The Role of Technology in Promoting Apostasy and Religious Freedom in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT: The proliferation of technology has transformed Nigeria's religious terrain, enabling individuals to access and disseminate information, connect with like-minded individuals, and challenge traditional religious authority thereby fostering Apostasy, or the act of leaving one's faith. This paper examines the role of technology in shaping apostasy and religious freedom in Nigeria. Using a qualitative approach, this study investigates how social media platforms, online forums, and other digital technologies have facilitated the growth of apostasy among Nigerian people. The findings suggest that technology has enabled apostates to connect with others who share similar experiences and worldviews, providing a sense of community and support. However, technology has also been used to surveil, harass, and intimidate apostates, creating tensions to religious freedom. The paper argues that technology has become a critical factor in shaping apostasy and religious freedom in Nigeria, and that policymakers, religious leaders, and civil society organizations can harness the use of technology to promote, rather than undermine, religious freedom.

KEY WORDS: Technology, Apostasy, Religious freedom, Nigeria, Social media, online forums.

INTRODUCTION

The proliferation of technology in Nigeria significantly impacts religious freedom and apostasy. Digital platforms enable the dissemination of diverse beliefs, fostering discussions around faith and freedom of expression. However, they also facilitate the enforcement of blasphemy laws, particularly in northern states where harsh penalties exist for perceived offenses against Islam (Davie, 2021). Technology has significantly influenced religious practices in Nigeria in various ways. For instance, it has provided access to resources like digital platforms which enable individuals to access religious texts, prayers, and teachings easily, enhancing personal study and understanding of faith. Many religious organizations now offer live streaming of services, allowing participation from anywhere, which is particularly beneficial during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. Through Social media, connections among believers, creating virtual communities that support shared faith experiences and discussions. The Mobile apps and websites facilitate administrative tasks for churches, improving communication and engagement with congregants. However, challenges include distractions during services and the potential spread of misinformation which has led to the surge in apostasy among some Nigerians. This paper examines the technology, apostasy, and religious freedom, highlighting the opportunities and challenges presented by technological advancements.

Technology, Apostasy and Religious Freedom in Nigeria

Religious freedom is globally recognised as a means to foster peace and provide protection to religious groups. Religious freedom is indeed a fundamental right that allows for the peaceful and harmonious practice of various religions. The right to religious liberty adds dynamism to religious communities worldwide. The freedom of religion entails that no laws should be established favouring a particular religious body, guaranteeing individuals the right to exercise and express their religious beliefs and act in accordance with those beliefs. All individuals are at liberty to maintain their opinions on matters of religion, such as participating in meetings, conferences, naming ceremonies, weddings, and other religious and social gatherings. This right extends beyond beliefs alone; it

encompasses the freedom of thought, religion, and conscience. This includes the freedom to change one's beliefs and religion, whether as an individual or as part of a group within a community, in public or in private, through written or verbal pronouncements, as well as the ability to manifest one's religion in practice, teaching, observance, and worship (Istifanus, 2023).

Nigeria, has witnessed significant changes in the religious sphere in recent years and technology has emerged as a critical factor shaping apostasy and religious freedom in Nigeria. While social

media have enabled religious organizations to reach more people, it has also injected competition for members, physical distance of leaders from their followers, and a manifest personality cult into their organizational structures (Akpore 2019). Digitalization have been linked to a decline in religious freedoms due to increased surveillance and potential discrimination against minority faiths (Yugang, 2024). Consequently, while technology can promote dialogue, it also poses risks to religious expression in Nigeria. Technology significantly influences the shaping of apostates and the promotion of religious freedom. Yugang indicates that while artificial intelligence can negatively impact religious freedoms through surveillance and algorithmic biases, it also provides platforms for religious expression and community building (2024). Emerging technologies enable religious organizations to enhance their missions but face regulatory challenges that may conflict with their practices (Speir, 2025). Furthermore, technology facilitates the exploration of diverse belief systems, allowing individuals to articulate and validate their faith in new ways (Patil, 2024). Balancing these dynamics is crucial for fostering an inclusive environment for religious expression.

The Role of Technology in Promoting Apostasy

According to Saeed, "Apostasy can refer to reverting from the Islamic religion to (infidel) either through action or intention, signifying an individual's withdrawal from the religion." It can also involve making statements of mockery (*istihza*), stubbornness (*inad*), or conviction (*i'tiqad*) (Saeed, 2004). Therefore, apostasy simply means renunciation, disaffiliation, abandonment, and defection from a former religion, encompassing the acceptance of contrary opinions to previously held beliefs (Patrick, 2009). Apostasy, or the act of abandoning one's faith, is a sensitive topic in Nigeria, where religion plays a significant role in shaping cultural identity. Technology has enabled the spread of information and ideas, which can contribute to apostasy in several ways:

Access to Information: The internet has made it easier for people to access information about different religions, philosophies, and worldviews, leading to a reevaluation of one's faith.

Online Communities and Forums: Online platforms have enabled individuals to connect with others who share similar views, providing a sense of community and support for those considering apostasy.

Social Media and Online Content: Social media platforms have created spaces for individuals to share their experiences, opinions, and beliefs. This has led to increased exposure to diverse perspectives, which can challenge traditional religious views. Social media platforms have become crucial for the growth of apostasy in Nigeria by providing a space for individuals to express and connect over their non-religious beliefs. In a country where apostasy can lead to severe repercussions, like imprisonment or violence, platforms such as Facebook and Twitter allow atheists to share experiences and find community support. Activists like Mubarak Bala have utilized soscial media to advocate for nonbelievers' rights, despite facing significant risks (Davie, 2021). This digital engagement fosters dialogue and encourages questioning of religious norms among Nigerian youth.

The Role of Technology in Promoting Religious Freedom

Technology has also played a significant role in promoting religious freedom in Nigeria:

Amplifying Marginalized Voices: Technology has provided a platform for marginalized religious groups to express themselves, share their experiences, and advocate for their rights.

Facilitating Interfaith Dialogue: Online platforms have enabled people from different religious backgrounds to engage in dialogue, fostering greater understanding and tolerance.

Providing Access to Religious Resources: Technology has made it easier for people to access religious texts, sermons, and other resources, which can be particularly important for minority religious groups.

Challenges and Concerns

While technology has the potential to promote religious freedom and apostasy, there are also challenges and concerns:

Online Harassment and Intimidation: Social media platforms can be used to harass and intimidate individuals who express dissenting views or abandon their faith.

Disinformation and Hate Speech: Technology can also be used to spread disinformation and hate speech, which can exacerbate religious tensions and conflict.

Regulatory Challenges: The Nigerian government faces challenges in regulating online content, balancing the need to protect citizens from harm with the need to preserve freedom of expression.

CONCLUSION

The relationship between technology, apostasy, and religious freedom in Nigeria is one that has come to remain. While technology has the potential to promote religious freedom and apostasy, it also raises challenges and concerns. Technology has emerged as a critical factor shaping apostasy and religious freedom in Nigeria. While it presents opportunities for increased access to information, amplified marginalized voices, and facilitated interfaith dialogue, it also raises challenges and concerns. By addressing these challenges and concerns, Nigeria can harness the potential of technology to promote religious freedom, facilitate apostasy, and foster a more inclusive and tolerant society. It is essential to promote digital literacy, regulate online content, and foster inclusive online communities that respect diversity and promote tolerance.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Digital Literacy Programs: Implement digital literacy programs to educate citizens on online safety, critical thinking, and media literacy.

Regulatory Frameworks: Freedom of religion and practice should be allowed without restrictions imposed by the government or dominant religion in a region or society. This alone can foster respect and unity among people of diverse creeds living in the same community. Furthermore, establishing inter-faith dialogue centres is necessary to address religious issues and related matters. Develop and implement effective regulatory frameworks to balance freedom of expression with the need to protect citizens from harm.

Inclusive Online Communities: Foster inclusive online communities that promote tolerance, respect diversity, and encourage interfaith dialogue.

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