Chapter 2

A Review of America's Religious Institutions' Utilization of Information Communication Technologies in Shaping Social Policy and Governance

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ABSTRACT

Information Communication and Technologies (ICTs) are vital tools that religious organizations pervasively utilize in the United States of America (USA) to shape social issues, influence social policy and participate in governance. This paper articulates the different methods of deploying ICTs by religious organizations toward social justice and human development in the USA from historical to contemporary times. Furthermore, the article highlights the nexus of intervention strategies and ICTs to address social problems such as poverty, unemployment, child abuse, human trafficking, and environmental issues. Contemporary ICTs applications such as twitter, Facebook, blogs, online communities and classical media outlets such as television, satellite communications and radios used by religious organization in influencing governance will be examined. Implications for teaching, practice and future research are delineated.

INTRODUCTION

The diverse use of Information and communication technologies (ICTs) has created a new paradigm of online religious communities that are influencing and shaping social welfare policies and governance across the globe. New online faith-based and religious communities are engaged in collaborations and resource sharing that are previously unknown to address myriad of social problems such as poverty,

child abuse, domestic violence, global food crises and cross-continental disasters to mention a few. The use of ICTs to connect people of similar religious persuasion to practice their beliefs has been described as virtual religion (George, 2006). The focus of this paper is to present a synopsis of the historical and contemporary applications of ICTs in addressing social problems, influencing social policy and governance in the United States of America (USA). The uniting and divisive roles of religion and ICTs usage in the USA are well discussed in literature (Armfield & Holbert, 2003; Sehat, 2012). Nevertheless, the activities or practices of people of identical religious persuasion using ICTs in the actualization of specific social-political aspirations has been described as techno-spiritual practices (Bell, 2006).

We argue that in the 21st century online communities through the deployment of various technologies will continue to have lasting impact and implications that will profoundly influence social issues, agenda setting, and governance in the USA society. Secondly we posit that the deployment of ICTs by religious, and faith-based organizations will constitute virtual communities of faith that could complement America's leadership and quest for world peace, social justice, and engaged diplomacy (Gendron Jr, Blas-Irizarry, & Boggs, 2009), especially in an increasingly social-politically, and economically disenchanting world. In this review, the social construct of governance is viewed as the behavior and or actions taken by individuals and other institutions (such the American government and corporate America). Furthermore, religion is viewed as the formalized belief in divine entities that encompass rituals and ceremonies performed at designated places and times. We do not subscribe to arguments that religion will be eliminated, but we agree that religion as once practiced will no longer exist because of the roles ICTs will continue to play. Techno-religious changes (a term coined by George, 2006) will also cause significant changes in perceptions of social issues, resource sharing, policy making and ultimately governance.

RELIGION, COMMUNICATION, AND GOVERNANCE IN THE PRE AND POST-COLONIAL PERIODS

Native Americans and Communication

Scientific research depicts human races as comprised of periods or eras of civilizations: prehistoric, modern, and trans-modern civilizations. Each civilization, in the past as is the current civilization, is governed by rank order bureaucratic hierarchies infused with some type of religious or spiritual belief systems. These religious or spiritual belief systems play a pivotal role in the success of the governance and functioning hierarchy. Americans' belief systems were composed of what Frankl (2006) calls a search for meaning in their spiritual world for answers to questions that were beyond their immediate comprehension. Native Americans sought answers through visions, through the earth and its natural elements (sky, wind, sun, rocks, rain), which was considered supernatural forces by white settlers who came to America. This search for answers by Native Americans was depicted as "spiritual" and was an integral aspect of Native American culture and communication structure (Griffiths, 1999). The spiritual practices offered Native Americans feelings of satisfaction not only internally but also guidance in how to behave in their daily lives and how to treat others (governance) (Garrett, 1998). Both religion, as practiced by the settlers and spirituality as practiced by Native Americans held significant roles in the governance process during the development of the USA. As immigrants from other countries continued to populate the 13 original colonies, the primordial form of ICTs was primarily human interactions.

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