

CYBERSPACE AND THE ACTIVITIES OF CHRISTIAN RELIGIOUS GROUPS IN NIGERIA, 1999-2021

Ojo, Solomon Ayantayo, PhD

Department of Political Science and International Relations
KolaDaisi University, Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria
&

Asor Gbamwuan, PhD

Department of English, History and International Studies
Admiralty University of Nigeria, Delta State, Nigeria

Abstract

The emergence of cyberspace or new media has enhanced the visibility of some Christian religious groups in Nigeria. Christian religious activities such as crusades, Sunday and midweek services, impartation and healing programmes, and counselling are seamlessly carried out by religious groups in cyberspace comparatively in recent times. The era of the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria saw the rise of these religious activities in cyberspace. However, the study of cyber-religion has not been adequately given attention in the context of Nigeria in academic discourses. Globally, there is an avalanche of scholarly work in this regard. Therefore, this study is a bridge to close the existing gap in Nigeria's religious historiography. The research is based on secularisation, modernization, and globalization theories. A desk review of extant literature, oral interviews with key informants, and personal observations by the researchers have been triangulated for objectivity and critical analysis. The study unveils that the utilization of new media by religious institutions and actors is bedevilled by some challenges which are categorized into three including audience problems, technical and denomination or church issues. The study, therefore, advocated for improvement in internet services by network service providers, reduction of the high cost of data tariffs, and youth empowerment as plausible ways out of these challenges.

Keywords: Cyberspace, Christian Religion, Nigeria, Challenges, Prospects

Introduction

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has revolutionized the global society and set a pace for accelerated development in all human facets. The ICT which began in the aftermath of World War II experienced astronomical dynamism in the 21st century making information dissemination and accessibility easier. One of the peculiarities of ICT is its daily complexity and novel posture that accommodates all spheres of human endeavours. Through cyberspace, e-commerce, digital financing, e-governance, e-learning, cloud computing, increased use of artificial intelligence, the rise of outsourcing industries, and increased adoption of digital skills among others are possible in contemporary times. The cyberspace, therefore, 'enables users to view a wide variety of information, including magazine, archives, public and college library resources, and current world and business news' (Ogunsola & Aboyade 2005:8). Religious practices also are not left out of the cyberspace in contemporary times (Gbadegesin & Adeyemi-Adejolu 2016; Galik 2015). Therefore, cyberspace has become a new trend where religious practices are showcased by many religious practitioners for various reasons. One such religious practice is what Galik (2015: p...) termed cyber-spirituality which he argued:

It is finding its way into the media. He thinks media are taking a whole set of traditional functions found in religion: they offer symbols, interpret the world, and offer shared experience, but also present feasts and ecstatic experiences.

Arising from the preceding background, this paper investigates the activities of religious groups in Nigeria from 1999 to 2021. The take-off choice of this study is premised on the basis that the Federal Government of Nigeria adopted a policy on ICT in 1999, and its implementation came in December 2001 leading to the establishment of the National Telecommunication Policy. The policy recognised the need for the establishment of an enabling environment for deregulation and rapid expansion of telecommunication services in the country. ICT was to be used in areas of education, wealth creation, poverty eradication, job creation, and global competitiveness. The implementation of ICT policy led to the adoption of the Global System for Mobile Communications (GSM) and its related components in Nigeria (Posu 2006:238). Our terminal period of 2021 marked 22 years of ICT revolution in Nigeria. Therefore, two decades is a long period to assess the impact of the new media on the socio-economic, political, and religious-cultural space of Nigeria. The paper is, therefore, divided into various parts with an introduction, review of the related literature, conceptual and theoretical underpinnings, the history of ICT in Nigeria, Christian religious groups and the use of ICT, benefits and challenges arising from the use of ICT by Christian religious groups in Nigeria, prospects, conclusion and policy recommendations.

Literature Review

Cyberspace accommodates all forms of social activities including religion. One of such socio-religious activities is cyber-spirituality which is the mental 'submerging' into cyberspace and experiencing a new, magical and fascinating world (Galik 2015). Cyber-spirituality cannot be fully understood as a new form of modern religion. As argued by Galik (2015), it does not reach the level of traditional spirituality but can saturate the spiritual needs of a hypermodern man. Oza (2020) argued that the difference between religion and spirituality cannot be discernible. Tracing the history of cyber religion, Oza (2020), asserted that the phenomenon began in 1990 when religious communities began to move their worship online to conduct religious rituals. It is on this basis that scholars started to document these practices hence a new nomenclature "digital religion," became popular in the first decade of the twenty-first century. This term is widely used to describe religion's evolution in the Web 2.0 context in the contemporary world order.

To Casey (2021), cyberspace widens the social foundation of religious life as it diminishes the relevance of location for religious identities. Brasher (2000) illustrated how in the transition from temple to screen, a radical alteration of the sense stimulation has taken place, consequently altering the religious experience itself. Berdzenishvili and Ketsbaia (2021) noted that an information space is just a superficial cover of man's spiritual life. That is why a virtual cyber-church will never replace a real temple. Hackett (2006:67) in this regard submitted that the internet has fundamentally altered our perceptions and our knowledge, as well as our sense of subjectivity, community and agency. However, O'Leary (1996) held a contrary opinion when he observed that the advent of the Internet has been as revolutionary for religious growth and dissemination as the invention of the printing press.

Noomen, Aupers, and Houtman (2006) underscored the importance or relevance of the new media to religious preachers including a limitless space, decentralized nature and interactive possibilities it offers, great opportunities for communication and the effective distribution of information in all spheres of human life. Religious experiences such as pilgrimages and rituals are often mediatized through technology (de Sousa, Tudor, & Evolvi 2021). It should be noted that established religious organizations and leaders also use the Internet to disperse messages to the community of believers (Guzek 2015), digital media also present the leeway of subverting existing hierarchies and values (Cheong 2017), linking religion with discourses of gender, race, and politics (Lovheim, Campbell 2017). Although Japee (2023:63) argued contrary to the benefits of cyber religion when he observed that:

In cyber religion, emotions become attached to digital objects, leading to a discourse that lacks any textual depth or nuance. As a result, even seers or spiritual leaders become objects, robbed of their humanity, and reduced to mere cyphers in a virtual realm. This results in a state of mental constipation where individuals become trapped in a cycle of superficial communication, leading to a pseudo-culture devoid of any real substance. The ultimate result is a loss of voice and agency, which is the opposite of what true religion seeks to achieve. Cyber religion operates as a destructive force against both human identity and cultural heritage, resulting in a flux of ideas that mimic one another. It creates a sense of false choicelessness, leading to a diminished capacity for communication and dialogue. Instead, what is needed is a new vision that can resonate with human beings and cultures alike. Cyberlanguage has a profound effect on the way we use and understand language, and it has the power to capture the essence of a culture in its entirety. However, the functional and fictional nature of this language can lead to a suspension of our sense of humanity, resulting in a loss of authenticity and depth. To overcome this, we must strive to find ways to use technology and language that honour and celebrate our shared humanity and culture rather than erase it.

Cyberspace or religion is not devoid of its inadequacies or was not born out of hunger, war or sicknesses as underscored above. It is in light of the foregoing reviews that this study seeks to contribute also to the body of knowledge on the subject matter. In other words, the study seeks to establish cyberspace and the activities of Christian religious groups in Nigeria with a special spotlight on their narratives, challenges and prospects from 1999 to 2021.

Conceptual and Theoretical Issues

Cyberspace and cyber religion are conspicuously the keywords this study conceptualized. Cyberspace as a term was first adopted by William Gibson in 1982.¹ The term connotes a 'virtual' world created by links between computers, Internet-enabled devices, servers, routers, and other components of the Internet's infrastructure to describe the location of people's interaction on the internet (Bussell, in Encyclopedia Britannica). Yusof et al (2011:1785) reinforced that:

Cyberspace is the global domain of electromagnetic as accessed and exploited through electronic technology and the modulation of electromagnetic energy to achieve a wide range of communication and control system capabilities.

Similarly, Peter Pace cited in Kuehl (2008:33) averred that:

Cyberspace is a domain characterized by the use of electronics and the electromagnetic spectrum to store, modify and exchange information via networked information systems and physical infrastructures.

Cyberspace, therefore, is a nervous system -the control system of the country composed of hundreds of thousands of interconnected computers, servers, routers, switches, and fibre optic cables that allow our critical infrastructures to work (Kuehl 2008).

The emergence of cyberspace has seen various tools for communication such as the internet, emails, chat rooms, websites, Short Message Services (SMS), 3G and countless others (Yusof *et al* 2011). Cyberspace has become a modern domain for cyber religion or a place where religious activities take place and has penetrated all the stages of social needs as articulated by Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Japee 2023). Fundamentally, the new media has opened up the penetration of the Christian religion in restricted parts of the world including Morocco in Northwest Africa, North Africa, Middle East, Central Asia and West China. This becomes possible as a result of satellite broadcasts and various digital channels. Ghajiga (2023:366) linked the church and the new media that enables the spread of Christianity to restricted areas as a result of government policy, war, hunger, and opposing religious groups in this way:

The Internet-based medium that allows easy and unfettered access, to person-to-person communication— including, but not limited to, so-called “social media; across the broad spectrum of the digital convergence of Internet and other media. It has therefore opened a whole new vista for the church, so much so that today more and more people are turning to the internet for answers to their felt physical, psychological, and spiritual needs; often contents are accessed through a motley shade of websites and applications, ranging from Facebook to video-on-demand platforms and from Twitter to the websites of high-quality online newspapers and magazines.

The new media has brought religious teachings and doctrines on cyberspace which some scholars tagged as cyber religion.

Cyber religion on the other hand is the Spread of religious extremism and peace through the internet and social media. It also denotes the presence of religious organizations and religious activities in this semi-imaginative place called cyberspace. Cyber religion accommodates all forms of religious activities including congregation, special missions, intimate faith and service activities to reach new converts and to stay connected with the current trend or stand the chances of losing relevance in the fast-growing globalised world. Radhakrishnan (2004) isolated some of the religious organizations that have followed the current trend of cyberspace including Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Chinese Traditional, and African Religion. Religious practitioners have taken advantage of cyberspace to encourage people in religious activities through short texts, and links that put followers in line with religious activities. Preachers of religion availed this opportunity not only to access information but disseminate religious ideas and dogmas to the global society (Casey 2001).

Cyberspace, therefore, has discredited the secularisation thesis of the 19th century. The theory postulates that modernization would sooner than later destroy religious dogma. Among the adherents of this thesis are Auguste Comte, Emile Durkheim, Ferdinand Tonnies, Max Weber and Karl Marx who pontificated that religion was a declining force in the 19th century. Iqbal (2023:4) captured this argument in his words:

Being stimulated by modernization force, religion would become a less important factor in the human life of modern society and a modern secular system. In other words, there would be a dominant force of the theological system falling. Furthermore, according to these scholars, religion would eventually vanish from the lives of modern secular society.

The above contentions summarize what secularisation theory is all about. Secularisation had its roots in the era of the Renaissance when Voltaire for example averred that 'an age of enlightenment would replace superstition and authoritarian religious order' (Fox 2001:54). This line of reasoning was later amplified by Thomas Woolston in 1710 that 'modernity would triumph over faith and Christianity would come to an end by 1900' (Stark, 1999:249). Unfortunately for scholars, modernisation has rather seen the triumph of the Christian religion in cyberspace.

To appreciate the modernisation thesis and its implications for religious awakening in the social space, it is pertinent to assert that modernisation theories are not a coherent set of ideals but rather a wide range of body of works in social sciences (Gwynne 2009). Walts Rostow, one of the adherents of modernisation theories used the United Kingdom (UK), and the United States of America (USA) as a model of development to postulate five stages that a society would necessary pass through to attend the status of modernisation (Gwynne 2009). The first stage according to Rostow is traditional society, the second stage is pre-condition to take-off, the third stage is take-off, the fourth stage is the road to maturity, and the fifth stage is high mass consumption. The third, fourth,

and fifth stages of Rostow's theory underscored modernisation in which the socio-political settings of the society are modernised. One of the peculiar characteristics of modernisation is globalisation which could be likened to a fast-moving train being pursued by countries of the world to catch up with (Radhakrishnan 2004). Besides, globalisation is a revolution whose impact on the socio-political structure of societies across the globe cannot be underestimated. The implication of globalisation on religion has been strongly noted by James Kurth cited in Radhakrishnan (2004:1404), that:

Globalisation is also a revolution, one of the most profound revolutions the world has ever known. Indeed, globalisation is the first truly world revolution. All revolutions disrupt the traditions and customs of a people. Indeed, they threaten people's security, safety, and even identity. The world revolution that is globalisation in some measure threatens the security of every people on the globe.

The threat posed by globalisation in other socio-economic spheres has similar traits to the religious-cultural backdrop. This is because globalisation has transformed religion into a new form of cyber-religious practice. What is hidden from most scholars of globalisation is their failure to appreciate the fact that globalisation is a smokescreen that diverts the attention of countries in the global South from the resurgence of imperialism. Therefore, globalisation can be seen from two different perspectives in the context of this study. To say that globalisation is an interdependence of nations and globalisation is also a symbol of imperialism. This is because, to the antagonists of globalisation, it is a well-calculated strategy by the Global North to expand the operation of their multinational corporations for profit maximisation using ICT (Babawale, 2007; Khor, 2000). It is against the backdrop of these two contending knowledge that this study articulates cyberspace and Christian religious practices in Nigeria.

The History of Cyberspace in Nigeria

The year 2000 could be considered as a watershed in Nigeria's roadmap in cyberspace. Before this period there were unplanned information systems and network infrastructure in Nigeria. Prominent was the Nigerian Telecommunication (NITEL, a merger of Post and Telecommunications (P&T), and NET limited) which came into existence in 1985, and several other Code Division Multiple Access (CDMA), and network operators. To say their conditions were obsolete, crude, and poor undermines a perfect descriptive analysis of the communication system in post-independence Nigeria (Ogunsola & Aboyade 2005). According to the World Bank statistics, only about 400, 000 analogue telephone systems were in existence in Nigeria between 1960-2001 transmitting on a teledensity of 0.04%. Against this backdrop, the government of Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida through Decree Number 75 created the Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC) on 24th November, 1992 (Mbanaso, Chukwudebe, & Atimati, 2015). NCC was created as an independent body to regulate telecommunication service delivery in Nigeria. Another important function of the NCC was to promote and protect customer's interest in the usage of communication facilities. Furthermore, the NCC was authorized to ensure healthy competition in the communication sector. These among other functions were the mandate of the NCC that in the final analysis set the stage for the revolutionisation of the communication sector in Nigeria.

The liberation policy of the NCC saw giant strides in the growth of the communication industry with the introduction of the Global System for Mobile Communication (GSM) telephony technology service (Akwaja 2023). Within a span of 2001 and 2008, NCC issued Digital Mobile Licenses (DML), to MTN and Econet Wireless Nigeria (now Airtel Nigeria) in 2001; Globalcom in 2003, and Etislate (Now 9mobile) in 2008 (Akwaja 2023). Through the issuance of the DML, NCC has set the ball rolling with a spectrum of licenses and renewals including Fixed Wireless Access (FWA) in 2002, Second National Operator (SNO) to Globacom in 2003, Third Generation (3G) in 2006, Fourth Generation (4G) in 2017 and Fifth Generation (5G) in 2021 as well as 2.6GHz licenses (Akwaja 2023). These developments saw accelerated mobile users in Nigeria in 2023 to stand at 226.2 million with a tele density of 118.5% within a short span of two decades. Internet subscriptions stand at 156,244,368 in 2023 while broadband penetration stands at 48.20%. The reform in telecommunications has not only expanded the availability of network provision but its accessibility as well. The reform led to job creation in the telecommunication industry value chain. There is a burst in Information and Communication Technology (ICT), contributing about 18.44% to Nigeria's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2022 (NBS 2022; Danbatta 2022). ICT has revolutionized the socio-economic, political, and cultural ways of man, and Nigerian society is not an exception. Arising from the foregoing, the next section of this study interrogates Nigerian Christian religious groups with the view of examining their activities in cyberspace from 1999 to 2021.

Nigerian Christian Religious Groups and the Use of Cyberspace

The new media has transformed the various ways in which people interact today and the church has not been left out of this trend. In Nigeria, cyberspace has opened up new ways of communicating church doctrines and programmes. Christian religious groups in Nigeria have taken this advantage to project their religious activities online through social media platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, WeChat, and

TikTok just to mention but a few. Nigerian Christian religious groups share faith and build communities, reach new audiences with low cost-effective, and also support fundraising and donations through these media. Reinforcing this argument, Okemi & Enadeghe (2023:355) with a specific focus on YouTube asserted that:

YouTube is a medium that has a massive impact on the spread of Christianity and whose impact may have outweighed that of the television in Christian broadcasting. It is a global online video-sharing and social media platform and is the second most visited website after Google Search. YouTube has more than 2.5 billion monthly users who collectively watch over one billion hours of videos each day. As of May 2019, videos were being uploaded at a rate of more than 500 hours of content per minute. Video categories on YouTube include music videos, video clips, news, short films, feature films, documentaries, audio recordings, movie trailers, teasers, live streams, vlogs, and more. Christian organisations have employed live stream services to broadcast their programme to millions if not billions across the world. Examples are Christ Embassy Healing Stream, Living Faith Church mid-week, Sunday services and national conventions, and the Redeemed Christian Church of God Monthly Holy Ghost Services and national conventions.

Ab initio, Nigerian religious groups have engaged in radio and television for Church programmes and activities for a long time. However, the era of the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) revolutionized the use of other social media handles to engage in Christian religious activities in Nigeria. This means religious groups departed from the unproven hypothesis that the new media was an instrument of the end-time church. However, during the era of COVID-19, which compelled social distancing and discouraged physical meetings, most of this religious dogma was thrown in the dustbin as noted by Oparinde (2023:395), thus:

Some traditional Christians had, according to unfounded religious and sociological constructed myths, perceived technology as of the devil. Brandished technology in the church like the onscreen projection of the service, use of mechanized modern microphones, photo and video ops etc., in some quarters are occultic and signs of the end-time church in the warm hug of worldliness. Interestingly, many of these denominations who antagonized the use of technology, have since the outbreak of the coronavirus and its aftermaths, embraced the tools of technology for church programming.

Reinforcing this argument Oveh (2023:338) averred that:

Religion under the COVID lockdown underwent remarkable transformations, with mediation replacing the physicality of worshipers gathering physically. In fact, during the COVID-19 lockdown, several religious communities worldwide were compelled to develop internet alternatives to face-to-face interactions.

As it is today, no church in Nigeria can fly without the effective use of new media. This is because online churches are not only effective but also easier and faster to disseminate religious teachings and programmes to millions of people across the globe. It is against this backdrop that most of the churches in Nigeria today not only have television channels for live streaming but all other forms of new media like Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook as captured in Table 1:

Table 1: Christian Churches in Nigeria and the Use of Television Channels and Social Media Handles

S/n	Name of the Church	Television Channel's Name	Social Media Handles
1.	Roman Catholic Church	Catholic TV (https://ctvnigeria.com)	Facebook (https://www.facebook.com/catholictvofnigeria/)
2	Living Faith Church World Wide (AKA Winners Chapel) (https://faithtabernacle.org.ng/)	They have Satellite Stations on DSTV GOTV STARTIMES	Facebook (facebook.com/WinnersWld) Twitter (twitter.com/WinnersWld) YouTube (Living Faith Church Worldwide) Instagram (instagram.com/Davidoyedepomin)
3.	The Lord's Chosen Revival Church (https://lordschosenfm.com/)	Chosen TV (tlccrm.org/chosentv/)	Facebook (https://www.facebook.com/tlccrmofficial/) Twitter (https://x.com/tlccrmofficial?lang=en) YouTube

			(https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCTpSz18J4PkEN6a2_HsZsSw) Instagram (https://www.instagram.com/tlccrmofficial/?hl=en)
4	Deeper Life Bible Church (https://dclm.org/)	Deeper Christian Life Ministry T.V. (Discontinued)	Facebook (https://www.facebook.com/dclmhq) Twitter : (@dclmhq) YouTube (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NG007K_Iqn8.)
5	Divine Hand of God Prophetic Ministries (divinehandofgod.org)	Divine Hand TV: (https://www.lyngsat.com/tvchannels/ng/Divine-Hand-TV.html)	Facebook: (Prophet Dr Emmanuel Omale.) Twitter: (@prophetdromale) YouTube: (Prophet Dr Emmanuel Omale.) Tiktok: (@prophetemmanuelomale.)
6.	Redeemed Christian Church of God (www.rccg.org)	Dove TV (https://dovevision.org/)	Facebook (https://www.facebook.com/rccg.org/) Twitter (https://twitter.com/rccgworldwide) Instagram (https://www.instagram.com/pastoreaadeboyeofficial/?hl=en) YouTube (https://www.youtube.com/channel/UChp4qCAPmz7-5BJ601FDFnA)
7.	Dunamis Int'l Gospel Centre (https://dunamis.tv/homepage/.)	Dunamis TV (dunamis.tv)	Facebook (dunamis.stealthethevangelism) YouTube (https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC0pFEFO86OwhVUcqAQ4ICjQ) Twitter (@dunamisworldwide.)
8.	ECWA (ecwaglobal.org) (emsofecwa.org)	ECWA TV (oyawatch.com) (ecwanationwidegist.wordpress.com)	Facebook (https://www.facebook.com/ECWAHQ/) Instagram (https://www.instagram.com/ecwacentralarea/) YouTube (https://www.youtube.com/c/ECWATelevision/playlists) Twitter
9.	Synagogue Church of All Nations (www.scoan.org.)	Emmanuel TV (scoan.org website)	Facebook (https://www.facebook.com/SCOANLegacy/) Twitter (https://twitter.com/SCOANTBJoshua) YouTube (https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCeLRL41Hz7eSaN2ZCxBxh9w) Instagram (https://www.instagram.com/the.scoan/?hl=en)
10	Full Life Christian Centre (fulllifefoundation.org)	Full Life TV	Facebook (Rev. Ntia I. Ntia and Full life christian center). Twitter (@rev_ntia, @fulllife4life, and @ukayntia.) YouTube (@RevNtiaINtia) Instagram (@ntiantiaunlimited, and @ukayntia.)
11	The Apostolic Church Nigeria (tacn-lawna.org) (tacnit.org)	Glorious Vision TV	Facebook (https://www.facebook.com/gloriousvisiontv/) Twitter (https://twitter.com/official_gvtv)

			YouTube (https://www.youtube.com/channel/UChsQO8iqETl0zL9YidbQUaw) Instagram (https://www.instagram.com/official_gvtv/?hl=en)
12	Mountain of Liberation and Miracle Ministries (https://graceneration.ng/)	Liberation TV	Facebook (https://www.facebook.com/groups/628170197721444/) Twitter (https://twitter.com/libe?lang=bn) YouTube (https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCePZkMO8KURFX34jvJwXhzQ) Instagram (https://www.instagram.com/chrisokaforministries/?hl=en)
13	Christ Mercyland Deliverance Ministry (www.christmercyland.org)	Mercy TV Plus	Facebook (https://www.facebook.com/groups/262283754720791/) Twitter (https://twitter.com/PlusTVAfrica/status/1506708645106655235) YouTube (https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCmELNXeDZsG1QpwYXGrIuGA) Instagram (https://www.instagram.com/olorisupergalmedia/p/DG3GEeSMEYB/?locale=es_ES%2F)
14	Divine Grace of Glory Church (https://dgogc.org/)	More Grace TV (https://moregrace.tv/)	Facebook (https://www.facebook.com/share/1A4yDb3bg/) Twitter (https://twitter.com/piaobaseki) Instagram (https://www.instagram.com/moregrace_tv) YouTube (https://www.youtube.com/@MoreGraceTV/videos)
15	Salvation Ministries (smhos.org)	Salvation TV (https://salvationtv.in/)	Facebook (https://www.facebook.com/groups/216066119687295/) Twitter (@smhosglobal) (https://twitter.com/smhosglobal) YouTube (https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCcT3HRjE96_54GswvAbvofw) Instagram (https://www.instagram.com/salvationtvglobal/) Pinterest (https://de.pinterest.com/pin/520939881879953911/)
16	Christ Love Synagogue of the Whole Word (https://www.apostleprinceikharebhore.org/)	Synagogue TV (Synagogue Tv Official – YouTube)	Facebook (https://www.facebook.com/synagoguetvofficial/?locale=en_GB) Twitter (https://twitter.com/christloveclmi?lang=en) YouTube (https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCqLGM53tIVZ2AsA9hDGCB1w/videos)

17	Jesus Christ Temple Ministry of Nigeria (churchofjesuschrist.org)	Temple TV (TEMPLE TV – YouTube)	Facebook (https://www.facebook.com/TEMPLETVJCTM/) YouTube (https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCPFFvkE-KGpR37qJgvYriJg)
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Source: Fieldwork by the Researchers, March 2024.

Table 1 gives the list of churches in Nigeria that have taken advantage of the new media in preaching, and conducting church programmes and activities on the social space. For example, the Living Faith Church Worldwide (AKA Winners Chapel) headed by Bishop David Olaniyi Oyedepo conducts several programmes and activities online including Sunday services and, the Shiloh programme at the end of the year. Shiloh's programme is watched all over the world with over 9 million people connected online.⁴ There is also a cross-over night for every Friday of the month and New Year. While other programmes in the commission like the Word of Faith Bible Institute (WOFBI), which is a spiritual edification programme are equally taken online. It should be noted at this juncture that these programmes are transmitted live across the globe and are watched in Living Faith Churches as well with a teeming population of viewers.

The Redeemed Christian Church of God headed by Pastor Enoch Adebayo is another example of the Nigerian Church that conducts its programmes and other activities online. Some of the programmes transmitted live stream on social media platforms are the monthly Holy Ghost Service, Annual Conventions, and Sunday Service, *et cetera*. The Deeper Life Bible Church headed by Pastor Williams Folorunsho Kumuye holds Sunday worship service, Monday Bible study, Tuesday Leadership training, Thursday Miracle and Revival Hour, Saturday Workers meeting, and Monthly Global Crusade. All these programmes are televised live and shared on other social media handles of the church. From these few examples, it is clear that the Church has moved from a conventional system to a digital world where, hymns, Bible studies, Sunday school classes, and teachings on counselling, among other things are digitised. These programmes attracted likes and followers on social media platforms as illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2: Showing the various Church positions (i.e. number of likes, followers and subscribers) in selected social media platforms as of 18th December 2017

Name of Church	Facebook Likes	Tweets	Twitter (now X) Following	Followers	Likes	Instagram Post Followers	YouTube Subscribers
Deeper Life Bible Church	143,369	4,105	7	10,085		498	
Salvation Ministries	180,161	5,119	-	28,137	1,224		7,117
Dunamis Intl' Gospel Centre	360,093	11,274	17	12,074	37	- -	-
Omega Fire Ministries	300,886	5	-	503		-	660
Living Faith Church, Otta	1,547,058	-	-	-	-	-	-
Daystar Christian Centre	133,480	25,880	44	97,692	19 5,859	-	-
Mountain of Fire and Miracle Ministries	18,016	1,211	53	5630	1		2,466
Redeemed Christian Church of God	304,098	18,523	201	31,228	955	-	-

Source: Enweani, U.V. & Eke, C.C. (2019). Use of Social Media by Religious Organisations in Nigeria: Lessons for Libraries and Information Centres, *Journal of Applied Information Science and Technology*, (12), 2. P. 55.

Table 2 shows how different churches/ministries in Nigeria adopted the use of social media platforms to showcase their church programmes and activities on Facebook, Twitter (now X), Instagram and YouTube. The activities of these churches in the social space are visibly attracting a good number of followers, likes, shares, and subscribers as projected. It is against this backdrop that the next section of this paper looks at the benefits arising from the use of cyber religion in Nigeria.

Benefits and Challenges Arising from the Use of Cyberspace by Religious Groups in Nigeria

There are a good number of benefits that accompany the new media and its adoption by Christian religious groups in Nigeria. One of such benefits is its wider audience targets including those who are not part and parcel of the church. This is why Bolu (2012:80) asserted that; 'more and more young people are turning to the internet to find personal, social and religious information and ecclesiastical institutions are devoting more and more resources to improving their presence on the web'. Not considering the commercialization of programmes that have become a new trend with the aid of the new media, churches have continued to enjoy astronomical growth with international licenses to own satellite religious channels and broadcast stations as illustrated in Table 1. Such stations are cost-effective in maintenance as compared to traditional media.⁵ Significantly, the adoption of new media by Christian websites, and blogs provides immediate answers to large audiences concerning Christian teachings and practices. With Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram live features and other live audio channels and live mixers, Christian holds live worship, prayer sessions, healing programmes and meetings online. This enables wider dissemination and accessibility at the comfort zones of worshippers in Nigeria and all other parts of the world. Today, people are obliged to download both video and audio messages on their mobile phones, computers, desk stops, and notepads and watch and listen at their convenience (Bolu, 2012). It should be noted that Christian film production has gone beyond the practice of cassettes and DVD players to viewing on several social media websites belonging to churches and social media end users.

Another important area in which the new media has tremendously benefited the church is the deconstruction and construction of the perception of Christianity and its practice in the contemporary world order. This means, there is a radical change in the practice and communication of Christian religion today. Certain practices like the use of handbells in churches like Christ Apostolic Church and the quizzing of offering money either to hide from another fellow member or pray for it to attract more blessings are gradually eroding. The social media and the availability of internet services have resolved some of these issues hence offerings and tithes are made online by some church members today.⁶ Against this backdrop, Boluwatife (2023:397-398) isolated the implications associated with the new media and practice of religion in Nigeria. He asserted that:

Some of these constructs are promoted along with unbiblical projections and commercialization of Christian identity through the pervasiveness of the internet, many of the initial frames and constructs are being reframed and reconstructed by the media... creating religious content in the space with no strong regulations and ethics would be an expansion of negative media.

Indeed, the above observation is apt considering the kind of religious activities and practices that are rampant on social media today. Some of these religious content are targets for commercial purposes especially by 'fake pastors' and 'false prophets' who have sneered into the social space for their aggrandizements. This gives the story in volumes as there are so many fake prophecies on the social space in Nigeria today by the 'so-called men of God'.

Another important dimension from which Christian Church worshippers in Nigeria benefited from the new media is the surmounting of security challenges including kidnapping, and attack on Christian churches in the Northern parts of Nigeria by Islamic religious fanatics or Boko-Haram terrorist groups, bandits among others. Christians who can access church programmes through their tablets, iPhones, Android phones, notepads, laptops *et cetera* have been secured in this respect. This is because they sit in the comfort of their homes, offices, and leisure places to access their messages virtually as they are in the church.

However, despite the apparent advantages of cyber-religion in Nigeria, it has some attendant drawbacks or challenges. The motley of challenges vitiating the benefits of cyber-religion are categorized as audience problems; technical problems, and denominational or church problems. These challenges are interwoven and are discussed thematically.

1. Audience challenges: These are the challenges associated with audience of the online Christian programmes. Participants shared various challenges confronted by recipients of internet-channeled Christian activities. These included:

Unequal access to digital technology: Not every member of a Christian denomination who wishes to engage the new media for their activities can access it. This is observed to be largely due to poverty and ignorance which prevents many Nigerians from being able to afford the purchase of Android phones, tablets or devices that are internet-compliant. It is no longer news that about 38.8% of Nigerians will be living in extreme poverty in 2024, while ignorance and illiteracy rates trundles 38% and 31% between 2015 and 2022 respectively.⁸ The twin problems of poverty and illiteracy have made a significant population of Nigerians unable to connect to the internet and access various social media handles for their religious edifications due to their inability to own internet facility devices. While these devices may not be exorbitant beyond the reach of the average person in economically advanced countries, the same cannot be said of Nigeria which is an import-dependent economy. The forex violability which dwindles the value of the Naira against the United States Dollars is largely responsible for the high prices of the phone devices far above the purchasing ability of many Nigerians generally. In the same vein, many respondents adduce low internet connection of many Nigerians to relatively high-cost data. Various service providers have different data tariffs which because of people's low income, do not find it convenient to purchase them for this purpose. As a way out, many churches encourage their members to go to church premises to partake in online programmes. Even at that, the high cost of Premium Motor Spirit (PMS), otherwise known as petrol and diesel to power their electrical generators as an alternative source of energy limits the effectiveness of this option. As of February 2024, a litre of petrol stood at 679.36 Naira against 263.76 in February 2023 which illustrated that the price of the commodity increased by 157.57 % within the period of 12 months.⁷

Reduction in physical fellowship: Another commonly reported challenge by the participants on cyber religious activities is that it reduces fellowship among the *brethren*. Online congregations may see the faces of their acquaintances on the channel being used without physical contact with each other. The usual warmth of togetherness felt while having physical contact in a congregation is missed through the cyber highway of worship. An interviewee aptly describes the challenge as "loss of fellowship" which implies that congregants lose contact or fellowship with one another due to the online mode of worship.

Home Distraction: Another problem associated with the online church for members is the issue of distraction which is inevitable for one reason or the other. Distraction is inevitable in a home setting through many factors and because of the absence of a spiritual atmosphere that is common in a church setting. For example, an interviewee among many others said that online church programmes much as it has the advantage of participation in the comfort of members' homes, are equally bedevilled by 'distraction in the comfort of the home'. This finding affirms the observation of Boluwatife (2023:398) that: 'for online users, staying through the live stream till the end without heading distraction appears more difficult than a journey through the earth in a day'. Therefore, in this regard, there is an eroding culture of average Christian worship that is anchored on honour, dignity, submission, and respect in the presence of God.

Differing Time Zone: It is discovered from the interviewees in this study that it is often difficult for some church members or expected audiences to participate during live broadcasts because the time zone of where they are does not line with that of the location of the programme. Different time zone across the globe makes it difficult for many would-be online audiences to partake in such programmes in real time and promptly. This is so because the internet facility facilitates the creation of a global audience at once. For example, a respondent complained of different time zones across the globe as a challenge of cyberspace-dominated church activity.

2. Technical Problem: These are problems relating to the equipment used for the online programmes including the equipment used by internet service providers, electricity, horn speakers etc.

Erratic Electricity Supply: The issue of poor electricity power supply from the National Grid which hampers effective electric power distribution to consumers is another problem confronting Christian activities in cyberspace. It is general knowledge that one of the problems weighing down the development of Nigeria is the epileptic power supply. Therefore, the twine problems of unstable power supply and high prices of fuel that could not be afforded by so many lovers of church programmes given the precarious economic situation of Nigeria is a major challenge. For example, a participant remarked that the income of many Nigerians is not commensurate to the high cost of data and fuel that are needed to access internet facilities for online religious activities. On the other hand, as pointed out by a respondent, service providers also suffer from the inadequacy of power supply. Availability of stable power is a *sine qua non* for effective service delivery which is a rarity in Nigeria. Therefore, the prevalence of power failure or outage coupled with the high cost of fuel in Nigeria greatly vitiate the advantages that cyber-religion offers hence it reduces audience participation.

Poor network connectivity: Participants commonly reported this challenge which causes disruptions during the livestreaming of programmes. This particular problem partly stems from poor network service provision by service providers in Nigeria which is more pronounced in rural areas where the majority of Nigerians live. For example, a clergyman who operates in a rural area affirmed that the internet network is problematic for

the church's online services from the church headquarters in Lagos.⁵ Even in urban settings, effective network services are not guaranteed as in advanced or developed countries in the global North. To buttress this point, a respondent said 'There's poor internet connection here in Minna which of course poses a hindrance to social media communications'.⁶ For clarity, Minna is the capital city of Niger State in Nigeria. Furthermore, poor internet connectivity manifests in sudden loss of sound or abrupt offline. The chat box of a live streaming programme that was tracked shows the reaction of the followers when they developed a connectivity problem. Some of the comments tracked are: "There is no connection. I guess it is a network problem." "No sound, what happened" "Please no audio yet. Thanks". These reactions show how frustrating poor internet connectivity poses a serious challenge to cyber religion despite its benefits.

3. Denominational or Church problem: These are problems identified with denominations or churches that are taking advantage of global communication and technological development that gave birth to cyberspace. Much as cyber-religion has a great deal of benefits to the church, it also poses some disincentives which include:

Increase cost of operation: The use of cyberspace for religious activities has brought with it the incidence of an increase in the operating cost of churches. The areas that impel expenditure which were not there before include the cost of data, communication equipment for internet service, and petrol or diesel for powering generators. These new areas of church spending were pointed out by some respondents, though not as if they do not appreciate the benefits that the online programmes bring to them.

Reduction in church revenue: Some respondents drew attention to the realization that the use of cyberspace drastically reduces their church income through tithe, free offerings, pledges, donations etc. This implies that many church members hardly give the church what is expected of them due to their non-physical gathering. To overcome this challenge, many churches devise the method of displaying bank details into which members are expected to transfer their financial offerings. Nevertheless, church income plummets largely due to a lack of know-how on the use of bank applications for fund transfers by church members, especially low-income and illiterate ones.

Reduction in church attendance: Some interviewees revealed that one of the drawbacks of cyber religion is that church attendance is reduced. Even though this technologically-driven mode of worship facilitates access to non-members of a church on a global or wider scale, it is observed that attendance by members reduces compared with physical gatherings. The reasons for this calls for a scientific investigation.

Conclusion and Prospects

The next question to interrogate is whether there are prospects or opportunities to surmount this plethora of problems that have been isolated and elaborated. Arguments arising from this nature form the next section of this study. Social media has revolutionized church worship contrary to the 19th-century postulations by secularisation scholars like Auguste Comte, Emile Durkheim, Ferdinand Tonnies, Max Weber and Karl Marx who opined that modernization would destroy religious dogma. Contrary, modernization through the instrumentality of globalization has served as a springboard for the spread and visibility of religious dogma. Today, the new media has made religious awakening more intensified. In Nigeria, the church has unpacked its doctrines on various social media platforms. However, the practice of religious groups in cyberspace has faced daunting challenges as we isolated and articulated in this study. The question at this juncture is whether these problems are surmountable. Affirmatively, they can be surmounted in the following directions.

First, there should be an improvement in the power generation supply in Nigeria. This is because power failure has devastating implications in Nigeria's economic setting. For instance, it affects internet service providers on the one hand and end users of internet services on the other hand. In 2023, the capacity of power supply in Nigeria stood at 4,886.40 megawatts (MW).⁹ Whereas, South Africa generated 58,095 MW for her citizens. Ghana, on the other hand, generated 4,710 MW and even distributed power to Togo, Benin, and Burkina Faso.⁹ To resolve this problem, the Nigerian Electricity Regulatory Commission (NERC), adopted the groupings of Tariff into different bands of A, B, and C categories. For Band A, the allotted number of hours for subscribers was 20 hours and above, Tariff B was 16 hours and above (but less than 20 hours) and Tariff C (12 hours and above, but less than 16 hours).⁹ With this pattern of discriminatory power distribution, it was expected to generate better results. However, the challenge of electricity power supply has not abated and subscribers of these packages have not seen any significant change hence its effects on accessibility of church programmes. Once, electricity power generation is improved, it will be easier for Nigerians to follow church programs by having access to effective network service and power accessibility to view or watch such programmes in their comfort zones. The government of President Bola Ahmed Tinubu has vowed to improve the power generation supply to 6000 MW. If this is done there is the possibility of more users of the internet services to access church programmes on the social space.

Secondly, there is a need for internet providers to improve their network service provision in Nigeria. It has been generally accepted that internet provision is poor while tariffs charged on such services are always higher. Although, Internet Service Providers have adopted the policy of Unlimited Data Plan (UDP), and Fair Usage Data Policy (FUD) the cost of subscription is still very high and cannot be affordable for an average Nigerian. For instance, in 2024 the high cost of data usage in Nigeria in Naira for the SmartHome subscription cost 11, 994 per month, Smarthome Lite stood at 21, 454 per month, Smarthome Plus was 31, 754 per month, Smarthome Premium was 47, 995 per month while Smarthome Platinum cost 66, 750. Given the high rates of unemployment and underemployment in Nigeria, a lot of people cannot afford the high cost of data usage. Although, MTN, Glo, Aitel and other network subscribers provided succor with lower tariff data as low as 100 naira this cannot guarantee a successful session for any church live programme. Therefore, if internet data providers can review their tariff systems a lot of poor masses could easily adopt the use of cyberspace to access church programmes and activities in Nigeria.

Thirdly, is the idea of youth empowerment through skills acquisition, Small Scale and Medium Enterprises (SMS), and White Collar Jobs in Nigeria. A teeming population of Nigerian youths have not been engaged in either of these sectors and are disempowered to afford the acquisition of smartphones or Android phones, iPads, notebooks, or satellites among others to watch church programmes. Youth empowerment is not exclusive to the government agenda but the Civil Society Groups, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), Charity Organizations, and the bourgeoisie class. Therefore, all hands must be on the deck to take the Nigerian youths out of poverty. The unemployment and poverty level in Nigeria is alarming and on the increase. The fight against these twin problems could go a long way in enabling the participation of church followers in cyberspace.

Fourthly, the participation of church followers in cyberspace is daunting with distractions which could not allow participants to follow diligently the church programme. If church followers are diligent and focused no amount of distraction could have overwhelmed them. Besides, the new media has provided an enabling environment for worshipers to have their programmes on the platter of gold and this opportunity must be taken with all sense of responsibility. Finally, Nigerian churches should provide satellites in all their branches to enable their followers who could not afford to watch online programmes privately to do so.

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Notes

1. **Neuromancer**, a novel (1984) by William Gibson that launched the cyberpunk movement within the science fiction literary genre. The novel, a fast-paced, gritty, Raymond Chandler-esque meditation on a computing-fueled dystopia of the near future, had an impact on many of its readers much like that of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* on the hipster-bohemian counterculture of the 1950s and '60s.
2. See Encyclopaedia at <https://www.encyclopedia.com/religion/legal-and-political-magazines/cyber-religion>.
3. See National Bureau of Statistics, (NBS) 2022.
4. Oral Interview with Pastor Udie, E. Living Faith Church Tose, Akinyile Local Government Area, Ibadan-Oyo State. 15th April, 2024.
5. Oral Interview with Pastor Ugbe, Deeper Life Church, Obiarukwu, Delta State, Nigeria 21st April, 2024.
6. Oral Interview with Pastor Sunday, B.B. of Living Faith Church Makurdi, Benue State, 4th June 2024.

7. Oral Interview with Pastor Awobode, Redeemed Christian Church of God, Ibadan-Oyo State, 22nd April, 2024.
8. Chibuze, J. 'Fuel Price Rises by 157.57 per cent in one Year', in The Guardian Newspaper of 21st March 2024.
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10. See the International Centre for Investigative Reporting (ICIR), at <https://www.icirnigeria.org/power-fluctuations-in-2023-governments-plan-for-2024/>. Accessed, 20-05-2024. Also, see Ojo, J. 'Tinubu, Nigerians Needs Stable Electricity Supply', in the Punch Newspaper of Tuesday, May 21st 2024. Available at: <https://punchng.com/tinubu-nigeria-needs-stable-electricity-supply/>. Accessed, 21-05-2024.