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"IN-LINE RELIGION": INNOVATIVE PASTORAL APPLICATIONS OF THE NEW INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES (NICTS) BY THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN NIGERIA[2]

1. *Introduction*

"Religion and the media seem to be ever more connected as we move further into the twenty-first century" (Hoover 2006:1). This assertion clearly defines the link between religious belief and praxis and the new information and communication technologies which are the most defining media instruments of the twenty-first century.

The new information and communication technologies (NICTs or simply ICTs), is the collective term given to the (second and third) generation of information technology spawned by the merger of computers and telecommunications. ICT encompasses computer systems and networks, cellular telephony, desktop publishing, multimedia production, the Internet, cable television and others. (Flor, 2001:2) ICT has led to the emergence of new forms of mass media culture different from the old media cul-

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ture of terrestrial radio and television. The new media is characterised by a multiplicity of media producers, and by nature of the medium it is not possible to present a complete index of what is available, or even to make an authoritative guess. Above all, this is a medium which is not time-based.

Within the past decade, the religious application and implication of these new technologies have attracted a lot of scholarship, especially in America (Zaleski, 1997; Bunt, 2000; Helland, 2000; Hadden & Cowan 2001; Underwood, 2001; Lawrence, 2001; Fernback, 2001; Nash, 2001; Jewel, 2002 & 2004; Babin & Zukowski, 2002; Hoover, Clark & Ranie, 2004; Brasher, 2004; Hoover & Park, 2005; Campbell, 2006; Hoover, 2006). Helland, one of the pioneer scholars categorized the religious application of these new media between *religion-online* and *online-religion*. According to him, *religion-online* is the self-conscious use of the online context by religious organizations or movements for purposes of publicity, education, outreach, proselytization and so on, while *online-religion* is the online context becoming or being used as a locus of religious, spiritual or other similar practice. (Helland, 2000: 207; See Hoover and Park, 2005:122)

In Africa, the growing scholarship in the field of media, religion and culture has also started to investigate the growth of the new media and their appropriation by religious groups in the continent. Some of these studies fall under Helland's *religion-online* categorization, like those that seek to show the globalisation dimension of religious groups, (or the projection of religious image and messages through the new media. Of special interest is the use of internet websites and satellite broadcasting (Asmaoh-Gyadu, 2003; Haron, 2004; Hackett, Forthcoming). Others can fall under the category of *online-religion*, like those that show how Africans, especially those in the Diaspora are constructing their identities through the new media (Myer, 2001, van Dyik, 2001, 2004).

At the recently concluded conference on New Media and Religious Transformation in Africa held in Abuja Nigeria, a good number of papers focused explicitly on the new information and communication technologies and their appropriation by various religious groups, including the African Traditional Religion (See Alhassan, Asamoah-Gyadu, Omachonu, Owoeye, Taiwo and Yahya).

This paper joins the growing corpus of literature on the relationship between religion and the new information and communication technologies in Africa. However, the case I will be presenting may not fall neatly into the two afore-mentioned categories. That is why I termed it innovative, and would classify it as an *in-line religion*, 'in' standing for indirect religious application of NICT. This paper thus advances a new perspective in studying the application of new information and communication technologies in religious belief and praxis in Africa.

2. *Comparative analysis of catholic and pentecostal use of NICTS in Nigeria*

In my researches in the field of media, religion and culture I have made extensive comparative analyses of the Catholic and Pentecostal churches in Nigeria and their different communication strategies. As I have made clear elsewhere, my focus on these two Christian groups derive from the fact that I see them as standing on opposite poles on the Christian religious platform (Ihejirika, 2006a:7; Forthcoming) David Martin described the movement from the Catholic model to the Pentecostal model of Christianity as "a tearing of the social fabric" (Martin, 2002: 23) There are differences between the major dimensions of the Pentecostal belief system and essential elements of the Catholic belief system (See Ihejirika, 2006a:8-10 for a detailed presentation of these differences).

But the most striking difference between the two groups lies in their approach to and appropriation of mass media technologies. I will briefly make separate presentations of their media use.

2.1. *Nigerian Pentecostals and their Media USE*

One of the defining characteristics of the Pentecostal strand of Christianity is the appropriation and use of modern media technologies as part of their religious ritual practice. (Amstrong, 1979; Hadden & Swan, 1981; Hoover, 1988; Bruce, 1990; Peck, 1993; Alenxander, 1994, Hackett, 1998). For these churches, as Rosalind Hackett notes, the appropriation and use of the media technologies facilitates the dissemination of the Word to the masses, and as such is a tool of expansion. It is also a reflection of their globalizing aspirations, as well as a calculated attempt to transform and Christianize popular culture so that it is safe for consumption by 'born-again Christians. In short, the modern media are deemed an acceptable weapon for God's army in the battle against Satan. (Hackett, 1998: 258)

Given this positive orientation, it is not surprising that among all the religious groups in Nigeria, the Pentecostals have made the most use of the mass media, especially the broadcast media. The first and most successful religious broadcasting in Africa was started by the Nigerian Pentecostal leader, Bishop Benson Idahosa (Lyon & Lyon, 1987, 1992). Since then, the Pentecostal use of the media has grown in quantity and sophistication (Adeoya & Ajayi, 1998).

In Nigeria today, religious broadcasting is almost synonymous with Pentecostalism. There are a hundred and one preachers, healers, counselors, exorcists, singers, who identify with this burgeoning movement within Christianity, and who buy air time on national, local and private radios and televisions to proclaim their fundamentalist message. Some also pay for space in newspapers to publish their messages. The most

notable figures among them are: Tunde Bakare of the Later Rain Assembly, Chris Oyakilome of Christ Embassy, Matthews Ashimolowo of Kingsway International Christian Centre, Enoch Adeboye of Redeemed Christian Church of God, Mike Okoronkwo of The Redeemed Evangelical Mission, David Oyedepo of the Faith Tabernacle, Taiwo and Bimbo Odukoya of The Fountain of Life Church. (Ihejirika, 2005)

The Pentecostals leaders follow a multi-media approach in their media evangelism. Apart from their radio and television programmes, many of them engage in the production of music cassettes and CDs. (Ojo, 1988, Udofia, 2004). The Pentecostals have also made in-roads into the popular cinema and home video industry in Nigeria known as *Nollywood*, (Ukah, 2008b, 2005b, 2003). There is also massive use of outdoor posters, billboards, banners and handbills (Uka, 1999, 2008a, 2008c).

With the dawn of the digital age, the Nigerian Pentecostals were quick in appropriating the new information technology, especially the internet and satellite broadcasting. Pastor Chris Oyakilome of the Christ Embassy runs a very successful satellite television broadcast from South Africa (Hackett, Forthcoming). My previous articulation of the cyber-ministry of the Redeemed Christian Church of God, (one of the mega-Pentecostal churches in Nigeria) presents a good example of the Pentecostal ministry in cyberspace:

The Redeemed Internet Outreach could be accessed at www.rccg.org. It is a well packaged web-site and has a lot of useful information about the church including a parish directory that lists the major parishes in Nigeria and abroad, their pastors and contact addresses. There is also a section providing information on past conventions of the church as well as the Holy Ghost Services and Festivals, with a section showing some pictures taken in past festivals.

The website is also interactive, and provides members with a discussion forum and a testimony forum where they can share with others the blessings they have received. Members can also receive prayer points as well as make prayer requests. With the provision of free e-mail boxes, members have greater possibility of communicating among themselves and with the leaders of the church.

The site also hosts an on-line bookstore where one can purchase electronically most of the books written by Pastor Adeboye, and other titles in the Redeemed bookshops. Through the Support RCCG section, the church also solicits for the financial support of members and other users of the site.

The most recent introductions to the website are web radio and television. These provide access to both live streaming and archives of Pastor Adeboye's preaching and ministrations. (Ihejirika, 2006a:31)

I have also noted that in their use of the mass media, especially the electronic media, Nigerian 'televangelists' have some characteristics which distinguish them from their counterparts in other parts of the world, especially the American televangelists:

• All of them are leaders of a church, which in most cases they are the founders.

• The whole structure of the church and the media programmes revolve around them. This is in line with many revitalisation movements where the leaders are more than simple leaders but prophetic figures representing the movements. The leaders are symbols of identification for the adherents, and thus need to be the major focus of attention.

• Most of them are well-educated. The high level of education and intellectualism of the Nigerian Pentecostal leaders and preachers is a remarkable feature, marking them out even from those in the United States. This high intellectualism mixed with the reputed spiritual prowess, increases substantially the religious and social influence

2.2. *Catholic Attitude to the new Media*

In contrast to the Pentecostals, the Catholic Church as an institution has exhibited ambivalent attitudes towards the media, which has bordered more on the negative. Cardinal Carlo Martini, former Archbishop of Milan once made a scatting critique of this attitude thus:

> My impression is that in our Church we have not yet understood the new challenge of the media sphere. We are awkward in communication. We have an inferiority complex before the great secular press or television or radio. We still don't know or appreciate the new language of the media with their insistence on connotation and vibration. We are ignorant of the new idioms and concepts of the religious language of today. (Martini, 1990:48; 1994)

Franz-Josef Eilers following Gaston Roberge sees in the relation between the Catholic Church and social communication three trends or attitudes which partly overlap. These trends, with their concomitant actions and positions are presented in the Table 1.

I will like to add a fourth trend to the ones of Roberge-Eilers . This new trend which I will call appreciation started with the dawn of the digital revolution, especially with the birth of the internet in the early nineties. The attitude that goes with it is that of positive understanding, the action is requisite use and pastoral care, and the position is that of an insider.

In my researches I have discovered that of all the technologies of mass communication, none has been so instantly accepted and embraced by the Catholic Church

Table 1: Showing Catholic Church's approaches to the mass media

| Trends | Catholic Church's Approaches to Mass Media | | |
	Attitude	Action	Position
Trend I	Suspicion and rejection	Censorship and control	Outside
Trend II	Imitation and ambition	Use at all costs	Marginal
Trend III	Critical understanding	Discriminating use and compassionate service	Inside

Source: Eilers, 1996: 185)

Table 2: Comparison of Catholics past teachings on mass media and teachings on new information and communication technologies

Everyone knows what damage is done to the soul by bad motion pictures. They are occasions of sin; they seduce young people along the ways of evil by glorifying the passions, they show life under a false light, they cloud ideals, they destroy pure love, respect for marriage, affection for the family. They are capable also of creating prejudices among individuals and misunderstandings among nations, among social classes, among entire races. (Vigilante Cura, No. 24)	It is important, (too), that people at all levels of the Church use the Internet creatively to meet their responsibilities and help fulfil the Church's mission. Hanging back timidly from fear of technology or for some other reason is not acceptable, in view of the very many positive possibilities of the Internet. Methods of facilitating communication and dialogue among her own members can strengthen the bonds of unity between them (The Church and Internet, No 10)
From the time when these arts (motion picture, radio and television) came into use, the Church welcomed them, not only with great joy but also with a motherly care and watchfulness, having in mind to protect her children from every danger as they set out on this new path of progress. This watchful care springs from the mission she received from the Divine Saviour Himself; for, as is clear to all, these new forms of art exercise very great influence on the manner of thinking and acting of individuals and of every group of men. (Miranda Prorsus, Nos.4-5)	For the Church, the new world of cyberspace is a summons to the great adventure of using its potentials to proclaim the Gospel message. This challenge is at the heart of what it means at the beginning of the millennium to follow the Lord's command to 'put out into the deep' Duc in altum!
It is the Church's birthright to use and own any of these media which are necessary or useful for the formation of Christians and for pastoral activity. Pastors of souls have the task of instructing and directing the faithful how to use these media in a way that will ensure their own salvation and perfection and that of all mankind. (Inter Mirifica, No. 3)	Catholic universities, colleges, schools, and educational programs at all levels should provide courses for various groups-seminarians, priests, religious brothers and sisters, and lay leaders...teachers, parents, and students as well as more advanced training in communications technology, management, ethics, and policy issues for individuals preparing for professional media work or decision-making roles, including those who work in social communications for the Church (Church and Internet, No. 11).

as the new information and communication technologies. At the early stage of the Internet, the Vatican employed the services of an American lady who is an expert in information technology. In 1995, three years after the launch of the World Wide Web,

the Vatican website was launched, and has remained the most authentic source of information on the Church in the web.

Both Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI have exhibited very positive attitudes to these technologies by applying them to their ministries. In 1998, Pope John Paul II made history by sending his Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation to the Church in Oceania through the Internet, the first time such an action was undertaken. Pope Benedict XVI now engages in period satellite interactive link with students from different parts of the world. Students from Nigeria participated in this link in 2006.

A comparative presentation of some excerpts from former documents of the Church on the media in general and recent ones on the Internet will show clearly the positive understanding towards the new information and communication technologies. Table 2.

The new positive understanding of the media is evident in the acknowledgement that instructions on the use of the media should be carried out by experts – (see the comparison between Inter Mirifica 3 above and Church and Internet 11). With the digital revolution, the Catholic Church began to come out of her excessive dependence on the print media. (The situation in Nigeria is a clear example of this over-dependence on print media – See Ihejirika, 2006b) It is true that there are still worries among some traditional Catholics on the dangers of the Internet to dilute essential Catholic doctrines and practices; but the current attitude in the Catholic Church with regard to the new information and communication technologies is very positive.

3. *Mater Cyberworld: an innovative pastoral application of ICT by a catholic diocese in Nigeria*

The presentation which follows derives from a recent research I carried out to investigate the prospects and challenges of shared internet centres in fostering ICT penetration into rural Africa. In the study[3], I purposefully chose *Mater Cyberworld*, an internet café owned by the Mater Ecclesiae Catholic Diocese, Ahiara Mbaise in eastern Nigeria. Two reasons informed the choice of the cybercafé: the rural nature of the Ahiara Mbaise diocese in which it is located, and the fact that it remained functional for many years, unlike others that folded within a year or so of operation.[4]

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[3]   This study was ethnographic in nature, which is now the privileged method for studying the contextual application of ICTs (see Miller & Slater, 2000; Tacchi, Slater & Hearn, 2003; Tacchi, Slater and Lewis, 2003). The field work was conducted between May and August 2007.

[4]   From around 2003, there was a proliferation of cybercafés in both urban and rural areas in Nigeria. It was seen as a viable business, and many young entrepreneurs went into it. But like the dot.com burst, it was not long before most of them began to fold up due to inability to break even and consistent break-down of their networks. Within the period Mater Cyberworld was set up there were

With a total population of 495,545 inhabitants (Ahiara Diocese, 2006), Mbaise has a population density of more than 1000 persons per square kilometre. It is thus one of the most densely populated areas of Igboland. The socio-economic consequences of this high population density are noted by social analysts thus:

As a rural area without any processing or manufacturing facilities, there are no employment opportunities available in Mbaise for the youth who leave school at the end of each school year. Many of them migrate to the various urban centres in search of employment. But the numbers who remain behind simply because they have no place to go is still staggering. (Ugo, 1994)

"In most parts of Mbaise, a situation exists in which an 'island' of an economically well-to-do person or family is completely surrounded by a wide 'sea' of numerous relatively poor and very poor people often living from hand to mouth at below subsistence level. An average so-called 'rich' person invariably supports financially and socially no less than twenty people" (Ajaebu, 1997)

"Our dense population has put a tremendous pressure on our lands. The farms are too small for any meaningful cultivation because of the large number of people sharing them. Because of the limited number of farming lands, the available ones are over worked or over cultivated thereby yielding poor results" (Agulana, 1998:33).

The pressures of the dense population have led many indigenes of the land, especially the youth, to migrate to other parts of the country and beyond. It means that majority of those who live in the locality are the elderly, people involved in self-subsistence agriculture, petty trading, artisans, mechanics, and civil servants. It is within this rural community that the Mater Cyberworld is located.

4. *Evaluation of the Mater Cyberworld*

I used Sarah Parkinson's four-point criteria for evaluating the strengths and limitations of the various models of internet access centres as the framework for our evaluation. These are scalability, sustainability, reach and use, and development impact. (Parkinson, 2005)

4.1. *Scalability of the Mater Cyberworld*

As Parkinson notes, at the micro level, the key questions related to scalability are: What are the requirements to set up a centre, and who will actually do it? (2005:12). The scalability factor thus examines the entrepreneurs of the access centres, their

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about four similar cafes established in some major market squares in Mbaise like Nkwogwu. But none of them last up to a year. The same situation was noticed in some other rural communities I visited in Imo State.

motivations - whether market-based or non-profit, as well as the technologies employed in providing services.

Mater Cyberworld is owned and managed by the Catholic diocese of Ahiara Mbaise. The diocese covers the whole of the Mbaise community. The diocesan centre is centrally located in Mbaise, at place called Ahiara Junction. At this junction, four roads leading to the five clans of the community converge. These roads are both tarred and untarred, but all of them are motorable. It is thus possible, within an hour to reach it from any part of the community using either a car, a motor-bike. With a bicycle, one can get to it in two and half hours. The cybercafe is situated in a spacious hall beside the secretariat of the Catholic diocese.

The motivation for setting up the café was articulated thus in the official website of the diocese: "Bishop Chikwe's vision is that through Mater Cyber World the people of Mbaise would not be left behind in the ongoing revolution in Cyber Space which he conceives as a Global "SITTING ROOM" for the proclamation of God's kingdom. He believes that with the extension of the Internet to a rural setting like Mbaise one would record great strides in the injunction of Jesus to preach the gospel "to the ends of the earth".(www.ahiaradiocese.org/projects.htm).

The Bishop, Rt. Rev. Victor A. Chikwe, in a personal interview explained further this motivation[5]: the internet facility was part of the comprehensive communication strategy of the diocese. At the time the diocese was erected in 1988, there was not a single telephone line in the whole of Mbaise, not even at the local government headquarters. He had then used a microwave radio mast to connect to a telephone line from Owerri, the state capital which is about 45 kilometres away. This was the first telephone line in Mbaise. Initially the telephone was for his private use, but later he extended two lines for public use. This public telephone service proved a great relief to Mbaise people who had had to travel to Owerri or Umuahia to make calls, with the attendant hazards on the roads, and often the disappointment of travelling the long distance without succeeding in making their calls.

The cybercafe began operation in 2003 and is equipped with industrial-sized C-band with 2.4m dish, 128kbps upload and 192kbps download. It has two sections - the internet phone section with four-port telephony equipment and a browsing section with 20 functional PCs and four full-time workers at the services of customers. There is also a standby generator which is switched on when there is electricity disruption.

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5   Bishop Victor A. Chikwe. Personal interview, 24th May, 2007. These interviews were conducted with three assistants within the months of April to June 2007.

4.2. *Sustainability of the Mater Cyberworld*

Sustainability, according to Parkinson is "the capacity to continue once begun" (2005:12). Sustainability depends on factors both external and internal to a centre. Key external factors include the local market, national market and outside support mechanisms. Internal factors include internal management and leadership. The elements making up the internal factors are the vision of the centre, the cohesion versus complexity in decision making, level of internal conflict, ability to partner, network, technical know-how, marketing skills, flexibility and quick response. The internal assets that make for sustainability are building, location, equipment, and available services.

The interview with the managers of the cybercafe revealed a number of factors that have sustained it. "We have been successful because of people's patronage. They feel secure because of the location. We also provide more efficient service in terms of speed of browsing, consistency in service provision. The time when the other cyber-cafes in the area were still open, people pass them to come here. The efficiency and consistency of our service owes a lot to our use of C-Band internet dish. Unlike the V-Sat dish, we do not experience many network disruptions. Since June 2006, we have had only experience three network disruptions."

It is evident that being located inside a church premises gives people the confidence that they may not be cheated and that the place would not be a den for miscreants (the so-called 'yahoo-boys'). Parents also have confidence in allowing the children to go to the cybercafe because of its strategic location.

The over-all manager of the café is a seminarian, who is on a one-year apostolic work. This ensures total allegiance to the proprietor and dedication to duty. He oversees the three employed workers. All of them refer to one of the Bishop's secretaries. This management structure assures effectiveness in service rendition and absence of internal conflict.

4.3. *Reach and Use of Mater Cyberworld*

According to Parkinson, to achieve universal access, access centres should be priced, distributed and designed such that any person can use the target services if he or she so chooses. This means that the price of the service must be within the reach of the prospective users' ability to pay, that the users are aware of the service, and that they have the capacity to use it, or feel able to acquire such capacity. (2005:13)

"Majority of the users are the youth – both boys and girls," the Manager told us. On several occasions we visited the cybercafe the preponderance of youth patronage was very evident. In fact, the cybercafe has become a meeting point of sort for the young people as many who are not browsing are seeing chatting in groups outside the building.

On the volume of clients he went further to explain: "Averagely, 400 young people visit the cybercafe every day. But during major periods like registration for JAMB and WAEC exams, or the checking of results for these exams, the average users rise to up to 1000 youths. Since majority of the users are University students, when the universities are in session, patronage may decline to as low as 100 users per day. Most of the users work on their own; only few require our assistance."

All the users we interviewed indicated that they are capable of browsing the internet on their own. Majority of them are frequent users of the café. One of them, a student of University of Nigeria Nsukka, (UNN) said: "I come here almost every day. I have a sense of attachment to the internet. I have introduced a lot of my friends to the internet. The major websites I make use of are Google for internet search, yahoo and hotmail for sending messages and chatting.

I also browse for my friends, my parents and other people who are not computer literate and do not know how to use the internet. I help them send messages to their children, and find other relevant information for them."

The browsing charge is also within the reach of the young people. The users are charged =N=100 (approx. 80 US cents) for one-hour browsing and =N=60 (50 US cents) for 30 minutes browsing. The money realised is able to pay for the monthly bandwidth fee to our providers (Israeli-based Gilat Communications), the salaries of employed workers and the maintenance of the systems.

4.4. *Development Impact of Mater Cyberworld*

Parkinson notes: "The development impact of universal access initiatives will be the sum of the centres themselves, the process of establishing them, the services they provide over time, and the improvements they engender in people's lives…. Local employment opportunities, the capacity developed by staff, and the money that flows into, out of, and circulates through the community as a result of the centre also have important implications for local economic development" (2005:14)

From our interviews and interactions[1] with the users of the cybercafe, its developmental impact, especially for the young people was evident. We asked the users to give reasons why they make use of the internet, and these are some of the excerpts from their responses:

As a student, we use it for research during the holidays, we can also use it to check our results, and those who have taken WAEC and JAMB can buy the scratch card and come and check their results. We can also send our assignments to our lecturers, and those who want to try their luck with the American visa lottery can do it here

I make use of the internet to communicate with friends, brothers and sisters, and conduct research for my B.Sc. in Nursing. It helps to broaden my knowledge, and of course it makes me feel on the same level as those living in the town.

We don't need to go to Owerri to send mails, make international calls, etc. I can just pick an *okada* (commercial motorcycle) for twenty naira and come here and browse.

The use of the internet café improves our knowledge of internet and computer. It makes us have a sense of superiority over those who do not have the knowledge, and also feel at par with those who live in the towns. When I chat with some of my friends living in the town, they express surprise when I tell them that I am in the village.

The developmental impact of the cybercafe is both tangible and intangible. Tangibly, it provides educational assistance to the young people and also a means for interacting with their peers. The importance of education for development is obvious. A solid developmental structure must be founded on sound educational foundation. Mbaise people place a lot of premium on education, both for the boys and girls. As Dioka noted: "Generally Mbaise people are known for investing much resources in education, and their women are not exempted. Unlike many parts of the country where women are scarcely educated, the Mbaise woman is given the same opportunity as the man … Only an insignificant minority fail to go to the school because of poverty, as poor parents are prepared to sell their lands or go into debt for the education of their daughters" (Dioka, 1994) The presence and use of the internet is a very tangible assistance their in educational drive.

Another tangible developmental impact of the cybercafe to the community is that it enables the people to keep in touch with their relatives living in other parts of the country and the world. We have noted earlier that because of the dense population of the locality, many indigenes are forced to migrate outside in search of their livelihood. Many of them, especially those living in America and Europe remit part of their incomes to support their folks back home. This fact was made clear by Ugoh in the following words: "What has helped to fuel the development of Mbaise so far is not the income generated in Mbaise. Instead, it is the surplus funds transferred to Mbaise by our sons and daughters living and working outside Mbaise. This explains the apparent contradiction that while agricultural output in Mbaise – the main source of income – remained stagnant over the years, all indices of development showed phenomenal increases." (Ugoh, 1994)

Through the electronic mails, and cheaper international telephone calls provided by the Mater Cyberworld, the people of Mbaise are enabled to keep constantly in

touch with their kits and kin living outside. Elderly parents request the young people to send the messages on their behalf. Often, these parents are brought to the telephone section of the cybercafe to speak directly with their sons and daughters living in America and Europe.

The major intangible developmental benefit of the cybercafe is the sense of empowerment it bestows on the young people who make use of the internet. Usually, people who live in the rural areas have a sense of inferiority with respect to those living in the urban areas. But as most of the youth interviewed indicated, the fact that they can access the internet in the rural area just like their colleagues in the urban areas makes them feel at par with them. This feeling of equality is important for growing people as inferiority complexes can retard both psychological and intellectual development.

5. *Socio-religious implications of Mater Cyberworld*

The innovation in the case of *Mater-Cyberworld* is the fact that we see a religious organisation using the new information and communication technologies as part of its overall pastoral service to the people. The direct intent of this communication venture is not to project the image of the diocese (the diocese has a website), it is not meant to attract new converts, it is not meant to educate people about the diocese, but it is aimed at providing a needed service to the people.

In this, Mater Cyberworld is similar to another communication venture, The Verbum Networks by the Catholic Dominican Congregation in the south-western Nigerian city of Ibadan. With an independent network operation centre, Verbum Networks aims at providing cheap and affordable internet services and Voice-Over-Internet-Protocol (VOIP) telephony to the people in the town

The Mater Cyberworld and the Verbum Networks are good illustrations of the Nigerian Catholic Church's involvement in the new information and communication technologies. The major investment here is towards providing service to the needy in the country. This contrasts sharply with the *on-line religion* trend, which is most prevalent in Nigeria, especially with the Pentecostal churches. Most of these churches appropriate the new information and communication technologies specifically to project their image, especially those of their founders, to broadcast their messages, and solicit for fund from members. The excessive strive by Pentecostal pastors to project their images through the media is what Asonzeh Ukah has termed 'roadside Pentecostalism' (Ukah, 2005, 2008c)

Though not directly meant for evangelization, the Mater Cyberworld indirectly provides a lot of pastoral gains for the Catholic Church. The fact that the café is situ-

ated within a Church environment gives the young people opportunity to animate their religious consciousness. This consciousness is reflected in their decorous dress code, and also the avoidance of the social vices linked with the internet – 'the yahoo-boys syndrome' and '419' internet scams in Nigeria. The café is also a sort of social interaction centre for the young people of the community.

Most importantly, the café offers a needed social service to the locality, especially to the youth. It helps to stem rural-urban migration by giving the young people the opportunity of partaking in the facilities available to their peers in the cities. It bridges the gap between the youth in the cities and those in the rural community of Mbaise. In this way, the cybercafe plays an important developmental role in the community. This role, as Robert White noted, especially that of bridging the gulf between the haves and the have-nots, is one of the areas which has not received sufficient attention from religious media, and which should be interrogated. He raised the question:

> To what extent are religious media dealing with the enormous social injustices that exist in the United States and in most other advanced industrial countries? It is widely recognized that these disparities in opportunity for education or adequate health services are increasing. Religious media often pretend to be the conscience of the nations, but rarely do these media take up the real issues of poverty, the growing underclass, and the suffering of children in these contexts of social injustice. The Media, Religion, and Culture perspective argues that it has adopted a cultural studies approach, but the tradition of critical theory, which is supposed to be part of the cultural studies tradition, is rarely found in the Media, Religion, and Culture perspective. (White, 2007)

The Mater Cyberworld as a form of religious media has certainly dealt with this social issue in the Mbaise locality and this is in my evaluation is innovative. It is an example of what could be described as indirect evangelization using the new media technologies, or what I have called *in-line religion*. I will define *in-line religion* as the application of the new information and communication technologies by a religious group for the benefit of other people, especially the marginal groups in society, which indirectly boosts the image of the group, and sustains the religious consciousness of the users.

6. *Evaluation and Conclusion*

Though this is a one-case study, but it does reflect the appreciation of the new information and communication technologies by the Catholic Church in Nigeria. Based on this study, we can outline some distinctions in the use of these technologies by the two religious groups under review:

I)   The Pentecostal churches unlike the Catholic Church is still ready to invest huge sums of money in setting up these new media technologies

II) Pentecostal websites are richer and more elegantly built than Catholic websites which just present the essential

III) Pentecostal use of the new media is directly religious in intent – providing users with Christian messages (through e-mails and SMS), while the Catholic use has indirect religious intent.

IV) The Pentecostal target audience is the middle class and upward mobile young adults, while the Catholic effort seems more directed at the rural youths and the marginal urban dwellers.

The use of the new information and communication technologies thus continues the Catholic Church social involvement in Nigeria. In the past, the Church has been in the fore-front of the establishment of formal education. Most of the best known schools in the country belonged to the Church, and many well-known individuals in the country had Catholic training. Through these involvements, the Catholic Church continues to play a very active role in the socio-political development of the country.

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Abstract

Walter C. Ihejirika

"IN-LINE RELIGION": INNOVATIVE PASTORAL APPLICATIONS OF THE NEW INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES (NICTS) BY THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN NIGERIA

In my researches in the field of media religion and culture, I have made extensive comparative analyses of the Catholic and Pentecostal churches in Nigeria and their different communication strategies. This paper highlights the appropriation of the new information and communication technologies by these two Christian denominations in Nigeria. Special attention is paid to the Catholic Church, because, unlike the Pentecostal denominations which see media technologies as an extension of the church pulpit, the Catholic Church has generally exhibited a somewhat cold attitude towards these instruments of mass communication. This attitude goes back to the advent of cinema which the Church's hierarchy then saw as having the potential of corrupting faith and moral. The Catholic Church has remained largely a print-based Church, investing most of her communication energy in the print media and in oral catechism. But in recent years, this negative attitude of the Church has started to change. Of all the technologies of mass communication, none has been so instantly accepted and embraced by the Catholic Church as the new information and communication technologies. Using the *Mater Cyberworld*, (a cyber-café founded by the Ahiara Mbaise Catholic Diocese in Eastern Nigeria), as a case, this paper highlights some distinctive characteristics of the Catholic Church's involvement in the new information and communication technologies. The analysis shows that this media appropriation is one of the means through which the Catholic Church establishes a strong presence in the Nigerian socio-political sphere.

Key words: In-line religion, Religion on-line, New information and communication technology, Catholicism, Nigerian Pentecostalism.

Резиме

Волтер Ц. Ихеџирика

„ИН–ЛАЈН" РЕЛИГИЈА: ИНВЕНТИВНА ПРИМЕНА НОВИХ ИНФОРМАТИВНИХ И КОМУНИКАЦИЈСКИХ ТЕХНОЛОГИЈА У ПАСТИРСКОМ ДЕЛОВАЊУ КАТОЛИЧКЕ ЦРКВЕ У НИГЕРИЈИ

Нека истраживања спроведена у Нигерији у области медијске религије и културе резултирала су ширим компаративним анализама деловања Католичке и Пентекосталне цркве у тој земљи и њихових различитих стратегија на плану коришћења комуникација. У овом чланку се разматра питање како две поменуте хришћанске деноминације прилагођавају ставове о коришћењу нових информативних и комуникацијских технологија у свом деловању у Нигерији. Посебна пажња посвећена је Католичкој цркви јер је генерално гледано ова деноминација, за разлику од Пентекосталне цркве која коришћење медијских технологија види као настављање обраћања верницима са црквене проповедаонице, заузела нешто хладнији став у односу на коришћење ових средстава масовних комуникација. Овакво постављање Католичке цркве се јавља још у далеком периоду успона биоскопа зато што је тадашња црквена хијерархија доживљавала филм као нешто што потенцијално може да утиче на кварење вере и морала. Католичка црква је остала при ставу да у свом деловању користи пре свега штампане материјале, усмеравајући највећи део своје комуникацијске енергије на штампу и усмено проповедништво. Али, ово негативно постављање Католичке цркве је почело да се мења последњих година. Ниједну технологију масовних комуникација Католичка црква није тако брзо прихватила и приргрлила као нове информативне и комуникацијске технологије. Полазећи од примера *Mater Cyberworld*-а (интернет кафића који је отворила католичка дијацеза Ахијара Мбејзе у источној Нигерији), у овом чланку су испитане неке видљиве карактеристике начина на који Католичка црква користи нове информативне и комуникацијске технологије. Ова анализа показује да је овакво прилагођавање медијског наступа један од метода помоћу којих католичка црква покушава да оствари што јаче присуство у нигеријском друштвенополитичком миљеу.

Кључне речи: „Ин–лајн" религија,[6] религија на интернету, нове информационе и комуникационе технологије, католицизам, нигеријски пентекостализам.

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[6]   Реч је о појму који је створио сам Волтер Ц. Ихеџирика и који полази од појма „он–лајн" религија. Аутор користи појам „ин–лајн" религија за означавање видова индиректног коришћења нових информационих и комуникацијских технологија у деловању верских деноминација – *прим. Оливер Потежица.*