

THE QUEST FOR SOUL AND SUSTENANCE: A PHILOSOPHICAL EVALUATION OF PUBLIC TRANSPORT EVANGELISM IN PORT HARCOURT, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Public transport evangelism, a ubiquitous phenomenon in Nigeria, reflects the intersection of religious fervor and socio-economic realities. This paper explores the practice of public transport evangelism in Port Harcourt, where religious messages are delivered in the form of sermons, songs, or printed materials within buses and other modes of public transportation. This practice, while celebrated by some as an innovative means of spreading religious messages, has also sparked debates about its ethical propriety and socio-cultural ramifications. By employing a philosophical lens, the paper examines the ethical and socio-cultural implications of this practice, focusing on the intersection of religion, public space, and social interactions. Drawing from the classical theory of utilitarianism, findings suggest that while public transport evangelism can provide comfort and moral guidance to some commuters, it raises ethical concerns regarding the coercion of vulnerable individuals and the invasion of personal space. From a utilitarian perspective, the benefits of promoting spiritual well-being are evident, yet the unintended consequences—such as distress or discomfort for certain passengers, with some evangelists using persuasive tactics to gain financial support or exploit vulnerable passengers—often undermine the overall happiness. The research calls for a balanced approach, recommending a shift toward more respectful and context-sensitive methods of evangelism that maximizes the benefits of Public transport evangelism while mitigating its challenges through proper oversight, community engagement, and adherence to ethical standards in religious outreach.

Key Words: *Commuters, Ethics, Gospel, Money, Public Transport Evangelism*

INTRODUCTION

In Port Harcourt, the commercial capital of Rivers State, Nigeria, public transport evangelism presents a fascinating interplay of faith, culture, and society. This public space has increasingly become a home for religious outreach, where preachers, driven by zeal and conviction, proclaim messages of salvation, repentance, and divine intervention to commuters. Religious groups, especially Christian ministries, utilize buses, taxis, and other forms of public transport to disseminate their messages. The primary aim of public transport evangelism is to make the message of Christianity accessible to individuals who might otherwise not attend traditional church services. As Uche (2020) notes, urban areas, with their transient populations and diverse demographics, pose unique challenges for evangelism. Public transportation systems, which serve as daily touchpoints for large numbers of individuals, offer a strategic platform for spreading religious messages. By reaching commuters in the midst of their daily routines, evangelists hope to spark conversations that may lead to personal transformation. A critical analysis of public

transport evangelism suggests that it is particularly effective in urban centers where other forms of outreach might have limited impact (Teshale, 2016).

The choice of public transport as a platform for evangelism reflects both the ingenuity and urgency of religious outreach in a nation marked by diverse beliefs, economic hardships, and a deep yearning for hope and sustenance. Nigeria, once pronounced the poverty capital of the world, faces severe socio-economic challenges. Many Nigerians are homeless, sleeping under bridges and in front of stores because they cannot afford housing or essential amenities. The Federal Mortgage Bank of Nigeria revealed that more than 9 million Nigerians lack access to affordable housing (Egobiambu, 2019). Additionally, malnutrition and epidemics plague many areas, as a high percentage of Nigerians struggle to feed themselves even twice a day. These dire circumstances have led many families to allow their children to beg on the streets for survival. High unemployment rates exacerbate the situation, leaving skilled and unskilled graduates, as well as entrepreneurial individuals, without opportunities or support. Many Nigerians believe that only divine intervention can alleviate their suffering. This belief draws on the historical and spiritual heritage of African societies, where ancestors are seen as intermediaries guiding the people's affairs (Gbote & Kgatla, 2014). Many also attribute their misfortunes to witchcraft, seeking spiritual remedies to overcome their challenges. Unfortunately, some preachers exploit this vulnerability, using God's name to extort money from those seeking spiritual assistance.

This backdrop sets the stage for a contentious debate about motor park evangelism in Port Harcourt. Critics accuse some evangelists of exploiting commuters under the guise of preaching, using religion as a means to secure their livelihoods. Others view these evangelists as providing spiritual protection for travelers. The ethical tensions have tarnished the reputation of some churches, leading to a noticeable decline in trust toward certain denominations. The Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), the umbrella body for churches, has largely remained passive in addressing these concerns. Linn (2020) argues that materiality is an inherent dimension of preaching that must not be overlooked. Focusing on materiality may illuminate what preaching accomplishes—or fails to accomplish—in the communication context. Evangelists capitalize on the transient nature of commuter spaces, where diverse individuals converge. While some see this practice as an innovative approach to spreading the Gospel, others critique it for its intrusiveness, ethical shortcomings, and commodification of spirituality. Ireland (2017) notes that the commercial nature of public transport complicates the ethical landscape of evangelism. Financial arrangements, such as transport companies compensating evangelists for using buses or trains as venues for preaching, risk commodifying the Gospel and undermining its message of grace. Critics argue that such arrangements could prioritize profit over spiritual transformation, leading individuals to perceive the Gospel as a marketed product rather than a life-changing invitation to faith (Krause, 2013). Moreover, public transport evangelism often fosters transactional encounters rather than genuine spiritual engagement. Rogerson (1995) highlights the ethical implications of these superficial conversions, where commuters may feel pressured into brief, socially polite interactions without experiencing lasting spiritual change. This raises questions about the long-term effectiveness of such evangelistic methods.

This paper seeks to understand and evaluate the phenomenon of public transport evangelism from multiple perspectives. It explores its historical evolution, theological motivations, and ethical challenges while situating the practice within Nigeria's broader

socio-cultural context. The central question—*Does public transport evangelism prioritize the Gospel or the money?*—serves as a lens to examine whether the practice aligns with genuine spiritual values or succumbs to materialistic tendencies. By engaging with philosophical, ethical, and socio-cultural dimensions, this work aims to contribute to the discourse on religion and society in Nigeria. It offers insights for theologians, ethicists, sociologists, and policymakers, while challenging preachers, practitioners, and stakeholders to reimagine public transport evangelism. The goal is to uphold human dignity, foster communal harmony, and authentically represent the transformative power of the Gospel.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilized a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative interviews and participant observation. Data were collected from a diverse group of stakeholders, including public transport operators, passengers, and evangelists involved in public transport evangelism. The survey aimed to evaluate commuters' attitudes toward public transport evangelism, while interviews with religious leaders examined their motivations and perceptions of the practice. Participant observation was conducted on selected bus routes to capture real-time dynamics of evangelism. A total of 30 interviews were conducted with public transport drivers, 25 with passengers, and 15 with evangelists. Observational fieldwork was carried out at various transport terminals and on buses across the city of Port Harcourt, including key locations such as Waterlines, Rumuola, Mile 1, Mile 2, Mile 3, Rumuokoro, Cohoba, Borokiri, and Eleme Junction motor parks.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in the classical theory of utilitarianism, developed by Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806–1873), which has been a cornerstone of moral and political philosophy since the late 18th century. Bentham, often regarded as the founder of classical utilitarianism, laid its foundation in *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1780). His principle of utility, defined as "the greatest happiness of the greatest number," advocates for actions that maximize overall happiness or pleasure while minimizing pain. Bentham's approach, often termed "quantitative utilitarianism," emphasizes measuring happiness through his "hedonistic calculus," which evaluates factors like intensity, duration, and certainty of pleasure or pain. His egalitarian outlook treats all pleasures and pains as equal, irrespective of their nature or source.

Mill, a protégé of Bentham, refined utilitarianism in his seminal work *Utilitarianism* ([1863] 2010). Addressing criticisms of Bentham's framework, Mill introduced the distinction between higher and lower pleasures, arguing that intellectual and moral pleasures (e.g., the pursuit of knowledge and artistic appreciation) are superior to physical ones (e.g., eating or sensual gratification). He famously stated, "It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied" (Mill, 1998). Mill's emphasis on the quality of experiences represents a shift toward "qualitative utilitarianism." Additionally, Mill's advocacy for individual liberty in *On Liberty* ([1859] 2006) emphasized that personal freedom should only be constrained to prevent harm to others, integrating broader social and political dimensions into utilitarian ethics.

This study applies utilitarian principles to analyze the ethical implications of public transport evangelism—a practice in which religious messages are shared in public transit spaces, particularly in Port Harcourt. This practice, predominantly associated with

evangelical Christian groups, seeks to reach diverse audiences, including those who may not attend church services. Activities range from spontaneous preaching and distributing tracts to singing hymns and engaging passengers in conversations about faith. While public transport evangelism offers opportunities for spiritual outreach in a context marked by urban poverty, social unrest, and a search for hope, it also raises ethical questions. The unsolicited nature of these engagements challenges the balance between the evangelists' intent to provide spiritual guidance and the passengers' right to a disruption-free commute. From a utilitarian perspective, the central question is whether the benefits of such evangelism, such as providing comfort and hope, outweigh the potential harms, such as discomfort, alienation, or intrusion experienced by other passengers. Bentham's framework, focused on maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain, offers a broad lens for evaluating these outcomes. Mill's refinement, which values higher pleasures and prioritizes individual liberty, adds nuance to the analysis by considering the spiritual and intellectual fulfillment offered by evangelism against the disruption it may cause to personal autonomy and public order.

The Historical Evolution of Public Transport Evangelism in Nigeria

Before the advent of Christianity, Nigeria's religious landscape was dominated by traditional African religions, which emphasized communal spirituality, ancestral worship, and sacred rituals. While these practices were localized, they fostered a deep sense of community and spiritual consciousness. Christianity was introduced to Nigeria in the 15th century by Portuguese missionaries, but its widespread influence began in the 19th century with the arrival of British missionaries. Early missionary efforts focused on education, health care, and proselytization in rural and urban areas (Eche, 2018). The missionaries employed strategies such as open-air preaching, which later influenced the emergence of public transport evangelism.

During the colonial period, Nigeria experienced significant infrastructural development, including the introduction of railways, road networks, and motor vehicles. Public transport systems such as trains, buses, and lorries became central to urbanization and commerce, providing new platforms for interpersonal interactions. After Nigeria's independence in 1960, public transport systems expanded to accommodate the country's growing population and urbanization. The emergence of intra- and intercity buses, minibusses ("danfos"), and motorcycles ("okadas") created opportunities for diverse social engagements, including religious activities. The early 20th century witnessed the rise of evangelical movements in Nigeria, notably the Aladura churches and the Pentecostal revival. These groups emphasized personal salvation, public witnessing, and the use of unconventional spaces for preaching (Ayegboyin, & Ishola, 2013; Deezia, 2021). Economic challenges in the 1970s and 1980s, including urban migration and unemployment, led many Nigerians to adopt innovative approaches to evangelism. Public transport, being accessible and affordable, became a practical venue for reaching a diverse audience. During the 1980s and 1990s, public transport evangelism became more organized. Evangelists, often self-trained or affiliated with local churches, targeted buses, trains, and parks during peak commuting hours (Ukah, 2008). The rise of Pentecostalism further popularized this form of outreach, as preachers emphasized healing, prosperity, and deliverance. The advent of portable sound systems, printed tracts, and recorded sermons in the late 20th century enhanced the effectiveness of public transport evangelism. Evangelists could reach larger audiences with amplified messages and

distribute materials for personal reflection. In the 21st century, public transport evangelism has adapted to modern challenges and opportunities. Urbanization, digital technology, and shifting religious demographics have influenced its methods. Evangelists now incorporate mobile apps, social media, and digital tracts alongside traditional preaching.

The practice of evangelism within public spaces is not new. Historically, Christian evangelism has involved preaching in marketplaces, streets, and open-air gatherings. However, public transport evangelism is a more modern adaptation, emerging alongside the rapid urbanization and increasing reliance on public transportation. In cities like Lagos, Nairobi, and Accra, where traffic congestion and long commuting hours make private cars less feasible for the majority, public transportation becomes an ideal venue for evangelistic efforts (National Bureau of Statistics, 2019). In the context of Nigeria, public transport evangelism has evolved as a response to the rapid population growth and the high demand for public transportation in urban centers. Religious organizations have increasingly targeted this space as a means to engage individuals who may not otherwise participate in religious gatherings or church services.

In Nigeria, public transport evangelism emerged alongside the growth of evangelical Christianity, especially with the rise of Pentecostal churches in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Pentecostalism, known for its fervent approach to evangelism, emphasizes reaching the lost through creative and unconventional means. The growth of urbanization in Nigeria, and Port Harcourt in particular, coupled with the rapid expansion of the transport sector, provided an ideal setting for this form of evangelism. The practice gained traction as more Nigerians turned to public transport due to overcrowded roads, traffic congestion, and rising fuel costs, making private car ownership less viable. As these transport systems became more widely used, they also became fertile grounds for religious engagement (Omenugha, 2016). Public transport evangelism thus reflects a strategic response by religious groups to reach a large, diverse, and often transient audience.

The Context of Public Transport Evangelism in Port Harcourt

Port Harcourt, the capital of Rivers State, is one of Nigeria's largest cities, with a diverse population and a vibrant urban economy centered on oil production and commerce (Akani, 2020). The city has witnessed rapid urbanization, with significant economic migration, marked by high levels of migration, unemployment, and infrastructural challenges, and religious diversification. The city, predominantly Christian in its religious composition, also contains a substantial number of Muslims, traditional African religious practitioners, and people who adhere to secular or non-religious ideologies. This diverse religious landscape provides fertile ground for interfaith dialogues as well as the promotion of particular faiths within public spaces. In Port Harcourt, as in many other Nigerian cities, public transport has become more than just a means of getting from one place to another. It is an arena for religious discourse, where evangelical preachers take to buses, taxis, and other public transport systems to spread the gospel.

Historically, evangelical Christianity has had a profound presence in Nigeria, especially since the advent of missionary activity in the 19th century. In Port Harcourt, this historical legacy intersects with the modern urban context, where the fast-paced lifestyle, economic pressures, and social fragmentation have created a yearning for meaning, belonging, and spiritual fulfillment. Evangelism, therefore, serves as a response

to these needs, providing a sense of community and divine intervention in the everyday life of city dwellers. Public transport in Port Harcourt is primarily informal, with minibuses (locally known as “keke bus”), buses, and shared taxis dominating the transportation sector. The informal nature of the transport system means that public transport spaces often become platforms for social interaction and religious expression. The predominance of Christianity in the region is evident, with numerous denominations actively involved in various forms of evangelism (Ajayi, 2020). This religious fervor spills over into everyday activities, and public transport becomes a space for evangelical outreach. Additionally, economic factors such as poverty and the lack of formal religious spaces contribute to the prevalence of evangelism in public transport.

Public transport evangelism, defined as the act of spreading the Christian gospel in public transportation settings, has become increasingly visible in Port Harcourt, presents a unique context due to its bustling transport networks and the strong religious presence in the region. The phenomenon involves evangelical activities such as preaching, handing out literature, singing, and praying in buses, taxis, and other forms of public transport. Public transport evangelism in Port Harcourt involves the spread of religious messages or beliefs by individuals, often preachers or religious enthusiasts, during journeys in public transport vehicles such as buses, taxis, or shared cars. The practice has gained considerable popularity in recent decades, with individuals using the transit time to distribute religious tracts, offer prayers, and sometimes engage in verbal evangelism. This form of evangelism is primarily carried out by Christians, although practitioners from other faiths, such as Islam, also engage in similar practices within the transportation context (Ojo, 2019). In the context of this study, public transport evangelism is characterized by preachers who use public transport vehicles to deliver religious messages, often in the form of short sermons or prayers. It is a strategy that targets a captive audience—commuters who are temporarily confined to the public space of the vehicle. The evangelists may ask for financial contributions as a form of support for their ministry or make appeals for donations. This form of evangelism has its roots in Nigeria’s vibrant religious culture, where the blending of faith with daily life is common.

Barinua (2024, oral interview) narrated his experience that in Port Harcourt, apart from the normal motor park shuttling and bustling, evangelists and/or preachers move close to the door where a vehicle is loading and a voice echoes, “Brethren, I greet you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ,” with a Bible and sometimes a handkerchief, and a corresponding “...Amen.” Their aim is obviously to preach, pray, and ask for financial assistance from commuters embarking on a journey. However, passengers at Abali/Mile One Flyover, Waterlines, Rumuokoro, and Eleme Junction motor parks witness this barrage of evangelists every minute of the day. Interestingly, the prayer pattern goes thus:

Father Lord, thank you for bringing us to this wonderful day. We are privileged to be among the living. We ask for your mercy and grace for your beloved children embarking on this journey. I come against every blood-sucking demon on the way. Nobody will die in this vehicle. I cover the passengers, driver, the tires, steering, engine, and the road with the ocean blood of Jesus. You shall not run into armed robbers. Your monies will not be used to pay mortuary bills. I transfer my grace to you. Go and return in peace (Abuoma 2024, oral interview).

The prayer ends, and the evangelist or preacher continues, "If you are led by the spirit, you can support the work of Jesus Christ." Some people with kind hearts drop or squeeze money to help the evangelists. In all of this, the driver(s) is very patient to wait for the prayer to end before driving off. Against this backdrop, Ugwu (2016) notes that itinerant preachers have inadvertently become partners with businessmen and women to keep the economy moving. The preachers, mostly shabbily dressed, have devised ingenious ways of winning souls and making a living in a country beset with recession, inflation, and joblessness. As a result, commuters have persistently expressed their opinions on these never-ending practices that significantly affect some motor parks in the country, especially in Port Harcourt.

The Motivations for Public Transport Evangelism in Port Harcourt

Evangelism, as a spiritual enterprise, is at the core of Christian mission and identity. Rooted in the Great Commission of Jesus Christ (Matthew 28:19-20), evangelism represents the deliberate effort to communicate the message of salvation, reconciliation, and the hope of eternal life. Framed as the "quest for souls," evangelism is more than a ritual or activity—it is a vocation that seeks to address the deepest spiritual needs of humanity. The biblical mandate for evangelism finds its strongest expression in the New Testament. Jesus' command to "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations" encapsulates the universal scope of the Christian mission. The metaphor of a "quest for souls" is drawn from the spiritual understanding that every human being is made in the image of God and, therefore, has an eternal destiny. Evangelism seeks to guide individuals toward the fulfillment of that destiny through faith in Christ.

The Apostle Paul's ministry exemplifies this quest. He tirelessly proclaimed the Gospel to Jews and Gentiles alike, motivated by a conviction that "it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes" (Romans 1:16). For Paul, evangelism was a matter of life and death—a spiritual urgency to rescue souls from sin and alienation from God. At its heart, evangelism is deeply theological. It is grounded in the nature of God as love (1 John 4:8) and His desire for all people to be saved (1 Timothy 2:4). The quest for souls reflects the divine initiative in redemption—God's relentless pursuit of humanity through the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Moreover, evangelism underscores the interplay between divine sovereignty and human responsibility. While it is God who ultimately saves, believers are called to be active participants in His redemptive mission. The apostle Paul described evangelists as "ambassadors for Christ" (2 Corinthians 5:20), tasked with imploring people to be reconciled to God. For many public transport evangelists, the practice is rooted in a deep sense of spiritual duty. Public transport evangelists often view their efforts as scattering seeds in fertile and challenging grounds alike, trusting God to bring forth spiritual growth. The transient nature of public transport is perceived as an opportune moment to reach individuals who might not otherwise encounter the gospel. This perspective aligns with the missionary zeal that characterizes much of Pentecostal and evangelical Christianity in Nigeria. Public transport evangelists often testify to personal encounters with God that compel them to share their faith publicly, even in spaces that may not be conventionally sacred.

On the other hand, public transport evangelism cannot be divorced from the socio-economic realities of Port Harcourt. High levels of unemployment, poverty, and economic instability have left many individuals seeking alternative means of sustenance. For some,

public transport evangelism serves as a source of income, as preachers often solicit offerings at the end of their sermons. These donations may come in the form of cash offerings or promises of support to religious organizations. Evangelist Okon Edet Akpan narrated:

My journey as a public transport evangelist began about five years ago. At first, I saw it as a way to fulfill my calling to spread the gospel. Nigeria is a country where millions rely on public transport daily, making buses and taxis vibrant microcosms of our society. I thought, 'What better place to reach souls than here?' I would stand at the bus terminals or join passengers on the buses, boldly preaching about salvation, repentance, and the hope of eternal life. My messages were often well-received, and some passengers even thanked me for reminding them of God's love in their busy, chaotic lives. However, one particular experience changed my perspective. On a hot afternoon in Port Harcourt, after delivering a message on faith and perseverance, a passenger approached me. He said, 'Man of God, you have blessed me today. Please take this as a token of appreciation,' handing me ₦5,000. I was reluctant at first, but he insisted. This was the first time anyone had given me money for preaching. From that day, I noticed a pattern. More passengers started to offer me money, sometimes quietly slipping it into my hand, other times announcing it aloud and encouraging others to join. It became clear to me that people not only valued the message but also wanted to support me materially. Soon, I realized the potential of this work to meet my financial needs. I began to hone my approach, crafting sermons that resonated deeply with people's struggles—topics like financial breakthroughs, divine favor, and overcoming adversity. These messages often drew more generous responses, as people connected their giving to the idea of receiving blessings. While my primary motivation remains sharing the gospel, I won't deny that the financial aspect has been a blessing. I use the money to support my family, fund my ministry, and even give back to the needy. I see it as God's provision for His servant. Still, I am careful to maintain the integrity of my calling. I remind myself constantly that my goal is not to enrich myself but to enrich others spiritually. The money is a byproduct, not the purpose (Okon 2024, oral interview).

For public transport workers such as drivers and conductors, the act of evangelizing can be a way to enhance their income, as they may receive more generous tips from passengers who are moved by the religious message or feel obligated to contribute to the cause. Some drivers recount that these preachers often remit a portion of the offerings to them or pay a small "fee" for the opportunity to evangelize, making it a mutually beneficial arrangement:

The preacher brings peace to the bus. People feel safer and more relaxed, which makes them willing to give more generously. At the end of the trip, we share the blessings—both spiritual and financial (Shoal 2024, oral interview).

A Conductor also recount his experience:

When passengers give money to the preacher, it helps us too. The preacher sometimes gives us something as appreciation, and passengers do not complain much about fares after hearing the Word (Nathaniel 2024, oral interview).

While the economic benefits of public transport evangelism are significant, it is important to acknowledge the spiritual motivations that often accompany these activities. Many individuals involved in public transport evangelism believe that their actions will lead to spiritual rewards, such as blessings, divine favor, or success in their professional endeavors. For some, the economic benefits are seen as a byproduct of their religious commitment, with the hope that their evangelistic efforts will lead to both material and spiritual prosperity. This belief is particularly common in a society where religious practice and financial success are often intertwined in the cultural consciousness. Critics argue that this practice exploits the goodwill of passengers under the guise of spiritual engagement. The blending of spiritual messages with financial appeals raises ethical concerns, particularly when passengers feel coerced into giving out of a sense of guilt or social pressure. This dynamic underscores the blurred line between genuine evangelism and opportunistic behavior.

Public transport evangelism also facilitates the building of networks and patronage that can be economically beneficial. Evangelists may attract attention from religious organizations or individuals who may provide financial or material support for their efforts. In some cases, drivers and conductors involved in evangelism may receive patronage from religious leaders or organizations that see the public transport sector as a fruitful avenue for spreading their message. This patronage can take the form of financial aid, free transport services, or even sponsorship of religious events. The integration of religion with economic activity in this context thus serves both personal and communal interests (Wotogbe-Weneka, 2016). In a society where social status is often linked to religious engagement and devotion, public transport evangelism can serve as a tool for individuals to gain symbolic capital. Religious leaders, drivers, and conductors who are perceived as actively engaging in evangelism may gain recognition within their communities. This recognition can translate into social prestige, which may have indirect economic benefits, such as access to influential networks, business opportunities, and social mobility. In some instances, the public display of religious commitment can be strategically used to enhance one's social standing, which can ultimately lead to increased economic opportunities.

In the competitive and fragmented public transport sector, where drivers and conductors often rely on informal networks and social interactions for business, religion can serve as a branding tool. Religious messages or activities carried out during transport journeys may appeal to a particular demographic of passengers, such as devout Christians or individuals seeking spiritual enrichment. Public transport evangelism, therefore, serves as a form of market differentiation, allowing drivers and operators to carve out a niche audience. By creating a religious atmosphere, these individuals may attract passengers who prioritize religious values, thereby increasing their ridership and, consequently, their income. Public transport evangelism is also a way for religious organizations to expand their networks and increase their influence. By tapping into the daily routines of commuters, religious groups can potentially recruit new members who may not have otherwise encountered their messages (Eze, 2023). The process of evangelizing during commutes often results in long-term engagement with passengers, which in turn creates

a steady flow of financial support through tithes, offerings, and donations. Another economic aspect of public transport evangelism involves the sale of religious merchandise, such as prayer books, CDs, anointed oils, and other religious items. These items are often marketed to passengers during their commute, with the goal of generating additional income for the religious organizers. The combination of transportation and product sales creates a hybrid business model where religious and commercial interests converge.

Ethical and Socio-Cultural Implications of Public Transport Evangelism in Port Harcourt

Public transport evangelism offers spiritual fulfillment to individuals seeking religious solace or guidance. For many residents of Port Harcourt, the stresses of daily life—economic hardship, insecurity, and social alienation—create a longing for hope and divine intervention. In this context, hearing a sermon or gospel message during a commute may provide emotional comfort and a sense of purpose (Okereke, 2018). From a utilitarian standpoint, the positive emotional and psychological impact on these individuals can be considered a form of happiness. Messages of faith, hope, and salvation have the potential to alleviate feelings of despair, contributing to individual inner peace and societal well-being.

In Nigeria, particularly in Port Harcourt, where social cohesion is often strained by ethnic, religious, and political divisions, public transport evangelism can offer a rare moment of collective engagement. Passengers listening to the same message, singing hymns, or experiencing spiritual upliftment together may form a temporary sense of solidarity. This shared experience can transcend individual differences, fostering communal bonds among strangers. From a utilitarian perspective, this momentary unity promotes collective happiness and reduces social alienation, enhancing the mental and emotional well-being of participants and strengthening societal fabric.

Public transport evangelism also democratizes access to spiritual teachings. Many Port Harcourt residents face barriers to attending religious services due to financial constraints, time limitations, or physical inaccessibility of places of worship. By bringing religious teachings into everyday spaces, evangelism ensures that spiritual resources reach those who might otherwise miss out. From a utilitarian viewpoint, this practice efficiently distributes religious knowledge and offers spiritual support, benefiting those who gain new insights or find guidance. The ease of access contributes to the happiness and well-being of individuals. Public transport evangelism also plays a significant role in the socio-cultural context of Nigeria and Port Harcourt. Religion shapes moral values, social behaviors, and cultural norms in these societies (Falola, 2001). Public transport evangelism contributes to fostering a sense of religious community among commuters and provides a platform for social interaction where individuals can bond over shared beliefs. Additionally, it democratizes religious access by reaching people in their everyday life situations, rather than relying solely on institutional settings such as churches or religious institutions. However, public transport evangelism can also reinforce power dynamics. Those who control the evangelistic activities—whether religious organizations or individual evangelists—often set the tone and content of the message, which can marginalize alternative beliefs or dissenting views. This raises questions about religious freedom and the potential infringement of personal agency through proselytization.

While the utilitarian value of public transport evangelism is evident, it raises several social, ethical, and practical concerns that must be addressed. In Port Harcourt, the

practice of public transport evangelism raises questions about the boundaries between religious expression and personal space. While freedom of religion is constitutionally protected, some passengers may feel uncomfortable with unsolicited religious messages or proselytism during their commute. The imposition of religious discourse in confined spaces, such as buses or trains, can be perceived as an infringement on individual autonomy and the right to privacy. Religious groups engaging in public transport evangelism must be sensitive to these concerns, ensuring their activities do not disrupt the peace or violate the rights of others (Eze, 2023). Striking a balance between promoting religious beliefs and respecting personal space is crucial for maintaining harmonious coexistence in public spaces.

A primary ethical criticism of public transport evangelism is its potential infringement on passenger autonomy. Passengers are often subjected to religious messages without consent, especially in the confined space of a vehicle, where opting out is difficult. This lack of choice can be distressing for individuals uninterested in engaging with such messages or those of differing faiths. From a utilitarian perspective, the discomfort or irritation experienced by unwilling participants detracts from overall happiness, raising questions about the practice's ethical justification. In other words, despite its growing presence, public transport evangelism also raises several philosophical and ethical questions. A core ethical dilemma centers around the issue of consent. In public spaces, passengers do not always have the freedom to choose whether they wish to engage in religious activities, particularly when confined in a bus or taxi. This raises concerns about religious coercion and the boundaries of freedom of expression. Furthermore, there is the question of whether public transport evangelism respects the diverse religious and cultural identities of passengers. Nigeria, as a religiously pluralistic society, has substantial Christian, Muslim, and indigenous populations (Oluwaseun, 2022). The imposition of religious messages in a space where individuals hold diverse faith commitments may contribute to religious tension or exclusion.

Another ethical consideration is the socio-cultural context of evangelism in public spaces. Public transport is often crowded, and the pressures of tight schedules and crowded spaces can exacerbate commuters' stress. Critics argue that using such spaces for religious messaging may be intrusive or insensitive to passengers who might be seeking solace in private contemplation rather than unsolicited preaching (Falola, 2001). Concerns also arise regarding the potential exploitation of vulnerable passengers. Many Nigerian commuters are economically disadvantaged, and the long hours spent commuting make them more susceptible to emotional manipulation. Religious groups or individuals may exploit these circumstances by offering promises of divine intervention or financial rewards, creating false expectations. To prevent such exploitation, religious groups must adhere to ethical practices, ensuring that their activities are transparent and do not take advantage of the hardships faced by passengers. Ethical guidelines should govern how religious groups engage with vulnerable individuals in public transport settings. Bobmanuel (2024) describes public transport evangelism as exploitative, alleging that preachers often persuade passengers to donate money by quoting scripture and claiming divine mandates. A respondent lamented:

The way we sow seed in Port Harcourt is becoming unbecoming. Sadly, foolish people comply and give money. I would rather give to a beggar who openly asks for money than to someone disguised in a

monkey jacket, reading excerpts of a storybook to beg for money (Amadi, 2024, oral interview).

Passenger safety is also a consideration in public transport evangelism. Evangelistic activities that involve large groups, such as prayer sessions or loud preaching, can sometimes lead to disturbances or conflicts among passengers. In crowded public transport systems, these activities can escalate tensions, particularly if there are passengers from different religious backgrounds or those who oppose the religious message. Religious groups must ensure that their activities do not compromise passenger safety or create unnecessary disruptions. This may involve limiting the scope of their efforts, choosing less intrusive methods, or engaging with transport authorities to establish ground rules.

From an economic perspective, public transport evangelism poses a utilitarian dilemma. On one hand, proponents argue that it offers psychological relief by distracting passengers from the challenges of commuting and promoting hope and motivation, which could enhance economic productivity. On the other hand, if such activities become overly disruptive, they risk causing dissatisfaction among passengers and reducing overall confidence in public transport services. Transport authorities must carefully assess these economic implications, balancing the interests of religious groups with the need to maintain efficient and reliable transport systems. Akinbode & Agunbiade (2019) critique the commercialization of faith, asserting that soliciting monetary gifts contradicts the principle of freely giving what one has received. He contends that the blending of financial demands with ministry reflects a broader issue in Nigerian Christianity, where religion often intersects with unethical practices. Similarly, Beville (2011) raises concerns about the theological competence of some evangelists, noting that they sometimes exploit religious systems to solicit funds under the guise of spiritual outreach. Public transport evangelism frequently blurs the boundary between spiritual outreach and commercial enterprise. Some evangelists solicit donations or sell religious materials, creating a transactional dynamic that can dilute the purity of their message. From a utilitarian perspective, this financial focus risks exploiting vulnerable passengers, ultimately reducing overall happiness and undermining the ethical value of such practices. A respondent shared their experience:

As a frequent traveler relying on public transportation, I have noticed a recurring pattern: individuals preach and pray for the journey's success, then request money for their ministry. Initially, I contributed, but now I feel irritated whenever I see them. I suspect these individuals are hungry hustlers masquerading as preachers (Nwanee, 2024, oral interview).

Public transport evangelism often disrupts the intended purpose of shared spaces, which are designed for peaceful and comfortable travel. Activities such as loud preaching, aggressive proselytism, or unsolicited interactions can cause discomfort to passengers who simply wish to commute. Obowunmi and Kinikini (2011) argue that such actions constitute an abuse of freedom of speech, as preaching in a confined space like a bus infringes on the rights of other passengers. They pose the question, "Must I be forced to listen?" and advocate for moderation in public religious expressions. Moreover, they distinguish between exercising freedom of speech and becoming a public nuisance, ultimately suggesting that preaching on buses should be prohibited. Another respondent remarked:

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is about the salvation of mankind. These hustlers do not preach the Gospel; they exploit travelers' fears to obtain money. Some even ask for tithes as if they were in church! The Gospel is free: 'Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out devils: freely ye have received, freely give (Agu, 2024, oral interview).

Public transport, as a shared space, is meant for individuals to travel to their destinations in relative peace and comfort. When evangelism becomes disruptive—whether through loud preaching, aggressive proselytism, or unsolicited interactions—it can detract from the overall well-being of passengers who simply wish to commute. The utilitarian calculus here would depend on whether the happiness generated by the evangelism outweighs the inconvenience or discomfort caused to passengers. If the evangelism causes widespread discomfort, it may not fulfill the utilitarian principle of maximizing happiness.

The Application of Utilitarianism to Public Transport Evangelism

From a utilitarian perspective, public transport evangelism can be viewed as a practice that aims to promote spiritual well-being and social harmony, potentially enhancing the overall happiness of society. For passengers who share the same religious beliefs as the preacher, the messages may provide spiritual comfort, encouragement, and a sense of community. They may find solace in the prayers, upliftment in the sermons, and inspiration to live more ethically (Akinbode & Agunbiade, 2019). Moreover, for those who may be going through personal struggles, a well-timed word of encouragement or a call to faith might resonate deeply, offering them a sense of hope. In a society marked by political instability, economic hardships, and environmental challenges, the presence of religious messages on public transport can be seen as a source of solace that contributes to the emotional well-being of individuals. Public transport evangelism can also be seen as a form of social bonding. It creates a shared experience for passengers, who, for a brief moment, are united by the common purpose of hearing a message or participating in a prayer. In a rapidly urbanizing society, such moments of connection can help foster a sense of community.

However, despite the potential positive effects, public transport evangelism can also lead to significant discomfort and even harm, which utilitarianism must account for in its moral evaluation. One of the primary criticisms of public transport evangelism is the potential violation of personal space. For many passengers, the public bus is a space where they seek private time to reflect, relax, or prepare for the day ahead. The sudden intrusion of a loud, unsolicited religious message can be seen as an invasion of this personal space. This discomfort may lead to frustration, irritation, and a feeling of being trapped, especially for those passengers who do not wish to engage with the message.

Furthermore, public transport evangelism can be problematic when passengers are coerced into listening to religious content they do not agree with. This is especially true in a pluralistic society where individuals of various religious backgrounds coexist. Non-Christians or those with different spiritual beliefs may feel alienated or offended by the preachers' attempts to impose a particular worldview on them. The practice can exacerbate societal divisions, particularly if it is seen as an effort to proselytize or convert people in a public space.

For passengers who are already stressed due to the pressures of daily life, the intrusion of loud religious preaching may add to their mental and emotional burden. It

may disrupt their ability to relax or reflect during their commute, leading to a negative experience that diminishes overall happiness. The utilitarian evaluation of public transport evangelism depends heavily on the perspective taken—whether one adopts an act utilitarian or a rule utilitarian approach (Macleod, 2016). From the act utilitarian perspective, each instance of public transport evangelism should be evaluated based on its immediate consequences. If a sermon brings joy, comfort, or a sense of hope to a significant number of passengers, it might be considered morally justified. However, if it leads to discomfort or resentment for many passengers, then the action may be deemed ethically problematic.

In contrast, a rule utilitarian approach would evaluate public transport evangelism based on broader societal rules. If society as a whole benefits from having a general rule that allows religious messages to be shared in public spaces, then public transport evangelism could be justified. However, if the practice leads to more harm than good when considered on a societal scale—such as fostering division or discomfort—it might be better to establish rules that limit religious preaching in such public spaces.

CONCLUSION

The phenomenon of public transport evangelism in Port Harcourt, as examined in this study, reveals a complex interplay of spiritual fervor, ethical challenges, and socio-cultural dynamics. It embodies the zealous pursuit of soul-winning that characterizes evangelical Christian practices in Nigeria, while simultaneously reflecting the socio-economic realities of the urban environment. This interplay underscores the dual motivations of evangelists: the spiritual goal of spreading the Gospel and the material necessity of sustenance within a challenging socio-economic context.

From an ethical perspective, public transport evangelism raises significant questions. The intrusion into private spaces, potential coercion of captive audiences, and the financial transactions involved sometimes undermine the principles of autonomy, respect, and transparency. While the evangelists often justify their actions through theological frameworks, this study has highlighted the need for a more reflective approach that prioritizes the dignity and agency of all individuals involved.

Socio-culturally, this practice sheds light on the resilience and adaptability of religious expressions in Port Harcourt's urban milieu. It demonstrates how faith communities navigate and respond to the pressures of modernity, economic struggles, and the pervasive demand for spiritual fulfillment. The tension between the sacred mission of evangelism and the secular realities of livelihood creates a unique cultural artifact that deserves critical attention. This philosophical investigation has sought to balance appreciation for the genuine religious commitment underlying public transport evangelism with a critical assessment of its implications. Ultimately, the study invites both practitioners and observers to envision more ethical and culturally sensitive approaches to evangelism that honor the Gospel's call for love, justice, and respect for the inherent dignity of all persons.

By integrating theological reflection, ethical critique, and socio-cultural analysis, this study contributes to a broader understanding of the intersections between religion, morality, and urban life. It is hoped that this work will inspire further dialogue and exploration, leading to transformative practices that embody the spirit of the Gospel in ways that uplift and unite the diverse communities of Port Harcourt and beyond.

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