

Social media influences on Zimbabwean Catholics in Botswana and subversion of the mainstream traditional Catholic religious norms.

Norbert Musekiwa & Ivy Musekiwa

Abstract

This paper explores how social media has facilitated the Zimbabwean diasporan Catholics to integrate in Botswana community whilst remaining active in discourses in the country of origin. It further seeks to establish how social media has gradually subverted the hierarchical structures within the Roman Catholic Church by expanding the arenas for a significantly larger number of actors to participate in church discourse. For example, the literate, illiterate, men, women, children, and other minorities are now able to utilise the social media platforms to evangelise, share the word of God and contribute to other conversations in the Roman Catholic Church. The paper relies on data gathered from the Gaborone Catholic community originating from Zimbabwe. Data was gathered from key informant interviews, group WhatsApp chats and videos including church websites from mid-January 2019 to end of April 2019. The information was analysed qualitatively through content and discourse analysis. The proliferation of social media has potential to result in increased religious interface and tolerance. Social media specifically WhatsApp as the faster and cheaper means of transacting ideas can be a double edged sword, watering down and in some cases potentially promoting extremist positions. Whilst it can promote other players, social media can also be harnessed to build and cascade more consensus building. The paper concludes that migrants specifically Zimbabwean Catholics in Gaborone, utilise WhatsApp platforms to establish and maintain relationships with family, friends, and other Catholics in various communities globally including the home country. The study established that the WhatsApp platform has also facilitated the participation of laity in the evangelising roles that had previously been dominated by the ordained members of the church.

Introduction

The Internet has brought a faster, cheaper, and more accessible generation of new media. With the advent of internet, a number of communication channels are readily available to people.

For example, it takes into account several medium of communication comprising social media such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter which offer new opportunities for social interaction (Campbell 2010). The internet allows for receiving and sharing information through the various technical use and appropriation of several instruments. As Campbell and Teusner (2011: 59) postulate, social media changes how people interact with one another; “it transforms our understanding of authority by creating new positions of power, flattening traditional hierarchies, and providing new platforms that give voice to the voiceless”. Those who could not come into play such as the illiterate, women and children including those not appointed to do so could now participate. The internet and accompanying social media allow easy access to various information in religious communities within or beyond their geographical settings (Kgatle 2018). By its nature, social media empowers users in ways that influence social interaction not limited to a specific language or geographical space (Morgan 2013). The relationship between religion and media has become significant in recent years because of the increasing easy access to the internet and related communication platforms. For example, WhatsApp groups make communication possible between individuals and groups. The paper seeks to establish the role, influence, and efficacy of social media particularly WhatsApp in augmenting and changing the nature of evangelising and communication within the Zimbabwean Catholic community, home and host communities, including other Catholics across the world

Background

The study of religion and media is not limited to the presence of mainstream preaching on various media platforms. It takes into account the people’s agency which includes their ability to articulate religious discourses on various platforms. With the new media, the audience has the potential to contribute to and determine their own religious meanings. Various media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, and Twitter provide spaces for the creation of authority that can disrupt the traditional power hierarchies within the Roman Catholic Church. Hoover (2016) informs that it is not just the capacities and characteristics of certain leaders and groups that connect authority with communities of shared meaning and action. Nowadays communities assist in constituting authority through “the mediation of their participation in certain forms of practice” (Hoover 2016: 21).

At the international, national, and local levels, media provides information sharing on national and global news about issues regarding the church, the family, and the community at large.

Social media such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram and Twitter are constantly bombarded with information which is usually updated multiple times a day making it possible for anyone who has information to share it. The constant updates allow for greater engagement with members of the community wherever they might be.

There has been significant growth in media and communication levels such as radio television and social media. The paper dwells mainly on social media where control by formal Church hierarchical institutions is generally limited. Although religion seems to be commercialised it has empowered certain categories of people who have been on the margins to participate. The pervasive uses of social media has destabilised religious authority in the mainline churches such as the Roman Catholic Church which results in the altering of values. For example, WhatsApp groups contribute in real-time interaction especially in Christianity.

Usually media provides Christians with a new context of creating a community (Costa 2016). Through the internet, there is facilitation of free speech and generally free access to information that can challenge religious authorities. Religious hierarchies that are mainly the denominational structures very often become subverted by the emerging multiple power structures created through social media. Uses of the internet in social media are now a challenge to the prescribed traditional religious structures (Hjvard 2008, Hoover 2008, Gunde 2015). The Roman Catholic Church is one of the Christian organisations believed to have a considerable number of followers with an estimated nearly 1.3 billion baptised Catholics all over the world (Esteves, 2016). It follows particular hierarchical procedures through various actors in the church. Traditionally, preaching and evangelising were the preserve of the ordained who assumed an unquestioned position of authority. However, reform programmes in the form of Ecumenical Council of the Vatican I and II democratised the Church as the laity increasingly played a greater role – although still under the tutelage of the ordained (Butler 1966). The advent of social media has disrupted this hierarchical arrangement where even the laity is now able to share the word of God, which is no longer limited to local communities but can be spread all over the world in real time. Various media platforms enable people to send, receive and comment on the messages.

Zimbabwean Catholics in Botswana also take advantage of the media platforms mainly WhatsApp in various ways to maintain both their Catholic Christian contacts at home and also remain participants in the host country. The Zimbabwean diasporan Catholics become part of the Botswana congregation by participating fully in the local church activities. Expatriates

serve on the executive committees of the church in various capacities and often as treasurer, chairperson or catechists. It is also easier for different nationalities to get involved as some parishes such as the Christ the King Cathedral in Gaborone has ex-officio positions for representatives from different nationalities. The main fund raising event for the Gaborone Diocese in the form of an annual family Fete is organised around nationalities and solidarities. Some members of the Zimbabwean community in Botswana integrate fully in host communities and one Zimbabwean expatriate became a funeral leader for the local communities. The funeral leader is typically a respected member of the local parish who has more than passing knowledge of Tswana culture and language.

Methods

For data, the paper relied on key informant interviews, WhatsApp group chats, and videos, including church websites. Data was gathered from mid-January 2019 to end of April 2019. The researchers were participant observers of 29 WhatsApp groups in four categories. Ten groups had a global outreach, ten groups were administered from Zimbabwe though members were from all over the world, five groups were for Zimbabwean Catholics in Botswana, and four groups were of a commercial advertising nature specialising in cross border transportation of goods and money remittances between Botswana and Zimbabwe including updates on various migrant information. The saturation number of WhatsApp groups in a category was between eight and nine hence the limit of ten groups per category. The information posted on these platforms is typically created to be shared with group members and the wider community and hence is in the public domain. There was therefore no potential harm or consent required to analyse data in the public domain. Growth in the membership of WhatsApp groups by researchers was by snowballing.

A total of seven interviews with key informants were held. Two WhatsApp video call interviewees were held in March 2020 with Zimbabwean nuns, one based in the United States and the other in Zimbabwe. Five face to face interviewees were held with three Zimbabwean members of the Saint Anne's Guilds and two members of the Zimbabwean Catholic Community all based in Gaborone, Botswana. The researchers got informed consent for all the interviews. Confidentiality was maintained as the identities of the informants and contributors in WhatsApp groups are maintained.

The data was analysed through content and discourse analysis. Through axial coding, themes such as evangelising, sharing daily word, fraternity of diasporans, contributions to the church,

and power relations emerged. Elementary power analysis was done to trace the changing nature and flows of the knowledge created by various actors.

Influence of social media on Zimbabwean Catholics in Gaborone

The media transforms society in a myriad of ways. The internet has capability to facilitate changes in how we perceive and interact with each other (Dawson & Hennebry 1999, Coman & Coman 2017). Catholics in the diaspora have taken up social media to keep in touch with their home countries. Several people through social media have been given global audience for their ideas which are not only limited to religion. The literate, illiterate, men, women and children are able to provide real time contributions to religion through social media. Thus social media provides new platforms that give various voices to the voiceless.

Migration among Zimbabweans to South Africa and neighbouring countries has been part of circular migration since the inception of colonialism and the discovery of gold in South Africa. However, such long distance migration was mostly practised by working age men whilst women and children were rarely involved. Differently, since the beginning of Zimbabwe's economic decline in 2000, women and children have also increasingly formed part of the migrating population. The expanded nature of the migrant population also entailed an increased demand for religious services and occasionally the demand extended to home languages. Zimbabwean Catholics in Botswana use the various online platforms for communication purposes. These migrants in Botswana have been able to access online Christian newsgroups in the Zimbabwean languages such as Shona and Ndebele. Media has managed to provide Catholics in Botswana with a context of creating a community despite the distance and geography. Internet facilitates free speech and access to information which sometimes challenges the mainline religious authorities and religious hierarchies. Denominational structures are not spared in the process. Dawson & Hennebry (1999:21) advise that the use of the internet results in proliferation of "misinformation and disinformation and the loss of control over religious materials" distributed through social media. Dawson & Hennebry (1999:21) further argue that social media brings in "new opportunities for grassroots forms of witnessing that encourage the rise of unofficial or alternate voices to traditional voices".

Social ties

Social media enables users to transcend time, geography and traditional channels of protocol (Campbell 2010). It subverts the authority of acceptable religious structures or leaders in the

church thereby creating new online rituals. Although social media enables easy access to information and builds social connections, it also subverts the mainline norms of the church. With social media particularly WhatsApp, Zimbabwean Catholics in Botswana are able to keep in touch with their families, friends, and community in their home country. The diasporans are also in constant contact with their home parishes which enables them to be up to date with the parish activities as well as participating in activities offered in Botswana as the host country. Besides participating in local parish activities, Zimbabweans have been able to keep up with the family ties through day to day interaction through social media. The maintenance of connection with home is critical since most Zimbabweans in Botswana perceive themselves as being in the country temporarily as they intend to go back when the economic and political situation in their home country normalises. Zimbabweans are able to make monetary contributions to their home parishes such as monthly subscriptions, funeral and fundraising contributions. Such financial contributions are increasingly affordable for the diaspora community since the fall of Robert Mugabe regime in November 2017 and the commencement of the depreciation of the Zimbabwean currency. These are easily facilitated through the various social media platforms. When there was need to fund raise for projects in Zimbabwe various payment platforms – including those set up specifically for members in diaspora - were established and shared via the WhatsApp groups.

The internet and social media has changed how we understand Christian communities by forming relationship networks that extend beyond connection (Elvovi 2016). WhatsApp on the other hand increases access to alternative sources of religious information. It also empowers people to contribute to information, opinions and experiences in public debates and conversations on religious matters. Through WhatsApp groups such as Jesus is Lord, Seminarians Mubatanidzwa in Zimbabwe, Mbuya Anna and Outer Deanery, Zimbabwean Catholics in Botswana are able to participate in debates and conversations concerning their parishes back home.

Social media and the subversion of Catholic hierarchical structure and norms

Social media challenges the traditional hierarchy of the church. The readings recommended by the Roman Catholic Church for mass each day and varied events such as weddings and funerals remain rather rigid as defined by the respective Diocesan liturgical authorities. However, the interpretation of the scriptures has been appropriated by other actors within the Church. A Zimbabwean catechist based in the United States issues via WhatsApp audio messages (in

Shona language), the interpretations of the Sunday mass gospel readings reaching a worldwide audience each week. In a way, the authority of the ordained in the interpretation of the scriptures has been challenged.

At the local parish level which is the lowest institution in the Church, the parish priest has supreme authority and typically relates with congregates through the executive leadership of the parish. For example, a request for a requiem mass for a congregante should be channelled to the parish priest through a section leader or a member of the parish executive committee. However, the advent of social media groups to which parish priests are participants can effectively resolve such issues as requests for the mass are easily channelled through an open forum such as WhatsApp. The ability of the WhatsApp group members to contribute and or censor the leadership and the parish priest in a way disrupts the traditional church hierarchy.

The Roman Catholic Church papal encyclical (letter from the Pope) is traditionally directed to senior Diocesan authorities but due to the advent of social media the encyclical can now also reach the ordinary congregante synchronously. This direct conversation between head of the Roman Catholic Church and ordinary members in a way subverts the traditional church structure and authority as part of the ordained group's authority is derived from their role of passing on papal messages to congregates

The internet fuels the challenge to the traditional hierarchical norms of the Catholic Church. WhatsApp do not lend them to formal theological discourse in the Catholic Church. It challenges traditional Christian structures and allows for public scrutiny of religious leaders. Zimbabwean Catholics in Botswana are able to listen to the daily word in their home language. An example is the daily word that is sent via WhatsApp by a Catholic nun based in Zimbabwe. The nun provides the daily readings and also shares her interpretation – reaching a worldwide audience. Such roles were previously the preserve of the ordained priests. Other priests are also able to send audios on their homilies through WhatsApp groups such as Daily Word, Sunday Word, Learning Catholicism, and Prayer Group of Saints. The internet is seen to be shifting patterns of sociability especially in Christianity. It also increases access to alternative sources of religious information. Catholics are not limited to Catholicism only but can have access to other religious information or prayer groups. Internet through various media platforms empowers people to contribute information, opinions and experiences to public debates and conversations. It has created a new social sphere that facilitates spiritual interactions.

Social media is the term often used to refer to new forms of media that involve interactive

participation.

WhatsApp is one of the platforms that create new social sphere that facilitates spiritual interactions. Since internet renders easy access to information, it provides opportunities to create new online rituals and builds social connections. People and Catholics included have an opportunity to be part of the local congregation or Christian denomination as well as the congregations back home. Through WhatsApp, family ties are built which are bound together in Christianity. The internet has changed how we understand Christian community. One can be associated with a Christian community which is not limited by their geographical space. WhatsApp groups such as Bira reTsitsi, The Living Word, Catechism of the Catholic Church, Learning Catholicism, Catholic Mass Readings and 54 Days Rosary Novena allow for the forming of networks and relationships that extend beyond local communities. Intercession prayer groups can be formed through the various social media platforms.

The study looked at the use of WhatsApp groups in Zimbabwean migrants' daily lives. One Zimbabwean Catholic migrant seemed excited sharing the view that with social media "we do not need to go home in order to interact with our parishes". The WhatsApp groups that facilitated the communication include St Anne's World Wide, Catholic Songs and Bible, Daily Word, World Catholic Hymns and Jesus is Lord. Social media has helped in reducing the gap in time and distances among migrants in terms of religion.

Social support and religious participation

Friendship most readily develops between persons who share the same values, interests and activities (Morgan 2013). Churches are mostly network driven by common religious beliefs and bring together individuals in a number of ways. One Catholic in Botswana confirmed that their connection to home country enables them to receive greater social support in times of need. The migrant reiterated that he often makes use of WhatsApp groups such as Catholic Hymns, Catholic Songs and Bira reTsitsi in sharing of songs in home language. The sharing of songs as one informant asserts, "make them feel closer to God" than the songs in English or any other language such as Setswana which they are not well versed in. In this regard, WhatsApp groups have been created to cater for sharing Catholic Shona and Ndebele hymns by members spread throughout the world. In some cases, networks are formed for specific purposes such as sharing employment opportunities and sending remittances home. These WhatsApp groups include Zim People in Botswana, MaZimbabweans ari MuBotswana,

Updates in Botswana and Gabz-Harare Malaicha. However, such networks are often appropriated as platforms for sharing testimonies and evangelising by members of different denominations including the Roman Catholic Church.

Social media functions as discursive spaces that enable people to negotiate various institutional religious authorities. Although social media might be used to implicitly critique certain forms of moderate Catholicism it is also used to bring Catholics together wherever they might be. Through social media, Catholics are able to praise members of the clergy who are actively engaged in the participation of various religious duties. Zimbabwean Catholic migrants are able to have their voices heard in decision making and also to make significant monetary contributions to the activities of the church. Despite being in different geographical spaces they are able to articulate authority in the structures of the Church. They can also make suggestions to other values they consider threatening to the Catholic society. Through various new media platforms people can use social media to build a Christian identity together with other Catholics all over the world. The digital space is a venue where Catholics who are in foreign lands are able to articulate a specific Catholic identity according to their cultural norms.

Although social media seem to subvert the authority of accepted religious structures or leaders some view it positively. Social media is acknowledged as a good invention because it has managed to facilitate communication with other Christians back home. At the same time, it has enabled the Zimbabwean Catholic diasporans to maintain the Christian values in the host country. Social media has expanded the number of arenas of religious forums and actors. It has been extended to those who have been previously the minority and excluded to take part. Those who could not read the bible were previously left on the margins but with the use of social media they can now participate in the activities of the Church through audio recordings. The illiterate are being catered for through audio recordings that are sent via social media platforms such as WhatsApp. People can get a voice bible and can also make significant contribution in the discussions. Distance is no longer a barrier to communication because of the social media.

Social media has changed religious activities in substantial terms (Hoover 2008). Nowadays there are a lot of actors that can participate in religious activities. The primary actors in religion are no longer the sole source of ideas and primary agenda setters. Other actors are coming too who also set the agenda and contribute to the religious narrative in a substantive way. The significant contribution by social media is probably more religious tolerance. For example, in the Roman Catholic Church no priest would be the sole custodian of preaching as other

challengers could also come in. For example, through various WhatsApp groups a nun and a male catechist send audio messages on gospel readings. This demonstrates that there tends to be watering down of extremist positions, whilst potentially social media could promote extremist positions. WhatsApp groups as social media platforms can also lead to consensus building in the Church. One can argue that there is still room for extremist to use the same platforms to promote their agendas.

With the new media platforms, there has been what can be seen as new positions of power that seem to be flattening traditional hierarchies. Media provides new platforms that give voice to the voiceless. WhatsApp as a form of social media has shaped the Christian leadership and institutions of authority. Many people have been given global audience for their ideas in Christian circles.

The formal structures including the supreme Roman Catholic Church authority, the Holy See, has also mobilised new media to evangelise, and communicate in real time with congregates world-wide. The Roman Catholic Church maintains the Vatican News – an online news outlet providing “news on Pope Francis, the Holy See, the Church in the world, and international news” in various major languages (Vatican News; 2019). The Vatican News “is also present on the main social media platforms: Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Instagram” and “finds its expression and interaction on a platform that is multilingual, multicultural, multichannel, multimedia and multi-device” (Vatican News; 2019). In a way, the Pope is able to communicate directly to the remotest and lowest ranked Catholic. In addition, the newsletter can also potentially reach non Catholics. As noted by Cheong (2017:28), “depending on the context, contemporary religious authority and organizing not only involves but often depends on the appropriation of new media”.

Conclusion

The relationship between media and religion exists in that social media in particular plays a fundamental role in the transmission of Christian information especially to those migrants who are in foreign countries. The impact of social media is recognised as a positive gesture to Zimbabwean Catholic migrants in Gaborone, Botswana. New social media such as WhatsApp has enabled more participants in religious activities to include the illiterate, women and children who before social media were left on the periphery. The paper highlighted how migrants specifically Zimbabwean Catholics in Gaborone, Botswana utilise the new media platforms to interact and be in touch with their families, friends and other Catholics in various

communities globally including their home country. Social media has enabled Zimbabwean migrant Catholics to keep up with the ongoing activities of parishes back home as well as participating in the activities in the host country. Through mainly WhatsApp Zimbabwean migrants are able to maintain social ties including using their home language of interaction in the various WhatsApp groups. Social media has proved to be an implicit way of advocating for Catholic values framing a certain Catholic identity according to the preferred cultural norms.

Bibliography

- Butler, C. B. (1966). *Vatican II -The Voice of the Church*. Retrieved October 31, 2019, from The Aggiornamento of Vatican II: <https://vatican2voice.org/3butlerwrites/aggiorna.htm>
- Campbell, H. A. (2010). When Religion Meets New Media. In S. M. Hoover, J. Mitchell, & D. Morgan , *Media Religion and Culture* (pp. 1-18). London and New York: Routledge.
- Campbell, H. A., & Teusner, P. E. (2011). Religious Authority in the Age of the Internet. In H. A. Campbell, & P. E. Teusner, *Virtual Lives: Christian Reflection* (pp. 59-68). Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press.
- Cheong, P. H., 2017. The Vitality of New Media and Religion: Communicative Perspectives, Practices, and Changing Authority in Spiritual Organization. *New Media and Society*, 91(1), p. 25–33.
- Coman, I. A., & Coman, M. (2017). Religion, Popular Culture and Social Media: The Construction of a Religious Leader Image on Facebook. *ESSACHESS: Journal for Communication Studies*, 10(2), 129-143.
- Costa, E. (2016). *Social Media in Southeast Turkey*. London: UCL Press.
- Dawson, L. L., & Hennebray, J. (1999). New Religions and the Internet: Recruiting in a New. *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 14(1), 17-39.
- Ellison, C. G., & George, L. K. (1994). Religious Involvement, Social Ties, and Social Support in a Southeastern Community. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 33(1), 46-61.
- Esteves, J. A. (2016, March 7). *Vatican Statistics Report Increase in Baptized Catholics Worldwide*. Retrieved November 2, 2019, from National Catholic Reporter: <https://www.ncronline.org/news/vatican/vatican-statistics-report-increase-baptized-catholics-worldwide>
- Evolvi, G. (2016). *Blogging Religious Change Identity, Hegemony, and Pluralism in Italy*. PhD Unpublished Thesis, College of Media, Communication and Information, University of Colorado, Boulder.

- Gunde, A. M. (2015). Online News Media, Religious Identity and Their Influence on Gendered Politics: Observations from Malawi's 2014 Elections. *Journal of Religion, Media and Digital Culture*, 4(1), 39-66.
- Hjarvard, S. (2008). The Mediatization of Religion: A Theory of the Media as Agents of Religious Change. *Nordic Journal of Media Studies*, 6(1), 9-26.
- Hoover, S. M. (2008). *Media and Religion*. Colorado: University of Colorado.
- Kgatle, M. S. (2018). Social media and religion: Missiological Perspective on the Link between Facebook and the Emergence of Prophetic Churches in Southern Africa. *Verbum et Ecclesia*, 39(1), 1-6.
- Morgan, D. (2013). Religion and Media: A Critical Review of Recent Developments. *Critical Research on Religion*, 1(3), 347-356.
- Vatican News. (2019, November 1). *Frequently Asked Questions*. Retrieved November 1, 2019, from Vatican News: <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/faq.html>