

# Emojis and Visio Divina: Contextualizing the Gospel to Reach East African Youth in the Digital Sphere

David Hirome

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## Abstract

This study investigates how East African youth engage with Christian contemplative spirituality through Visio Divina, using digital art and emojis on smartphones. With a qualitative approach, six Ugandan and Kenyan participants enrolled in a three-week Visio Divina exercise via WhatsApp. Results indicate that participants experienced a range of emotions, suggesting that Visio Divina effectively fosters deep spiritual reflections. The study demonstrates the potential of digital art and emojis to communicate the gospel in a way that resonates with African youth. This research highlights the benefits of aligning spiritual practices with contemporary digital communication methods, offering new insights for modern evangelization.

**Key Words:** Christian spirituality, contextualization, digital evangelization, emojis, Visio Divina, youth engagement

## Introduction

Over five decades ago, Nigerian scholar E. Bolaji Idowu argued that “one of the major assignments before those who seek to communicate and inculcate the Gospel in Africa is that of understanding Africa and appreciating the fact that they must learn to address Africans as Africans” (Idowu, 1969, p. 17). Idowu emphasized the need for Christian evangelists in Africa to carefully consider the African cultural context. While several aspects of this context remain familiar today, significant changes have occurred, including the global influence of digital culture on African lives.

Digital culture, particularly among urban dwellers, has permeated activities like banking, transportation, and social events through the adoption of “digital technologies, digital media, and mobile technologies” (Akindès & Yao, 2019, p. 105). This digital shift is especially evident among young Africans and their engagement with social media (Hollington & Nassenstein, 2018, pp. 811–812). As a result, religious content has proliferated on African media channels, with Christianity increasingly leveraging “media for church ministry across major cities of sub-Saharan Africa such as Nairobi and Kampala” (Munyangata & Facker, 2023, p. 117). Pentecostals, in particular, have adapted digital technology for ministry in Africa's digital sphere (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2015, p. 163).

However, traditional methods of communicating the gospel to African youth often rely on rational apologetics, attempting to present Jesus Christ as Lord, despite young people being exposed to diverse worldviews (Ndereba, 2022, p. 1). These methods have been adapted for online spaces (Ndereba, 2021, pp. 28-30). While rational evangelism has its merits, it often overlooks experiential approaches to faith, which have proven beneficial for youth (Smith & Denton, 2005). Young digital users tend to prefer personal experiences, frequently expressed through visual elements like photos and emojis in their everyday communication (Buckingham, 2007, p. 157; Hollington & Nassenstein, 2018, pp. 811-812).

Relatedly, the Christian contemplative practice of Visio Divina, involving prayerful reflection on Christian art, has been known to influence an individual's view of God, self, and

others, facilitating a personal encounter with God (Binz, 2016, pp. 16-17). For example, *Visio Divina* has been contextualized for communicating the gospel to youth in Western societies (Kuchan, 2004) and has been adapted for youth in Nairobi, East Africa, promoting spiritual formation (Selvam and Mwangi, 2014). However, little is known about the missional potential of Christian contemplative practices involving emojis among African youth in online spaces. This article explores how East African youth experience *Visio Divina* in Christian digital art, incorporating the cross and emojis through their smartphones.

### **My Positionality**

My early exposure to smartphone technology during my teens, subsequent undergraduate studies in Information Technology, and then seminary training are no doubt foundational to my interest in the intersection of faith and technology. My first experience with the practice of *Visio Divina* occurred during the Corona virus lockdown period, which later led me to explore an online version of *Visio Divina*.

During this time, I began regularly posting Bible verses from the Book of Proverbs, accompanied by emojis, in a Ugandan diaspora social media group. The mixed feedback from this experience sparked my interest in exploring the missional potential of a *Visio Divina* practice that combines Christian art and emojis among youth in the East African digital sphere. The hope is that youth ministries in East Africa can innovate in contextualizing historical Christian contemplative prayer for mission.

### **Theories of Contemplative Prayer**

Contemplative prayer, a spiritual practice found across various religious traditions, involves intentionally cultivating deep, silent awareness and connection with the divine. Numerous theories and perspectives have emerged to explain the nature, purpose, and effects of this practice. The following literature review explores some of these theories, shedding light on the diverse understandings surrounding contemplative prayer.

One prominent theory shaping the understanding of contemplative prayer is the apophatic tradition. This tradition emphasizes letting go of discursive thoughts and entering a state of silent communion with God, beyond the limitations of rational understanding. Apophatic prayer is often described as a "negative way" (Keating, 2009, p. 126), yet it is also argued to enable the use of one's "spiritual senses" (Bourgeault, 2004, p. 32).

In contrast, the cataphatic tradition suggests that contemplative prayer can involve positive language and imagery to approach the divine. This approach emphasizes affirming and engaging with divine attributes and characteristics through prayer. Theologians like St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Ignatius of Loyola provide insights into this understanding of prayer (McGinn, 1994). A common proposition in this tradition is that actively meditating on God's qualities can deepen one's connection and lead to transformative encounters with the divine.

Christian contemplative prayer encompasses both apophatic and cataphatic traditions, distinct from practices in other religions by its focus on realizing God's presence and enabling communion with God (Bourgeault, 2004). This practice is deeply rooted in Christian history, tracing back to the Bible, the Desert Fathers and Mothers, and medieval monks (Ferguson et al., 2010). In modern times, it has been largely promoted by Western scholars, particularly through meditation as advocated by John Main and centering prayer championed by Thomas Keating and Cynthia Bourgeault (Benner, 2012, p. 225).

The growing interest in centering prayer has led some Christian groups to organize *lectio divina* sessions, which became a "program for contemplative reawakening" (Bourgeault, 2004,

p. 74). These sessions have constituted a recovery of the early Christian monastic practice of *lectio divina*, which involves “reading the scripture, or more exactly listening to it” (Keating, 2002, p. 20). *Lectio divina* has four stages: scripture reading, reflection, spontaneous prayer, and resting in God's presence (Keating, 2002, pp. 29-30). Related to *lectio divina* is *Visio Divina*, in which art replaces scripture reading.

### **Contemplative Practice of Visio Divina**

*Visio Divina* is a spiritual practice rooted in medieval church history and involves “attentively and receptively gazing upon an image so that the experience leads us to mediation and prayer” (Binz, 2016, p. 16). *Visio Divina*, or “holy seeing, is a way to pray with your eyes” (Calhoun, 2015, p. 47). Visual aids in prayer have been part of Christian tradition since ancient times, using “icons, the cross, stained glass, mosaics, art and statues in church as invitations to pray with the eyes” (Calhoun, 2015, p. 47).

But Christian history has also seen resistance to the use of images in worship. Early Christian communities, influenced by Jewish traditions, were cautious about the use of images, adhering to the Second Commandment's prohibition against “graven images” (Exodus 20:4). The most significant early conflict over religious imagery occurred during the Byzantine Empire, particularly in the eighth and ninth centuries with iconoclasts advocating for the destruction of icons (Pelikan, 1974, pp. 91-92). The other major period in Christian history that featured fierce resistance to images was during the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century. Reformers like Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin rejected the use of religious images, stressing that they distracted from the primacy of Scripture and encouraged idolatry (Eire, 1986, pp. 78, 201).

Despite such historical resistance to the use of images in worship, icons are generally justified by some Christians as aids in contemplation of the divine rather than objects of worship or adoration. In this regard, “the mystery of the Incarnation is the greatest argument in favor of icons and legitimizes the depiction of the divine” (Binz, 2016, p. 12).

*Visio Divina* has traditionally been associated with Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches, but the contemplative practices of *Visio* and *Lectio Divina* are increasingly practiced across denominational lines, commonly in some Anglican churches in the West. The four steps of *Visio Divina* are often modeled after the *Lectio Divina* exercise: *lectio*, *meditatio*, *oratio*, and *contemplatio* (Robertson, 2011, p. 205). This contemplative prayer fosters “an intimate dialogue with a living, present, divine interlocutor” who communicates with the individual (Robertson, 2011, p. xii).

### **Contextualizing Visio Divina in Christian Ministry**

Recent innovative practices of *Visio Divina* include projects by Eileen Crowley and Morna Simpson that have utilized photographs. Crowley has taught contemplative photography through a course where participants reflected on photographs uploaded to a dedicated website. The course aimed to help participants grow in sensitivity to the Holy Spirit's work within themselves and the world around them (Crowley, 2013). Crowley has also written about a similar practice among Lutheran congregants that promoted participants' faith (Crowley, 2014). Simpson's work has explored the role of contemplative photography in strengthening the missional potential of churches, finding it suitable for enhancing traditional Christian groups as missional communities (Simpson, 2020). Karen L. Kuchan developed a contextualized approach to evangelism using *Visio Divina*, targeting young people in Western society. Her project assessed the practice's impact on faith, hope, and love among ten young participants (Kuchan, 2004).

In a non-Western context, a study of Christian contemplative prayer among African youth revealed its potential role in youth formation (Selvam & Mwangi, 2014). Given that young people are dominant users of digital spaces in East Africa, and traditional efforts to communicate the gospel to them have often been unsatisfactory, there is a need to explore the missional potential of Christian contemplative practices like *Visio Divina* among African youth online.

## **Method**

### *Research Design*

This study employed a qualitative research method to understand participants' experiences. Digital images were sent to the participants, followed by probing questions. A participatory approach was also used, allowing participants to contribute their expertise. Participatory research involves active collaboration between researchers and the community or participants being studied (Reason & Bradbury, 2008). Such research aims to empower individuals and communities by giving them a voice in the research process, enabling them to contribute their knowledge, experiences, and perspectives (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995, p. 1674).

Participatory research also emphasizes the importance of reflexivity and researcher positioning. Researchers in participatory studies acknowledge their own subjectivity, biases, and positionalities, striving to maintain an open dialogue with participants (Hall & Tandon, 2017, p. 17). As a researcher, I maintained reflexivity throughout the research process by:

- 1) Focusing on interpreting the participants' experiences and highlighting their meanings rather than filtering them through my own biases;
- 2) Analyzing every detail, even those that seemed familiar to me; and,
- 3) Maintaining constant awareness of the need to practice reflexivity.

### *Participants*

A total of six participants were recruited using a combination of purposeful and snowball sampling methods. Snowball sampling, also known as network or chain sampling, “involves locating a few key participants who easily meet the criteria you established for the participation in the study” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 98). These initial participants then refer the researcher to other individuals for further interviews. Four of the six participants were purposefully selected from two social media groups—one Ugandan and one Kenyan—each with a total of 200 members, which the researcher had long observed as a participant. The selection criteria were active communication using emojis in social media activities and regular sharing of gospel-related content. The remaining two participants were recruited through snowball sampling, based on a referral from one of the initial participants.

The participants' ages ranged from 21 to 30; four were male and two were female. Three participants (two females and one male) completed the entire three-week session. One participant completed only the first week, while the other two withdrew towards the end of the first week. The three participants who completed the entire exercise included one Ugandan and two Kenyans.

### *Intervention*

The researcher utilized two digital images featuring a cross overlaid with various emojis, each symbolizing different emotions and themes reflected in the Passion narratives (see Figures 1 and 2 below). As has become common knowledge, emojis are small pictures used to convey

“tone, intent, and feelings would normally be conveyed by non-verbal cues in personal communications but which cannot be achieved in digital messages” (Alshenqeeti, 2016, p. 56). Originally introduced in Japan to convey emotions in internet communication (Skiba, 2016), emojis have become popular in youth digital communication patterns (Hollington & Nassenstein, 2018, pp. 811-812).

The cross was chosen for its significance as one of the most recognizable Christian symbols. One cross was a wooden figure photographed during a visit to a seminary, while the other was a neon cross downloaded under a Creative Commons Zero license, permitting modification. Each image was accompanied by a four-step set of suggested instructions:

- Step 1: SEE. Observe the entire picture, then focus on the part that draws your attention.
- Step 2: INQUIRY. Reflect on your experiences (feelings, desires, emotions).
- Step 3: LED. Contemplate what you have seen. If needed, close your eyes, pray to God about your observations, and seek further communion with Him. Spend a time of silence before the Lord.
- Step 4: WORSHIP. Conclude with gratitude to God. Write down what you believe you have received from Him, commit to acting on it, and share the good news with a friend.



Figure 1: The first digital image featuring emojis superimposed upon a wooden cross



Figure 2: The second digital image featuring emojis superimposed upon a neon cross

### *Procedure*

The first stage of the research involved establishing a relationship with the participants and explaining the study's purpose. This stage was essential because the contact occurred through social media, specifically WhatsApp, and participants needed to feel comfortable with the exercise. Participants were informed about their privacy rights and then introduced to the steps of Visio Divina. The exercise was conducted individually, beginning during Passion Week with the distribution of the first image. Each participant received the image and instructions for Visio Divina on their smartphones. They were asked to take sufficient time to reflect and respond to the probing questions. The second image was sent the following week with the same instructions and questions. In the third week, participants were instructed to create a contemplative image using a photo they took with their phone or downloaded legally, and to superimpose at least three emojis. This image was intended to be created with the purpose of sharing faith with another youth.

### *Data Collection*

The following probing questions were used:

1. Is there a figure or shape that stands out to you?
2. What feelings or desires do you notice?
3. What do these emotions reveal about your relationship with Jesus Christ and with your neighbor?

### *Data Analysis*

The data was analyzed thematically. Thematic analysis involves “identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). Reflexivity was a key focus during this process. The following procedures were followed:

1. Focused on interpreting participants' experiences and uncovering their meanings rather than viewing them through the researcher's biases.
2. Carefully analyzed every detail, even those that seemed familiar.

3. A grounded theory approach was used, rather than a theoretical framework (Charmaz, 2008), similar to studies among Kenyan youth (Selvam & Mwangi, 2014). Open coding was performed by reading responses to highlight words related to the research questions, followed by second-level analysis and thematic coding.

## Results

### *Participants' Experience*

**Lack of Understanding and Time:** All participants reported a lack of familiarity with Visio Divina. Three out of six participants were unable to complete the study due to their lack of understanding of contemplative prayer. One participant commented, "I really don't understand this kind of Visio Divina prayer practice." Time constraints were also a factor; two participants later withdrew due to a lack of time, while the three who completed the exercises spent several hours on them. One of the participants who completed the entire exercise shared about having to "scrutinize the image over and over."

**Gratitude Accompanied by Sadness and Guilt:** Most participants initially felt gratitude toward God in response to the images, using terms like "grateful" and "gratitude." However, this gratitude was often accompanied by feelings of sadness and guilt, described as "guiltiness." Participants connected these emotions to God, with expressions such as, "I am really grateful that, as a sinner, God saved me."

**Most Popular Emojis:** Among the emojis used in the two images of the cross, the bread emoji was the most popular, with most participants associating it with the body of Christ and personal needs such as daily bread. The other emojis that participants related to included the face holding back tears, envelope with an arrow, loud crying, snake, money bag, and wine.



Figure 3: The most popular emojis that resonated with the participants

### *Participants' Art*

**Positive Emotions:** When asked to create a digital image incorporating any devotional picture and at least three emojis to communicate their relationship with God, participants expressed positive emotions. They described their feelings as "gratitude," "happiness," "strength," and "love," and related these emotions to both themselves and others.

**Background Images:** The background art created by participants featured religious symbols, nature, and people. Most of the participants used pictures of their family and themselves as background art and then superimposed emojis of their choice.

**Common Emoji Expressions:** The most frequently used emoji was the smiling face with heart-eyes, symbolizing love from God and family. This emoji was followed by the folded hands emoji, representing gratitude to God, and the flexed biceps emoji, signifying God's power and personal empowerment.



Figure 4: The three most used emojis in the participants' art

## Discussion

This study explored Christian contemplative spirituality within an African digital context, specifically examining how East African youth experience *Visio Divina* through Christian digital art featuring the cross and emojis on their smartphones. The aim was to investigate innovative digital approaches for engaging African youth, including those in East Africa, in online spaces to facilitate their connection with Christ.

The themes emerging from this study offer insights into achieving this aim. Participants expressed a range of emotions, including gratitude and sadness, which are relevant to the process of repentance and salvation, as reflected in 2 Corinthians 7:10. These expressed emotions suggest that contemplative digital art, in particular emojis, may serve as a viable medium for communicating the gospel to African youth.

Anog-Madinger notes that “the message of God’s love becomes more meaningful when connected with and expressed through the communication forms that resonate with the recipients” (Anog-Madinger, 2022, p. 54). Given that African youth are prominent users of digital communication, employing various forms such as “videos, music, jokes, audio recordings, pictures, graphics, stylized writing, and emojis” (Hollington & Nassenstein, 2018, pp. 811-812), integrating these elements into spiritual practices can enhance engagement. Besides, connecting with young people requires recognizing their religious and cultural symbols (Ndereba, 2021, p. 28).

Furthermore, visuals are particularly effective in bridging the gap between young people and faith, as “photographic images can operate on a subconscious level to elicit responses about meaning, identity, and spirituality” (Dunlop & Richter, 2010, p. 209). Such an effect suggests that incorporating visual elements into spiritual practices can be a powerful tool for fostering spiritual engagement among youth.

## Conclusion

This study investigated the use of *Visio Divina* in engaging East African youth with Christian spirituality through digital art and emojis. The findings indicate that this approach could effectively resonate with young audiences, integrating their prevalent digital communication practices with contemplative spirituality. Participants' mixed responses—ranging from gratitude to sadness—highlight the potential of *Visio Divina* to evoke deep emotional and spiritual reflections. Those responses correspond to the broader understanding that digital art, including emojis, can serve as a meaningful channel for conveying religious messages.

By aligning spiritual practices with the digital communication styles of African youth, this study contributes to innovative methods for outreach and engagement. Given the high usage of digital platforms among East African youth, this approach not only meets them where they are but also leverages their familiar communication forms to foster spiritual growth. In a fast-paced digital world, granting young people “permission to move slowly, feel, and attend to both their inner and outer worlds is not only essential, but critical” (Dalton et al., 2019, p. 26). At the same time, “evangelization requires discerning what’s really happening in the digital environment, which means listening first” to understand young people's interests (Dailey, 2015, para 3).

A limitation of this study is the small number of participants, but the reflexivity and rigor of the qualitative approach serves as a balance to this limitation. Further studies in this area could employ a quantitative approach and thus include a larger sample of East African youth.



Other studies could also consider building on the insights from this research to create Christian contemplative digital images that feature the emojis of love, praying hands, and biceps. Overall, this study underscores the importance of adapting spiritual practices to contemporary communication methods, offering a promising avenue for reaching and nurturing faith among the next generation.

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