

SOCIAL MEDIA AND SPIRITUALITY: THE CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Christianity at one end is a religion and at the same time it is a life-long process, which evolves round organized beliefs, ritual practices and traditions. On the other end, spirituality is concerned with having a sense of greater purpose, beyond human traditions. It is more of a connection to the divine or celestial realm. Spirituality is an individualistic journey. It could be regarded a laissez faire business. In simple words, one could be spiritual but not religious. However, studies have shown that humans do experience spiritual shifts. These are as result of causal factor through the process of accommodation, socialization and interactions. One of the major means of these processes is the social media. The social media is an eye opener to the global world, a window to facilitate global exposure and blend. As a result of the exposure, the social media has immensely affected our spirituality. The effects of social media has been of positive and negative, hence, the paper examines the effects of social media on spirituality from the Christian perspective. The paper discussed the positive and negative effects of social media on spirituality. It included the differences between religion and spirituality and some recommendations were made.

Keywords: Spirituality, Christian Spirituality and Social media.

Introduction

In the recent decades, as observed, many individuals have turned to the use of social media, rather than the physical attendance or appearance in the church, particularly in this era of increased technology and technical skills. However, this attitude could be attributed to the flamboyant exposure and use of the social media by individuals particularly Christians. Many Christians find it no longer a necessity to appear in church gatherings, as the social media creates avenues which allow individual Christians to seek and find personalized interpretation to suit and justify their spiritual desires and needs. Like the church, the media, (especially social media) is also an agent of socialization, through which Christians get to extend their interactive relationship beyond the walls or building called the church, (Philip 2016).

However, the social media been relatively new has become an addict on individuals particularly the Christians. It evolves in the day to day activities of the individuals, particularly their spirituality. On the other end, spirituality involves the acknowledgement and recognition of a higher power and force beyond, it actually deals with certain spontaneous events that exceeds human reasoning and attributed to the celestial terrains, (Emmons 2006).

The social media effects on the spirituality of the individuals, is both to advantage and disadvantage. Hence, the study discussed these effects on spirituality particularly of the Christians.

Spirituality

Spirituality is a more complicated term than it seems. Studies by (Srividya 2012) shows that spirituality is divided into Theistic and non-theistic definitions, the theistic is concerned with the Abrahamic and Dharmic forms of spirituality, while the non-theistic deals with belongingness, meaningfulness, connectedness and selftranscendence alongside with service to others. (Emmons, 2006).

According to Scott (2020), spirituality is a broad concept of belief in higher being, it could include religious traditions attached to higher powers and connection to larger world. Spirituality originates from Hebrew word “ruach” meaning a range of sentences such as life giving, spirit, breath, wind and animation of something, such could be person’s life or faith. Unlike religion, spirituality is a medium of transformation, social change and growth. It is likened to a purer, personalized form of religion, excluding dogmatism, politics and any institutional authority (Scherurs, 2002). However, all the definitions of spirituality meet at a confluence, which is the seeking or searched of self-purpose, self-discovery, self-harmony and self-reality. Many at times, spirituality and religion are used interchangeably, due to the misconception that they are related and imply the same thing, but this is not the case, hence, there is the difference between spirituality and religion.

Religion Versus Spirituality

According to Philips (2002), religion is a policy, practices and creeds of a faith, while spirituality is the condition. In a similar way, Wilkinson (2012) attributed religion to organized rules and conditions, for worship and discipleship while spirituality is attributed to morals, spiritual encounters and belief in celestial powers. Spirituality is living being more aware of things outside of yourself.

In another way, religion is portrayed as formal and exclusive unlike spirituality which is not formal (Aravamudha & Krishnaveni 2014). Unlike religion which evolves around bounded rules and communalism, spirituality is an individual practice alongside the belief and acknowledgement of a being and interconnections. The difference between religion spirituality is obvious, to an extent that it could be appropriate to conclude, that one could be spiritual but not religious (Sharma, 2017), in as much as religion is a pathway to attain spirituality.

To understand spirituality in a simple language, the following are clear clues; according to Scott (2002);

1. Asking questions about suffering and death.
2. Deepening connections with other people.
3. Having compassion for others.
4. Seeking happiness beyond materialism or external pleasures
5. Seeking life purpose and meaning.
6. The desire to make the world a better place.

At this juncture, having described the term spirituality, it should be noted that the keen interest of the paper is spirituality from the Christian perspective, hence, Christian spirituality refers to the organized beliefs extracted from the creeds and doctrines of the church. Christian

spirituality is based on hope, love, self-denial alongside promise of redemption (McGrath, 1999). Christian spirituality simply implies the Christian way of life, living a fulfilled or fulfilling life based on the exemplary life of Jesus Christ and the Holy Scriptures. It is a life process that evolves round the encountering and knowing God.

This study is anchored on the human development model of spiritual growth. This growth is attained through consistent prayers, Bible reading and meditation, charity, and building strong relationships within the ecclesiastical family. (Kim, 2010) affirms that spiritual growth will be facilitated by factors that promote spiritual life. (Kim, 2010) further expatiated on the factors which include: praying, fasting, revival and power. These factors were further grouped into characteristics and deeds. The characteristics are highlighted as; Faith, Love , Knowledge, Wisdom, Holiness and Joy while the deeds are; The Holy Scriptures, Prayers, Gratitude, Worship, Obedience, Speech and actions with interactive relationship.

The Social Media

The social media is the newest and trending aspect of the media. It has become a global technological structure, which facilitates and enhances accessibility, communication, socialization and interaction of inter-relationships, hence altering the traditional manner of socialization (Mitic & Kapoulas, 2012). The social media creates avenue through which individuals participate and share contents via electronical access (McGrath, 1999). According to Kaplan and Haenle in (2010), the social media constitutes organized internet applications founded through the idealogical and technological structures called Web 2.0. It concerns itself with modern technology, encouraging participation, collaboration, content generation, information sharing and connection among individual users. It calls for a social networking system of connecting the users (Drahosova & Balco, 2017). From another angle, Dye (2007) views the social media as medium for creativity, content, consumption and connectivity.

Historically, the use of social media can be traced to the early 60s, The Plato system was launched in the University of Illinois, (McGrath, 1999). The plato system offered early forms of social media features which include; Notes, Term-talks, Talkomatic, ARPANET (1967), Netiquette (1982). However, today, the social media has become integrated into individual life daily (Boyd & Ellison, 2007).

Numerous social media platforms are created with respect to the various needs of the individual users. For instance; Facebook for social networking, Linkedin for professionalism, Instagram for creativity and business, Tinder for romance and relationships, My space for Music and Youtube for videos (Boyd & Ellison, 2007) and these needs extend to the spiritual needs of individuals as well. Below is the table showing some of the numerous social media sites and their dates of establishment;

Social Media Site Date Of Establishment

Open diary	October 20, 1998
Live journal	April 15, 1999
Friendster	March 22, 2003
Linkedin	May 5, 2003
Hi5	June, 27, 2003

My space	August, 1, 2003
Orkut	January 22, 2004
Facebook	February, 4, 2004
Flicke	February 10, 2004
Youtube	February 14, 2005
Yahoo!360	March, 16, 2005
Bebo	July 2005
Twitter	July, 15, 2005
Tumblr	February, 12, 2007
Instagram	July 5, 2010
Google +	June 28, 2011
Snap chat	September, 2011
Tik Tok	November, 2016

(Koles & Nagy, 2012)

Also, is the statistical presentation on the usage of the social media and the country of origin January 2021 as at by (Few, Research, 2018)

NETWORK NAME	NUMBER OF USER (MILLIONS)	ORIGIN
Facebook	2,740	United State of America
Youtube	2,291	United State of America
Whatsapp	2,000	United State of America
Facebook messenger	1,300	United State of America
Instagram	1,221	United State of America
Wechat	1,213	China
TikTok	689	China
QQ	617	China
Douyin	600	China
Sinawelbo	511	China

From the table above, it is clear that there is a high percentage of individuals using the social media and this figure will continue to increase year-in-year-out.

The Effects Of Social Media On Spirituality

It is no dispute that during the last decades there has been an escalated growth and development in communication technology and this in turn has altered human lifestyle and human interaction. The virtual method of communication is now integrated into human live. Affirming this fact, (Buffardi & Campbell, 2008), emphasize on the rapid growth and the alteration of human social interaction through the invention and trending pattern of the social media, expatiating the fact that the world is shifting to the digital realm. The social media being a platform enable the users to communicate, establish social relations, share information and knowledge related to personal experiences in real life (Chun-Ming & Mengsiang H, 2016).

Moreover, it is a tool to bring families together through communication. The use of the social media is not restricted to business or other professional intention, rather the use extends to religious concerns. Religious institutions are not left out in the use of the social media, infact it serves as the easiest and cheapest way to reach out to members, followers or disciples

irrespective of the denomination. From observations made by (Hutchings, 2011), it has become a reality that contemporary churches and religious groups are now technologically expanding, particularly to fit into the digital era. Christian communities now worship, discuss, worship, teach, pray and give spiritual support via the electronic media or digital media. Christians irrespective of the groups or denominations now meet through chat rooms, forums, blogs, videos streams, social network site.

To (Campbell & Lovheim), the social media constitutes the space where individual and groups (Christians) live out their social and spiritual lives. It serves as a tool, which technologically enables spiritual outreach, through messages, video streaming and the rest (Hutchings, 2011). These Christian denominations combine both local and online resources, practices and connections, through the digital method to complement their membership. Many Christians and Christian religious groups or denominations have switched to the use of social media as medium of outreach to members or fellow Christians so as not lose them. They are able to infuse the lives of their members, who had been sharpened and moulded by offline practices and experiences.

However, social media effects on our spirituality are of both advantage and disadvantage. After all, as a tool, the effects are determined by how it is used by the users; hence the social media in (Asiedu, 2017) has a record of the positive effects outweighing the negative effects, particularly on the Christian spirituality.

The social media as a tool for communication aids family bonding, thereby giving a sense of belonging to Christians, even beyond the building of church. The social media serves as an avenue to motivate, encourage Christian communities, even without the church gathering. A good instance, is the COVID 19 situation, when buildings were locked down and the congregation were held through online sites. The social media also provide the forum to create, share spiritual contents (these could be images, prayer points or teaching) with which our spirituality is charged and developed in the right channel. It can also be used to disseminate information required for spiritual growth and enhancement (Henderson & Bowley, 2010).

Hence, it facilitates the fulfillment and satisfaction of individual spiritual needs, through the search for higher or new knowledge spiritually. The social media provides the forum for a free distribution and expression of spiritual information, particularly in this globally connected world. The connection through the social media has no boundaries or restrictions, be it racial, geographical or denominational, thus it is a good tool to facilitate spiritual growth across the world. It enhances the discovery of inner peace & harmony through its powerful ability to inspire and inculcate spirituality into individuals on daily basis. The social media also contributes towards the spiritual growth of individuals through interconnection with people, enhances our wellbeing and encourage or build our ability to make the world a better, safer place to live and enjoy. (Schreurs, 2002). However, there are also negative effects of social media on our spirituality, although these negative effects are silent, there is an urgent need to guard against them.

The negative effects of social media on spirituality may be silent but they are what should be guarded against; the social media is responsible for several deceptive attacks, particularly the magnitude and implications of the deceptions, when the culprits take advantage of the connection among individuals, this do not exclude spirituality (Schreurs, 2002). As a result of this a lot of

Christian individuals have fallen prey to false deceptive heretical teachings which in turn affect their spiritual growth and development. Many have been misled by these heretical teachings.

There are also cases of social bullying, a situation whereby individuals (particularly Christian leaders) are being attacked, their names and ministry scandalized, destroying such individuals reputation and dignity, such scenarios could be disastrous to one's spiritual life which is unimaginable without social media.

More so, the alarming rate of its development and growth across the globe alongside its impacts on individual users, even in future, however it is logical to deduce that the social media has come to stay, with all its advantages and disadvantages.

Conclusion

Spirituality and social media are two different concepts, however, it is deduced that social media affects individual spirituality. This in the sense that social media enhances spiritual growth, heightens the bond within the congregation, serves as medium for dissemination of information, it creates room to share spiritual issues, spiritual educating and inspiring contents, which would go a long way to build spiritual lives and even strengthen the weak ones. Congregation could get to extend fellowships, beyond the buildings and establish a more open inter-relationship, thereby broadening the scope of spiritual knowledge for growth. Nevertheless, there are shortcomings on the parts of the social media, particularly through the inappropriate usage by individuals. Such as bullying, heretical teachings, blackmailing and the related. Hence, it is recommended that individuals, especially congregation members should be educated, orientated and also be aware of the negative effects of the social media so as to guard against such.

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