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Religion AI And The Growth Of Online Gospel

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Abstract

This study explores the intersection of religion, artificial intelligence (AI), and the growth of the online gospel, focusing on the implications for contemporary faith practices. The rapid integration of AI into religious contexts has transformed how the gospel is disseminated, raising critical questions about the authenticity and communal aspects of spiritual experiences This research aims to critically explore the influence of AI on online gospel dissemination, focusing on the ethical and theological challenges that emerge from this digital shift. Utilising Media Ecology Theory, proposed by Marshall McLuhan, this study contextualises the impact of technology on religious practices. Employing a mixed-methods approach that combines theological, historical, and phenomenological research, the study offers a thorough understanding of how AI impacts religious experiences. It also explores the gaps in existing literature on how AI affects traditional religious practices and the personalisation of faith in digital environments. Findings reveal that while AI-driven applications enhance accessibility and personalisation, they also pose risks to doctrinal integrity and communal worship. Additionally, the reliance on digital platforms may dilute the authenticity of religious experiences. This research adds to academic discourse by offering a detailed analysis of the challenges and opportunities that AI and digital media bring to religious practice. Based on these findings, the study offers the following five recommendations to the religious organisation and other stakeholders in the AI:

(I) Develop ethical guidelines for AI usage in religious contexts, (II) Enhance digital literacy programs for faith communities, (III) Foster hybrid worship models that integrate online and in-person experiences, (IV) Encourage collaborative content creation among congregants, and (V) Conduct ongoing research to monitor the evolving impacts of digital evangelism.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Online Gospel, Digital Evangelism, Media Ecology Theory, Theological Implications

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Introduction

The integration of artificial intelligence (AI) within religious practices has significantly changed the way the gospel is disseminated, particularly through digital platforms. This technological shift has enabled religious institutions to reach global audiences, fostering the growth of an online gospel movement. The term "gospel" originates from the Old English word gōspel, meaning "good news" or "glad tidings," and is derived from the Greek word *euangelion*. In Christian tradition, it refers to the teachings of Christ and the written accounts of His life and message found in the New Testament. Artificial intelligence, capable of processing large amounts of data and mimicking human interactions, offers exciting opportunities in religious experiences by providing personalised spiritual guidance, virtual companionship, and simulated encounters with divine figures (Alkhouri, 2024:290). The pace of its transformation is historically unprecedented, requiring religion and theology not only to accept technology's integration into their daily life, but to recognise it as essential to the entire evolutionary process, as it has elevated our culture and consciousness (Delio, 2013:163). However, the implications of AI's role in shaping religious experiences and the authenticity of digital evangelism necessitate scholarly examination. Also, as religious communities increasingly embrace AI-driven tools, such as chatbots, virtual assistants, and personalised religious content, questions arise regarding the balance between tradition and innovation in spiritual practices.

The swift growth of online gospel initiatives sparks concerns about the possible decline of communal worship and the commercialisation of faith through algorithmic influences. Digital technology is fundamentally altering the concept of humanity, especially in terms of

being a religious or spiritual individual, in an "irreversible" process. This transformation significantly affects the religious and spiritual lives of "digital natives," who have always lived in an Internet-connected world (Bingaman, 2023:108). This study addresses the insufficient exploration of how AI's integration into religious practices influences the authenticity and communal aspects of the gospel in digital spaces. Additionally, it seeks to fill the gap in understanding the ethical and theological implications of AI-driven evangelism in reshaping traditional religious experiences. This study also seeks to explore the complexities of AI's integration into religious contexts, examining how this intersection affects the authenticity, accessibility, and theological dimensions of the gospel in the digital age.

Statement of the Problem

The rapid adoption of AI technologies in religious contexts has outpaced scholarly analysis, leaving critical questions unanswered about their impact on the authenticity and integrity of gospel dissemination online. This study examines the potential challenges associated with AI-driven evangelism, specifically its impact on traditional religious practices, communal worship, and the consistency of theological teachings.

Purpose of the Study

This study seeks to critically examine the role of AI in the growing dissemination of the gospel online, with a focus on its effects on the authenticity and communal dimensions of religious practices. The study also seeks to offer a detailed insight into how AI-driven technologies are transforming traditional evangelism and their potential long-term impacts on religious communities.

Theoretical Framework

This study utilises Media Ecology Theory, developed by Marshall McLuhan, to investigate how media and communication technologies shape human experiences and societal structures. The media we use to engage with the world act as extensions of our senses, with each communication medium possessing unique sensory characteristics that enhance our perception of reality (Lum, 2014:137-153). Using this framework, the research examines how AI-driven digital platforms are reshaping religious practices and the spread of the gospel, potentially changing how religious communities interact and experience their faith.

Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, integrating historical analysis, theological exploration, and phenomenological inquiry to examine the impact of AI on the online dissemination of the gospel. By integrating these methods, the research offers a comprehensive understanding of the evolution of religious practices, the theological implications of AI, and the lived experiences of individuals interacting with AI-driven religious platforms.

The Historical Relationship Between Religion and Technology

The relationship between religion and technology has a rich history, beginning with the invention of the printing press, which transformed the distribution of religious texts and ideas. The relationship between science, technology, and religion has not always been favourable. The first major conflict occurred when the Church condemned Copernicus's and Galileo's heliocentric discoveries in 1616 and 1623 Barrado-Navascués, 2023:167-239). Over time, technological advancements such as radio, television, and the internet have continued to transform how religious communities communicate and practice their faith. Today, the advent of AI represents the latest chapter in this ongoing evolution, raising new questions about how technology can shape and even redefine religious experiences and doctrines.

As AI technologies become increasingly integrated into religious contexts, they challenge traditional boundaries between the sacred and the secular, prompting a reevaluation of how faith is experienced and expressed. The world is increasingly viewed as a spiritual. For some, religion hinders scientific progress, particularly in evolutionary biology. Others see technology as a threat to traditional ways of life, believed to hold a richness that contemporary tech culture cannot match and may even endanger. Technology is a complex reality that encompasses not only the tools and machines we utilise but also the skills, processes, attitudes, culture, and social structures that it influences or creates (Herzfeld, 2022:1).

For many, however, religion is neither a problem nor relevant to their lives (Dennett & LaScola, 2010:122-150). This historical perspective highlights the dynamic relationship between religion and technology, revealing patterns of adaptation and resistance within religious communities. By understanding these past interactions, we can better contextualise the current influence of AI on religious practices and

anticipate future developments in the digital age, especially, AI gospel dissemination in the world, and Nigeria in particular.

The Shift in Gospel Dissemination: From Traditional to Digital Media

The spread of the gospel has greatly transformed, shifting from traditional oral and written forms to the extensive use of digital media, enabling religious messages to reach global audiences with remarkable speed and accessibility. Social media, video, and mobile technology excel at producing, disseminating, and manipulating content. For digital missionaries, this represents both significant benefits and the need for adaptation, signaling a technological and missiological revolution. Apple's innovations in recent years have significantly aided the spread of the gospel in closed countries, allowing thousands of music files and e-books to be stored on a single device or memory card, enabling the discreet smuggling of gigabytes of biblical resources (Dyer, 2014:45-60). This transition has undeniably shifted the gospel from being mainly shared within physical communities to being broadcast across various online platforms, such as social media, podcasts, and live-streamed services. The digital age has expanded the reach of evangelism while also introducing new challenges and opportunities for maintaining the authenticity and communal aspects of religious practice.

As the online landscape continues to evolve, the methods of engaging with the gospel are diversifying, incorporating interactive elements such as chatbots and virtual worship services that cater for individual preferences and lifestyles. Many Christians use platforms like Twitter and Facebook to invite others to "follow me as I follow Christ," while websites like Sticky Jesus serve as hubs for online evangelism, offering shareable content, blog posts, and daily tweet suggestions (Birdsong & Heim, 2012:6-10). Indeed, this is in many ways, a revolutionary moment for missions, leading to equally groundbreaking changes in practice. Nonetheless, this shift towards digital media has also prompted a rethinking of traditional theological concepts, as religious leaders grapple with the implications of virtual communities on communal worship and spiritual growth. However, new communication media can drive innovations in religious practice, even when they are used to extend or uphold traditions rather than break from them (Shandler, 2009:4). Ultimately, the evolution of gospel dissemination highlights the need for religious institutions to adjust their strategies to leverage the advantages of digital media while staying faithful to their core beliefs and practices in spreading the Gospel.

Religion and Artificial Intelligence: A Comprehensive Examination

The Role of AI in Contemporary Religious Practices

Artificial intelligence is becoming essential in modern religious practices by providing personalised spiritual guidance, automated prayer reminders, and even AI-generated sermons. During the late 20th and early 21st centuries, several notable roboticists and AI pioneers released popular science books that highlighted the significant links between religion and science in modern life (Geraci, 2008:138-166). These applications of AI are reshaping how individuals engage with their faith, often providing more accessible and convenient ways to participate in religious activities.

However, this integration of AI also raises critical concerns about the potential depersonalisation of spiritual experiences and the extent to which AI-driven practices can authentically represent and uphold the core tenets of religious traditions. Religion influences scientific theories, with U.S. robotics and AI reflecting Christian beliefs in cosmic purpose, favouring AI over humanoid robots for developing intelligence and saving human minds in virtual forms. Notwithstanding, robotic pets cannot offer true companionship or love; instead, bringing Christ's love to communities through genuine care is the better path (Geraci, 2006: 229-253). Significantly, AI, particularly through social media, has greatly enhanced evangelism in Nigeria by enabling religious messages to reach a broader audience with greater speed and personalisation. This digital shift has transformed traditional evangelistic methods, fostering new forms of spiritual engagement and community building across diverse demographics.

Case Studies of AI-Powered Religious Applications

AI-driven religious applications have emerged as impactful tools for enriching spiritual practices, with notable examples including AI chatbots like "Abraham" in Judaism, which provides personalised religious guidance, and "Sermon AI," designed for creating Christian sermons. Another example is the Hindu AI priest, "Siddhanta," which autonomously conducts rituals and recites prayers. Additionally, "Karma" is an AI platform used in Buddhism to deliver tailored meditation sessions, while the Islamic app "Salah Time" utilises AI to help users determine prayer times and offer guidance on religious obligations. Significantly, AI is increasingly influencing religious practices by creating new forms of worship and community, prompting theological questions about the nature of faith and the relationship between humans and non-humans (Mustak et al., 2021:389-404).

AI-powered religious applications have increasingly been used to spread the Gospel of Christ, offering personalised Bible study plans, prayer guides, and digital sermons tailored to individual needs, which encourage believers to engage with the teachings of Christ more intimately, making the message of the Gospel accessible to a global audience. Three AI tools for evangelism include chatbots that provide personalised scripture recommendations, sermon generation software that tailors messages based on audience needs, and virtual reality platforms that simulate immersive worship experiences. These tools enhance outreach efforts by making the Gospel more accessible and engaging in the digital era, also, AI in Nigeria's church missionary space will boost the production of accessible online Christian books, reaching a broader audience within local communities (Afunugo & Molokwu, 2024:2).

By enhancing traditional evangelism efforts, AI tools are helping to reinforce and expand the reach of Christ's teachings in the digital age. Nonetheless, these applications demonstrate the potential for AI to make religious practices more accessible, particularly in regions with limited access to religious leaders or institutions. Nonetheless, these case studies also underscore the ethical and theological dilemmas, as dependence on AI could raise questions about the genuineness of spiritual guidance and the risk of technology overshadowing human participation in religious life.

Ethical and Theological Considerations of AI in Religion

The integration of AI into religious practices presents significant ethical and theological implications, particularly concerning the authenticity and authority of AI-generated spiritual guidance. Ethically, there are concerns about the potential for AI to manipulate or misinterpret religious teachings, leading to deviations from traditional doctrines. Undoubtedly, personal contact is essential and irreplaceable in church missions, as exemplified by Jesus, who trained his Apostles directly. While new technologies can aid in missions, they should be secondary to direct human interaction (Lynch, 2014:3). Theologically, the use of AI challenges fundamental concepts such as divine inspiration and the human role in spiritual leadership, raising questions about whether machines can truly mediate religious experiences or convey sacred truths. Additionally, the reliance on AI in religious contexts could erode the communal and relational aspects of faith, as technology increasingly intermediates personal and collective spiritual practices.

The Influence of Religious Institutions on AI Ethics

Religious institutions are essential in creating the ethical frameworks that guide the development and use of AI within spiritual contexts. By anchoring AI ethics in theological principles, these institutions can ensure that the use of AI technologies is consistent with fundamental religious values, including human dignity, compassion, and the sanctity of life. Digital technology has become a crucial tool for fulfilling the church's mission, especially in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic (Hendriks et al., 2022:72-85). The integration of digital technology in evangelisation is encouraged for its improvements to traditional practices, especially when used ethically. In Christian education, it can enhance evangelisation by incorporating the meditative practice of prophetic dialogue (Diaz, 2021:3-15). However, religious leaders and scholars can offer valuable perspectives on how AI can be utilised to strengthen, rather than diminish, the communal and spiritual aspects of faith. As AI continues to evolve, religious institutions must actively engage in dialogues about the ethical implications of AI, advocating for the responsible use of technology that respects both the spiritual and moral well-being of individuals and communities.

The Growth of the Online Gospel: Impacts and Future Directions
Digital Evangelism: Approaches and Obstacles

Digital evangelism has emerged as a crucial strategy for religious organisations aiming to connect with wider and more diverse audiences via online platforms such as social media, podcasts, and streaming services. Although these digital strategies provide unparalleled opportunities for disseminating religious messages worldwide, they also pose challenges, including the need to uphold theological integrity and cultivate authentic community within virtual environments. Virtual gospel preaching is increasingly essential for the modern church, requiring creative management to keep viewers engaged (Tari, 2023:510-518), and to achieve this, churches must blend principles and methods to remain flexible in all circumstances, effectively reaching the global community (Pakpahan et al., 2022:7201). Moreover, the rapid and frequently commercial nature of digital media can hinder efforts to foster meaningful and lasting spiritual engagement, as religious content competes with a wide range of secular online distractions.

As digital evangelism expands, religious organisations must strike a balance between leveraging technology for outreach and preserving the richness and authenticity of spiritual experiences. Tackling these

challenges will be essential to ensure that the expansion of the online gospel positively impacts both individual faith journeys and the larger religious community.

The Influence of Social Media on the Spread of the Gospel

Social media has revolutionised gospel dissemination by enabling real-time access to religious messages for global audiences and fostering interactive engagement with followers. Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram have become crucial resources for religious leaders and organisations to disseminate teachings, host live services, and build virtual communities. The church doesn't need to be confined within a building but can exist as small communities of disciples in various locations (Oentoro & Idayanti, 2022:202-205), and as part of the body of Christ, the church transcends time and space (Dwiraharjo, 2020:1-17). Although, cyberspace is integral to Gen Z's spirituality, online interactions alone may not nurture the soul, making the church's guidance essential for this generation (Subowo, 2021:379-395).

While social media improves outreach, it also raises concerns about the potential dilution of religious content and the challenges of maintaining doctrinal consistency in diverse and decentralized online settings, along with fostering unhealthy rivalries within religious communities. Most importantly, as social media continues to shape the landscape of gospel dissemination, religious leaders must strategically leverage its potential while preserving the depth and accuracy of their teachings. Striking a balance between broad accessibility and theological integrity will be crucial to ensuring that social media serves as a powerful and authentic tool for spiritual growth and community development.

AI and the Customisation of Religious Experiences

AI technologies are increasingly being used to tailor religious experiences by offering personalised spiritual guidance, prayer recommendations, and content suggestions that align with individual preferences and behaviours. This degree of personalisation allows believers to engage with their faith in ways that feel more relevant and accessible, potentially enhancing their spiritual connection. It may be beneficial to explore why AI could be considered irrelevant to intelligence research. A widely recognised argument is that while AI can create intelligent machines, their intelligence differs fundamentally from human intelligence or cognition (Van der Maas, Snoek & Stevenson, 2021:101548). While the wheel is a remarkable

invention, it lacks relevance to biologists since it does not occur in nature as a means of movement. Similarly, many AI innovations, such as cognitive wheels, may have limited applicability; even if AI holds psychological relevance, it can only provide insights into cognitive processes rather than intelligence, which focuses on individual differences in cognitive functioning (Dennett, 2006:15-40).

Nonetheless, the use of AI in this context raises concerns about the possible commodification of religious practices and the risk of valuing convenience over the integrity of community and doctrine. Although AI-driven personalisation can improve individual engagement with religious content, it also poses a challenge to the traditional, communal aspects of faith practices. Therefore, it will be essential to ensure that these technologies reinforce, rather than undermine the core values of religious communities as we navigate the future of AI in spiritual contexts.

The Influence of Online Gospel on Traditional Religious Practices

The rise of the online gospel has greatly affected traditional religious practices by changing the ways communities participate in worship and fellowship. Many congregations have experienced a decrease in physical attendance as individuals increasingly seek spiritual nourishment through digital platforms, resulting in a transformation of communal worship dynamics. Obviously, AI leverages psychological knowledge to conduct thought experiments and develop artifacts that replicate aspects of the mind and behaviour (El Maouch & Jin, 2022:781730; Dennett, 2020:27). However, this approach goes beyond merely understanding the mind; it also seeks to actively influence it. The pursuit of Artificial General Intelligence (AGI) focuses on developing machines that can replicate human-like cognitive abilities, including multifunctional learning, problem-solving, and adaptive reasoning (Kumar, Sharma & Saini, 2020:1119-1122), yet it raises critical ethical questions regarding the societal consequences of developing machines that could rival or surpass human intelligence.

The transition of AI compels some religious leaders to reevaluate the significance of in-person gatherings and the role of digital interactions in nurturing meaningful spiritual connections and preserving doctrinal integrity. As the online gospel continues to transform traditional religious practices, religious leaders must modify their strategies to effectively blend digital and in-person experiences by achieving a balance between fostering community cohesion and embracing technological advancements which will be crucial for the future vitality of the faith-based organisations.

Anticipating Future Trends in the Online Gospel Movement

Religion remains a sensitive topic in today's globalised world, where the internet has become essential for individuals and social groups (Hoffman et al., 2004:37-42). Most major religions are not only discussed online but are also practiced and sustained through digital platforms. As technology advances, the online gospel movement is likely to see an increase in the utilisation of augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR) to create immersive worship experiences that replicate the feeling of being in a physical sanctuary. African digital worshippers have created online communities specific to their churches, featuring information sharing and recognised hierarchies. However, aspects typical of offline worship, like regular interactions, relationship building, and conflict resolution, are less prominent in online settings (Chiluwa, 2013:1-37). Furthermore, AI-driven analytics will definitely provide religious organisations with deeper insights into audience engagement, enabling them to create more customised content that addresses the specific spiritual needs of diverse communities.

According to Helland (2005:8-22), a Yahoo directory for "religion and spiritual beliefs" showed a surge of 234 new Christian websites in just 24 hours in 2002, with more individuals using the Internet for religious purposes than for commercial ones (Larsen, 2004:17-22). Over time, the internet has become "spiritualised," as worshippers utilize common discourses for their religious practices (Campbell, 2005:14-22). The emergence of online communities may also give rise to more collaborative and participatory forms of worship, where individuals can share content and experiences, promoting a sense of belonging, despite physical distances. Ultimately, the future of the online gospel movement will depend on the capacity of religious institutions to innovate, while staying rooted in their foundational beliefs and practices.

Conclusion

In summary, the convergence of religion and AI in the expansion of the online gospel offers considerable opportunities and challenges for modern faith practices. This study contributes to academia by providing a comprehensive analysis of how AI technologies and digital media are reshaping religious experiences, emphasising the

need for ethical frameworks and theological considerations in these developments. By exploring these dynamics, the research offers valuable insights for scholars, religious leaders, and practitioners seeking to navigate the complexities of faith in an increasingly digital world.

Recommendations

I. Develop Ethical Guidelines: Religious institutions ought to work together with theologians, ethicists, and technologists to develop ethical standards for the application of AI in religious practices, ensuring that technology aligns with fundamental spiritual values.

II. Enhance Digital Literacy: Faith communities should prioritise digital literacy programs to equip members with the skills necessary to navigate online platforms and discern authentic religious content from misinformation.

III. Foster Hybrid Worship Models: Religious organisations should create hybrid worship models that seamlessly integrate in-person and online experiences, promoting community engagement while accommodating diverse preferences.

IV. Encourage Collaborative Content Creation: Encourage congregants to participate in the creation of digital religious content, fostering a sense of ownership and community involvement while ensuring the representation of diverse perspectives within the faith.

V. Conduct Ongoing Research: Institutions should invest in ongoing research to monitor the impacts of digital evangelism and AI technologies on religious practices, allowing for informed adaptations and interventions as the landscape continues to evolve.

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