

# Digital Evangelism: The Place of Religion in the Emerging Social Order in Nigeria

Abubakar Mamman-Muhammad  
Baze University, Abuja

**Abstract:-** The relationship that exists between technology and religion has become a phenomenon that is culturally interactive, however, the degree and scope of synergy are often complex and progressive in a globalized society where technology has evolved into a sophisticated institution that is sustained or locked in a grid of digital infrastructure negotiating both time and space. On the other hand, the popular Marxist perception that termed religion as “the opium of the people” has gradually metamorphosed into a multi-faceted institution, wherein it seeks to address not only man’s spiritual but also man’s extensive communal, partisan, cultural, economic, and other needs. We have also seen the proliferation of religious movements that have grown out of these societal needs who advocate for a new social order through administrative transparency, accountability in service, religious and cultural harmony in our societies. The interests of these movements though conflicting sometimes manage to address our common and practical societal needs always. This suggests that religion in continuum of its social responsibilities has taken a dive into new territories by adopting and deploying new technologies, it has negotiated for a space in the mediation of Nigeria’s emerging social order. Apparently, this study examines the two leading religions in Nigeria, Christianity, and Islam and how these religions are using technology to reach its expanding audiences. This paper suggests that religion is only able to perform its task effectively today by depending among other things upon the mastery of practical components of technology as evangelical tools in mediating the new social order (administrative transparency, accountability in service, religious and cultural harmony in our societies).

**Keywords:-** Cultural harmony; Digital evangelism; Moral realism; Religiosity; Social order; Transparency

## I. INTRODUCTION-

The paradigm of communication beckoned at the invention and propagation of the computer. The paradigm becomes more glaring as technology moved into the era of personal computing. To put this assumption in perspective this paper noted the development of audio-visual, like the broadcast televisions on one hand the proliferation of personal computing technologies such as the smart phone on the other hand. In addition, the digital space characterized by

the new media is expanding at a quick speed (Silverblatt, 2004).

Enveloped by the new phenomena the initial response by religious institutions was apparent in the newly adopted methods of evangelizing activities. Today, religious officialdoms now utilize the global new media in their evangelism.

The globalized society is chockfull in this age of information, nested in a social extent of information malleability and geography. It demonstrated that the preserve of early intellectuals rooted in closed societies, social strata peculiarity, memberships of premier and elitist organizations has been eroded by the instantaneity of information. This global phenomenon has rubbished geographical and social boundaries in numerous ways and places. ‘Outsiders’ now increasingly obtain information previously classified as exclusive preserve of a privileged few through a variety of means. These developments implicate factors that submit stout variations in earlier concepts of our definition of what makes a group and organization, with religious groups now required to adjust (Anderson, Bell, & Shirkey, 2014).

With the growth of new means of communication exchange, religion has refused to take a back seat as it joins the train notably as a major driver, which is seen from the contents of its communication. This trend differs from the traditional social networks, where the nature of information exchanged lean towards a more diverse nature, laden with the potential for behavioural change with respect to the objects of knowledge. When religion is put in context, it becomes evident that the chances of non-religious professionals to have access to *too much information* is just plausible.

With a qualitative variation in evidence, the control of information suits a concern that is increasingly becoming heavy in carrying out our daily undertakings, whether such activities are political, economic, or cultural in nature. The way and manner we collect and use relevant information, becomes more important than how we meet more people, it is in this light that this paper seeks an understanding, designed to deepen our communication processes and efficacy, by developing a mutual confidence in new media; this search is true even for the revered realms of religion. Thus, we are obligated to concede to the open fact, that the digital age is leading the way to a gigantic change in human culture.

## II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

It is easy to evoke theoretical discussions of new media effect against Mashall McLuhan using his ‘medium is the message’ dictum. This aphorism can be used as a lens in dissecting the relationship of media, religion, and society.

However, this paper believes despite its aptness, that it is limited in scope if the debate is taken beyond its periphery. It is in that regard, that this paper suggests a scrutiny of ethical and structural standards in how technology is adopted. This paper finds the theoretical framework useful at different stages, which closely examine our varied processes, technological annexation, and value judgments that remain fundamental to our choices and strategies. Therefore, this paper offers an alternative viewpoints and frameworks that reflects how people see, react, and echo the affordances of digital media among faith-based communities; thus, the following theories-

### ❖ *The uses and gratification theory (UGT)*

Between 1973 and 1974 the trio of Dennis McQuail Jay Blumler and Joseph Brown were joined by Elihu Katz, Michael Gurevitch and Hadassah Haas, to critically assess the media. This collaborative research directed scholars to look deeply on how people saw the media and especially the mediums of mass communication. While earlier messages focused on the media content, UGT was more concerned about media audience seeing the audience as inertly unprotected to strong media messages. The theory further presumed that an active audience that wilfully select and use media content to satisfy various needs is possible and its simply ‘out there’. The theory did not see media contents as products of culture by assuming that media contents are imbued with a potential practical value.

The theory of uses and gratifications marked a research paradigm in mass communication, by focusing on the effect of the mass media on its audience people. In this scenario therefore, this paper will question how people are using the media in its religious evangelism. Although recent research proved that the use of UGT does not always suggest that the theory is always active but serves as a variable often used for qualitative research.

If we consider audience activity as a variable in qualitative research, it is adequate if we put it into the following- that UGT is more of a point of view than a theory as such, it considers mass communication process from the viewpoint of the audience. Many scholars see UGT in either a functional or a psychological perspective (Campbell, 2013). The functionalist sees UGT in the perspective of how people see and use media content.

On the other hand, the psychological approach is more concerned with inquiries as to what motivates the audience and the effects of using the media. It is therefore not far to see if digital evangelism is a tool used by religion to negotiate an emerging social order. It will be interesting to note what type of content does it produce, but most importantly it will be

asking pertinent questions like ‘how is the message structured’ and ‘how does these messages motivates it audience.’

The attempt is to integrate other theoretical approaches that will help to augment gaps in the final assumption. Thus, using UGT as a framework; this paper employed the dynamic approach, which revised and extended its scope by not only looking at religion but looking at religion through the lens of ‘digital evangelism’.

### ➤ *The Domestication of media theory-*

This is a rather interesting theory as it focuses on the way and manner technology and in extension the new media is tamed and deployed for specific purposes. The duo of Roger Silverstone and Eric Hirsch first propounded the domestication of media theory in 1992, it inquires on how technology especially the new media influence our choice of information and how it has constrained our choices in the ‘moral economy’ or rather how it has developed into a framework of values that regulates the family and even the community itself.

Interestingly the theory is set to extricate decision making, which may occur at different levels including decisions of annexation, objectification, absorption, and transfiguration of any technology (media) as a domesticated tool in the family or community life. The theory suggests how we consider values and beliefs, and how informed or constrained the adoption of such technology will mean (Silverstone & Hirsch, 1992). For this paper it will be used to identify what is the key motivation to adopt digital evangelism, given that religion also has other priorities.

### ➤ *Network analysis-*

This paper is certain, that additional theories will further enrich its position thus the addition of ‘*Network Analysis*’ or sometimes referred to as the social network theory. The theory examines the social constructions and connexions around a person, group, or organization and how these connexions affect the individual beliefs and behaviours. The theory, which is based on a network system, identifies the shift in society. A shift from the boundaries of family, institution and religion to some slackly restricted relations based on supple and self-motivated social networks (Rogers & Kincaid, 1981).

Rogers and Kincaid propounded the theory in 1981, they stressed that the communication network consist of ‘interconnected individuals who are linked by patterned communication flows.’ This theory is relevant today as it was in 1981, because it seeks to understand how people can first connect, interpret and understand each other, they argued that this cycle creates a personal, interactive communication structure and that is what digital media has succeeded in doing today. Therefore, the network analysis may just offer the creative potentials of digital evangelism. The theory will also help in remapping Nigeria’s emerging social order within religious communities.

❖ *Religion- from “Opium of the People” to a multi-faceted institution*

‘Religion is the opium of the people’ (*Die Religion ... ist das Opium des Volkes*) remains one of the most frequently paraphrased statements of the German philosopher Karl Marx.

There are empirical proofs that demonstrated the benefits of religious practice within society. While religion has proven to promote the well-being of individuals, families, and the community, studies have also proven its benefits to the poor. There are new insights that suggests regular appearance at religious services is linked to healthy lifestyle, established family life, durable marriages, and well-mannered children (Skuetze, 2010). A further prove also shows that religion also leads to a fall in the frequency of home abuse, delinquency, substance abuse, and bad habit (Fagan, 2006). Perhaps, our religiosity has helped us to increase our physical and mental balance, not to forget the promise for longevity and elevation. These are all possible when the effects are intergenerational, where values are passed on to the next generation. It is true that some pockets of studies show the occasional negative outcomes of religion, majority of similar studies also demonstrate religious positivity, ordinarily, conclusions of negative effects are usually linked to specific circumstances related to certain forms of religious practice, most of which could be described as a deliberate adulteration of religion.

Resilient and recurring evidence shows that the regular practice of religion has positive effects in nearly every aspect of our social concern. This indicates that religious practice shelters against social malady and dysfunction (Fagan, 2006).

Explicitly, obtainable data evidently indicates religious belief and practice to be associated with the following-

➤ *Advanced marital contentment and solidity-*

In marital contentment, religiosity is expressed through different levels of religious participation. The focus here is a comparison between marriage and religiosity, keeping in mind that couples especially women now have access to religious content directly on their smart phones. The argument is that marriage and a family’s religiosity largely have sweeping and positive effects; that they sway parallel spheres of life (Waite & Lehrer, 2003). In this regard, marital contentment can be advanced when technology is deployed to meet its objectives.

➤ *Durable parent-child relationships-*

Times are changing and the offer of technology is limitless, new media is a banquet of options and children today are having a field day. To the child it is a guarantee of independence and a coveted network that reduces the involvement of parents in their social lives. However, parents see this as loss of control or mildly put- loss of connection with the children where they are apparently expected to keep sensible control, for the sake of care and general health, of their children (Taylor, 2013). The consequence for this attitude in the emerging social order is best imagined. Relationships are constantly redefined, cultural norms and

values reach the child even before the parent reconciles his mind with the issue.

➤ *Superior educational goals and fulfilment (chiefly among the poor)-*

By absolutely improving the quality of teaching and learning, parents are hopeful that superior education can bring about a significant change for a child’s future. The poor who rely only on superior education to be able to bring about a socio-economic change mostly hold this belief (McLeese, 2013). To this paper, looking at the Nigerian example we see knowledge institutions competing to cater for the needs of the populace. Despite glaring differences, these institutions continue to share crucial tasks and responsibilities (to provide superior education).

If we measure this against the backdrop of the central thesis of this paper, we will be looking at the proliferation of media campaigns by knowledge institutions, where educational fulfilment is promoted alongside the religiosity of its people. In Nigeria, superior education has always been the domain of private institutions and statics have clearly shown these private institutions are mostly faith based (Fapohunda, 2015). This addresses the connection that educational goals and fulfilment cannot be disconnected from religion especially in a digitized society like now.

➤ *Advanced levels of positive workplace behaviours:*

It is astounding how digital evangelism has advanced positive workplace behaviours. Without a question, Nigeria's new social structure has rooted itself, particularly in social media. Citizens need a work environment that fosters principled practice and is unwavering to principles and good behaviour to practice successfully and ethically. (Green, 2012). A progressive working atmosphere is fashioned where advanced levels of good work behaviours and the mien of citizens are dependable with each other and equally reinforcing. There is substantial evidence that religion (especially on social media) is providing the needed religious framework where employers understand the work task, respect their employees, and are dedicated to executing expert standards (DESA, 2009).

➤ *Advanced levels of well-being and happiness-*

In this paper, we also examined that the media could similarly mediate the rapport between religion and wellbeing. The media today is at the forefront of promoting individual religiosity, and this could range from a fundamental individual resolve to a person’s social preference, to the role of the media as an insurance mechanism to people who are lonely and lack agency (Graham & Crown, 2014).

➤ *Advanced levels of self-control, self-esteem, and coping skills-*

There is a big incentive to preserve and enrich a positive idea of oneself as a key dynamic of many present-day self-theories (Gecas, 1991). These theories posit self- formations as valued and protected formations, and the media especially the new media has found it a rather fertile ground for habit cultivation. It is in this light that digital evangelism has found its niche in that ‘personal space,’ thus, they provide to the

individual a self-evaluation on standards that matter, where uncomfortable conditions can be avoided. This can occur through increased efforts at self-improvement or, more typically, through such self-serving activities such as the social media, and this has keyed in adequately in the individuals' positive perception of the emerging social order especially in Nigeria.

❖ *The New Social Order-*

Defined as the way a society is organized, and the rules and standards required to maintain that organization.

➤ *Transparency and Accountability-*

Since the return of democracy in 1999, Nigeria has witnessed series of convulsive delusions that has become disturbing towards its development. With the emergence of a new social order where values such as integrity, transparency and accountability become pronounced every day, the dimensions of this order signal a departure in Nigeria's development. The incessant turmoil in both states and national assemblies is an expressive testament to the points in question. The seeming absence of these values exposes Nigeria's to a kleptocratic circle that has become a deep-rooted culture of governance, this attitude is not just a national infestation, but an art perfected by the people involved (kleptocratic art). Thus, Nigeria has lost its image as a democratic nation in global politics as attributes of democracy (social order) are incomplete without transparency and accountability (Ukaogo, 2000).

Transparency and accountability have been shrouded by local or national politics, a signifier of openness as its principal trepidations in a young democratic culture. This means that transparency and accountability play a very important role largely to either the advancement or retrogression of any society and Nigeria is not an exception. To understand the contentions and harmonies of transparency and accountability in Nigeria is by simply x-raying its budgetary process, the final picture is a rather gloomy one when we put it against the struggles of the ordinary Nigerian. Here we see a process that is infested by kleptocrats, a conduit of underdevelopment where huge sums of money simply vanish and find nests in the bank accounts of kleptocrats. It is also interesting to note that this group of people have constituted themselves into a kleptocratic dynasty where the battered process that is feeding them is inherited in a process of 'dynastic transference' (Ogbeidi, 2012). It is in this light that the emerging social order in Nigeria with the age of new media and digital evangelism is trying to reconnect man and God as a viable linkage (transparency and accountability) for national development.

➤ *Religious and cultural harmony-*

Concerned that serious occurrences of bigotry and discrimination based on religion or belief, including acts of violence, coercion, and oppression motivated by religious intolerance, are on the rise in many parts of the world and that Nigeria is not immune poses a threat to the realization of fundamental human rights and fundamental freedoms (UN, 2005).

For there to be peace, understanding, and friendship amongst people of different cultures and nations of the world, it is crucial that there be diversity in cultural, ethnic, religious, and etymological aspects of life. (Chodron, 2010). Indicators of cultural bias, bigotry, and chauvinism toward various cultures and religions, with recent events in Nigeria serving as good instances, cause animosity and violence among people and nations all over the world.

In Nigeria, the two major religions have not used the new media to its full potential to mediate thorny differences in the polity; indeed, the new media has promoted individual inclusion in governance it has also pronounced insignificant differences that is widening its cultural divide. The new media has been often deployed to malign, coerce, and shame opponents thus initiating avoidable conflicts. This paper concludes that although constructive, glitches still occur in the application of the new media for religious and cultural harmony in Nigeria. It is in this light that digital evangelism is pioneering an aggressive education of the public on the need to cultivate requisite aptitude for message inquiry (Olabamiji, 2014).

➤ *Moral realism and the instantaneity of information-*

Moral realism, also known as ethical realism or moral Platonism, is the area where ethical judgments lead to intents that refer to objective (i.e., independent of subjective opinion) elements of the world, some of which may be true to the extent that they accurately report those features. However, trust is and must be the cornerstone of any successful data collecting from people. Its conclusions are convincing, especially when we are looking at how people share information with one another.

With nearly magical possibilities in technologies that promise anytime, anywhere access to information, technology-aided ubiquity and instantaneity have arisen as significant aims of most information technology providers (Dholakia, 2001). Industry executives and researchers pay close attention to the complex physics, structures, and economics of such technologies, but often give little emphasis to the social and cultural aspects of these technologies.

The development of mobile connectivity is a powerful force in technology. It will eventually converge into significant adjustments to how people live and work. These new technologies are drenched in a sea of instantaneity and ubiquity promises, which in turn promise a world of unimaginable personal freedom and social connections.

➤ *Evangelism and the new techno-culture-*

According to Kate Shellnut (2009) religion has been greatly influenced by technology in the following ways-

- Religion is now more widely available and can now be found everywhere. By downloading prayer schedules to their mobile devices, which are then automatically modified for location and season, Muslims can now hear the digital call to prayer. Thanks to searchable online Bibles like BibleGateway, biblical sections are being created and distributed utilizing artificial intelligence to directly address the moral requirements of the public. In



Nigeria, digital media is now deployed as a powerful tool to restore and reconstruct a country's national value system by engaging in digital evangelism. In Nigeria, the new media is now used to communicate religious messages capable of making its citizens achieve lofty ambitions and greatness, by promoting hard work, religiousness, and public values (Ogwo, Asemah, & Obidike, 2013).

- Distance has been eliminated, as religious leaders are able to reach a community of people who may be incapacitated by distance to meet with clergies' face to face. It has also promoted freedom of religions as non-believers of a given faith may find solidarity on blogs and message boards.
- Reputations are shifting- Megachurches and large non-denominational religious organisations are adopting non-traditional worship styles and spaces with rhythmic set designs, big screens of song lyrics and no notices. Technology has granted parishioners the ability to text in questions or responses to a clergy's message and vice-versa.
- Statistics become imperative- Online metrics, like page views, Twitter followers and Facebook friends have begun to influence religious groups. These numbers, however, might not accurately reflect a religious organization's mission to build up societies or convert people to their beliefs. The religious organization can monitor things like likes, page views, and comments thanks to it.
- Lay people get involved- social media and the Internet are intrinsically participatory media, allowing individuals outside of religious organisations to contribute to and shape the public—for good or bad. Social media inspires ordinary people to offer criticism and share their opinions, writing on a religious organization's Facebook wall or sending a Twitter message connotes participation with major reforms originating from simple and harmless comments.
- Organizations now focus more on strategy- religious non-profits organizations are hiring tech experts, digital marketers, and online researchers to offer direction. To improve online presence many religious bodies are maintaining blogs, Facebook and twitter accounts. The use of technology is centred contextually and that the religious organizations that do it consider their actual context and addressees first instead of copying others.

### III. CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, this paper meandered around a seemingly simple question 'what is digital evangelism?' for some time now, Nigerians have seen significant shifts in the way, manner information is communicated, and how technology especially new technology is changing people's religiosity. We have seen the proliferation of megachurches; however, we have not also taken cognizance of cyber churches that have literally evaded the digital landscape.

Albeit early churches despite their huge size are confined to a single web page where the activities of the church are broadcasted. But it isn't the same anymore these simple websites have metamorphosed into interactive

religious environments where communion has become a personal engagement that fervently seeks to mediate the lives of its worshippers and the emerging social order in Nigeria, even if we turn a blind eye to the proliferation of self-styled evangelist who are not connected to the church. Although it is not a Christian peculiarity, with Islam very much culpable, the scenario is not encouraging with the proliferation of alien doctrines that have found their way into the fabrics of Nigeria's peace and tranquillity.

In this regard therefore, we posit that digital evangelism is an offshoot of the megachurch, which has simply adopted new technology to further its course. What digital evangelism does is to copy some aspects of the offline church services by transferring it online using new media technology, which are largely 'digital' usually characterized by its ability to be manipulated, networkable, density, compressibility, and interactivity. Although scholars in communication have condemned this rigid classification, new media will not include analog television programs or print unless they have technologies that supports digital interactivity.

Globalisation is taken over everything, but globalisation in a digital world is literally narrowing its scope to the frames of any digital device. Nigerians are today embracing the new technology in droves (Ihejirika, 2012), where online worship experiences are offered in countless choices. It is worthy of note that in our earlier analysis of the social network theory this paper pointed out how the theory examines the social constructions and connexions around a person, group, or organization and how these connexions affect the individual beliefs and behaviours. Interestingly, the theory suggested that on a network system this new technologies bring about a shift in society as we see in our analysis of the megachurch and the cyber church. This is religious shift to some slackly restricted relations based on supple and self-motivated social networks. For example, many multisite churches, and webcasting of religious services via WhatsApp, iPhone, Blackberry messenger and Facebook among others (for example Emmanuel TV live) is common.

This paper noted therefore, the new media as a social space is not for a selected few, it has simply adopted new technology (digitization) as the needed pedestal to extend and alter religious practice and Nigeria is therefore not an exception. Although, there are radical changes in communication technologies, it has failed to review the standards and the context in which we conceive religion. The term 'digital evangelism' is deployed in this paper to fill this void, by echoing this new voice for enunciating the advancement of religious practice online.

Finally, 'digital evangelism' does not only refer to the articulation and practice of religion online, but it also suggests how digital media is shaping our religiosity. Thus, this paper draws the connection with domestication of media theory, by considering technology especially the new media and its influence on our choice of information and how it has constrained our choices in the 'moral economy' or rather how it has developed into a framework of values that regulates the family and even the community itself. In this analysis, the

theory is set to extricate decision making, which may occur at different levels including decisions of annexation, objectification, absorption, and transfiguration of any technology (media) as a domesticated tool in the family or community life with the power to mediate our perception and adoption of Nigeria's emerging social order. Digital Evangelism as a concept has permitted us to discuss the present state of religion relative to digital artefacts and the culture (Nigeria's emerging social order) in which it is positioned.

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