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Re-Imagining Christian Formation: The Influence of AI on Spiritual Growth

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Abstract

It's no news that the expeditious development of artificial intelligence (AI) in modern times has transformed several aspects of human life, including religion and spirituality. This paper, through qualitative method, explores the impact of AI on Christian formation, and its role in reshaping spiritual development and practices with regards to Christian faith. Christian formation, being traditionally rooted in community, personal devotion, and mentorship, now faces new challenges and opportunities resulting from the advancing digital age. AI technologies, such as personalized Bible study tools, prayer applications, and the virtual fellowship platforms, offer contemporary ways to foster spiritual growth. However, these advancements also propel ethical concerns, including the risk of over-reliance on technology, the potential for superficial spirituality, and the misalignment of AI generated content with Christian values. This paper also examines the positive and negative impacts of AI on Christian formation, proposing a balanced approach that integrates AI with traditional spiritual practices. The paper will engage theoretical frameworks on Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and Social Learning Theory, for in-depth discussion. By addressing these issues, the study aims to guide Christian communities in thoughtfully embracing AI while preserving the authenticity and depth of spiritual growth.

Keywords: Christian formation, spiritual growth, spiritual development, and artificial intelligence

Introduction

The 21st century could be described as being the era of a phenomenal rapid and ongoing technology advancement, permeating into every sphere of human life and human living, this including religious affiliations, and spiritual growth and development. The very prominent of the concurrent technology advances, is the artificial intelligence (AI), which is rapidly gaining grounds within the Nigerian societies. Its awareness among humans has prompt its quick integration into the various professional fields, ranging from education to healthcare. Traditionally, Christian growth is characterized by the processes of shaping lives, through Christian rites such as scripture study, prayers, worship, and community activities (Smith, 2009). From a general view, Christian growth is being measured by individual interactions within the church, through communal worship, mentoring, and theological education (Foster, 2000).

However, the rise of AI reflects the possibility of reshaping these traditional methods, creating new opportunities for spiritual growth and advancement beyond societal and cultural boundaries (Bartholomew, 2017). Its prominent contribution to Christian formation is

embedded in its ability to personalize the spiritual experience through platforms such as the You Version, which is characterized with customized Bible reading plans, and related online software applications that enhance personalized prayers or meditative practices, (Grahams & Wallis, 2018). The use of AI designed devotional practices or scripture readings, individuals are enhanced with greater ability to engage with their faith on a deeper, and more private level. This thereby fosters engagement and continuity in spiritual practices, aligning with the general AI trend. The paper, *Reimagining Christian Formation: The Influence of AI on Spiritual Growth* aims to explore the contributions of AI to human spiritual growth, building, and sustaining a good Christian image in the present era, while it addresses the challenges as well.

Defining the Concepts

Christian Formation and Growth

The term "Christian formation" is described as the intentional process by which individuals and communities are shaped in faith and becoming more Christ-like. It involves the development of a person's spiritual, intellectual, moral, and social life in accordance with the teachings of Christianity. Christian formation goes beyond the acquiring knowledge, it embraces the nurturing of a transformative relationship with God, particularly through prayers, bible study, worship, community activities, and services. Christian formation is geared towards spiritual maturity and a deeper and holistic integration of individual's faith in life, (Smith, 2009). In Christian traditions, formation depicts a lifelong journey of believers, with continual or ongoing improve in faith and in righteous living. Christian formation is also attributed to the acts of discipleship, (Luke 9:23). On the other hand, Christian growth is the reflection of the inward transformation of the heart alongside the outward expression of faith. It embraces an ongoing evolution of maturity in faith, through a non-static phrasal process.

These phrasal process comprises of Moral and ethical transformation, which reflect in the continuous growth of a Christian (Colossians 3:12-14), Intellectual growth, indicating the deeper desire for knowledge about God and a higher zeal towards living a righteous life (2 Timothy 3:16-17), and Rational growth, a reflection of a Christian's ability to encourage and motivate another fellow Christian, (Hebrews 10:24-25). Holistically, Christian formation and growth on a broader level, embrace the following: spiritual practices, Discipleship, transformation of characters, intellectual development, community and service, and the role of the Holy Spirit (Packer, 2008).

Spiritual Growth

Spiritual growth is regarded as the concurrent advancement in individual's relationship with God, it depicts a process of spiritual phrasal growth until maturity with peculiarity with faith, righteousness, and purpose. It describes a transformation of both the inward beliefs and outward expressions. Spiritual growth is initiated by the heightening of Holy Spirit activities in individuals or community. The spiritual growth of an individual is characterized with a transformation of character, a deeper relationship with God, discipleship and obedience, practical faith, and continuity (Smith, 2009). Willard (2006), described spiritual growth as the transformation of the holistic individual into Christ's like. Willard, stressed on the importance of prayer, meditation, and fasting during the course of such transformation asserting that they

are acts of spiritual discipline. Smith (2009), explained it as an invitation into the presence of God, and it is facilitated by spiritual disciplines.

Smith extended the lists of spiritual discipline to include; solitude, simplicity, and submission. Ortherg (2009), views spiritual growth as the process of becoming more like Jesus. He emphasized the fact that spiritual growth transcends personal transformation, but aligns with the life and mission of God. Orthega also asserted that spiritual growth is indicated in the deepening of inner change, outward acts of service, alongside interaction with others.

Artificial Intelligence (AI)

AI as commonly used, is attributed to the field of computer science aimed to create machines or systems capable of performing tasks that typically require human intelligence. These tasks include problem-solving, learning, reasoning, understanding natural language, and perception. It is geared towards the stimulation of human cognitive processes, with the goal of developing systems that can autonomously perform complex tasks, make decisions, as well as adapt to new situations, replicating the intellectual capabilities of humans. AI embodies, the use of machine learning for language processing, robotics, indicating the use of human tasks performing machines called robots, cognitive computing, which involves replicating human cognition, and autonomous systems, which can independently perform human tasks without human interferences (Russell & Norvig, 2010).

Theoretical Frameworks

This study engages a dual framework, using the Social Learning Theory and the Technology Acceptance Model. Social Learning Theory (SLT), proposed by Albert Bandura, focuses on learning through imitation, observation, and modeling within a social context. This theory posits that learning transcends beyond cognitive process, and involves human interactions. As such, this can significantly reshape Christian formation, through which communal interaction, mentorship, and personal discipleship, thereby fostering spiritual growth.

In this context, artificial intelligence introduces new dimensions, it challenges and expands the pace of spiritual growth. In Christian formation, learning often takes the form of observation and imitation of Christ and other faithful figures such as; pastors, mentors, and saints. This principle is central to Social Learning Theory, where individuals acquire new behaviours by watching others. Bandura (1977) in Poole, (2018), notes that Behaviour modeled by others, whether machine, or human can be internalized and replicated. So virtual platforms powered by AI may provide curated spiritual content, sermons, and bible studies, consequently fostering learning through observation of digital representations of Christian principles. According to Poole (2018), technology advances offer opportunities for Christian formation to extend beyond physical space of the church, and allowing believers to engage in more flexible and personalized forms of spiritual development. Social Learning Theory places emphasizes keenly on the importance of social interaction for learning. Hence, AI through platforms like the bible study apps, virtual prayer networks, and series of online Christian communities and groups, can create new social learning spaces where individuals engage in conversations, discussions, and communal experiences. Turkle (2015), asserts that AI like

other digital technologies, have the ability to connect individuals in ways that traditional community structures may be unable to, thereby fostering a sense of belonging and shared learning, though there are controversies and critiques on this.

Also, AI could enhance Christian formation through its facilitating of personalized spiritual experiences, by presenting itself as a consistent and accessible mentor (Deterding, 2016). However, there are inadequacies reflected in social learning theory as engaged in Christian formation and spiritual growth, these inadequacies include; its inability to provide revelation and discernment of the Holy Spirit, which Guthrie (2002), regarded as central to Christian formation, its inability to constantly stimulate genuine spiritual growth (Macintyre, 2007), and its inability to replace or substitute for human interaction, especially face-to-face conversations as indicated in Carr (2014). In simple words, Christian formation through Social Learning Theory highlights the potentials and limitations of AI in facilitating spiritual growth. The fact that AI can offer personalized, accessible spiritual learning, model behaviours, and foster community, does not deny that it is attached to inadequacies, particularly its incompetence to match up with human powered abilities, and its genuine spirituality. Therefore there is a need to take precautions while integrating AI into our spiritual engagements.

The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM)

This model was developed by Fred Davis in the year 1989, as a framework to explain how users acknowledge, recognize, and accept and engage in a technology. The model suggests that perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness are two primary factors influencing technology adoption. In the context of reimagining Christian formation and the influence of AI on spiritual growth, TAM offers valuable insights into how believers might engage with AI-driven tools and platforms designed for spiritual development. In the context of Christian formation, perceived usefulness describes the extent to which a person believes that using a particular technology will enhance their performance or fulfill their needs, implying that Christian formation and spiritual growth is possible when AI-driven tools and apps are perceived useful and adopted by individuals (Venkatesh et al, 2003). More so, the designing of such apps, such that it is easy and accessible, prompts its adoption by individuals, similarly, its endorsement by trusted leaders or mentors motivates individuals to be more comfortable with these apps (Morris & Venkatesh, 2000). It is also affirmed, that attitudes toward technology significantly affect its acceptance and use, therefore for Christian formation and spiritual growth, a positive attitude towards the use of AI, is required for a purposeful integration into believer's spiritual journeys.

The Impacts of Artificial Intelligence on Christian Formation and Spiritual Growth

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is increasingly shaping the way people interact with various aspects of life, including spirituality and Christian formation. AI has both positive and negative influences on how individuals grow spiritually and engage in Christian practices. The positive and negative effects of AI on spiritual growth and Christian formation are:

The Positive Impacts

- i. **Increased Access to Resources:** - These constitutes of the Bible study tools. AI-powered apps like You Version, Bible Gateway, and Logos offer personalized reading plans, searchable Scripture references, commentaries, and cross-references, which facilitate deeper understanding and study of the Bible. These tools make it easier for individuals to engage with scripture daily and dive into deeper theological study. Challies (2011), acknowledges that technology, including AI, has made resources more accessible and beneficial for personal growth, helping with their faith more effectively.
- ii. **Personalized Spiritual Formation:** - AI can analyze an individual's spiritual journey and recommend personalized devotional plans, prayer guides, sermons, and worship music. This can help individual's tailor their spiritual practices to their current needs, making the process of Christian formation more engaging and suited to their personal growth. AI-powered platforms can also assist in facilitating spiritual mentorship by providing personalized guidance and tracking spiritual progress. For instance, AI tools could help identify a person's struggles and recommend resources or questions for reflection, fostering personal development. Smith (2009), argues that spiritual formation is about cultivating the right desires and habits. AI can support this by encouraging practices that nurture these desires, such as daily devotionals or reflection questions.
- iii. **Accessibility and Global Reach:** - AI facilitates virtual church services, prayer meetings, and Bible studies, which help Christians who are geographically isolated or unable to attend in person. AI can optimize these experiences by ensuring that the delivery of content is effective and engaging across different platforms. AI can assist those with disabilities, such as visual or hearing impairments, by providing audio Bible readings, closed captioning, and other accessibility features to make Christian formation and spiritual growth more inclusive. Wright (2011), acknowledges the increasing role of technology in broadening access to the gospel and church activities. AI allows the church to reach more people globally, facilitating Christian growth for those who would otherwise not have access.
- iv. **AI as a Tool for Evangelism and Outreach:** - AI can be used by churches to analyze social media trends, track search behaviours, and identify areas of spiritual interest. This data helps tailor outreach and evangelism strategies to specific communities or individuals. AI's ability to analyze data can make outreach efforts more efficient and effective in reaching non-believers. According to Stark (1996), a well strategized and effective communication is essential for church growth. AI tools can enhance the ability to spread the gospel message by optimizing outreach.

The Negative Impacts

- i. **Depersonalization of Spiritual Practice:** - Spiritual growth in Christianity often involves deep, relational experiences, either through prayer, fellowship, or mentorship. While AI can provide resources and content, it cannot replace the personal, relational, aspects of Christian life. Relying too heavily on AI for spiritual growth can reduce face-to-face interaction, which is central to Christian discipleship. Turkle (2011), argues that over-reliance on technology for human interaction leads to a sense of isolation. In the context of spirituality, AI cannot provide the relational depth needed for true and genuine Christian formation.

- ii. **Risk of Theological Inaccuracy:** - AI-generated content, such as sermons, devotionals, or theological insights, may lack the depth and theological accuracy provided by experienced pastors and scholars. Without human oversight, AI could propagate misinterpretations of scripture or the faith, leading to potentially harmful or unbiblical teachings. In this context, McGrath (2011), stresses that relying on technological learning without guidance of trained theologians and church leaders, holds high risks. More so, AI cannot understand the nuances of Christian doctrine in the way a trained theologian can.
- iii. **Over-reliance on Technology:** - Over-relying on AI tools could result in a diminished practice of personal spiritual disciplines like prayer, fasting, and scripture meditation. AI tools may encourage quick, surface-level engagement with spiritual content, which could lead to more shallow, less transformative Christian walk. Boyd (2005), cautions against the overuse of technological means to achieve spiritual ends, emphasizing the need for authentic, incarnational discipleship that cannot be fully mediated by AI.
- iv. **AI and Ethical Concerns in Decision-Making:** - While AI can offer practical advice and personalized content, it lacks moral judgment. AI systems are used to assist in decision-making or provide ethical advice, they may promote answers based on data patterns rather than deep spiritual wisdom. This undermines the Christian understanding of decision-making that involves seeking God's will through prayer, scripture, and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Smith (2014), indicates that technology shapes desires and practices, hence, arguing that relying on technology for moral and spiritual guidance can be a dangerous path as it removes the relational and spirit-led discernment process.
- v. **Potential for Decreased Community Engagement:** - As AI fosters community, it also enhances isolation as individuals may opt for personal, solitary spiritual practices instead of engaging in face-to-face fellowship with others. Community engagement is central to Christian formation, as it fosters accountability, support, and the sharing of spiritual gifts. Citing Bonhoeffer (1939) in (Poole, 2018) individuals build faster and effectively in community than in isolation, he also insists that genuine spiritual formation occurs within the context of relationships, instead of some digital platforms.

Reimagining Christian Life in Contemporary Era.

Building a Christian image in the contemporary era involves navigating various cultural, social, and theological challenges while staying true to core Christian values. The task requires engaging with the complexities of modern life, including technology, social justice, environmental concerns, and ethical dilemmas. There have been several authors studies on the reimagining Christian life especially in this era, Tim Keller's work have been instrumental in presenting Christianity as a rational, intellectually rigorous faith while engaging deeply with culture. In his work, Keller (2009), emphasizes the relevance of Christianity in postmodern world and provide answers to common objections to the faith. Keller is known for promoting a vision of faith that is both compassionate and thoughtful, highlighting Christianity's deep intellectual and social contributions. A theologian, of the New Testament, Wright, from his exploration of the historical and theological context of the bible, and his writings on Jesus' resurrection and the Kingdom of God, as well as his critiques of modern biblical scholarship, have helped Christians understand their faith in a fresh, historically grounded way.

In a similar way, Lewis presented Christianity as an intellectually coherent worldview while speaking to the heart through storytelling. On the other hand, Stott, an evangelical leader and theologian made emphasis on the centrality of the cross and the need for personal transformation has influenced a generation of Christians worldwide. Meanwhile, Willard's focus was on spiritual formation and the deeper, transformative aspects of discipleship. He insisted that Christianity is not just about believing the right things but living a life that reflects the kingdom of God. His works have helped people move beyond superficial notions of faith and into a deeper, more authentic practice of Christianity. Another scholar, Harrison, emphasized on the importance of spiritual practices and daily rhythms as a means of experiencing God's presence. Her work is particularly relevant in the contemporary era, where many people are seeking ways to integrate their faith into the ordinary, mundane moments of life. It is emphasized that Christian spirituality can be deeply integrated into the modern world through liturgy and prayer.

Meanwhile, there are strategies for building and rebuilding Christian image particularly at this era, and these include:

- i. Embracing Authenticity:** - Modern audiences are often skeptical of hypocrisy. Christian authors, emphasized the importance of living out the gospel genuinely, even in the midst of personal struggles.
- ii. Focus on Grace and Love:** - Christianity's message of grace, forgiveness, and unconditional love is a powerful image that resonates with people today. Authors emphasized the transformative power of grace, hence indicating that grace in itself is a tool for both physical and spiritual transformation.
- iii. Engage with Culture:** - Understanding and interacting with contemporary culture is vital for building a relevant Christian image.
- iv. Encourage Intellectual Engagement:-**
- v. Emphasize the Human Experience:** - The human dimension of Christianity, especially its capacity to address the deep questions of life, suffering, and purpose remains central to building a compelling image of the faith. Building a Christian image today involves a balance of theological depth, compassion, intellectual engagement, and cultural relevance. By continuing to engage with the changing world and offering thoughtful, authentic depictions of the faith, these authors and others are helping shape a positive and compelling image of Christianity in modern era.

Challenges Militating Against Reimagining Christian Life in Contemporary Era.

Reimagining Christian life in the contemporary era, involves navigating the complexities of a rapid changing world while remaining anchored in the timeless truths of the gospel. The church and individual Christians are confronted with new challenges, including advances in technology, shifting cultural norms, and growing secularism, which affect how faith is practiced and lived out in everyday life. Reimagining Christian life in this context requires creative engagement with modern realities while upholding core Christian teachings, community, and spiritual practices.

Reimagining Christian life in the contemporary era faces several significant challenges. These challenges arise from social, cultural, theological, and technological shifts that impact how Christianity is lived and understood today. Some of these challenges include:

- i. Secularization and Declining Religious Authority:** - Many societies, especially in the West, are becoming increasingly secular, which weakens traditional religious authority and reduces the influence of Christianity in public and private life. Taylor (2007), discusses how modernity has transformed belief systems, making faith one option among many rather than a default worldview. It is also acknowledged that secularization has a strong influence on how religion is practiced today.
- ii. Pluralism and Religious Diversity:** - The presence of multiple religions and worldviews challenges Christian exclusivism and demands new approaches to interfaith dialogue and coexistence. Eck (2001), highlights how pluralism requires rethinking religious identity and practice in multicultural contexts.
- iii. Individualism and Consumer Culture:** - Contemporary culture's emphasis on personal choice, autonomy, and consumerism often conflicts with Christian communal and sacrificial values. Twenge (2006), discusses how cultural shifts toward self-focus affect spiritual commitment.
- iv. Technological Disruption and Digital Culture:** - The rise of digital media reshapes how people encounter faith, community, and authority, creating both opportunities and fragmentation. Smith (2014), points to how cultural liturgies, including digital ones, shape Christian imagination and life. Turkle on the other hand, warns about how technology affects human relationships and by extension, spiritual formation.
- v. Theological Challenges and Doctrinal Stagnation:** - Some argued that traditional Christian doctrines may struggle to address contemporary ethical and existential questions, prompting debates about reform and reinterpretation.
- vi. Social Justice and Ethical Complexity:** - Contemporary concerns about justice, equality, gender, and sexuality has aroused controversies for Christian ethics and community life, as Pui-lan (2005), challenges traditional Christian frameworks and calls for inclusive reinterpretations.

Creating a Balance between Innovation and Spirituality

Creating a balance between innovation and Christian traditions in the contemporary era is a crucial challenge, especially as new technologies and cultural shifts rapidly influence the way Christians engage with their faith. To maintain a harmonious relationship between the two, it is essential to embrace innovation without losing sight of the core values and practices that have defined Christian life for centuries. Hence, the following are ways to achieve the needed balance between innovation and spirituality.

- i.** Innovation should be seen as a tool that enhances, rather than replaces, Christian tradition. These advanced technologies, such as the digital media are designed to support traditional Christian practices, this support should not in any way be compromised. Although the context may change, the message and the practices of the church remain the same (Wright, 2011). For example, churches use the digital media to connect with distant members, during Bible studies, worship services or fellowships.

- ii. Any innovation introduced within the church or Christian practice should be grounded in biblical and theological principles. That is technologies are to enhance Christian doctrines, and not to create or alter them, as Stott (2001), asserted, the gospel can be communicated through various modern means, yet it must preserve its faithfulness to biblical messages. For example, are the AI-driven Bible apps, it is essential that the content remains doctrinally sound and faithful to scripture.
- iii. Christian traditions, particularly liturgical practices, should be maintained but made flexible to adapt to contemporary contexts in ways that align with today's audience without losing their essence. Smith (2009), argues that Christian liturgy (the acts of worship) shapes desire and identity, and that traditional forms of worship, particularly through hymns, rituals, or scripture readings should be preserved, though they can be expressed in culturally relevant ways. For example, is the case in which the worship music include contemporary styles, the traditional acts of prayer, confession, and communion can still be honored, thus keeping the focus on core practices while innovating in musical or artistic expressions.
- iv. Churches and Christian leaders should practice discernment in how they approach modern and new technology innovations, by ensuring that the new tools or methods align with Christian values. Not all innovations are beneficial, as such, discernment helps to avoid tools or trends that may lead believers away from core Christian principles. Willard, emphasizes the importance of the wisdom and discernment especially when navigating cultural trends and technology innovations. Christian growth occurs when individuals wisely integrate the teachings of Jesus into their lives without losing their connection to the spiritual practices that nurture faith. For instance, when adopting AI tools or digital platforms, church leaders should ensure that these innovations foster genuine Christian growth, and not for spiritual fantasies. Hence the need for theological experts to evaluate the ethical implications of using new technologies in ministry.
- v. A healthy balance between innovation and tradition can be maintained by encouraging dialogue and collaboration between generations. Older generations, who may have deep connections to traditional practices, can offer valuable insights, while younger generations can introduce new technological approaches. , it is affirmed that a Christian community should include members of all ages, with each generation contributing to the spiritual life of the church. This illustration applies to situations in which churches create spaces for younger and older members to engage in conversation about how traditional practices can be expressed in contemporary ways. This intergenerational dialogue ensures that innovation doesn't outpace tradition.
- vi. The innovation in the church should be prayerfully discerned, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Christian traditions place great emphasis on divine guidance, and any innovation should be tested as such. According to Peterson (2011), pastors are to guide their congregations through the complexities of modern life with discernment and reliance on the Holy Spirit. Innovation should be tested against the scriptures and the spirit's leading. This is such that church leaders can incorporate prayerful reflection into the decision-making process when considering new methods of worship, community engagement, or technology use, ensuring that innovations align with God's will and the church's mission.
- vii. The core focus of any innovation should be on fostering Christian formation and discipleship. Innovation should serve the goal of making Disciples of Christ, and new methods should align with the goal of helping believers grow in their relationship with

God and with others. In a book authored by Horton (2013), innovation should be a support for discipleship and not a mere cultural relevance.

Conclusion

AI holds both future prospects and challenges for Christian formation and spiritual growth. On one hand, AI can help personalize spiritual practices, expand access to resources, and enhance community engagement, on the other hand, bound to it, are significant risks particularly the depersonalization of faith, ethical misguidance, and the undermining of relational aspects of Christian practice. However, Turkle and Smith offer cautionary perspectives on the roles of technology in spiritual life, while scholars like Keller, (2009) and Wright (2011) highlight the potential benefits of integrating digital tools into Christian growth.

AI can be a valuable resource when used responsibly and thoughtfully but should never replace the relational and incarnational aspects of the Christian faith, which are essential for true spiritual formation. In contemporary times, there should be equality in the ratio of technology innovation to Christian traditions and this can be attained through ensuring that innovations support, instead of undermining traditional Christian practices. Also by embracing technology advancements and cultural shifts with discernment, measuring innovations based on biblical and theological standard. The church should maintain its traditions, while engaging effectively with modernity, as the goal should not be geared towards abandoning traditions but to contextualize and use innovation to further the mission of the church, which is primarily the making of disciples of all nations, while retaining the timeless truths.

Recommendations

- 1 AI should be seen as a helpful tool to complement traditional Christian practices, it should not be a replacement.
2. Churches and Christian organizations should implement safeguards policies or measures to ensure that AI -generated contents are aligned with biblical injunctions.
3. Christians should be maintain a safe balance between digital engagements and the traditional face-to-face spiritual practices.
4. Churches and church leaders should ensure dialogue and mentorship between generations regarding the use of AI for spiritual growth and upliftment.
5. Churches and church leaders should maintain a consistent monitoring of the impacts of AI on individuals and community.

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