iren 2022). He had long recanted this stance though. There were also pastors in Nigeria who vowed never to own a mobile phone at its advent in Nigeria, insinuating that it must be connected to "the beast" to be able to function the way it does. Today, many of them own smartphones and even more complex digital devices.

Religion, especially in Nigeria, traditionally viewed science and technology with a great deal of suspicion. Religion saw science as an adversary that was turning it into something irrelevant, while science viewed religion as incompatible with a modernizing society. As society became more and more automated and digital, with digital natives (people born within the years of the boom of digital technologies) at the top of their game, those who were born before the advent of digital technologies (the so-called "digital immigrants") moved to the digital world. Hence, as a resilient phenomenon, religion followed its devotees into the digital.

Various religious groups began to employ digital technologies such as the digitized sacred texts, prerecorded religious broadcasts, live streaming of religious services, and so on. The COVID-19 pandemic, which started in 2020, led to a reduction of physical human contact and literally moved religion to the virtual space and erased the digital divide within the religious world, as observed by Miller, Munday, and Hill (2019). Governments encouraged it and some religious groups took advantage of it, while others were highly skeptical about the government's real intentions and the Internet's efficacy for religious purposes. However, religious groups began to worship online and started meeting for various religious rituals in virtual spaces, using mobile apps like Zoom, Google Meetings, Skype, Microsoft teams, and so – on or social media outlets such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter etc. This lived experience gave rise to what scholars call *digital religion*. Digital religion is religion as a digitalized phenomenon, encompassing digital worship and digital piety. As a novel phenomenon, digital religion has its merits and reasons for distrust. For instance, it is convenient to worship from the comfort of one's home; also, digital worship breaks national boundaries as people from different nations and continents can gather in fellowship in the same virtual room. On the other hand, its problems range from ascertaining the divide between the sacred and the profane, to the lack of brotherly and sisterly warmth that only

physical meetings afford, to barriers to fully participate in religious rituals (for example, partaking in holy communion in Christianity), and to ethical issues like persons with ulterior motive or impious fellows presenting themselves as pious in the digital group. The list is endless. Hence, the efficiency of digital religious experience with respect to the numerous functions religion serve may be questioned. Digital religion also led to a shift in the study of religious phenomena that were taken to an entirely different and unprecedented realm, with scholars of religion needing to reorient their studies in order to fully understand the phenomenon.

This paper aims at exploring the ebb and flow of digital religion which has come to stay in the current digital world. This study's focal point of interest is Christianity in Nigeria, with primary data drawn from two Christian religious groups founded by Nigerians, whose activities are largely virtual, namely: Living by Design Nation (LBD), founded by Pastor Austin Chiefo Ejiofobiri and New Season Prophetic Prayers and Declaration (NSPPD), founded by Pastor Jerry Eze.

This study contributes to the current literature by interrogating digital religion, worship, and piety from sociological and ethical perspectives, with insights from Emile Durkheim's functional theory of religion and Jeremy Bentham's ethical theory, utilitarianism. The paper is descriptive and draws its data from focus group discussions, participant observation, interviews, and published works/literature. The research approach is inductive, with data being analyzed thematically.

The rest of this paper will take the following layout: theoretical framework; Christianity and digital religion; Christianity and digital worship; Christianity and digital piety; sociological analysis; ethical analysis; maximizing the merits and minimizing the shortfalls of digital religion, worship, and piety; and conclusions.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Durkheim's Functional Theory of Religion: Emile Durkheim derived his functional theory of religion from his study of the totemic religion of the Australian aborigines, which he documented in his 1921 classic work entitled: *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. Durkheim observed that religion influenced people's thoughts and behaviour in society and that people separated the sacred (that which evokes awe and reverence) from the profane (mundane or ordinary everyday things and activities, rituals, symbols, and objects). This dichotomy between the sacred and the profane, according to Durkheim, is defined by society. Durkheim's stance on religion and its functions is emphasized in his definition of religion thus: "a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite in one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them" (Durkheim 1912, trans. by Fields, 1995, p. 44).

According to Durkheim, religion involves consistent rituals and observances by a community of votaries. This affords believers a sense of group solidarity or community consciousness. Sacred rituals and observances are used to mark occasions like birth, death, marriage, and so on. Durkheim, therefore, highlights the social roles of religion. For him, religion functions as a binding force for a community of believers. It also prods and more importantly, props common morality and values. Hence, as a result of these functions, religion contributes to the well-being and sustenance of the group or the community. In other words, religion functions as a tool for and in fact, an expression of social cohesion and social order and control, as it enforces religious morals and norms in society. Durkheim also argued that religion provides meaning for life and gives answer to hard/ultimate questions of life.

Nevertheless, Durkheim, just like other social scientists of his time, predicted the dwindling or extinction of religion as society and science advanced. The primary criticism of this theory is its conspicuous silence on the dysfunctions of religion. For the purpose of this paper, the tenets of Durkheim's functional theory of religion will be deployed as a backdrop for the sociological analysis of digital religion, worship, and piety in contemporary Nigerian Christianity. While Durkheim's functional theory is a germane backdrop for a sociological discourse on digital Christianity, utilitarianism, an ethical theory, is adopted as a framework for an ethical inquiry on the same phenomenon.

Utilitarianism: An ethical discourse on digital religion, worship and piety considers the moral implications of the interaction between religious practices and the Internet. As Campbell (2013) notes, digital religion not only refers to religion as articulated and performed in the new media space, but also represents how digital media and spaces are influencing religious practices and are being influenced by them. To achieve this goal, we deploy a utilitarian ethical tool.

Utilitarianism is a normative ethical theory that stems from the 18th and 19th centuries. It was defended and popularized by English philosopher and economist, Jeremy Bentham, and further developed by John Stuart Mill. This ethical theory is associated with the consequentialist ethical school of thought which prioritizes outcomes and consequences of human actions (Duignan, 2009). Notwithstanding its different versions, utilitarianism is an ethical theory that suggests that moral and immoral actions can be determined by weighing actions that promote the greatest good for the greatest number of people and vice versa. The term "utility", from where the theory derives, according to Jeremy Bentham, is the property an object possesses, which makes it beneficial, advantageous, pleasurable, and good. Bentham not only speaks of promoting pleasure, but places great emphasis on maximizing such pleasure for the greatest number of people (Dimmock & Fisher, 2017). In calculating future consequences, Bentham proposed the *hedonic calculus*, which recommends consideration of the intensity, the possible duration, certainty, remoteness, fecundity, purity, and extent of such good.

Act utilitarianism and *rule utilitarianism* are the two major forms of utilitarianism. While act utilitarianism focuses on the consequences of the action of an individual, rule utilitarianism initially evaluates potential moral rules. Rule utilitarianism insists that a moral agent should act in such a way that if his/her action was made a universal rule, it would bring the greatest good to the greatest number of people (Birsch, 2013).

Even though Bentham proposed the *hedonic calculus* as a tool for calculating future outcomes, it is difficult to predict the future with absolute certainty. Furthermore, utilitarianism houses the possibility of a tyranny of the majority. Since the theory places too much power in the hands of the majority as a determinant factor of morality, there is the possibility of exploitation of the minority to achieve the “good” for the majority. For this and some other pitfalls embedded in the utilitarian theory, this paper is based more upon rule utilitarianism, which emphasizes a rule-based system of actualizing maximum utility.

CHRISTIANITY AND DIGITAL RELIGION

The advent of information technology and the internet has unequivocally given impetus to the presence of religion in the virtual space. Practically, in the recent years, Christianity has tremendously relied on cyberspace, as a means of spreading its teachings. In this sense, the clash between science and religion is said to be artificial, as Wariboko and Nwanyanwu (2022) have noticed. Religion and science work in *pari passu*.

The major world religions are not just communicated on the internet, they are also adhered to and maintained in cyberspace (Chiluwa, 2013). This means that religion has become part and parcel of the digital world, where it can be easily accessed, propagated, and from where it can make proselytes. The COVID-19 pandemic heightened the presence of religion in the virtual space. Campbell (2020) notices that a good number of religious communities from all over the world were forced to move to the online worship which replaced the former “physical” worship, due to the COVID-19 restrictions. According to Hoover (2006), religion and media have been together all through the chronicle of events. Fundamentally, religion depends on media technologies to disseminate its message (Horsfield, 2015). It follows, therefore, that the establishment of some internet-based religious rituals is not necessarily the direct result of the physical distancing restrictions occasioned by the pandemic. A strong nexus and synergy between religion and the internet basically existed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, that has plagued the world in the year 2020. During the peak of the pandemic, however, the internet was mainly employed by Christian religious groups – Mainline Churches, Pentecostal Churches, and even New Religious Movements – to amplify and widely disseminate their activities. As a matter of fact, Pope John Paul II, during his papal

message on World Communication Day in 1990, echoed the prospect of propagating Catholic messages via the internet (John Paul II, 1990). In a 1963 Vatican II document about social communication, the Catholic Church promoted a responsible use of the media to improve and develop the apostolate, even though the media has greatly evolved from what it was then. Thus it appears that the digital religion phenomenon is not a novel development, because of the long history of religion in the digital world. The traditional status of the Christian faith has been tweaked by a prevalent digital culture that affects all facets of human life (Zukowski, 2012). However, the reality of the COVID-19 pandemic, which made it impossible for religious people to participate in their normal physical worship, also made it possible for people to assume that a novel perspective on religion has emerged. The digital culture has, however, digitized the prescribed or doctrinal form of worship (such as the liturgy), as well as other elements of the Christian religion.

The internet has earned a spiritual function, as devout are now replete in cyberspace, with the purpose of taking part in various religious activities (Campbell, 2005). And this trend of religious practice is encountered all around the world. The virtual environment is assumed to be sacred, thereby creating an atmosphere of awe and reverence. According to Campbell (2013), “digital religion is a critical and organized survey of the study of religion and new media. It covers religious practices with a huge range of new media forms and engagement of new media”.

Digital religion does not simply refer to religion as it is performed and articulated online, but it points to how digital media and virtual spaces are shaping and are being shaped by religious practice (Campbell, 2013). As such, what happens in cyberspace, as well as other dynamics that concern the practice of religion in the media, became the interest of scholarship on religion.

Nevertheless, A.U. Nwalozie (personal communication, March 7, 2022) avers that the online practice of religion cannot provide the real essence of religion. For him, there are elements of falsehood occasioned by the virtual environment, which is not “real”. He also stated, *inter alia*, that most people are skeptical about the possibility of communicating with God and satisfying their spiritual needs in a virtual setting that is not different from that of a typical Nigerian movie (a Nollywood production).

Notwithstanding, Campbell (2013) notes that digital religion represents an amalgamation of online and offline religious environments. In digital environments, religion is seen to possess both the attributes of online culture (such as interactivity, convergence, and audience-generated content) and traditional religion (such as patterns of beliefs and rituals tied to historically grounded communities). Hoover and Echchaibi (2012) therefore note that the discussion on what is religious in the contemporary world needs to include the structure of religion in relation to the digital.

Digital religion is a phenomenon that is associated with certain revolutions that have taken place in modern society, owing to secularization, globalization,

industrialization, religious change, science and technology, freedom of religious belief, urbanization, and a host of other aspects.

CHRISTIANITY AND DIGITAL WORSHIP

The use of the internet in almost all fields of human endeavor, including religion, has created a huge degree of flexibility in contemporary times. This is also the case with Christianity, as the internet and social media have been fully adopted for worshipping God and reaching out to people far and near. In other words, the internet does not just create room for sending and receiving religious prayers and propagating doctrines, but is rather the place where a high number of votaries or devotees are now able to practice their faith via the internet, as well as maintain their membership within their physical “face-to-face” church (Chiluwa, 2012). This is owing to the prevalence of online cultural practices that have impacted the entire human existence.

According to Kucukvardar (2020), humanity has seen the clash between science and religion for many years, but presently there is a considerable level of consensus in that regard, as they both seek answers to modern-day questions. However, one cannot inquire or attempt to solve any problem in recent times without resorting to science and at least some technological tools. As such, religious worship, which nowadays is using the internet, is no exception. The development of what we call the internet and information technology accompanies the emergence of online worship.

Today, the improvement of computer technologies and internet facilities has indeed facilitated the presence of unnatural worlds that have the semblance of natural worlds (Kucukvardar, 2020). For instance, during a participant observation of a digital worship session of the LBD, it was observed that offline worship is mirrored with digital substitutes and improvisations during digital worship. Virtual social interaction is enabled during digital worship. Digital worship entails the actual worship (religious observance, rituals, prayer, religious experience, and expression etc.) using digital tools and the virtual space. It, therefore, depicts actual religious activities that are conducted online (Kucukvardar, 2020).

Online Christian worship in Nigeria is fast becoming popular among Christians, leading to the emergence of the “internet churches”, where Christians worship in addition to their local offline churches. During digital worship among Christians in Nigeria, almost all activities that take place in offline church worship also take place online. These include healing, prayers, word ministrations, intercession, thanksgiving, anointing, communion, offerings, mostly through credit card transfer, and so on. Religious retreats, conferences, and conventions are also held online or broadcasted live via Zoom, Google meet, Telegram, or any other online platform.

In Nigeria, Christian offline worship and practices are also administered online, by Churches like Redeemed Christian Church of God, Deeper Life Bible Church, Living Faith Church Worldwide, and Believers' Love World. The members of these Churches give their tithes and offerings online. They also participate in other activities during worship, as directed by the minister, while healing ministrations and anointing services are being performed through the same process. Online worshipers simply watch the videos and carry out the instructions received from the clergy (Chiluwa, 2013).

But physical bonding/fellowship that is the norm during offline worship is conspicuously absent during digital worship. To fill this gap, some digital worshipers also attend offline worshipping activities. More so, C.H. Udo (personal communication, March 2, 2022), opines that digital worship lacks the spiritual atmosphere/awe that characterizes physical worship sessions.

CHRISTIANITY AND DIGITAL PIETY IN NIGERIA

Being a Christian presupposes the acceptance of a virtuous call to religious piety which applies both to laymen and to clergy. The act of reverence and devotion to the Almighty God through the media or the internet is indeed a novel development in the chronicle and growth of Christianity in Nigeria and elsewhere. Digital piety translates religious acts or duties in the digital space that show religious piousness. Etymologically, piety is derived from the Latin word *pietas*, which means devout or dutiful. It entails full participation in all the things that involve worshiping God and His service; inward, and more especially, outward expression of reverence to God. It presupposes devotion and reverence to religious practices and God. For instance, reading the Bible, sharing Bible passages on social media, attending virtual worship services, sharing Godly counsel on the media, sharing videos of participation in prayer, praise, or Christian charity, sharing videos of pastors/priests preaching, advertising or sharing fliers for religious programmes and so on. A.R. Kilani (personal communication, March 16, 2022) notes that while digital worship entails observance by virtual participation in religious rituals via digital technologies, for spiritual growth and satisfaction, digital piety refers to the depiction of godliness or actual involvement of oneself in religious duties online, for personal and spiritual growth and fulfillment.

More so, Christians and in general those who want to be identified as Christians and pious in Nigeria engage in an online confession of faith by depicting devotion to God – a devotion characterized by prayers, rituals, meditations as well as thanksgiving and charity – which are brandished through different platforms of social media, such as YouTube, Facebook, Zoom, Twitter, Instagram, etc.

In another development, some persons generally put up a show of religious piety online or in online religious communities, but they do not display the same

religious personality elsewhere, either physically or in other online non-religious communities or groups they belong to. This deceptive attitude makes it difficult to differentiate real piety from a mere show off, put up as a portrayal of “ideal” identity; sheer deception, or other such gimmicks, to gain acceptance in an online group of religious people and so on. It is not uncommon to see that non-religious persons are posting religious scriptures or messages or even drive an argument online with religious backup. Some even share “visions”, “prophecies”, and their acts of charity online to imprint their religiosity and piety in the minds of viewers and listeners. This online show of religiosity is often aided by numerous digital stickers, emojis, and memes that are usually employed to symbolically express piety online. Digital piety, therefore, which is religious reverence expressed online, represents a concept and practice that need more in-depth research to uncover, decipher and situate.

SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Sociologists view religion as a social phenomenon with social relevance and implications. Religion has maintained this social relevance till present times even as it has delved into the virtual space. Emile Durkheim’s (1912, trans. Fields, 1995) functional theory of religion as well as his definition of religion reflects the social dimension of this phenomenon. Miller, Munday & Hill (2019, p. 376) emphasize the role religion plays in social networking sites which they refer to as the “burgeoning social sphere”. To this sense, the assertion that truth about Christianity is dispensational (A.C. Ejiofobiri, teaching during a Christian worship service on zoom, April 29, 2022) remains instructive, although some schools of thought that interpret the Bible literally may not subscribe to it. As things, cultures, and, lived experiences evolve, the application of God’s word also evolves. The Christian religion did not remain offline at the emergence of the internet. It migrated to the virtual space, or at least, hybridized its environment. The Christian religion and, indeed, other religious groups adopted the use of the internet. For instance, A.C. Ejiofobiri (sermon during a Christian worship service on ZOOM, April 29, 2022) notes that the Biblical injunction to lay hands on the sick and pray for them can be substituted with praying for them online without any physical laying of hands. Interestingly, this teaching, which has now been modified in the internet age, remained unchanged for all the millennia of the existence of Christianity. But Miller, Munday & Hill’s (2019, p. 377) claim that religion or “religiosity (is) associated with less participation in online communities” may be germane only for the non-religious communities, because online religious communities are becoming stronger and more organized.

Campbell (2013) identifies five aspects of religion that are of concern for scholars of religion with respect to digital religion: ritual, identity, community,

authority, and authenticity. All these aspects of religion are somewhat challenged in digital religion, thus, affecting the social aspect and functions of religion. The ritual, which has to do with “doing” religion in terms of a handshake, taking of communion, kneeling before the altar, and so on are apparently incompatible with digital religion. However, digital tools such as GIFs, stickers, and emojis are employed to convey the affective/emotional aspect of religious worship.

More so, Durkheim (1912, trans. Fields, 1995) asserts that religion entails the dichotomy between the sacred and the profane. According to Durkheim, the sacred is “set apart and forbidden”. The question is, do virtual religious groups accessed with smartphones, computers, android tablets or other digital devices qualify as sacred? Are they set apart from mundane things and forbidden? The virtual space of digital religion is accessed with the same devices that one sometimes uses to shout at people on the internet, send nasty text messages, see movies (sometimes, immoral ones or even pornography), and perform other mundane activities. This blurs the line or even annuls the whole dichotomy between the *sacred* and the *profane* as both the sacred and the profane use the same outlet. It seems that, as societies evolve, the gap between the sacred and the profane closes. Admittedly therefore, this line is also blurred in offline service / worship, where one can use the hands for the sign of the cross and for other profane gestures. However, offline sacred “times” and “spaces” are more sacrosanct than online sacred “times” and “spaces”, if they exist at all. For instance, one will unlikely use the finger for a titillating gesture while in church, but can easily switch between online service / worship and sexting on the same mobile device, at the same time. Unlike offline worship, what exist online are fluid or temporal boundaries which are hardly respected. A. Egba (personal communication, April 2, 2022), decries the fact that in digital religion, sometimes, a notification alert pops up during virtual worship, thereby constituting a serious distraction during such religious engagement. In other words, exposed to the entire globe online, coupled with the luxury of privacy to do what one wants without the social and religious norms that characterize physical worship, as well as the inability of humans to control their curiosity, it is difficult, yet important to shield the sacred “space” and “time” from outside intrusions during digital worship. Fesko’s (2019) view resonates with the ideas above. While not deriding the import of technology in “doing” religion, Fesko calls for circumspection in practicing religion on the internet using digital device.

Nevertheless, Durkheim avers that religion unites people into one moral community. The offline community is diametrically opposed to an online community due to its lack of social control. A digital religious community may represent a convergence of total strangers who painstakingly construct the religious identity they wish to brandish, some with pseudo-identities, devoid of physical contact / warmth, yet connected as people of one faith and creed. Digital religion seems to deny worshipers physical bonding as suggested by Durkheim’s functional theory of religion, which sees religion as a centripetal force that unites a

community. Bonding is one of the major functions of religion that engenders social cohesion and synergy. Attention has been drawn to how the internet has altered the original idea of communality in the Church, which encouraged physical warmth, sharing and caring. The strength of any spiritual community lies in its ability to worship, pray, praise, cooperate, evangelize, identify, and solve problems together and reach out to members of their community. Most of these are admittedly present in virtual religious communities. However, it is almost impossible to reach out on a one-on-one basis to members of an online religious community with a limitless audience. Besides, the physical church is the only place where emotional and reassuring gestures such as hugging, patting on the back, and holding hands can truly be expressed. There are undoubtedly digital expressions for these gestures, even though they cannot really substitute for the actual gestures performed by the adherents during church gatherings.

More so, the idea of a “moral” community is at odds with the way the ideal self is being built within the online communities in general and in religious online communities in particular. While the ideal self can be projected as well during the offline practice of religion, it is easier to conceal it online as it effortlessly escapes the social control of the community. According to Campbell (2013), digital religion enhances public self-representation. Identity can, therefore, be misrepresented or effortlessly reconstructed in digital religion. Ironically, Miller, Munday & Hill (2019) state that elsewhere online, young adults (who preponderate in digital religion) display little or nothing of their religious values. As such, it is incongruous to study digital Christian religion with the same tools and methods employed in the study of traditional patterns of Christianity.

Despite convenience in practicing digital religion, some questions arise, such as those related to authority and influence. Nevertheless, scholars have expressed concerns that the new media potentially creates new forms of authority. Webmasters, bloggers and any other person who is able to secure some form of “online social capital” can easily assume an authoritative position without meeting the prerequisites to adequately perform such function (Campbell, 2011). The same is true for religious communities, where people who are highly influential in the online can get to interpret religious texts, beliefs and practices and anyone whose values align with such interpretations would easily adopt them. This view is materialized in the emergence of “The Free Nation” (aka, Free the Sheeple Movement), an online Church led by a self-acclaimed Bible teacher named Ifedayo Olarinde, popularly known as Daddy Freeze. Daddy Freeze, a popular media influencer, is known for his endorsement of divorce and teachings against tithing, to cite but a few of his highly controversial “Christian teachings” and polemics.

Nevertheless, the virtual community of Christians is usually heterogeneous owing to the fluidity of the internet. LBD and NSPPD, for instance, comprise Christians from various denominations and virtual communities. In digital religion, geographical barriers are also broken, adherents can join digital worship from any

part of the world, provided they have the proper device and access to the internet. Unlike offline religion, denominational affiliation is not necessarily sacrosanct in digital religion. For Campbell (2013, p. 14), digital religion fosters an online community that functions as an assemblage of loosely bounded social relations. Thus, digital religion challenges “traditional community boundaries and patterns”. In other words, in digital religion, there are no familial ties, nor a cultural homogeneity of the members. Therefore, bonding in virtual Christian communities is to some extent enabled by the intricacies of the internet. Again, since young people and the educated are more technology savvy (Miller, Munday & Hill, 2019), the elderly and uneducated seem to be excluded from virtual communities of believers, thus being alienated. This point will be analyzed from an ethical stance in the next section.

Nevertheless, since digital worship is mediated via digital technology, to enhance communication, on-topic stickers, memes, and emojis are developed and used to express meaning, emotions, thoughts, dispositions, and mien. The virtual religious community actually simulates the offline communities to a reasonable extent, but the prevalent online pseudonymity and disguised identity poses a limitation to religious practices on the internet. It has been humorously said that there is no evil person in cyber society as everyone appears to be so benign in their online profile and discourses (Al-Zaman, 2019). The fact that most internet users brandish only such content that matches their “cosmetic” identity makes digital religion a dicey form of worship. A person with the wrong motive could get through with an unscrupulous plan by simply posing as a fellow brother or a “man of God” to unsuspecting religious votaries so as to gain acceptance and perhaps swindle people or leverage on opportunities strictly reserved for members of that particular religious group.

But for the earnest online members of digital religious communities, digital worship is convenient as one can easily worship from the comfort of one’s home, place of work, hospital, without the rigors of putting on appropriate outfits and the time and inconveniences of walking, driving or boarding a vehicle to the “offline” church venue. Also, quite convenient are the online/digital proselytization and invitation to worship service, via social networking platforms. In digital religion, pre-worship rituals are played down on and personal sacrifices are greatly reduced.

Will offline religion in Nigeria fizzle out or dwindle with time, since the online religious communities are, no doubt, more appealing (especially to digital natives, the young people), convenient, more encompassing, less rigid, transnational, affording wider network and technology compliant? What happens to people (the elderly, those without access to the internet) who are locked out from the digital world? Will drivers of the Christian religion in Nigeria be resolved to effectively hybridize religion in the country? These and others are questions that only time will find their answers. However, Campbell (2013) asserts that digital religion offers a workaround to navigate through the intricacies of religion nowadays,

which challenges the old definitions of religion that may soon be considered obsolete. The representation and manifestation of religion in the new media challenges the sociology of religion and those studying religion in general and points to a likely renegotiation or reevaluation of the “what”, “how”, “where”, and “functions” of religion. The next section presents an ethical analysis of digital religion in Nigeria.

ETHICAL ANALYSIS

Recent academic interest in the phenomenon known as “digital religion” bears witness to the conspicuous presence of religious organizations and spirituality on the internet. With more religious bodies embracing the live streaming facilities, the “smart” church funding options (bank transfers and other online giving platforms such as Tithe.ly, Givelify, Easytithe, and so on), engaging in social media religious interactions, making use of religion-themed emojis, stickers and posters as a means of expressing religion, the issues of what the Bible recommends and the effectiveness of digital religion, are brought to the foreground as equally worthy to be studied (Okonoboh, 2017). The ultimate goal of this reality is to ensure that this new phenomenon brings about the most benefits over harms for the most stakeholders. In this case, the individual, church, and society at large. Herein lies the relevance of the utilitarian ethical theory. What follows is a consideration of possible outcomes or consequences of performing religion online, via the Internet.

As stated before, one major advantage of digital Christianity is the fact that it is accessible and all-inclusive. By enabling virtual religious communities, there is the advantage of countering the geographical boundaries and reaching out to a larger congregation (Chiluwa, 2014). Religious teachings and rituals can be made accessible to people irrespective of their location and without necessarily requiring them a special time that must be planned in advance. This in particular is a welcome development for the Christian faithful, who for one reason or the other is not able to make it to the physical church gathering. Consider, for instance, the fact that people who are physically incapacitated or bedridden can easily participate in religious worship with just a click on their internet-connected phone. The existence of this facility gives such people great psychological relief, the satisfaction that comes with connecting with God and other believers, succour, and a sense of belonging. Digital religion, therefore, opens more windows for religious worship attendance and narrows down constraints.

Furthermore, religious practice is encouraged and enhanced for Christians everywhere through the availability of digital Bible and other Christian materials, such as daily devotionals and digests. A devout Christian who wants easy / quick access to the word of God for his / her personal growth, to discussions with fellow

Christians, or to other forms of evangelism has these materials at his / her beck and call. Access to a digital Bible cancels any excuse that may arise from the unavailability of paper print Bible.

It also gives room for a better appreciation of different and conflicting Christian ideologies / doctrines and enables a form of synergy among members of different denominations. Online Christian interactions prove very handy, especially in an era where non-Christian activities, such as internet fraud, insincerity and sexual indiscretions loom large. A young mind lacking a strong value system and guidance may be easily influenced by non-Christian values that can be found on the internet. The internet affords youths the opportunity of discussing Christianity in their own language and with the peculiarities of their generation.

The availability of religious information online has the potential of facilitating both intra- and inter-religious dialogue and tolerance. An open-minded person may stumble upon religious events and articles of a faith different from the person's own faith and get to see things from a different perspective. This could result in a change of perception and attitude towards such faith. In other words, one does not need to attend a church to learn about Christianity or attend a mosque to learn about Islam and its values anymore.

Furthermore, with members of most online Christian ministries drawing from various denominations, interaction without a precise affiliation is enhanced. This allows religion to play its role as a centripetal force, one that unites, and not a centrifugal force that divides. Sometime in 2020, a Catholic priest in the diocese of Abuja, who officiates online Sunday mass, Reverend Father Chinenye Oluoma, opened a fundraiser for the refurbishing of an erstwhile dilapidated orphanage home. Funds gathered for this orphanage home were enough to completely transform it into a state-of-the-art orphanage home. Noteworthy is the fact that these donations came from a virtual congregation made up of both Catholics and non-Catholics. Digital Christianity, in this case, proved to break the intra-religious boundaries at least for charitable reasons.

Also, apart from accessing information online, people interact, date, and also follow various online trends. Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter are applications used for social interaction. As Scott Thumma, a professor of sociology of religion observes, if Churches do not adopt these tools effectively, they are indeed guaranteed never to capture the imaginations of the younger digital native generations (Towndrow, 2016).

The foregoing discussion emphasizes the way utilitarian perspective can be used in analysing digital religion, since this has expanded the frontiers of many religious bodies and fostered easy access to worship services, religious contents and materials for numerous religious practitioners. The emergence of digital religion, worship and piety has facilitated a wide religious outreach and unhindered religious expressions, thus fulfilling the stipulations of the utilitarian ethical theory.

On the other hand, the internet serves also as a "spiritual hub" among other types of hubs, where religious practitioners select from a vast array of resources

and experiences in order to assemble and personalize their religious beliefs and behaviours (Campbell, 2011, p. 14). In other words, digital religion encourages performing some sort of do-it-yourself spirituality, where a person can literally create their own faith by merging elements that align with their chosen lifestyle. The consequences of this are not always in line with some of the core values of Christianity, as this could result in syncretism and undefined hybridization of religious practices, leading further to an identity crisis. As some concerns have been raised, this is the point where rule utilitarianism comes in very handy. Rule utilitarianism would rather recommend the regulation of digital religion to retain the essence of all religious tradition and to enhance maximum utility for all religious person.

Concerns have also been raised regarding online church offerings done through bank transfers as against the traditional church offering given at the altar. During offline Christian worship, worshipers take their offerings to the church altar with a thankful heart, expressed through singing songs of praise and dancing joyfully. Such offerings are given by the faithful and blessings are released by the priest. This practice is simplified in the online church practices, where a worshiper transfers his/her offering at his/her convenience using the Church's account details, which are usually displayed on the screen. This distorts the original idea of church offering, and the fulfillment that comes with taking one's offering to the altar, as alluded to in Matt. 5:23–24: "therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift", is eluded. Such offering, strictly speaking, was not offered at the altar. Also, the online church apparently disregards non-monetary offerings, a gesture that disempowers worshipers who may not have money but are willing to offer material belongings. Traditional Christian practice encourages people who may not have money to offer such items as farm produce, household items, and other useful items. Accepting only monetary offerings is therefore a downside of digital religion. This structure of exclusion, albeit the exclusion is against a minority of the faithful, is a pitfall of considering digital religion only through the lens of utilitarianism.

Another critical issue associated with the phenomenon of digital religion is its marginalization of a number of people from religious participation. Should offline religion disappear, people who are not internet savvy, such as the digital illiterates and the elderly, people who cannot afford smartphones or data subscriptions, and people in geographical areas with poor or nonexistent internet access will be shut out from worship. Herein lies one of the limitations of the utilitarian school – its inability to fully account for the utility of an action or phenomenon to everyone involved.

A utilitarian assessment of the phenomenon of digital religion, worship and piety shows that the phenomenon is geared towards shifting the frontiers of

religion, making religion more accessible and germane in the digital world. However, digital religion is not available or satisfactory to every worshiper. This remains a limitation of the utilitarian ethical theory. However, the continued, conspicuous presence of physical worship services makes up for this limitation, as many Christian religious groups either fully embrace digital religion, physical religion or a hybrid of both. The believers' ultimate goal of maintaining a cordial relationship with God with the assurance of salvation can also be achieved through the presence of the Christian religion on the internet, which is already saturated with content that can sway a weak mind. As Towndrow (2016) posits, if Christians do not get involved and maximize the information technology for religious purposes, they will lose out.

Some of the apparent hiccups of digital religious practices elaborated above, such that could question or misrepresent the essence of the phenomenon, can be tempered when rule utilitarianism is deployed. Strict rules of engagement should be adopted by religious bodies and individual practitioners in order to actualize the maximum utility of digital religion, worship, and piety for a greater number of Christians through digital tools.

MAXIMIZING THE MERITS AND MINIMIZING THE SHORTFALLS

Admittedly, religious presence on digital platforms encounters a number of bottlenecks and could sometimes stray out of its original context. It also cannot be denied that it has positively contributed a great deal to religious practices in Christendom. Rumbay (2020) posits that acknowledging God as the origin of all things stands as a strong foundation in the interaction between religion and technology. It should also be acknowledged that humans, who are co-creators with God and also God's stewards, are saddled with the responsibility of making creation, technology, and science inclusive. For Towndrow (2016), rather than reject or avoid technologies because of their susceptibility to disreputable use, it is important to cautiously accept them and hope for the best results. Therefore, within the line of thought that all religious people should also proselytize, Christians are commissioned to ensure that the gospel penetrates the nooks and crannies of the earth – "go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the father and of the son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19). The internet as we know it is a nation, or rather a transnational unit in its own right. Hence the emergence of such denominations as "netizens", "digital natives" and "digital migrants" which are currently used especially by scholars to identify net (internet) citizens and different generations of internet users – the natives and migrants.

An example of rule that can be enforced within the above-mentioned frame is that, in order to guard against distractions while participating in online religious activities, notifications from other social platforms can be disabled. Personal discipline, to this end, should also be preached as a prerequisite of practicing digital religion. Also, as new ways of expressing worship continue to emerge, it is important to exercise caution in order to retain the very essence of worship. The traditional worship pattern should therefore not be conveniently relegated to the background. For all intents and purposes, virtual religion, for now, should not phase out either the physical or the offline religion, but can be used to facilitate worship and evangelism. As churches continue to operate online, it is important to also maintain the functionalities of the offline church as a point of physical contact and material sacrament.

Finally, to fully fathom digital religion in contemporary times, researchers and scholars of religion need to intentionally employ digital methodologies in the study of religion as the traditional ways of studying religion are now inadequate to fully grasp the transformations religion goes through, in a digitalized world.

CONCLUSIONS

In a world taken over by the internet, that has enabled virtual meetings, religion cannot but align with the trend, against the prediction of Emile Durkheim and other social scientists that the progress of science would herald the end of religion. Thus, digital religion, which is expressed in digital worship and piety has taken the center stage in religion, the Christian religion in Nigeria in this case. While this novel reality is to be applauded, it has its own fair share of pitfalls and has altered the face of religion as it used to be known, practiced, and studied. It follows therefore that while it is admitted that digital religion has come to stay, adherents must find ways to maximize its positive aspects and minimize its negative aspects. Among other things, Christian Churches in Nigeria are obviously not ripe to fully transit to digital worship solely. Without wanting to negate its strengths, digital religion is somewhat exclusive but can be utilized with a great deal of discretion. Hence, a finely balanced blend of digital as well as offline worship would be necessary in the present-day Nigeria. However, the use of digital methodologies is indispensable for contemporary scholars of religion in order to make sense of the transformations brought by digital religion.

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