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The Reconstituting Nature Of Cyberspace Technologies On The Basic Church "Doctrine" Principle

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Abstract

In general, technology is essentially linked to the question of religious values and doctrines, which either enables or constrains the mission and identity of the church. Technology has become the destiny and inspiration of the modern age that configures the being of the church and the ways of doing the mission of the church; it has passed from being a mere instrument used by the church to attain specific ends to a way through which the church's doctrinal dimension is perceived, explained and determined. The enucleating argument of the article is that even though cyberspace technologies (Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and all other internet related technologies) give the church a renewed way of doing mission, there are basic church principles that cannot be compromised or surrendered to technological determination since they give the church her unique identity. The article employs the critical theory of technology expounded by Andrew Feenberg, which argues that technology is not a mere means and therefore not neutral; technology has become a reconstituting phenomenon. The reflection assumes more of a cautionary approach to technology as the church gets more engaged with it.

Key Words: Reconstituting, cyberspace technologies, basic church doctrine principle, mission

INTRODUCTION

In the article by Davis Nyakwara and Anthony Ichuloi (2022), it is argued that advancements in cyberspace technologies (Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, collection of blogs, texting, live streaming media, etc) enable the church to go beyond the boundaries of space and time. They offer the church an incredible opportunity to reach out to members all over the world and promote ways through which it does mission (worship, fellowship, pastoral care, education, mission, community outreach, evangelism and communications). But it is equally important to take note that cyberspace technologies have a reconstituting power; they are fundamentally linked to the question of religious metaphysics, especially the doctrine of transcendence such that with it the faithful encounter the challenge of articulating a comprehensive notion of Ultimate transcendence. It has become an indispensable moving force, destiny of the modern world, to the point that the nature of the church is determined and defined by it to the height that our regard to the church has changed considerably (Ichuloi, 2016). Various cyberspace technologies are not simply a means used by the church to realize her activities and mission, but have become a force that deconstructs and reconstructs the reality of the church; they have revolutionized the nature of

the church, such that almost all regard to it is organized by and around those technologies, changing the traditional constructs of the church that depended on face-to-face settings. Today, technology is conceived to be a frame of evidence through which the church is interpreted and as the sole way through the church is illumined; it is taken to provide solutions to almost all of man's problems (Heidegger, 1962). Everything is being determined by technology as a direction, which sets a framework that provides a set of conditions for our understanding of reality (Don, Ihde, 2010). This whole problem of technological transcendence leaves us with an intriguing question: What are man's most fundamental aspirations in technology? But it is important to maintain that even though cyberspace technologies give the church a renewed way of doing mission, there are aspects of the church that cannot be compromised or surrendered to technological determination since they give the church identity. Our religious nature cannot be understood merely from the immanent or physical coordinates of existence, we have to go beyond spatial relations to something more; as humans, we have the capacity to overcome the relative meaningfulness of life found in our mere contingent, subjective everyday experiences.

God as a Transcendental Religious Doctrine

Today, the transcendental nature of technology challenges Christian theology on the transcendental nature of God. Many thinkers (Heidegger, 1977; Rojcewicz, 2006; Glazebrook, 2000; De Beistegui, 2005; Corkery, 2003; Ichuloi, 2016) posit that technology is now becoming the destiny of the modern person, whereby through it everything is seen and interpreted; technology is "erroneously" taken to provide solutions to everything within the world (De Beistegui, 2005). Everything is being determined by technology as a direction, which sets a framework that provides a set of conditions for the understanding of reality (Ihde, 2010). Anthony Ichuloi (2016) postulates that as destiny, technology is similar to the reality of one who has a hammer in that with it everything else looks like a nail to be worked upon. Today, it is common for people to transfigure, image and reconstruct themselves through technology as though they are self-creators and not God. The risk of this technological metaphysics is that God sinks into the level of technological metaphysics in that he is not seen to occupy much space in the minds and doings of many people. Technological metaphysics puts into question the Ultimate transcendence of God through which everything, including technology itself should derive its meaning, reverence and significance.

Another notable fact is that this is not just a problem for God alone, but also a homo-religious problem because humans are withdrawn from their original and ultimate Source (Ichuloi, 2015). Humans become not only the victims or the servants of technology, but also uplifted to the level of reverent disciples to adore technology (Ichuloi, 2015). In this regard, humans are caught up at a point of a serious ontological dilemma between the choice for God and for technological things. Their participation in God as the Ultimate transcendent power that gives meaning to their lives is deeply challenged, and the consequence of such act of reverence to technology is the exile or the loss of God in human search for meaning. This loss of God is about human indecision regarding God (Heidegger. 1977), which leads to the height that the love of God seems to weigh the same value or even less value with the love of technological rationality and scientific objectives, which are the modern equivalent of the deity. Modern science and technology renders man incapable of according any value to God and making an option for Him. In this sense, the scientific and technological spirit conceals, suffocates and even deadens the spirit within Christian and religious thought in the strive for the ultimate cause of human meaning and reverence. At a deeper level, religion is made irrelevant by rationalistic and scientific theories, whereby God and religion, or the abandonment of both do not bother man anymore and cannot but become a mere manifestation of the scientific and technological aggression upon man himself (Ichuloi, 2016). Within the totalizing nature of technology (to the point of replacing our ultimate end), we are therefore left without aspirations beyond the calculative frame of science and technology.

The indecision or the exile of about God in modern man's life, leads yet to another serious problem, the problem that there can be no normative standard; no any other final goal, and no higher end whatsoever (except science and technology) to guide, direct or limit the whole process of technological progress except technology itself. In the case that any normative standard outside of science and technology is to be perceived, then, it is conceived as deterrence to science and technology in their attempt to realize their purposes, a kind of disillusionment to the scientific and technological spirit (Ichuloi, 2015). Under such consideration, the absence of any normative standard or material loading of science and technology comes to be regarded as the highest value to be sought (destiny) and norm of interpreting and relating with reality. Everything seems to be reduced to what is physically experience-able because of technological theoretic and material grounding. As a matter of fact, which seems to be easy to do, is that the technological modern human subject tries to reduce all the transcendent dimensions of her life and existence into the immanent order alone (into calculative goals). Science and technology are conceived as the only value and norm because by their very nature they do not have limits and so cannot impose any limits upon us in terms of their quest and limitless nature, and inducement to maximum consumption of their products.

It should be noted that the transcendental nature of technology tends to conserve and sustain a philosophy that does not transcend the natural, material, corporeal, fallible and changing human world or reality (Downes, 2003). It is restricted to space and time, carrying with it the failure for us to achieve the meaning of life that is to be realized in the contemplation of the Ultimate Being,

consequently dissolving our conception of the One and unique Transcendent God. But replacing God and trusting in the transcendental power of technology is a form of idolatry (Schuurman, 2019). God as a transcendental reality cannot be be relegated to the the determinations of technology. Pope John Paul II in his letter Veritatis Splendor remarks that "the development of science and technology, this splendid testimony of the human capacity for understanding and for perseverance, does not free humanity from the obligation to ask the ultimate religious questions. Without Ultimate transcendence, we lose the pulling and unifying force that integrates us as humans, opening us to the limitless future of our existence that is not to be bound and defined by the logic of science and technology (Ichuloi, 2016). It would be unwise to dismiss or make God a marginal matter in our endeavour of searching for meaning both within the contingent and spiritual aspects of our being.

Paul Downes (Downes, 2003), in his commentary on Heidegger argues that a comprehensive understanding of Ultimate transcendence cannot be resolved by any logical principle drawn from science and technology, except one of existence: the interactive one. Ultimate transcendence is an ontological (existential) foundation for the understanding of human nature, where we achieve authentic human subjectivity and understanding of ourselves; our existence is not found in a mere human ontic aspiration as its form of self-definition. Without Ultimate transcendence, we lose the pulling and unifying force that integrates us as humans, opening us to the limitless future of our existence that is not to be bound and defined by the logic of science and technology. Anthony Ichuloi (2016) postulates that to undermine the Ultimate Transcendent leads the modern subject into two possibilities: either to be totally doomed in life or to believe so much in herself, in her science and technology and feel that she is living a 'superhuman' level of being. This is the illusion of both science and technology; it is an illusion in the sense that if there are basic human facts that are beyond the domain of science and technology, then, by removing them from human meaning is itself a form of self-degradation to a 'sub-human' level giving more ground to our claim of technology as instrument of self-dissipation. Life without God is life that is material, corporeal, natural, fallible, limited, temporal and above all purely human (Stuhr, 2003); a life doomed to absurdity. The urge for God expressed in our everyday sense of dissatisfaction is basically because the value of human existence cannot be found only in material coordinates of life presented by technological rationality (Ichuloi, 2016) .

Physical Space for Community Religious and Church Experience

It is indubitable that with cyberspace technologies physical space is no longer a necessary dimension of the church and religious operations since activities carried in the physical church can now be done through cyberspace technologies (Nyakwara & Ichuloi, 2022). The use of digital connections and spaces creates transnational faith communities and digital liturgical spaces across borders that redefine the 'presence' and 'none present' of congregants in ways that enhance their participation in church and the nourishment of their faith (Mpofu, 2021). However, physical space is an important horizon that defines the reality and operations of the church and doing away with it is a serious attempt to minimize the church's mission. First, it implies the symbolic representation and presentation of the church community, the creation of cyberspace Christians that are not measured by the physical determinations of religious experience. Inter-community church and faith activities are reduced to the provisions of email feedback, chat rooms where the level of discussions is often less than religiously inspiring, and the electronic cognition of letters with a base of creating information sharing and communication with web people that are unknown. This reconstitutes basic and important aspects of church activities like verbal exchanges of religious experiences and the sense of a religious gathering. It restructures the internal organization and functioning of the traditional model of the church, thus reconstituting the understanding of mission-religious practices with regard to presence, space and geographical or physical barriers in the effective implementation of 'the mission of God's people' (Wright, 2010). In profound ways it carries with it the challenge of virtual rituality that may or may not enhance religious worship for the formidable religious experience, entailing real-time and face-to-face participation of those involved. Sometimes this becomes difficult, especially when it comes to authentic presentation of visual, aural, and symbolic dimensions of religion that are capable of creating a serious experience of God in the virtual space.

Furthermore, the absence of physical operations of the church due to the use of cyberspace

technologies can contribute to a decline in Church attendance prompted by various factors like poor network connectivity, high cost of internet related technologies, the conservative and luddite position of church membership, and so on. There is also the tendency for some Christian faithful, especially the young too lazy about by not going to Church under the pretext that they can access the church service or prayers on mobile internet applications (Fitzgerald, 2014). The apparent media-mania has the tendency to create false sense of being comfortable with the "virtual church" than the real face-to-face ecclesial assembly of the faithful. Also, since social media communication is often a private affair, digital ecclesiology brought by cyberspace technologies posits tremendous cautionary challenges to the church, especially when it comes to individualism and exclusivism in the church, whereby those with the monopoly of computer knowledge and resources may be more active in the cyberspace church context than those who lack that advantage. The false sense of community created by ICTs through information sharing and communication with people that we may not know or have seen, tends to create a "church" on cyberspace that is entrenched in radical individualism that does not see any meaning and sense in face-to-face church. We are aware that social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Yahoo, Gmail, WhatsApp, Snapchat just to mention a few are privately owned and privately-oriented, which can influence the type of Christianity and ways of being church that is transmitted through them.

Attached to this is church hierarchical controls that seek to determine leaders and influencers on free online communities (Williams, 2020). New or different non-church authority figures that own the technology companies and power-knowledge tend to control the church in teaching and directing its affairs. When there is open access for all including non church participants in online church membership it leads to serious confusions in denominational distinctiveness and teachings. Anyone can claim to have a church with his own teachings that may even contradict the position of traditional churches. In economically poor and rural areas there are constant interruptions of online connectivity thus affecting the activities of pastors and congregants since they cannot meet the cost of airtime and access to data. In some areas internet speed is very low and internet signals could disappear for days and even weeks. The 3G and 4G smart phones that sustain internet communication is not easily available for all the faithful. In essence, this excludes many church members since they are compelled to remain offline. There is the challenge of the cost of installing a full fledged Church ICT infrastructure for effective development of internet technologies include content such as TV station or TV production, computers, central storage or repository, database server, SMS server, web portal, email server, Internet bandwidth, local area network (within church buildings), wireless network infrastructure, optical fiber cabling, call centre or help desk, church internet domain, ICT resource centre, CD/DVD production studio, and printing press or publishing house. With financial cost constraints, the church finds it difficult to realize programmes for congregants to enhance their use of the internet related technologies as outreach medium to many who need to hear and receive services from the Church. The risk of this is that cyber-religion may turn out to be for the elite (intellectual endeavor) and the rich than all inclusive faith community.

Since all is mediated by specific technologies, the important physical features of church that enhance the sense of being church are no longer grasped from within the perspective of direct human religious experience. The use of cyberspace technologies creates a situation of Church symbolic representations without concrete human interactions that are crucial in defining the Church (Nilles, 2012). As argued by Ichuloi (2015) the modern subject lives with only the illusion of technology, which gives rise to the belief in her mind that through technology she "conquers" everything. But such illusion is paradoxical in that technology enables our understanding of the church but it also constraints many aspects of the church.

Sacramental Ministry of the Church

It has been argued that advancements in technology, particularly information and communications technologies (ICTs) have enabled the church to conquer the missionaries boundaries of space and time. This is because church ministry is always and everywhere adaptive to new creative patterns of doing mission facilitated by online services (Campbell & Dyer, 2022) that reach to congregants with disabilities, the sick, and so on to participate in the life of the church and enhance their spirituality and sense of being church. Because of the instant nature of cyberspace technologies, congregants are able to connect, bond and form communities and

associations all over the world (Kamp, 2016). However, this is not without its its challenges to sacramental life and ministry of the church as it raises fundamental questions like: Can sacraments be properly revealed and administered in the digital space? Can sacraments be reinvented to fit the uprising digital ecclesiology? Can church ministers bless the Lord's Table online? These questions point to the fact that it is not just about any church actions in the digital space, rather the role of those actions in the whole sacramental life of the believers (Silva, 2018). For instance, it is not possible to participate in the holy communion/last supper, administer baptism, marriage and visit to the sick online (Okyere, 2018). It is extremely impossible to perform online religious rituals related to those sacraments and activities of the church. To pretend to substitute physical rituals in the celebration of sacraments in the church is tantamount to doing away with fundamental principles that define sacraments in church and the ritualistic life of faith.

Naturally, one would argue that the meaning of sacraments depends on the act of faith of those who receive them, but faith also demands physical witness of the believing Christian or believing community. Faith is not imaginary or desired, but real faith lived within the physicality of the sacraments like the Eucharist and the community that celebrates it. Of course one may argue that the Eucharist/last supper can be celebrated by the presiding minister online and the participating congregation receive it by desire with the 'real presence' of God taking new forms of online presence and language (Burridge, 2022). There are those who contest that real presence cannot be confined to the elements of bread and wine (De Gruchy, 2013). But the debate on the 'real presence' of Christ in the sacrament of bread and wine should also include the question of whether the minister should be physically present or that his 'presence' can be replaced through audio-visual equipment.

The church must re-prioritize its nature as presenters of God's presence in the world, and to do so she must cultivate habits and liturgies that create the space and circuits for that presence to be felt and known underlining the fact that whichever form the celebration takes should not be taken to substitute the physical and ritual aspects of the celebrating community that demands gathering with an authorised priest/president around 'the Lord's table'

(Burridge, 2022). Even with the use of cyberspace technologies, churches should find ways to promote physical gatherings, the celebration of the sacraments together as a believing community in neighborhoods, bodily movement in worship, shaking hands and hugging each other. They should do anything to re-sensitize people to the fleshly reality of the church in the world. Cyberspace and technologies decontextualizes the objects, especially rituals of religious experience. Church members tend to live according to an atomic conception of themselves independent from the physical contexts, with alienating results from each other as members of the physical church.

Physical human communication whether interpersonal and group is crucial in defining the sacramental life of the church. Divorcing physical presence in the celebration of the sacraments is equivalent to the fact that congregants too are divorced from their internal physical relationships, where all the physical elements of the sacraments are removed and consequently the ways of being church. Of course, it is true that whenever a dominant liturgical paradigm no longer serves as an effective framework for the interpretation of the concerns of a people's existential contexts, then a paradigm shift in its hermeneutics becomes inevitable, necessitating a re-visitation of its articulation calls for a constant academic endeavor (Mbamalu, 2015). But any application of online technologies in the celebration of the sacraments should consider aesthetic and ritual aspects that make for a robust engagement of participants using the medium. Christians should be people of presence, related to God and to one another through the unifying power of the Holy Spirit. The activities of the liquid cyber church are based on the characterization of "liquid" nature of modernity manifested in cyberspace technologies. The "liquid Church" presented in cyberspace technologies tend to have a sense of fragmentation, volatility, fleeting, and ephemeral. It is the worldview that is based on an understanding that a spirituality that does not practically transform the lives of people is not worth much.

Conclusion

The paper has argued that technology has become an indispensable dimension of being church, and it is becoming impossible today to think of any Christian community independent of being-with-technology. But even though cyberspace technologies have significant contribution to the

church's life, we cannot close our eyes from the fact that it challenges the basic church "doctrine" principle that gives it identity and consistency. The very enabling cyberspace technologies used by the church to enhance her mission have reconstituting downsides on the same church; cyberspace technologies reconstitutes the basic principles and foundations of the church like church doctrine on transcendence, physical space for community religious and church experience, and a meaningful celebration of the sacraments.

The article has endeavored to argue that church doctrine ultimate transcendence is a necessary aspect of church theology that cannot be substituted with immanent transcendence. Immanent transcendence proposed by technological claims about human nature are minimalistic in their view of man with practically no room for Ultimate transcendence since it is determined by material spheres of life; it also tends to rule out of God as the ground for self-definition. It has been reiterated that man's search for meaning merely in the technological immanent transcendence undermines his vision for Ultimate transcendence. To be church and Christian is fundamentally a kind of self-closure to God as the ultimate end. Regarding cyberspace technologies as the ultimate reality of the church and members is itself the instrument of self-satisfaction in the ministry of the church, leading to self-dissipation, where church members remain contented only with the offers of technology, while much about themselves, particularly the role of God in their lives remains hidden.

It has also been posited that the interface between the digital and religious spaces and practices that challenge physical presence in the life of the church and give new meanings to it should not be taken as a normative standard that both modify traditional practices and create new meanings that arise from this technological creative engagement.

The article also underscored that sacramental life of the church is an important aspect that cannot be merely substituted by technological symbolic representations. There are fundamental ways of celebrating sacramental life of the church like rituals and the gathering community in worship, which should not in a rush be substituted by technological symbols.

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