PLASU Journal of Religion, Culture and Humanities
Vol: 2 No. 2. July, 2026

SPIRITUALITY, POWER, AND CORRUPTION: UNDERSTANDING THE PARADOX OF HIGHLY RELIGIOUS AFRICAN SOCIETIES

DR. THADDEUS GRACE SOFI,
Department of Religion and cultural Studies,
Plateau State University Bokkos

Abstract
Religion has historically functioned as a central moral regulator in African societies, shaping ethical conduct, communal cohesion, and leadership accountability. Yet, paradoxically, many African nations, particularly Nigeria, exhibit persistent corruption, weak governance structures, and eroded social trust despite high levels of religiosity. This study critically examines the complex interplay between spirituality, moral authority, and corruption in African contexts, with a focus on Nigeria, seeking to understand why profound religious commitment does not automatically translate into ethical governance. This study employs a qualitative, desk-based methodology, the study analyses secondary data from scholarly publications, empirical reports, and institutional assessments. The study also adopts an interdisciplinary lens that incorporates sociology of religion, political science, and ethics. Conceptually, the research draws on Weber"s theory of authority, the moral economy framework, and the instrumentalisation of religion, highlighting how religious institutions may simultaneously serve as moral guides and instruments of political legitimization. The study finds that while Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religion (ATR) retain ethical framework, their moral authority is frequently compromised through political patronage, prosperity-oriented doctrines, and erosion of indigenous communal sanctions. This compromise fosters ethical relativism, normalizes corruption, undermines governance, hampers national development, and weakens social cohesion. Nevertheless, the research identifies pathways for moral renewal, including reinforcing ethical accountability within religious institutions, promoting civic and religious education, reclaiming the prophetic role of religion, maintaining institutional autonomy from political co-optation, and leveraging religion as a tool for sustainable development. The study concludes that reclaiming ethical spirituality is indispensable for restoring public trust, promoting accountability in governance, and fostering sustainable development in African societies. Ultimately, the research contributes to understanding the paradox of religiosity and corruption, demonstrating that religion, when ethically anchored, can transform from a legitimizer of power into a catalyst for moral and social transformation.

Keywords: Religiosity, Corruption, Moral Authority, Governance Introduction

Introduction

Africa is widely recognized as one of the most religious regions in the contemporary world. Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religion (ATR) continue to shape social norms, moral values, political behavior, and everyday life across the continent (Ellis & ter Haar, 2020; Kalu, 2021). In countries such as Nigeria, religious language dominates public discourse, religious leaders command significant moral authority, and faith-based institutions exert strong influence on political and economic life (Marshall, 2019; Danfulani, 2020). Ordinarily, such

deep religiosity should foster ethical conduct, social responsibility and accountability in leadership. However, the lived reality of many African societies sharply contradicts this expectation.

Despite high levels of religious participation and public piety, corruption, abuse of power, moral decadence, and institutional failure remain pervasive across the continent. Empirical reports, such as the *Corruption Perceptions Index*, consistently rank many highly religious African countries among those with persistent corruption challenges (Transparency International, 2023). Scholars have therefore questioned the assumed positive correlation between religiosity and moral integrity, noting that intense religious expression does not necessarily translate into ethical governance or social justice (Ayantayo, 2021; Oluwaseun & Lawal, 2024). This contradiction presents a significant sociological and moral puzzle that demands critical interrogation. This paradox becomes even more troubling when religion itself becomes entangled with political power and economic interests. Rather than functioning primarily as a moral compass, religion in many African contexts increasingly operates as a legitimizing tool for authority, wealth accumulation, and political mobilization (Obadare, 2018; Onapajo, 2020). Religious symbols, rhetoric, and rituals are often deployed to sanctify power, silence dissent, and justify inequality, thereby weakening the ethical foundations of spirituality (Ukah, 2022). In such contexts, spirituality becomes expressive and performative but largely detached from moral accountability.

Historically, African spiritual traditions both indigenous and institutional played a central role in moral regulation, communal accountability, and social cohesion (Mbiti, 2019; Obidah, 2022). Spirituality was deeply embedded in everyday life and closely linked to ethical responsibility, collective wellbeing, and respect for communal norms. However, contemporary African societies are witnessing the gradual erosion of these moral systems due to modernity, urbanization, global capitalism, and politicized religion (Akinade, 2020; Agbiji & Swart, 2019). As spirituality becomes increasingly privatized or commercialized, its capacity to restrain corruption and abuse of power diminishes.

Statement of the Problem

The fundamental problem addressed in this study is the persistent coexistence of deep religiosity and widespread corruption in African societies. Despite the numerical growth of religious institutions, increased participation in religious activities and the prominence of spiritual discourse, corruption continues to undermine governance, public institutions, religious organizations, and interpersonal trust (Gbadamosi & Adebayo, 2023). More critically, religious institutions themselves are sometimes implicated in the legitimization of corrupt political actors or the normalization of unethical practices through silence, selective morality, or prosperity-centered theologies (Ukah, 2022; Marshall, 2019).

This situation has led to a growing crisis of moral authority, where religion no longer commands unquestioned ethical legitimacy in the public sphere (Afolayan, 2022). Public trust in both political and religious institutions is steadily declining, raising urgent questions about the social role of spirituality and its relationship with power. This study therefore seeks to

critically examine the paradox of spirituality and corruption, not to dismiss religion, but to understand how power distorts spirituality and undermines its ethical mandate.

Research Questions

The study is guided by the following research questions:

i. Why does corruption persist in societies that are deeply religious?
ii. How has spirituality been reshaped by power and politics in contemporary African societies?
iii. In what ways do religious institutions and leaders interact with political and economic power?
iv. What factors account for the disconnection between religious devotion and ethical behaviour?
v. How can spirituality be reclaimed as a force for moral accountability and social transformation?

Aim of the Study

The main aim of this study is to critically examine the paradox of spirituality, power, and corruption in highly religious African societies in order to understand why deep religious commitment has not translated into ethical governance and moral integrity.

Objectives of the Study

The specific objectives are to:

i. Examine the traditional moral role of spirituality in African societies.
ii. Analyse the relationship between religion and power in contemporary Africa.
iii. Identify social and institutional factors that sustain corruption in religious contexts.
iv. Assess the implications of corrupted spirituality for moral authority and public trust.
v. Propose pathways for restoring ethical accountability within African religious life.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and analytical approach, drawing on sociology of religion and African religious studies. It relies on:

i. Conceptual analysis of spirituality, power, corruption, and moral authority
ii. Critical review of recent scholarly literature
iii. Contextual reflections drawn mainly from Nigeria and other African societies

The approach is interpretive rather than statistical, allowing for deeper engagement with meanings, contradictions, and structural dynamics (Ellis & ter Haar, 2020; Ayantayo, 2021).

Significance of the Study

This study contributes to scholarly debates on religion and morality by challenging the assumption that religiosity automatically produces ethical societies. It is also socially relevant, as it highlights the ethical consequences of the fusion between spirituality and power.

Practically, the study offers insights that may assist religious leaders, policymakers, and civil society actors in rethinking the moral responsibilities of religion in Africa (Agbiji & Swart, 2019; Afolayan, 2022).

Scope and Limitation of the Study

The study focuses on African societies, with particular reference to Nigeria. It draws from Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religion but does not attempt an exhaustive comparative analysis. The emphasis remains on conceptual clarity and sociological interpretation rather than empirical measurement.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework Conceptual Clarifications

A rigorous examination of spirituality, power, and corruption requires clear conceptual grounding. These concepts are often used loosely in public discourse, yet they carry distinct sociological and ethical meanings that shape how social realities are interpreted and addressed.

Spirituality

Spirituality, in this study, refers to the ethical, moral, and transcendental orientation that shapes human conduct, social responsibility, and communal values. While spirituality is commonly associated with religious belief and practice, scholars increasingly distinguish between *religion as an institution* and *spirituality as lived moral consciousness* (Agbiji & Swart, 2019; Kalu, 2021). In African societies, spirituality traditionally encompassed moral obligations to the community, respect for life, accountability before both the divine and society, and the integration of belief with ethical action (Mbiti, 2019; Obidah, 2022). However, contemporary African spirituality is increasingly characterized by ritualism, emotional expressiveness, and prosperity-oriented theology, often detached from ethical responsibility and social justice (Ukah, 2022). This shift has transformed spirituality from a moral force into a symbolic resource that can be mobilized for personal success, political legitimacy, and institutional survival.

Power

Power, sociologically understood, refers to the capacity of individuals or institutions to influence behavior, control resources, and shape social outcomes (Weber, 1978). In African contexts, power operates not only through political and economic structures but also through religious authority and symbolic legitimacy (Ellis & ter Haar, 2020). Religious leaders often command immense influence over followers‟ beliefs, political choices, and moral judgments, making religion a potent site of power negotiation. The fusion of spirituality and power becomes problematic when religious authority is used to legitimize political dominance, shield leaders from accountability, or silence ethical critique. Scholars note that religion‟s moral language can be weaponised to sanctify authority and normalize inequality, thereby transforming spirituality into an instrument of domination rather than moral guidance (Marshall, 2019; Obadare, 2018).

Corruption

Corruption is broadly defined as the abuse of entrusted power for private gain (Transparency International, 2023). While commonly discussed in political and economic terms, corruption also possesses deep moral and cultural dimensions. In religious societies, corruption is not merely a violation of legal norms but a betrayal of sacred moral commitments (Ayantayo, 2021). In African societies, corruption manifests at multiple levels: political leadership, public institutions, religious organizations, and everyday social interactions. When religious institutions tolerate or legitimize corrupt practices, corruption becomes morally normalized, further weakening social trust and ethical accountability (Gbadamosi & Adebayo, 2023).

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in an interdisciplinary theoretical framework, drawing from Sociology of Religion, Political Sociology, and Moral Sociology. Three complementary theories are particularly relevant.

Weber's Theory of Legitimate Authority

Max Weber‟s theory of authority provides a useful lens for understanding how religion legitimizes power. Weber identifies three forms of legitimate authority: traditional, charismatic, and legal-rational (Weber, 1978). In African religious contexts, charismatic authority often embodied in pastors, prophets, imams, and spiritual leaders plays a dominant role. Charismatic religious leaders often command unquestioned loyalty, allowing their moral authority to override institutional accountability. When such authority aligns with political or economic power, ethical scrutiny is weakened, creating fertile ground for corruption (Marshall, 2019; Onapajo, 2020). Weber‟s framework helps explain how spirituality, when tied to personal charisma rather than ethical structures, becomes vulnerable to abuse.

Moral Economy Theory

Moral economy theory emphasizes the role of shared moral norms in regulating economic and political behavior (Thompson, 1971; Booth, 2021). In traditional African societies, moral economies were sustained through religious sanctions, communal accountability, and ethical expectations tied to spirituality (Obidah, 2022).

The erosion of these moral economies through neoliberal capitalism, political patronage, and commercialized religion has weakened ethical restraint. Contemporary religious institutions often operate within market logics, prioritizing growth, wealth, and influence over moral discipline (Ukah, 2022). This theoretical perspective highlights how the breakdown of shared moral expectations contributes to the persistence of corruption in religious societies.

Secularization and De-secularization Debates

Classical secularization theory predicted a decline in religion‟s social influence with modernization. However, Africa presents a contrasting case where religion remains highly

visible and influential (Casanova, 2019). Scholars therefore speak of *de-secularization* the public resurgence of religion without corresponding ethical transformation (Ellis & ter Haar, 2020).

This study aligns with critical scholars who argue that Africa is not experiencing *too much religion*, but rather *too little ethical religion* (Afolayan, 2022). Religion‟s public presence has expanded, yet its capacity to regulate morality has diminished, producing the paradox of intense religiosity alongside moral decay.

Analytical Framewor-k of the Study

Drawing from the above concepts and theories, this study adopts an analytical framework that views corruption in religious African societies as a consequence of:

- The instrumentalisation of spirituality for power and legitimacy
- The collapse of communal moral accountability systems
- The fusion of religious authority with political and economic interests
- The commercialization and privatization of faith

This framework allows for a nuanced understanding of corruption as a moral, spiritual, and structural crisis rather than merely a legal or administrative problem.

Relevance of the Framework to the Study

The conceptual and theoretical framework developed here provides a solid foundation for analyzing the paradox of spirituality and corruption. It enables this study to move beyond moral condemnation toward sociological explanation, highlighting how distorted spirituality undermines moral authority and sustains unethical power relations in African societies (Ayantayo, 2021; Agbiji & Swart, 2019).

RELIGION, POWER, AND MORAL AUTHORITY IN AFRICAN SOCIETIES

Religion as a Source of Moral Authority in Africa

Historically, religion in African societies functioned as a primary source of moral authority, social regulation, and communal cohesion. Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religion (ATR) all emphasized ethical conduct, accountability, and social responsibility as central components of spiritual life (Mbiti, 2019; Kalu, 2021). Moral values such as honesty, respect for life, communal solidarity, and justice were reinforced through religious teachings, rituals, and sanctions, making religion inseparable from everyday moral consciousness.

In African Traditional Religion, moral authority was deeply embedded in cosmology and communal life. Ethical violations were believed to attract not only social sanctions but also spiritual consequences, thereby reinforcing moral discipline (Obidah, 2022).

Similarly, Islamic moral philosophy emphasized justice (*adl*), accountability before God, and responsible leadership, while Christian ethics stressed integrity, humility, and service to others (Ayantayo, 2021). In these traditions, religion did not merely offer metaphysical explanations but actively shaped moral behavior and social order.

The Transformation of Religious Authority in Contemporary Africa

In contemporary African societies, the moral authority of religion has undergone significant transformation. While religious institutions have expanded numerically and gained increased public visibility, their ethical influence has become more ambiguous (Ellis & ter Haar, 2020). The proliferation of churches, mosques, and spiritual movements has not corresponded with a proportional increase in moral accountability or ethical governance.

Scholars argue that this transformation is partly due to the institutionalization and politicization of religion (Marshall, 2019). Religious leaders now operate within complex networks of political patronage, economic competition, and media influence, which reshape their moral priorities. As religious authority becomes personalized and commercialized, moral critique of power is often replaced by pragmatic accommodation and selective silence (Ukah, 2022).

Religion and Political Power: Patterns of Interaction

The relationship between religion and political power in Africa is neither new nor inherently problematic. Historically, religion played a legitimizing role in leadership selection and moral governance. However, in contemporary contexts, this relationship has increasingly become transactional (Obadare, 2018). Political actors seek religious endorsement to gain legitimacy, while religious leaders seek state patronage, protection, or access to resources.

This mutual dependence undermines religion‟s prophetic and critical role in society. Rather than challenging unjust structures, some religious institutions actively endorse corrupt leadership, spiritualise political failure, or frame material success as divine approval (Onapajo, 2020). Such practices blur the boundary between moral authority and political expediency, weakening religion‟s capacity to hold power accountable.

Commercialization of Religion and the Erosion of Moral Authority

One of the most significant factors contributing to the decline of moral authority in African religion is the commercialization of spirituality. The rise of prosperity-oriented theologies, religious entrepreneurship, and faith-based consumerism has reshaped religious practice into a marketplace of spiritual goods and services (Ukah, 2022; Gbadamosi & Adebayo, 2023).

In this context, ethical discipline is often subordinated to numerical growth, financial success, and public visibility. Religious leaders may avoid confronting corruption among wealthy patrons or political elites for fear of losing support. Consequently, spirituality becomes transactional, and moral accountability is selectively applied, further entrenching corruption within religious and social institutions.

Religion, Social Trust, and Moral Crisis

The erosion of religion‟s moral authority has serious implications for social trust in African societies. When religious institutions are perceived as complicit in corruption or morally, public confidence in both spiritual and political leadership declines (Oluwaseun & Lawal, 2024). This moral crisis contributes to cynicism, ethical relativism, and the normalization of corrupt practices at all levels of society.

Religion‟s failure to function as a moral counterweight to power thus deepens the very social problems it claims to address. Instead of serving as a source of ethical renewal, religion risks becoming a symbolic cover for moral decay (Afolayan, 2022). This condition underscores the urgency of critically re-examining the relationship between spirituality, power, and moral authority in Africa.

Reassessing Moral Authority: Towards Ethical Religion

Despite these challenges, religion remains a powerful social force capable of moral transformation. Several scholars argue that the solution does not lie in the rejection of religion, but in the recovery of its ethical core and prophetic function (Agbiji & Swart, 2019; Ayantayo, 2021). This requires deliberate resistance to the politicization and commodification of spirituality, as well as renewed emphasis on accountability, justice, and social responsibility.

Reclaiming moral authority also involves re-embedding religion within communal ethical frameworks rather than individual success narratives. Religious leaders and institutions must be willing to confront power, critique injustice, and model ethical integrity if spirituality is to regain its credibility as a force for social transformation.

EMPIRICAL REFLECTIONS ON SPIRITUALITY, POWER, AND CORRUPTION IN AFRICA

Religion and Political Patronage in Nigeria

Nigeria presents one of the clearest illustrations of the paradox of deep religiosity alongside pervasive corruption. As one of the most religious countries globally, Nigeria records high levels of church attendance, mosque participation, prayer culture, and public religious expression. Yet, the country continues to struggle with entrenched political corruption, weak institutions, and leadership crises (Transparency International, 2023).

Empirical studies show that political elites in Nigeria frequently seek religious endorsement as a strategy for legitimizing power and neutralizing moral scrutiny (Obadare, 2018; Onapajo, 2020). Political actors routinely appear in churches and mosques during election periods, receive prophetic endorsements, and frame electoral success as divine will. In return, religious leaders gain access to state resources, political protection, and public visibility. This reciprocal relationship weakens religion‟s capacity to function as an independent moral voice and reinforces patron-client dynamics that sustain corruption (Danfulani, 2020).

Christian Institutions and the Moral Contradictions of Prosperity Theology

The rise of prosperity-oriented Christianity has significantly reshaped the moral landscape of Nigerian religious life. While Pentecostal movements have contributed positively to social mobilization and personal discipline, scholars note that the excessive emphasis on wealth, success, and miracles has diluted ethical accountability (Marshall, 2019; Ukah, 2022).

Empirical observations reveal that corrupt political figures and business elites are often publicly celebrated within religious spaces through thanksgiving services, honorary titles, and financial donations, with little interrogation of the sources of wealth (Gbadamosi & Adebayo, 2023). This practice implicitly communicates that material success is a sign of divine approval, regardless of moral means. Consequently, corruption becomes spiritually rationalized, and religious spaces risk becoming sanctuaries for unethical power rather than sites of moral reform.

Islam, Moral Discipline, and the Politics of Selective Accountability

Islamic moral teachings strongly emphasise justice (*adl*), accountability (*hisbah*), and ethical leadership. In several Northern Nigerian states, Islamic institutions historically functioned as mechanisms for moral regulation and communal discipline (Ayantayo, 2021). However, contemporary realities reveal a growing gap between Islamic ethical ideals and political practice.

Empirical studies indicate that political elites often invoke Islamic identity and symbols to consolidate power while simultaneously engaging in corrupt practices that undermine social welfare (Ibrahim & Osaghae, 2019). Institutions established to enforce moral discipline are sometimes weakened by political interference, selective enforcement, or elite capture. This selective accountability erodes public confidence in both religious and political authority and reinforces perceptions of moral hypocrisy.

African Traditional Religion and the Breakdown of Indigenous Moral Sanctions

African Traditional Religion (ATR) historically provided strong moral checks on leadership through spiritual sanctions, communal accountability, and fear of supernatural consequences. In many African societies, moral violations attracted social ostracism, ritual cleansing, or spiritual punishment, which reinforced ethical behaviour (Mbiti, 2019; Obidah, 2022).

However, colonial disruption, religious displacement, and modern legal systems have weakened these indigenous moral structures. Contemporary leaders often operate outside traditional moral frameworks, reducing the effectiveness of communal sanctions. As indigenous moral authority declines, no equally effective ethical system has fully replaced it, creating a moral vacuum that facilitates corruption and abuse of power (Akinade, 2020).

Religion, Social Trust, and Public Disillusionment

One of the most visible consequences of the fusion between spirituality and corrupt power is the erosion of social trust. Surveys and qualitative studies reveal growing public cynicism

toward religious institutions perceived as complicit in political corruption or moral compromise (Oluwaseun & Lawal, 2024). When religious leaders fail to challenge injustice, citizens become less inclined to view religion as a credible source of moral guidance.

This erosion of trust has broader social implications. It contributes to ethical relativism, where individuals justify corrupt behavior as necessary for survival, and weakens collective commitment to social responsibility. Religion‟s failure to serve as a moral counterweight to power thus deepens the very crises inequality, injustice, and insecurity that afflict African societies (Afolayan, 2022).

Comparative Reflections across Africa

Beyond Nigeria, similar patterns are observable across sub-Saharan Africa. In Kenya, Ghana, Zimbabwe, and South Africa, religious institutions play prominent public roles yet often struggle to maintain ethical independence from political power (Ellis & ter Haar, 2020). While some religious leaders adopt prophetic stances against corruption, others align with ruling elites, reinforcing the paradox of religious vitality without moral transformation. These comparative cases underscore that the problem is not religion per se, but the distortion of spirituality through power, institutional interests, and material incentives. Where religion prioritizes proximity to power over ethical witness, corruption thrives under the cover of piety.

IMPLICATIONS FOR GOVERNANCE, DEVELOPMENT, AND MORAL RENEWAL

Implications for Governance

The empirical reality of spirituality entangled with power has profound consequences for governance in African societies. When religious authority is instrumentalised to legitimize political power, institutions designed to promote transparency, accountability, and justice are undermined (Obadare, 2018; Onapajo, 2020). Leaders who enjoy religious endorsement are often insulated from moral scrutiny, enabling corrupt practices to thrive unchecked.

This phenomenon has resulted in weakened institutional governance**,** as religiously sanctioned leaders can operate above ethical and legal norms, leading to a dual crisis of governance and moral authority (Danfulani, 2020). The persistence of patron-client relationships, selective enforcement of laws, and moral relativism further erodes public trust in both political and religious institutions (Oluwaseun & Lawal, 2024). Governance in such contexts becomes performative rather than ethical, prioritising legitimacy and survival over public service.

Implications for National Development

The intertwining of spirituality with corrupt power significantly hampers national development. Corruption diverts public resources away from essential sectors such as education, healthcare, and infrastructure, directly affecting socio-economic growth (Transparency International, 2023). Religious institutions, which could play a mobilising role for development, may instead inadvertently endorse inequitable resource distribution through selective moral sanctioning (Gbadamosi & Adebayo, 2023).

Furthermore, the moral ambiguity created by compromised religious authority undermines social cohesion and collective responsibility, critical components of sustainable development. Citizens disillusioned by the ethical contradictions of religious and political leaders may withdraw from civic engagement, reducing societal capacity for collaborative problem-solving (Afolayan, 2022; Sofi, 2023).

Implications for Social Trust and Ethical Culture

Corruption legitimized through religious endorsement damages social trust, creating widespread cynicism regarding both public and spiritual authorities. As trust diminishes, ethical norms are eroded, and unethical behaviors become normalized. This result in a cycle of moral decay, where citizens emulate the unethical practices sanctioned or tolerated by spiritual authorities (Ayantayo, 2021; Ukah, 2022).

The erosion of ethical culture has long-term consequences. Without a moral compass anchored in accountable spiritual practice, societies are at greater risk of conflict, social fragmentation, and institutional instability. The moral vacuum left by compromised spiritual authority exacerbates corruption at all levels, from grassroots interactions to national leadership.

Pathways for Moral Renewal

Despite the challenges, religion remains a powerful vehicle for ethical regeneration and social reform if its prophetic and ethical roles are reclaimed. Several pathways are recommended:

i. **Reinforcing Ethical Accountability within Religious Institutions**: Religious leaders must actively critique injustice, resist political co-optation, and model ethical conduct (Agbiji & Swart, 2019; Marshall, 2019). Accountability mechanisms within religious institutions should be strengthened to prevent complicity in corruption.
ii. **Re-embedding Religion in Communal Ethics**: Spirituality should reconnect with communal moral frameworks rather than individual prosperity narratives. This involves reasserting values such as honesty, communal responsibility, and justice, drawn from both African traditional ethics and scriptural teachings (Obidah, 2022; Mbiti, 2019).
iii. **Civic and Religious Education**: Education programs should emphasize the ethical obligations of citizens and religious leaders alike. Integrating moral reasoning with social responsibility can reduce tolerance for corruption and reinforce public accountability (Ayantayo, 2021; Akinade, 2020).
iv. **Separation of Spiritual Authority from Political Patronage**: Religious institutions must maintain independence from political and economic interests. While engagement with governance is necessary for societal influence, it should not compromise ethical critique or public accountability (Ellis & ter Haar, 2020; Onapajo, 2020).
v. **Transparent Collaboration between Religion and Development Agencies**: Partnerships between religious institutions and development organizations can leverage spiritual influence to support ethical governance, social welfare, and poverty

alleviation, ensuring that religion becomes a facilitator rather than an inhibitor of development (Oluwaseun & Lawal, 2024).

Synthesis

The implications of the paradox of spirituality and corruption are extensive. Compromised religious authority undermines governance, impedes development, erodes social trust, and fosters moral decay. Conversely, if ethical spirituality is reclaimed and properly institutionalized, religion can serve as a transformative tool, promoting accountable leadership, ethical culture, and sustainable development across African societies (Afolayan, 2022; Ukah, 2022; Sofi, 2023).

Conclusion

This study has critically examined the paradox of deep religiosity and persistent corruption in African societies, with a particular focus on Nigeria. Despite high levels of religious engagement, spirituality has often been instrumentalised to legitimize power rather than to enforce ethical accountability (Obadare, 2018; Onapajo, 2020). Religious institutions, across Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religion (ATR), which traditionally served as moral regulators, are increasingly co-opted into political and economic agendas, weakening their prophetic and ethical role (Mbiti, 2019; Ayantayo, 2021; Ukah, 2022).

Empirical evidence demonstrates that corruption in Africa is sustained not solely by political structures but by the erosion of moral authority within religious institutions, commercialization of faith, and selective enforcement of ethical norms (Gbadamosi & Adebayo, 2023; Afolayan, 2022). The fusion of religious authority with political patronage and material incentives has created a social environment in which unethical behavior is normalized and public trust in leadership is eroded (Oluwaseun & Lawal, 2024; Sofi, 2023).

The implications of these dynamics are profound. Governance is compromised, development is hindered, social trust is weakened, and ethical culture is undermined. However, this study also shows that religion, when reconnected to its moral and communal roots, remains a powerful instrument for ethical renewal and social transformation (Agbiji & Swart, 2019; Marshall, 2019). The challenge lies not in rejecting religion, but in reclaiming its ethical essence and reasserting moral authority in leadership and society.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to address the paradox of religiosity and corruption in African societies:

i. **Strengthen Ethical Accountability in Religious Institutions**
   Religious leaders and institutions must develop internal accountability mechanisms to resist political co-optation and moral compromise. Ethical oversight councils and transparency initiatives within religious organizations can ensure moral consistency and credibility (Agbiji & Swart, 2019; Marshall, 2019).

ii. **Promote Civic and Religious Education**
Educational programs should integrate ethical reasoning, communal responsibility, and moral discernment into both secular and religious curricula. This can empower citizens to critically assess leadership, challenge corruption, and uphold moral values (Ayantayo, 2021; Akinade, 2020).

iii. **Re-establish the Prophetic Function of Religion**
Religious institutions should actively critique corruption, injustice, and unethical leadership. Reasserting the prophetic role involves speaking truth to power and modeling ethical behavior, reinforcing religion‟s function as a moral compass (Obidah, 2022; Ukah, 2022).

iv. **Ensure Separation of Spiritual Authority from Political Patronage**
Religious organizations must maintain autonomy from political and economic interests. While engagement with governance is necessary for societal influence, it should not compromise ethical critique or facilitate impunity (Ellis & ter Haar, 2020; Onapajo, 2020).

v. **Leverage Religion for Development and Social Transformation**
Partnerships between religious institutions, civil society, and development agencies can mobilize spiritual influence to promote ethical governance, social welfare, and poverty alleviation. Religion can thus serve as a catalyst for sustainable development rather than a legitimizer of corruption (Oluwaseun & Lawal, 2024).

Reference

Afolayan, A. (2022). *The crisis of moral leadership in Africa: Ethics, governance, and social responsibility*. Ibadan: Safari Books.

Agbiji, O. M., & Swart, I. (2019). Religion and social transformation in Africa: A critical and constructive engagement. *Scriptura*, 118(1), 1–14. https://doi.org/10.7833/118-1-1720

Akinade, A. E. (2020). African religiosity and the challenge of moral integrity in the public sphere. *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 167, 45–62.

Ayantayo, J. K. (2021). Religion, morality and corruption in Nigeria: An ethical appraisal. *Ilorin Journal of Religious Studies*, 11(2), 1–18.

Casanova, J. (2019). *Global religious and secular dynamics*. Leiden: Brill.

Danfulani, U. H. D. (2020). Religion, legitimacy and power relations in contemporary Nigeria. *Jos Journal of Humanities*, 14(1), 23–41.

Ellis, S., & ter Haar, G. (2020). *Religion and politics in sub-Saharan Africa* (2nd ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Gbadamosi, G., & Adebayo, F. (2023). Religious symbolism, political patronage and corruption narratives in Nigeria. *African Journal of Social Sciences*, 13(2), 89–105.

Ibrahim, J., & Osaghae, E. (2019). *Nigeria: Politics, economy, and society*. London: Zed Books.

Kalu, O. U. (2021). African Christianity and public morality in the twenty-first century. *Studies in World Christianity*, 27(3), 256–272. https://doi.org/10.3366/swc.2021.0354

Marshall, R. (2019). *Political spiritualities: The Pentecostal revolution in Nigeria*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Mbiti, J. S. (2019). *African religions and philosophy* (Reissued ed.). Oxford: Heinemann.

Obadare, E. (2018). Pentecostal presidency? Religion, power and politics in Nigeria. *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 56(3), 475–497. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X18000315

Obidah, S. (2022). Indigenous moral systems and the crisis of communal ethics in Northern Nigeria. *Nigerian Journal of Sociology of Religion*, 7(1), 61–79.

Oluwaseun, A., & Lawal, T. (2024). Religion, public trust and moral accountability in sub-Saharan Africa. *African Governance Review*, 6(1), 33–52.

Onapajo, H. (2020). Religion and political mobilisation in Nigeria: Beyond piety and devotion. *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 38(4), 471–486. https://doi.org/10.1080/02589001.2020.1728473

Sofi, T. G. (2023). Indigenous values, moral authority and social cohesion in contemporary Nigerian society. *Journal of African Religious Thought*, 5(2), 14–32.

Transparency International. (2023). *Corruption perceptions index 2023: Sub-Saharan Africa*. Berlin: Transparency International.

Ukah, A. (2022). Prosperity, power and prophecy: Moral contradictions in African Pentecostalism. *Religion Compass*, 16(3), e12425. https://doi.org/10.1111/rec3.12425

Weber, M. (1978). *Economy and society: An outline of interpretive sociology* (G. Roth & C. Wittich, Eds.). Berkeley: University of California Press.

