Deux ex Machina: Exploring Digital Worship in the Salvation Ministries, Port Harcourt, Nigeria.

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Abstract

This study delves into the practice of digital worship and its influence on religious practices and beliefs within The Salvation Ministries in Port Harcourt, Nigeria. Employing a qualitative research method complemented by Media Theory, the study utilizes data gathered from primary and secondary sources. These sources include interviews with pastors and members of The Salvation Ministries, an online survey administered to digitally engaged church members, and a content analysis of digital worship materials such as social media posts, online sermons, and virtual prayer sessions. The findings reveal that digital worship has significantly expanded the reach of The Salvation Ministries beyond its physical location and fostered a stronger sense of community among members, enabling easier connections with leaders and fellow

worshippers. However, challenges such as the lack of personal interaction and the potential for technology to replace genuine spiritual experiences are also highlighted. Consequently, this paper emphasizes the importance of striking a balance between embracing technology and maintaining the authenticity and sincerity of spiritual practices.

Keywords: **Pentecostalism, Digital Media, Religious Experience, Salvation Ministries**

Introduction:

The term "*Deus Ex Machina*," Latin for "God from the Machine," symbolizes the role of technology in facilitating spiritual communion and forging connections. In the context of digital worship in The Salvation Ministries, *Deus Ex Machina* represents how technology transcends physical distance and other barriers, enabling members to experience divine connection. This study aims to explore the practice of digital worship within The Salvation Ministries and assess its impact on the church's growth, member engagement, and spiritual fulfillment.

The practice of digital worship has gained traction particularly in the wake of COVID-19 pandemic, which necessitated the development of virtual platforms for religious gatherings. Digital worship incorporates modern technologies such as social networking, live streaming, and video conferencing to facilitate worship and spiritual connection within faith communities. The contestations here are why did the church embrace digital worship? Was it strategy to expand its membership reach or to provide alternative avenues for worship participation? What kinds of digital tools are used in the Salvation Ministries worship and liturgical practices? To what extent does digital convey religious experiences to members of the Church. These issues are what the authors seek to address in this essay.

Pentecostalism: Dynamic and Diverse Tradition

Pentecostalism is a branch of evangelical Christianity that places great significance on the active presence of the Holy Spirit within its beliefs, religious practices, and organizational structure (Jacobsen, 2003; 2021). This movement encompasses various churches that prioritize and normalize the experiential encounter with the Holy Spirit during worship and spiritual activities. Pentecostal Christians not only

value but also actively promote the experience of the Spirit as an integral part of their everyday Christian lives and worship. The Holy Spirit serves as both the evidence and conduit for spiritual gifts, including glossolalia (speaking in tongues), prophecy, exorcism, the authority of the Bible, the priesthood of all believers, and the imminent return of Jesus Christ. Pentecostalism embraces the "full gospel," drawing on biblical promises found in the Gospel of St. Luke (24:29), Acts (1:8), John (3:16), Acts (2:4), James (5:14-15), and I Thessalonians (4:16), as well as the markers of Justification.

However, attempting to categorize Pentecostalism is a challenging task due to its heterogeneity and the existence of contested narratives surrounding its origins. There are thousands of distinct Pentecostal movements, each with its own unique story of inception. Some scholars attribute the movement's roots to the Azusa Street Revival of 1906, while others, such as Andrew Walls (2002; 2023), Lamin Sanneh, 2003, 2007), Ogbu Kalu 2007, 2008), and Nimi Wariboko (2014), present alternative narratives that challenge the assumptions underpinning the Azusa Street mythology. For instance, in West Africa, indigenous evangelists like William Wade Harris of Ivory Coast and Garrick Sokari Braide sparked Pentecostal-inspired revival movements in the early twentieth century, which had only a tenuous connection to Pentecostalism as observed in the global North (Miller, 2013:13).

Digital Worship Theories

The discourse on Digital Worship in the Salvation Ministries Port Harcourt is stimulated by two theories: Mediation and Technological Determinism. The Mediation theory asserts that media are tools used to create and express cultural meanings (Barbero, 1993). It emphasizes the cultural practices of the audience in interpreting media in local and global contexts. Within the religious context, this approach views media as an integral part of religious practice rather than mere tools that impact religion. Lynch (2014) builds upon Durkheim's work and argues that media serve as multiple sacred forms, extending beyond religious expressions. Lynch describes the mediation of sacred forms as the interaction of symbols, thoughts, and feelings made possible through media, enabling communication and interaction with those forms (2014:4). In the realm of digital worship, mediation becomes crucial for understanding the use of technology.

Meyer (2006) suggests that mediation reduces the distance between human beings and the transcendental, and digital worship offers practices of mediation that bridge this distance. The term "media" is broadly understood to encompass all devices that facilitate the experience of transcendence (Meyer, 2009). Various elements, such as images, sounds, space, and bodily practices, including media technologies like cassettes and videos, participate in the practices of mediation.

Accordingly, Stewart (2006) introduces the theory of religious mediation, which considers media as practices rather than solely focusing on texts, technologies, or institutions. Hoover emphasizes what individuals do in relation to media across different situations and contexts. This perspective aligns with Geertz's (1993:90) definition of religion, which highlights the influence of cultural contexts on the mediation and meaning of religious practices. While commonly applied to traditional media like television, this approach also applies to digital media, examining how meaning-making occurs through media use. To address the impact of digital culture on religion, the theory of mediation serves as the foundation for new theoretical approaches. Hoover and Echchaibi (2021) conceptualize the approach of the third space, influenced by works in sociology and architecture. The third space refers to the virtual realm between online and offline experiences, where religious practices can flourish. Drawing from Homi Bhabha's post-colonial theory, they view the third space as hybrids that enable new approaches to religious practices. This perspective explores the meaning-making function of media while focusing on the generative power of internet space in creating and circulating narratives and aesthetics.

Another concept related to mediation is hypermediation, which considers digital media as generative of new meaning for religious practices. This theory builds on Martin-Barbero's concept of mediation and highlights the increased speed of communication that intensifies religious practices and understanding (Echchaibi, 2017). Hypermediated religious spaces are characterized by fast and emotional exchanges across online and offline venues (Evolvi, 2018).

Mediation theory, as proposed by Lundby (2014), addresses the impact of new media on socio-cultural change. It describes how changes occur when communication patterns transform due to new communication tools and

technologies. Mediatization involves the interplay between media and other societal institutions, including religion, influencing religious organizations, practices, and beliefs (Hjarvard, 2013; Lovheim, 2014; Lovheim & Hjarvard, 2019). The cultural approach to mediatization emphasizes the role of media communication technologies in ongoing transformations and societal construction (Hjarvard, 2008). Mediatization theory recognizes that religion becomes more visible in the public sphere through media representation and the inclusion of religious symbols and beliefs within popular culture. Deep mediatization, characterized by the differentiation of media technologies, increased connectivity, omnipresence of media, rapid innovation, and datafication of social life, explores the entanglement of human actors and technologies in the internet age (Hepp et al., 2018). While research on religion within the framework of deep mediatization is still emerging, some studies examine how religious institutions like the Roman Catholic Church embed digital media in their communication strategies and negotiate their use (Radde-Antweiler et al., 2018).

The Religious Social Shaping of Technology (RSST) approach, proposed by Campbell (2020), examines how religious groups shape and negotiate technology, particularly in the realm of digital tools and new media. RSST focuses on both the technological structures and cultural layers that influence forms of interaction within religious communities.

In contrast to technological determinism, the social shaping of technology theory considers how people use and negotiate technologies. It emphasizes that societal and technological changes are mutually shaping phenomena, with human action playing a significant role in shaping technology and social change (Williams & Edge, 1996). Campbell's RSST approach recognizes the unique negotiation of media within religious communities due to their moral economics, historical practices, interpretive traditions, and contemporary values.

The theories of mediation, mediatization and social shaping of technology offer different perspectives on how media shape religious practices and institutions. While mediation emphasizes the cultural practices and meanings created through media, mediatization explores the broader social and institutional changes resulting from media proliferation. The social shaping of technology theory

focuses on how religious groups actively shape their media use and interaction. These theories collectively contribute to understanding the complex relationship between media and religion in the digital age.

Salvation Ministries: Embracing the Digital Era

Pastor David Ibiyeomie founded Salvation Ministries on April 13, 1997, at Plot 35, Birabi Street, GRA 1 Port Harcourt. The church started with a modest congregation of 54 members, consisting of 10 males, 9 females, and 9 children. Over the years, Salvation Ministries has experienced remarkable growth, evolving into a thriving church with an overflowing crowd. Presently located at Plot 17 Birabi Street, GRA 1 Port Harcourt, the church attracts approximately 154,000 worshippers on Sundays, both in its headquarters and satellite branches, as well as through its online presence.

In 2001, Salvation Ministries launched its television program, "The Hour of Salvation," which initially aired on NTA Channel 10 Port Harcourt. The program's maiden episode, "Faith is Now," set the stage for its subsequent expansion. Today, "The Hour of Salvation" is broadcast on over 40 television stations, both locally and internationally, including Salvation TV (the organization's television station) and Daystar USA/RNN New York. In 2002, the church introduced "Destiny Moulding Hour," a household radio program that has since transformed into a 24-hour online radio station known as Salvation Radio since January 22, 2014.

Salvation Ministries has fully embraced digital technology, integrating it into nearly all aspects of its operations. From services to worship, testimonies to altar calls, the organization utilizes digital platforms to connect with its members and extend its reach.

I. *Services*:

Salvation Ministries conducts its services simultaneously across its global satellite branches every Sunday. From 6 am to 2 pm, the church holds five services, each lasting for one and a half hours. These services comprise prayers, testimonies, opening hymns, sermons, praise and worship, altar calls, and occasional thanksgivings. Worshipers follow these programs on TV screens, broadcasting the transmissions from the headquarters. The sermon during these services is

delivered by the Overseas General Pastor, David Ibiyeomie. To accommodate the vast number of worshipers and ensure efficient crowd management, the services are segmented, allowing individuals to choose their preferred time of worship. The services are either relayed live through satellite technology, such as plasma TVs, speakers, and telecasts, or recorded for later exploration. In addition to the Sunday services, the church also holds two midweek services on Thursdays at 4:30 pm and 6:15 pm, following the same format as the Sunday services. Furthermore, there is a monthly spiritual empowerment program that spans one week at the beginning of every month, featuring three daily sessions with Holy Ghost hours at 12 noon and 4 pm, including sermons, prayers, and Holy Communion. Apart from the home cell groups held every Tuesday in members' homes, all other service activities are coordinated online from the headquarters, often with Pastor Ibiyeomie delivering the sermon.

II. Praise and Worship:

Salvation Ministries' worship style, which resonates with the African celebration of divine favor, is conducted both online and across its branches simultaneously. The church's vibrant and soul-lifting worship style has attracted Africans who appreciate its cultural alignment. The church has developed a unique religious culture that responds to popular culture. Through its charismatic liturgy, referred to as "praise-co," Salvation Ministries seeks to replace secular music and dance styles. Former secular musicians, now turned gospel singers, evangelists, pastors, and politicians, have adopted Salvation Ministries' music and dance traditions, infusing gospel elements into rites of passage and drawing inspiration from gospel music and dance. By entertaining and engaging the audience with choreographed diatribes that address the influence of popular culture on beliefs, the church encourages a change in the style of gospel music production. Music and dance play a vital role in the mass mediation of religion within Salvation Ministries, especially appealing to the younger generation. The church organizes bands and orchestras, employing electronic equipment and various musical instruments to enhance the worship experience, including guitars, trumpets, saxophones, and portable organs or electronic keyboards.

III. Testimonies

Ministries places great importance on testimonies, which are shared online and simultaneously relayed to the entire congregation. While testimonies are not directly transmitted to satellite branches, they are collected locally and then sent to the headquarters for global dissemination. This practice allows the religious experience to become visible to everyone, regardless of their physical location. The captivating nature of these testimonies often inspires individuals to contribute financially to the church, believing that they too can access the same blessings and favor. Through the application of digital technology, worship is no longer bound by physical constraints but can occur anywhere, making sacred space limitless.

IV. Altar Call:

During physical church services, the altar call prompts worshipers to respond to an appeal by coming forward to commit themselves to Christ or receive healing. In Salvation Ministries' online services, the congregation is asked to place their hand on any part of their body as a symbolic act during the altar call. Some preachers even instruct the viewers to "stretch forth your hand and touch the screen (of the device)" as they pray for them, emphasizing that the Holy Spirit can perform miracles regardless of physical distance. The screen, rather than being seen as an obstacle, becomes a tool for connecting the pastor to the believers and facilitating a physical connection. This understanding has alleviated the challenges posed by physical distance for many believers, enabling them to receive the same healing experience as those physically present.

V. *Offerings*:

Salvation Ministries provides multiple options for offering contributions, allowing members to give physically or make direct payments into the church's accounts. Before collecting the offering, a prayer is said online from the headquarters. The offering is conducted simultaneously across all branches.

VI. Communion Service:

While Communion is physically administered to members during the service, the blessing of the Communion is conducted online by Pastor David Ibiyeomie. The local pastor presents the Communion at the altar, and Pastor Ibiyeomie prays over it. The Communion service occurs monthly and is synchronized globally.

VII. *Anointing*:

During an anointing service, oil is brought to the altar, and Pastor David Ibiyeomie prays over it. The local branches follow the same pattern online. After the prayer, ushers distribute the oil to the members, who then anoint themselves by dipping their fingers in the oil. Anointing with oil may be part of any regular service, but its conduct and timing remain consistent, just like other programs in the church.

VIII *Announcements*:

Salvation Ministries relays announcements online from the headquarters, saving time and ensuring members across different branches receive information promptly. Any issues specific to local branches can be addressed after the service. By maintaining a strong focus on time consciousness, online announcements keep members informed about church activities and programs worldwide.

IX Conferences, Conference, Pastoral Schools, Meetings, and Other Programs:

Salvation Ministries leverages digital technology to enhance its visibility and extend its reach through various platforms such as Plasma TV, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Telegram, and YouTube. The church conducts conferences, fellowships, meetings, workshops, and theological education programs for its followers online. YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter are the primary platforms used and watched by the congregation. Additionally, many members watch pre-recorded services uploaded to the church's website or Google Drive .

Religious Experience, Digital Worship, and the Evolution of Churches in the 21st Century

Members of Salvation Ministries assert that they can experience the same depth of spirituality as those attending traditional face-to-face church services. They believe that God, being immaterial, transcendent, all-knowing, omnipresent, and omnipotent, can be felt anytime and anywhere. This aligns with Rudolf Otto's perspective that religious experience encompasses attributes such as love, power, reason, purpose, and goodwill, representing the *mysterium tremendum et mysterium fascinans* (1968).

The world is undergoing a profound technological revolution, and the Church is not exempt from this progressive shift. Recognizing the need for change, the

Second Vatican Council acknowledges that "we must be aware of and understand the aspirations, yearnings, and often dramatic features of the world in which we live. Our age is characterized by profound and rapid changes that extend to every corner of the globe. These changes result from human intelligence, creativity, and their impact on technology, influencing people's judgments, desires, thoughts, and actions towards others and the world" (Vatican II, Part I, Art. 3). The Church is an integral part of this interconnected world, sharing the same challenges and influences. As stated in Vatican Council II, "the spiritual restlessness of our time and the changing structures of life are part of a broader transformation, marked by the growing role played by mathematics, natural and human sciences on an intellectual level, and their practical implications on technology" (Flannery, A., 1996, Vatican Council II, Part I, Art. 5). Technology has permeated all aspects of society, including the Church, which cannot afford to shy away from scientific advancements. Rather, the Church encourages positive developments that align with human values and faith.

As the social order undergoes change, the world is adapting and evolving its structures and modes of operation. Salvation Ministries has embraced this change and is making significant strides. By embracing positive change, they are reaching out to clans, tribes, villages, and various social groups through new and effective mass media, awakening them to the reality of the gospel. The Church acknowledges and appreciates recent technological advancements while also recognizing the need to moderate excessive usage or any abuses that undermine positive human development.

The Church wholeheartedly supports anything that strengthens the faith of its members. Digital worship is viewed as a step in the right direction. Salvation Ministries invests in training its members in technology and offers scholarships to intelligent but financially disadvantaged students pursuing technical studies. These technicians play a crucial role in facilitating digital worship and other related digital courses. Many religious organizations are embracing digital worship as it spreads rapidly. This is the realm of the 21st-century church, where technology and faith intersect to create transformative experiences for believers.

The adoption of digital worship by The Salvation Ministries is driven by various factors, including the desire to reach a wider audience, accommodate members unable to attend physical services, and engage with the tech-savvy younger generation.

While digital worship in The Salvation Ministries has encountered challenges such as ensuring reliable internet connectivity, mitigating technical glitches during live broadcasts, and guarding against cyber attacks, the church has continuously evolved its digital worship strategy. By leveraging technology, the church aims to enhance the quality of its broadcasts and enrich the worship experience for its members

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, the concept of religious experience in the context of digital worship and the 21st century church is a topic that raises important considerations. Members of Salvation Ministries assert that they can still have a profound religious experience despite not engaging in traditional face-to-face church services. They believe that God's presence is immaterial, transcendent, and omnipresent, allowing them to connect with the divine anywhere and anytime. This resonates with Rudolf Otto's view of religious experience as encountering the holy, which encompasses attributes such as love, power, reason, purpose, and goodwill.

The world is undergoing a rapid technological progression, and the church cannot afford to remain stagnant or detached from this reality. Vatican Council II acknowledges the need for the church to be aware of and understand the aspirations and changes happening in the world. The church exists within the world and is influenced by the same factors that affect society as a whole. Technology has permeated every aspect of our lives, including the church, and rather than shying away from scientific advancements, the church embraces positive developments as long as they align with its faith commitment and are not anti-human. The changing social order and the development of new ways of doing things present an opportunity for the church to engage and make a positive impact. Salvation Ministries has embraced this change and leveraged new and effective mass media to reach various groups and social relationships, spreading the gospel and awakening people to its reality. The church appreciates the recent

technological advancements but also recognizes the need to exercise moderation and prevent abuses or excesses that could hinder human positive development. The church's primary goal is to strengthen the faith of its followers, and in this regard, digital worship is viewed as a positive step forward. Salvation Ministries invests in technology training for its members and offers scholarships to support technical studies, recognizing the role of technicians as facilitators of digital worship and other digital-related courses. The trend of adopting digital worship is growing rapidly among religious bodies, highlighting the evolving nature of the 21st-century church. The understanding of the intersection of religious experience, digital worship, and the 21st-century church prompts reflection on how technology can enhance and transform religious practices. While embracing technological advancements, it is crucial for the church to navigate this evolving landscape with a discerning and cautious approach, ensuring that faith commitments and human positive development remain at the forefront.

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Appendices

Table: Digital Tools Used in Liturgical Practices of Salvation Ministries