

# Regulating Artificial Intelligence for Spiritual Well-Being: A Legal and Ethical Framework for Protecting Digital Faith Communities in Africa

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## Abstract

As artificial intelligence becomes embedded in contemporary religious practice (from algorithm-driven religious content to AI-powered spiritual assistants) the intersection between digital technology and spirituality raises profound normative, ethical, and legal questions. This paper examines the regulatory gaps and emerging risks posed by AI to the spiritual well-being of individuals and faith communities in Africa, with particular focus on Nigeria and Rwanda. It explores how unregulated AI systems can distort spiritual discernment, facilitate religious manipulation, amplify harmful content, and commercialise sacred beliefs through algorithmic profiling. Drawing on the Nigeria Data Protection Act (2023), Rwanda's data governance structures, international AI regulatory models, and African communitarian values, the paper proposes a contextualised legal-ethical framework for safeguarding digital spirituality. It argues that regulatory interventions must balance innovation with the protection of human dignity, autonomy, and spiritual agency, principles foundational to African religious and cultural traditions. The study adopts a doctrinal-analytical methodology complemented by multidisciplinary insights from theology, data protection, and AI ethics. The paper concludes by recommending rights-based, culturally grounded regulatory mechanisms that strengthen trust, ensure responsible AI deployment, and preserve the authenticity of spiritual experience in the digital age.

**Keywords:** Artificial Intelligence, Spirituality, Data Protection, Digital Rights, Faith communities.

## 1.0 Introduction

In recent years, the intersection between artificial intelligence (AI) and spirituality has increasingly attracted scholarly attention, reflecting a growing convergence where technology profoundly influences religious experiences and spiritual practices. This intersection presents significant opportunities for enhancing spiritual guidance, expanding access to religious resources, and fostering new expressions of faith in digital domains. However, alongside these opportunities lie emerging dangers, such as spiritual confusion, ethical dilemmas, and threats to spiritual autonomy within digital religious spaces.<sup>86</sup> A key problem in this evolving landscape is the absence of comprehensive regulatory frameworks to protect individuals' spiritual autonomy and safeguard the integrity of digital religious environments. Without adequate regulation, spiritual communities face risks of manipulation, cultural dilution, and erosion of trusted authority structures.<sup>87</sup> The relevance of these issues is particularly pronounced in African contexts, including Nigeria and Rwanda, where spiritual beliefs are deeply woven into social and cultural identities, and where rapid technological adoption heightens the urgency to understand AI's impact on spiritual practices and develop context-

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<sup>86</sup> Alkhouri, K. I. *Spiritual confusion in the era of artificial intelligence*. *Journal of Psychology of Religion*, Advance online publication (2025).

<sup>87</sup> IIARD Journals. The necessity for regulation in digital religious spaces. *International Journal of African Religious and Digital Studies*, (2025) 12(1).

sensitive policies that uphold digital religious freedoms and authenticity.<sup>88</sup>

This paper aims to explore the opportunities, challenges, and regulatory needs arising from the integration of AI in spiritual and religious domains within African settings. The research addresses the following questions: How does AI influence spiritual autonomy and religious practice in digital spaces? What forms of regulation are necessary to protect digital religious environments? A qualitative approach, combining literature review and case study analysis, is employed to investigate these questions.<sup>89</sup> The paper follows a structured approach based on these sections: Conceptual Clarifications, Theoretical/Analytical Framework, Mapping the Interaction Between AI and Spirituality, Risks and Challenges of AI for Spiritual Discernment, Legal and Regulatory Perspectives, Toward a Legal-Ethical Framework for Protected Spiritual AI Use, Policy Recommendations for various stakeholders and Conclusion.

## 2.0 Conceptual Clarifications

The rapid advancement of digital technology, particularly Artificial Intelligence (AI), has created a profound nexus with human existence, challenging our understanding of everything from intelligence and creativity to faith and ethics. This section defines and discusses foundational concepts central to understanding the intersection of artificial intelligence (AI) and spirituality within African digital religious contexts, particularly Nigeria and Rwanda.

### 2.1 Artificial Intelligence

Artificial intelligence (AI) is the ability of a digital [computer](#) or computer-controlled [robot](#) to perform tasks commonly associated with intelligent beings.<sup>90</sup> It is the simulation of human

intelligence processes by machines, specifically computer systems. This broad field encompasses several distinct forms that are crucial for understanding its impact on society. In simple terms, artificial intelligence encompasses computer systems and algorithms capable of performing tasks that require human-like intelligence. This includes:

- **Narrow AI:** This is the only type of AI currently in widespread use. Also known as "weak AI,". It refers to systems designed and trained to perform a specific, limited task. Examples include virtual assistants like Siri, fraud detection software, recommendation systems (Netflix, Amazon), and dedicated AI for playing chess. Its capabilities are restricted to the domain for which it was programmed. Therefore, this AI focuses on specific tasks such as natural language processing or image recognition.
- **Generative AI** is a subset of AI, typically built on complex deep learning models known as Large Language Models (LLMs), that is capable of producing complex, original content such as text, images, video, or audio in response to user prompts. Tools like ChatGPT and Google Gemini exemplify this category. While generative AI can produce human-like outputs, it does so through statistical analysis of its vast training data, not through actual consciousness or understanding.<sup>91</sup>
- **Algorithmic Systems** This term refers to the combination of data, algorithms, and models that work together to automate decision-making or content curation. Essentially, an algorithmic system is the operational structure the "how" of modern AI. For instance, the recommendation

<sup>88</sup> Oyebanji, I. T. Artificial intelligence and its effects on Christian youths' spirituality in Nigeria. *African Journal of Religion, Theology and Society*, (2025) 7(2), 45-62.

<sup>89</sup> Ungar-Sargon, J. AI and spirituality: The disturbing implications. *Journal of Medical Clinical Research & Review*, (2025) 9(3), 1-7.

<sup>90</sup> Britannica, artificial intelligence <https://www.britannica.com/technology/artificial-intelligence>, accessed on the 18<sup>th</sup> November, 2025.

<sup>91</sup> IBM, *What is Artificial Intelligence*, <https://www.ibm.com/think/topics/artificial-intelligence#> accessed on the 18<sup>th</sup> November, 2025.

engine on a social media platform is an algorithmic system that determines which content is shown to a user based on calculated metrics like engagement and relevance.<sup>92</sup> Broadly, it refers to data-driven, rule-based processes that influence information delivery and user interaction in religious digital platforms.

## 2.2 Spiritual Discernment

Spiritual discernment involves the process by which individuals or communities evaluate and interpret spiritual truths to distinguish authentic spiritual guidance from error or manipulation. It is an essential human faculty, especially in a world saturated with digital information and algorithmic suggestion. Theologically, it centers on seeking divine will and guidance aligned with religious doctrines. Sociologically, it relates to communal and cultural mechanisms by which spiritual meanings are negotiated and validated.

Sociologically, spiritual discernment can be understood as the process by which individuals and communities critically evaluate stimuli (beliefs, actions, systems) to maintain fidelity to their core values, moral frameworks, and communal identity. In the modern context, this involves distinguishing between authentic spiritual experience and technologically mediated mimicry. It becomes a societal safeguard against the depersonalization, commercialization, and misinformation that can arise from algorithmic interactions. Discernment helps a community evaluate if new technologies, like AI, genuinely enhance spiritual life or reduce it to mere mechanistic, data-driven engagement.<sup>93</sup>

## 2.3 Digital Spirituality

Digital spirituality relates to the evolving religious practices and experiences mediated by digital

technologies, including online worship, virtual faith communities, and AI-powered religious tools such as chatbots offering spiritual guidance or scriptural interpretation. This dimension reshapes access to spiritual resources and engagement with faith in increasingly digital environments. The practice of online worship involves using digital platforms such as live streams, video conferencing, and dedicated apps to facilitate communal religious services and practices. The shift to online worship was significantly accelerated by global events (like Covid-19 Endemic), creating a "disembodied presence" where individuals can interact and engage without physical proximity. This offers accessibility and a new space for interaction but also alters the traditional depth and nature of embodied spiritual engagement.<sup>94</sup>

## 2.4 Algorithmic Influence and Manipulation

AI algorithms shape religious experiences by personalizing and recommending religious content or simulating spiritual advisory roles. While offering benefits like accessibility and engagement, these systems can pose risks by distorting doctrine, facilitating spiritual manipulation, and commercializing sacred beliefs through profiling and targeted content delivery. Algorithms on social media and digital platforms prioritize engagement metrics (likes, shares, time spent) to maximize profit. This logic inadvertently promotes content that is sensational, emotionally resonant, and polarizing, which often leads to the spread of misinformation.

However, the pursuit of engagement can create "echo chambers" and "filter bubbles" where users are only exposed to content that reinforces their existing views, thereby amplifying ideological polarization and societal divides. High-profile incidents have demonstrated how targeted algorithmic advertising can be used to sway public

<sup>92</sup> Sustainability Directory, *What Is Algorithmic Influence* <https://lifestyle.sustainability-directory.com/question/what-ethical-considerations-arise-from-algorithmic-influence/> accessed 10<sup>th</sup> November, 2025.

<sup>93</sup> Scientia et Fides, *Artificial Intelligence and Spirituality: A Tool for Engagement or a Threat to Transcendence?*,

<https://apcz.umk.pl/SetF/article/view/60310> accessed 16<sup>th</sup> November, 2025.

<sup>94</sup> David Ogunbiyi, Artificial Intelligence and Its Effects on Christian Youths' Spirituality [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/393129343\\_Artificial\\_Intelligence\\_and\\_Its\\_Effects\\_on\\_Christian\\_Youths'\\_Spirituality#:~:text](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/393129343_Artificial_Intelligence_and_Its_Effects_on_Christian_Youths'_Spirituality#:~:text) accessed 16<sup>th</sup> November, 2025.

opinion and compromise democratic processes, raising critical questions about autonomy and human control. Furthermore, algorithms trained on biased data can perpetuate systemic disadvantages against certain groups, leading to unfair or discriminatory outcomes in areas like law enforcement or loan applications.

## 2.5 Data Governance and Digital Ethics

Data governance refers to frameworks and policies guiding the ethical collection, storage, processing, and protection of personal and religious data. The Nigeria Data Protection Act (2023) recognizes religious and philosophical beliefs as sensitive personal data requiring stringent protection measures.<sup>95</sup> Ethical dimensions include transparency, accountability, fairness, and respect for spiritual autonomy, ensuring AI systems uphold human dignity within religious contexts. AI data governance is more complex than traditional governance due to the sheer velocity and diversity of data, and the "black box" opacity of many AI models. Key components include establishing clear data ownership, implementing strong privacy and security measures, and ensuring data quality to mitigate bias (Transcend.io, 2024; AI Multiple, 2025).<sup>96</sup>

Digital Ethics, on the other hand, is the moral compass that guides the development, deployment, and utilization of digital technologies and data, addressing the moral principles and values governing their use. It deals with what ought to be done, often going beyond legal compliance to proactively prevent harm and promote human well-being.

Data Governance and Digital Ethics are inextricably linked and function optimally in

synergy. Ethics provides the underlying values—the "why" that inform the rules, while governance establishes the structure and mechanisms, the "how" to implement and enforce those ethical intentions. Without governance, ethical goals lack the structure for implementation; without ethics, governance risks becoming a rigid, compliance-only exercise that ignores unintended harms. Together, they are essential for creating a trustworthy and beneficial digital environment.

## 3.0 Theoretical/Analytical Framework

This section outlines the theoretical lenses and ethical frameworks deployed to analyze the intersection of AI and spirituality in African digital religious contexts, especially Nigeria and Rwanda. Combining these perspectives provides a comprehensive basis for assessing opportunities, risks, and regulatory needs.

### 3.1 AI Ethics Principles

UNESCO is alleged to have produced the first-ever global standards titled "Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence" in November, 2021. In its recommendation UNESCO identified the following principles which laid out a ten core human-rights centred approach to the Ethics of AI: Proportionality and Do No Harm, Safety and Security, Right to Privacy and Data Protection, Right to Privacy and Data Protection, Multi-stakeholder and Adaptive Governance & Collaboration, Responsibility and Accountability, Responsibility and Accountability, Transparency and Explainability, Human Oversight and Determination, Sustainability, Awareness & Literacy, and Fairness and Non-Discrimination.<sup>97</sup> However, central to understanding AI's impact on spirituality are core AI ethics principles widely

<sup>95</sup> The Nigeria Data Protection Act, 2023, explicitly identifies "religious or similar beliefs" as sensitive personal data, mandating enhanced protection and lawful processing conditions.

<sup>96</sup> Transcend, *AI Data Governance: Ensuring Ethical Use and Security*, <https://transcend.io/blog/ai-data-governance>, accessed 1<sup>st</sup> November, 2025.

<sup>97</sup> UNESCO, *Ethics of Artificial Intelligence*, <https://www.unesco.org/en/artificial-intelligence/recommendation-ethics> accessed 14th November, 2025.

endorsed by international organizations such as UNESCO and OECD. These include:

- Transparency: This principle demands clarity regarding how an algorithmic system operates, what data it uses, and why it produces a specific outcome. AI systems must therefore operate in an explainable manner, allowing users and regulators to understand how decisions affecting spiritual content and interactions are made.<sup>98</sup> This principle directly addresses the non-transparent nature of algorithmic influence/manipulation. In Digital Spirituality, transparency is critical for trust; users must know if a spiritual reflection or counseling session is generated by a human pastor or a Generative AI Chatbot.
- Accountability: This requires that entities (developers, operators, or organizations) be held responsible for the consequences and impacts, positive or negative, of their AI systems. Developers and deployers of AI religious tools must be responsible for their systems' effects, particularly regarding spiritual well-being and doctrinal integrity.
- Fairness: AI applications should avoid bias and discrimination, ensuring diverse religious beliefs are respected and equitably represented, preventing marginalization within digital spirituality.<sup>99</sup> This is essential for Data Governance and Digital Ethics. It challenges the biases embedded in datasets that could lead to unfair exclusion or targeting of specific religious or ethnic groups in online spiritual communities or content filtering.

### 3.2 Human Dignity Theory

Human dignity theory, foundational in bioethics and human rights, is especially pertinent for protecting spiritual autonomy. Kant's most famous formulation of dignity is that human dignity is a status that places the life of human beings above all price. As a rhetorical statement, this is about as good as Kant gets, and it remains a deeply moving formulation.<sup>100</sup> AI applications must respect the inherent worth of individuals, safeguarding their freedom to pursue authentic spiritual experiences without coercion or manipulation. This theory anchors ethical concerns about data privacy, informed consent, and spiritual agency within AI-mediated religious settings.<sup>101</sup> Algorithmic manipulation that attempts to "hyper nudge" an individual's spiritual choices or political views is a direct violation of their dignity, as it treats the person as a means to an end (engagement metrics, profit) rather than an end in themselves.

This lens is critical when analyzing AI-powered religious tools. It insists that while AI can assist spiritual practice, it must not replace the fundamental human capacity for spiritual experience, moral agency, and genuine relational ministry. The dignity of the user must be prioritized over the efficiency of the algorithm.

### 3.3 African Communitarian Ethics

African communitarian ethics, epitomized by concepts such as **Ubuntu** ("I am because we are") and relational humanism, emphasize interconnectedness, communal harmony, and respect for personhood within a collective moral framework.<sup>102</sup> These values highlight the importance of protecting relational spiritual identities and culturally grounded expressions of faith from algorithmic harm or misrepresentation in digital spaces. They call for regulatory

<sup>98</sup> UNESCO. (2024). *Recommendation on the ethics of artificial intelligence*. <https://www.unesco.org/en/artificial-intelligence/recommendation-ethics> 16th November, 2025.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>100</sup> Philosophy Now, Kant's Theory of Human Dignity, [https://philosophynow.org/issues/150/Kants\\_Theory\\_of\\_Human\\_Dignity](https://philosophynow.org/issues/150/Kants_Theory_of_Human_Dignity), accessed 18<sup>th</sup> November, 2025.

<sup>101</sup> Pellegrino, E. D. (2002). The philosophy of human dignity. *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy*, 27(4), 317-338.

<sup>102</sup> Mbiti, J. S. (1969). *African religions and philosophy*. Heinemann.

approaches that balance individual rights with community well-being.<sup>103</sup> Ubuntu directly addresses the health of online worship and community. It shifts the ethical focus from mere individual privacy to the quality of the shared digital space. It demands that algorithmic systems should promote solidarity, mutual aid, and respectful engagement, rather than polarizing content that fragments the religious community.

By integrating the technical demands of AI Ethics Principles with the inherent value of Human Dignity and the relational imperative of African Communitarian Ethics (Ubuntu), the framework is comprehensive enough to analyze the mechanisms of technology, the sacredness of the individual, and the health of the community in the digital age.

### 3.4 Data Protection Principles

Data protection laws serve as the regulatory foundation for safeguarding personal and sensitive data, including religious beliefs. The Nigeria Data Protection Act (NDPA 2023)<sup>104</sup> classifies religious beliefs as sensitive personal data, mandating stringent protections to prevent misuse, unauthorized profiling, or exposure. Rwanda's data governance frameworks<sup>105</sup> similarly prioritize privacy and secure digital identities. Complemented by international norms such as the GDPR, these principles demand lawful, transparent, and ethical handling of spiritual data within AI systems.

### 3.5 Framework Suitability

This multi-dimensional framework suits the topic because it:

- Addresses ethical challenges specific to AI's influence on spirituality, including bias, manipulation, and lack of transparency.

- Prioritizes spiritual autonomy and dignity, core to religious freedom and well-being.
- Integrates African cultural values, enhancing contextual relevance and promoting culturally sensitive regulation.
- Anchors legal arguments in existing data protection regimes, facilitating practical regulatory recommendations.

By combining AI ethics, human dignity theory, African communitarian principles, and data protection laws, the paper constructs a robust framework to critically assess AI's complex role in shaping digital spirituality and to propose balanced, rights-respecting regulatory solutions.

## 4.0 Mapping the Interaction Between AI and Spirituality

Artificial intelligence (AI) is increasingly shaping spiritual experiences and religious practices in Africa through multiple applications, as evidenced by various case studies across the continent. This section outlines how AI currently influences spirituality, highlighting both benefits and emerging challenges, with an emphasis on African contexts like Nigeria and Rwanda.

### 4.1 AI-Assisted Preaching and Digital Worship

AI technologies are being integrated into religious services to support preaching and worship. For example, AI-powered chatbots operating on platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger provide theological answers, prayer points, and schedule counseling, extending the reach of religious leaders beyond traditional congregations.<sup>106</sup> Digital livestreaming and mobile apps facilitate wider dissemination of sermons and devotionals, breaking geographic barriers and increasing engagement, as seen in Nigerian

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>104</sup> Section 65 of the Nigeria Data Protection Act, 2023. (2023).

<sup>105</sup> Article 3 of the Law No 058/2021 of 13/10/2021 Relating to the Protection of Personal Data and Privacy.

<sup>106</sup> Oyebanji, I. T. (2025). Artificial intelligence and its effects on Christian youths' spirituality in Nigeria. *African Journal of Religion, Theology and Society*, 7(2), 45-62.

churches like Daystar Christian Center and The Elevation Church,<sup>107</sup> even Nigerian pastors report using ChatGPT-style tools for sermon research, drafts, and topical teaching preparation.<sup>108</sup> These tools enable more personalized and accessible worship experiences.

## 4.2 Algorithmic Recommendation of Religious Content

AI algorithms curate and recommend religious content tailored to individual preferences, enabling users to access spiritual materials aligned with their beliefs and practices. This personalized content delivery enhances engagement and spiritual learning but also raises concerns about algorithmic bias and echo chambers that may limit exposure to diverse perspectives or reinforce particular theological views.<sup>109</sup> Journalists and researchers in East and Central Africa note “digital faith” ecosystems where sensational or emotionally charged religious content is amplified because it drives views and shares. This alters what congregations see and can polarize belief practices.<sup>110</sup>

### 4.3 AI Chatbots as Spiritual Advisers

AI chatbots simulate spiritual advisers, offering scriptural interpretation, guidance, and counseling.<sup>111</sup> People are already using chatbots for spiritual conversation and emotional support; dedicated “pastor” chatbots exist and are being adopted by faith communities online.<sup>112</sup> While this expands access, especially in areas underserved by

clergy, the mechanization of spiritual advice risks diminishing the nuanced, empathetic pastoral care that human leaders provide. It also poses questions about accountability and ethical boundaries in automated spiritual counseling.<sup>113</sup>

#### 4.4 Deepfakes and Misinformation Affecting Doctrine

The rise of AI-generated deepfakes and misinformation threatens to distort religious doctrines and propagate false teachings. Manipulated audio or video content can undermine communal trust and sow division within faith communities, highlighting the urgent need for verification mechanisms and digital literacy. Recent disinformation campaigns in West Africa (e.g., Burkina Faso) have used AI-generated imagery and deep fakes to create emotionally persuasive political narrative similar techniques can (and have) been applied to religious contexts.<sup>114</sup>

## 4.5 Data Profiling Targeting Faith Communities

Faith communities are increasingly subject to data profiling based on digital activities, religious affiliations, and online behaviors. This profiling informs targeted content delivery but may also enable commercial exploitation or discrimination,

<sup>107</sup> These insights are drawn from case studies and analyses of AI applications in African religious contexts, including Nigerian and broader African examples ("Spirits in the machine," 2024).

<sup>108</sup> Techpoint Africa, *Some Nigerian pastors are using AI for their work, but there are spiritual downsides* <https://techpoint.africa/insight/nigerian-pastors-ai/>, accessed 18<sup>th</sup> November, 2025.

<sup>109</sup> Ungar-Sargon, J. (2025). AI and spirituality: The disturbing implications. *Journal of Medical Clinical Research & Review*, 9(3), 1-7.

<sup>110</sup> Monitor, Amen, algorithm: The rise of digital faith and monetised miracles <https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/lifestyle/religion/amen-algorithm-the-rise-of-digital-faith-and-monetised-miracles>

[monetised-miracles-5068660?utm\\_](https://www.monetised-miracles-5068660?utm_), accessed 18<sup>th</sup> November 2025

<sup>111</sup> Alkhouri, K. I. Spiritual confusion in the era of artificial intelligence. *Journal of Psychology of Religion*, Advance online publication (2025).

<sup>112</sup> The Christian Science Monitor, *God in the machine? People use chatbots as spiritual advisers.* <https://www.csmonitor.com/Science/2025/0802/ai-faith-prayer-religion?utm>, accessed 17<sup>th</sup> November, 2025.

2025.

<sup>114</sup> The Week, Burkina Faso's misinformation war, <https://theweek.com/politics/burkina-fasos-misinformation-war>? accessed 18<sup>th</sup> November, 2025.

challenging privacy and spiritual autonomy.<sup>115</sup> Political actors have used micro targeting in Nigeria and Kenya, and the same techniques can be (and are) repurposed by religious actors or commercial actors targeting believers.<sup>116</sup>

#### 4.6 Benefits of AI in Digital Spirituality

Despite risks, AI offers notable benefits such as increased accessibility to religious teachings, inclusiveness by reaching marginalized groups, multilingual translation of sacred texts, and enhanced engagement through interactive platforms.<sup>117</sup> In Africa, innovative uses include remote healing sessions via mobile phones and digital preservation of traditional religious knowledge.<sup>118</sup> These contributions promise to democratize and revitalize spiritual practices in the digital age.

### 5.0 Risks and Challenges of AI for Spiritual Discernment

As artificial intelligence (AI) increasingly permeates religious spaces, it presents several profound risks and challenges specifically affecting spiritual discernment. These dangers are critical to understand in African contexts like Nigeria and Rwanda, where spiritual agency and traditional religious authority remain central to communal life.

#### 5.1 Distortion of Doctrine

AI-generated theological content may lack the nuanced understanding and spiritual insight

required to interpret sacred texts correctly. This can lead to the inadvertent spread of doctrinal distortions and theological confusion, undermining the rich tradition of theological scholarship and human discernment within faith communities.<sup>119</sup> Such distortions risk weakening adherence to orthodox beliefs and may cause spiritual disorientation, potentially hindering individuals' reception of authentic divine guidance.

#### 5.2 Digital Spiritual Manipulation

Algorithmic systems designed to personalize religious content can be exploited to manipulate spiritual beliefs and behaviors. By selectively amplifying certain teachings or perspectives, AI may promote specific ideologies, subtly influencing faith choices and interpretations without users' awareness.<sup>120</sup> This raises ethical concerns about autonomy and the authenticity of spiritual experiences mediated by AI.

#### 5.3 Erosion of Traditional Authority Structures

The rise of AI chatbots and virtual spiritual advisers challenges the role of human religious leaders. Overreliance on automated spiritual counseling risks diminishing the relational and empathetic dimensions inherent in pastoral care. It may also lead to devaluation of traditional authority figures and disrupt established faith community dynamics.<sup>121</sup>

<sup>115</sup> IIARD Journals. The necessity for regulation in digital religious spaces. *International Journal of African Religious and Digital Studies*, (2025) 12(1).

<sup>116</sup> Joshua Kitili, *Beyond The Ballot: A Comparative Analysis to Political Microtargeting Practices and Regulations in Kenya and Nigeria*, <https://journal.strathmore.edu/index.php/jip/article/view/259/293?utm>, accessed 18<sup>th</sup> November, 2025.

<sup>117</sup> Oyebanji, I. T. Artificial intelligence and its effects on Christian youths' spirituality in Nigeria. *Op cit.*

<sup>118</sup> IIARD Journals. The necessity for regulation in digital religious spaces. *Op cit.*

<sup>119</sup> Firebrand Magazine. The theological and ethical dangers associated with using artificial intelligence in Christian

religious settings. (2023). <https://firebrandmag.com/articles/the-theological-and-ethical-dangers-associated-with-using-artificial-intelligence-in-christian-religious-settings>, accessed 17<sup>th</sup> November, 2025.

<sup>120</sup> Frontier Ventures. Final reflection: Artificial intelligence (AI) is transforming nearly every facet of missions work. (2025). <https://connect.frontierventures.org/mission-frontiers/final-reflection-artificial-intelligence-ai-is-transforming-nearly-every-aspect-of-modern-life>, accessed 17<sup>th</sup> November, 2025.

<sup>121</sup> Alkhouri, K. I. Spiritual confusion in the era of artificial intelligence. *Journal of Psychology of Religion*, Advance online publication. (2025).

## 5.4 Privacy Invasion and Profiling of Religious Identity

AI systems process large amounts of personal and sensitive data, including religious beliefs classified as sensitive under data protection laws like Nigeria's NDPA 2023.<sup>122</sup> Inadequate safeguards can lead to unauthorized profiling, surveillance, or commercialization of sacred beliefs, infringing on spiritual autonomy and privacy rights. Such exposure may also create vulnerabilities for discrimination or persecution.

## 5.5 Bias in AI-Generated Religious Content

AI models trained on limited or culturally biased datasets risk perpetuating inequities and excluding minority religious perspectives. This bias undermines fairness and inclusiveness, potentially marginalizing certain faith groups within digital spiritual ecosystems.<sup>123</sup>

## 5.6 Overreliance on Machine Outputs for Spiritual Decisions

Dependence on AI for spiritual guidance risks fostering spiritual complacency and weakening personal and communal discernment. AI lacks a spiritual conscience or connection to transcendent truth and cannot replace the role of the Holy Spirit or human wisdom.<sup>124</sup> Such overreliance may dull critical engagement and reduce faith in algorithmic outputs.

## 5.7 Ethical Issues in Automated Religious Counseling

Automated counseling raises questions about the authenticity, empathy, and accountability of AI-driven spiritual support. The inability of AI to truly minister in a pastoral sense risks alienating users or

offering inappropriate guidance, calling for strict ethical oversight.<sup>125</sup>

## 6.0 Legal and Regulatory Perspectives

This section analyzes the current legal and regulatory frameworks relevant to AI use in religious contexts in Nigeria, Rwanda, and internationally. The aim is to assess how these frameworks address—or fall short of addressing—the protection of spiritual autonomy and digital religious rights in the AI era.

### 6.1 Nigeria

Nigeria's **Data Protection Act (NDPA) 2023** is a landmark legislation that classifies religious and philosophical beliefs as sensitive personal data, requiring enhanced protection measures such as explicit consent for processing and strict confidentiality safeguards.<sup>126</sup> However, gaps remain in regulation specifically tailored to AI systems influencing digital spirituality; it also has significant gaps concerning AI and spiritual autonomy. The absence of comprehensive AI-specific regulatory guidelines leaves space for unregulated algorithmic manipulation of religious content and spirituality-related profiling.<sup>127</sup> The NDPA effectively regulates the data (e.g., your prayer requests) but not the content (e.g., the doctrinally flawed AI-generated advice). It does not mandate mechanisms to verify the authenticity or theological accuracy of AI-generated spiritual outputs, which is the core threat to Spiritual Discernment. The Nigerian Religious Coalition on Artificial Intelligence has called for firm regulation and ethical frameworks to moderate AI's impact on faith communities, emphasizing the importance of cultural sensitivity and spiritual dignity.<sup>128</sup>

<sup>122</sup> Section 30 of the Nigeria Data Protection Act, 2023.

<sup>123</sup> Ungar-Sargon, J. AI and spirituality: The disturbing implications. *Journal of Medical Clinical Research & Review*, (2025) 9(3), 1-7.

<sup>124</sup> Frontier Ventures. Final reflection: Artificial intelligence (AI) is transforming nearly every facet of missions work. *Op cit.*

<sup>125</sup> SecureGive, *What pastors need to know about AI in ministry*. <https://www.securegive.com/what-pastors-need-to-know-about-ai-in-ministry/> accessed 18<sup>th</sup> November, 2025.

<sup>126</sup> Section 65 of the Nigeria Data Protection Act, 2023.

<sup>127</sup> Yogesh Awasthi1, George Okumu Achar, *African Christian Theology in the Age of AI: Machine Intelligence and Theology in Africa*, <https://www.questjournals.org/jrhss/papers/vol13-issue1/1301207216.pdf>, accessed 18<sup>th</sup> November, 2025.

<sup>128</sup> The Nation Online. (2025, October 26). Religious coalition seeks firm regulation, ethical use of AI. <https://thenationonlineng.net/religious-coalition-seeks-firm-regulation-ethical-use-of-ai/>. Accessed 16<sup>th</sup> November, 2025.

## 6.2 Rwanda

Rwanda has established a robust legal framework for data protection under Law No 058/2021 of 13/10/2021 Relating to the Protection of Personal Data and Privacy, which sets out comprehensive requirements for the collection, processing, and protection of personal data, including sensitive data such as religious beliefs.<sup>129</sup> This law mandates strict consent requirements, purpose limitation, data minimization, and security measures, representing a significant step toward safeguarding privacy in the digital age. Additionally, Rwanda's strategic emphasis on digital innovation is balanced with regulatory mechanisms to ensure responsible and ethical AI deployment, though explicit provisions addressing AI's impact on spirituality and religious data remain limited. The law thus provides a strong foundation to build culturally and spiritually sensitive AI governance frameworks that respect individual dignity and community values in the Rwandan context.<sup>130</sup> As of the latest information, Rwanda has a National AI Policy, but has not yet adopted a specific law or regulation governing the development and use of AI. While the DPP law protects the data, the algorithms and their spiritual influence remain largely ungoverned by a legally binding, risk-based AI framework.

## 6.3 International and Comparative Frameworks

Globally, the European Union (EU) AI Act 2024, which is the first comprehensive legal framework for AI globally, and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) AI Principles provide detailed guidelines on transparency, accountability, fairness, and human oversight in AI systems, some of which can be adapted to religious contexts.<sup>131</sup> The EU AI Act,

which has the force of law, primarily targets systemic risks. The proliferation of doctrinally distorted AI-generated religious content (e.g., a Chabot hallucinating a sermon) does not clearly fall under "unacceptable risk" unless it explicitly causes significant physical or psychological harm. The UNESCO Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence (2024), as earlier pointed out, underscores the protection of human dignity, cultural diversity, and freedom of thought and religion as fundamental ethical considerations.<sup>132</sup> Both the OECD AI principles and UNESCO AI Ethics Framework are barely soft laws with non-binding standards, and they shape global policy and regulation. They are crucial for setting the ethical bar. Nonetheless, none of these international frameworks explicitly address the specific challenges AI poses for spiritual discernment or digital religious freedoms.

Global discourse highlights the fundamental tension between efficiency and authenticity in spiritual life. The key challenge is that existing law protects speech and data, but not the integrity of doctrine or the authenticity of spiritual experience. Regulating content accuracy risks violating freedom of speech and the separation of church and state; yet, unregulated AI risks theological distortion and epistemic conformity.

## 6.4 Shortcomings and Challenges

Current laws, both in Nigeria and globally, inadequately capture the nuanced risks AI poses to digital spirituality, including doctrinal distortion, spiritual manipulation, and erosion of traditional authority structures. Issues such as algorithmic transparency, accountability for AI-generated religious content, and protection of sensitive spiritual data require more explicit provisions. Moreover, enforcement challenges and lack of contextualization to African religious-cultural

<sup>129</sup> Law No 058/2021 of 13/10/2021 Relating to the Protection of Personal Data and Privacy, Rwanda.

<sup>130</sup> African Christian Theology in the Age of AI, 2025.

<sup>131</sup> European Commission. Proposal for a regulation laying down harmonized rules on artificial intelligence (AI Act), (2021). <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52021PC0206>, accessed 18<sup>th</sup> November, 2025.

<sup>132</sup> UNESCO. Recommendation on the ethics of artificial intelligence, (2024). <https://www.unesco.org/en/artificial-intelligence/recommendation-ethics>, accessed 17<sup>th</sup> November, 2025.

realities limit the effectiveness of existing regulations.<sup>133</sup>

## 7.0 Toward a Legal-Ethical Framework for Protected Spiritual AI use

Given the complex ethical, spiritual, and legal challenges posed by artificial intelligence (AI) in digital religious contexts, a dedicated legal-ethical framework is essential to safeguard spiritual discernment and autonomy, particularly in African environments such as Nigeria and Rwanda. This framework integrates core principles from AI ethics, human dignity, African communal values, and data protection laws to address the unique risks and opportunities AI presents for digital spirituality.

### 7.1 Transparency in AI-Driven Religious Tools

AI systems used in religious contexts must be transparent about their operations, data sources, and decision-making processes. Users should be clearly informed when they interact with AI-driven spiritual advisers or receive AI-generated religious content, allowing them to understand and critically evaluate the information's origin and nature. Transparency builds trust and supports informed spiritual discernment.<sup>134</sup>

### 7.2 Mandatory Human Oversight

Despite AI's benefits, final spiritual guidance and decision-making must remain within human authority. Mandatory human oversight ensures that AI tools do not supplant genuine pastoral care or

spiritual counseling but complement it. Religious leaders and ethical review boards should oversee AI deployments to verify doctrinal accuracy, ethical compliance, and cultural sensitivity.<sup>135</sup>

### 7.3 Protection of Sensitive Religious Data

Strong protections must be enforced for religious data classified as sensitive under laws such as Nigeria's NDPA 2023 and Rwanda's Law No 058/2021. This includes strict consent requirements, data minimization, secure storage, and prohibition of unauthorized profiling or commercial exploitation. Protecting the privacy and sanctity of spiritual data preserves individuals' rights to freedom of religion and conscience.<sup>136</sup>

### 7.4 Algorithmic Impact Assessment for Faith-Based Apps

Prior to deployment, AI applications for religious use should undergo rigorous algorithmic impact assessments to identify risks of bias, misinformation, spiritual manipulation, or doctrinal distortion. Such assessments encourage developers to design systems that respect spiritual diversity, uphold fairness, and prevent harm.<sup>137</sup>

### 7.5 Accountability Mechanisms for Misuse

Clear accountability frameworks are needed to address harms caused by AI misuse in spiritual domains. Mechanisms might include regulatory oversight bodies, complaint and redress systems for affected individuals or communities, and legal

<sup>133</sup> ACHPR Draft AI Study. African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (2025). <https://achpr.au.int/sites/default/files/files/2025-04/draft-achpr-ai-study-march-2025.pdf>, accessed 17<sup>th</sup> November, 2025.

<sup>134</sup> Vatican Guidelines on Artificial Intelligence: An Ethical and Spiritual Approach. Pontifical Commission for Vatican City State, (2025). <https://www.ddg.fr/actualite/vatican-guidelines-on-artificial-intelligence-an-ethical-and-spiritual-approach>, accessed 17<sup>th</sup> November, 2025.

[on-artificial-intelligence-an-ethical-and-spiritual-approach](https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/recommendation-ethics-artificial-intelligence), accessed 17<sup>th</sup> November, 2025.

<sup>135</sup> Ungar-Sargon, J. AI and spirituality: The disturbing implications. *Journal of Medical Clinical Research & Review*, (2025), 9(3), 1-7.

<sup>136</sup> Nigeria Data Protection Act, 2023; Law No 058/2021 Rwanda.

<sup>137</sup> UNESCO. Recommendation on the ethics of artificial intelligence, (2024). <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/recommendation-ethics-artificial-intelligence>, accessed 14<sup>th</sup> November, 2025.

liabilities for developers or platform operators who breach ethical norms or data protection laws.<sup>138</sup>

## 7.6 Cross-Border Cooperation for Platform Governance

Given the global nature of digital religious platforms, cross-border regulatory cooperation is critical to harmonize standards, share best practices, and jointly oversee multinational faith-based AI services. This ensures consistent protection of spiritual rights across jurisdictions and prevents regulatory arbitrage.<sup>139</sup>

## 7.7 Embedding African Spiritual-Cultural Values

The framework must embed African ethical principles such as Ubuntu and relational humanism, emphasizing interconnectedness, communal dignity, and respect for cultural and spiritual identities. Incorporating these values affirms indigenous worldviews and fosters regulatory solutions that resonate with local faith communities and social norms.<sup>140</sup>

## 8.0 Recommendations

The development of AI systems that respect Spiritual Discernment and Human Dignity requires coordinated action across government, religious institutions, developers, regulators, and civil society. Based on the preceding analysis and to ensure responsible and culturally sensitive deployment of AI in African religious contexts, especially Nigeria and Rwanda, the following concise policy recommendations are proposed:

### 8.1 For Governments in Nigeria and Rwanda

- Develop and implement dedicated AI governance frameworks that incorporate religious, ethical, and cultural considerations specific to digital spirituality.
- Strengthen enforcement of existing data protection laws (NDPA 2023, Rwanda's

Law No 058/2021) to cover AI applications handling sensitive religious data.

- Promote digital infrastructure development and equitable access to reduce rural-urban disparities in AI-enabled spiritual services.

### 8.2

#### For Religious Institutions

- Provide AI literacy and ethical training for clergy and faith leaders to enhance understanding and oversight of AI's role in spiritual practice.
- Establish internal ethical review boards to monitor AI tools used in religious contexts and advocate for congregants' spiritual autonomy.

### 8.3

#### For AI Developers

- Adopt participatory design approaches involving religious leaders and communities to co-create AI systems aligned with sacred values and diverse faith traditions.

### 8.4

#### For Regulators (NDPC, Rwanda ICT Bodies)

- Regulators must operationalize existing data laws and pioneer specific high-risk regulations for AI affecting belief systems.
- Create specialized AI ethics advisory councils that include theologians, ethicists, and data protection experts for ongoing guidance and policy updates.
- Develop complaint and redress mechanisms accessible to users affected by AI-related harms in spiritual contexts.
- Facilitate cross-border cooperation to establish harmonized standards for AI governance in digital religious spaces.

### 8.5

#### For Civil Society and Academia

- Conduct interdisciplinary research exploring the socio-ethical impacts of AI

<sup>138</sup> ACHPR Draft AI Study. African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, (2025).

<sup>139</sup> OECD. OECD principles on artificial intelligence, (2019).

<sup>140</sup> Mbiti, J. S. African religions and philosophy. Heinemann, (1969).

- on spirituality, emphasizing African epistemologies and cultural contexts.
- Promote public awareness campaigns to enhance digital literacy and informed engagement with AI-driven spiritual tools.
- Advocate for inclusive policy dialogues that incorporate marginalized faith groups and rural communities in AI governance discussions.

## Conclusion

The intersection of artificial intelligence (AI) and spirituality in African contexts such as Nigeria and Rwanda presents both transformative opportunities and significant challenges. AI's integration into religious practices, from AI-assisted preaching to algorithmically curated spiritual content, can enhance accessibility, inclusiveness, and engagement in faith communities. However, the risks of doctrinal distortion, digital spiritual manipulation, erosion of traditional religious authority, and privacy infringements require urgent attention.

This paper has highlighted the regulatory gaps in current data protection and AI governance frameworks that inadequately safeguard spiritual autonomy and digital religious freedoms. Drawing from AI ethics principles, human dignity theory, and African communitarian values like Ubuntu, a tailored legal-ethical framework was proposed to preserve spiritual discernment and cultural integrity in the digital age. This framework emphasizes transparency, mandatory human oversight, sensitive data protection, algorithmic impact assessments, accountability mechanisms, cross-border cooperation, and embedding African spiritual-cultural values.

Ultimately, safeguarding spirituality in the AI era demands collaboration among governments, religious institutions, AI developers, regulators, and civil society. Rights-based, culturally grounded regulatory mechanisms are essential to

build trust, foster responsible AI innovation, and ensure that digital spirituality enriches rather than diminishes the authenticity of faith experiences.

Looking forward, this confluence of technology and spirituality offers a pivotal opportunity for Africa to lead in crafting inclusive, ethical AI governance that harmonizes innovation with respect for profound spiritual and cultural traditions. This stewardship will ensure that AI acts as a bridge enhancing communal bonds and spiritual well-being rather than as a barrier undermining them.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> Nkala, 2024; African Multidisciplinary Journal, 2025; African Christian Theology in the Age of AI, 2025.