

ROLE OF CHRISTIAN ETHICAL PRINCIPLES IN ADDRESSING CORRUPTION IN THE NIGERIAN SOCIETY

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Abstract

This study examines the role of Christian ethical principles in addressing the pervasive issue of corruption in Nigerian society, analyzing its socio-cultural, economic, and political impacts. Although previous research examines various anti-corruption efforts, few have considered the intersection between Christian ethics and secular strategies. This research fills that gap by evaluating how Christian organizations contribute to combating corruption through moral advocacy, ethical education, and community engagement. The core issue lies in the normalization of corruption within Nigerian society, despite numerous secular anti-corruption reforms. Thus, this paper examines how Christian organizations can collaborate with secular efforts to create a more integrated approach to addressing corruption. This research employs a mixed-method approach, incorporating theological, historical, and phenomenological perspectives to offer a multidimensional analysis of corruption. This approach is justified by its ability to capture both the religious and socio-political aspects of the issue. The findings reveal that while Christian organizations have made notable contributions their efforts are often fragmented and under-leveraged. The thesis argues that a more integrated approach, combining Christian ethics and secular strategies, could strengthen efforts to foster integrity and accountability in Nigeria. Key five recommendations include strengthening collaboration between faith-based and secular entities, promoting ethical education, advocating for policy reform, developing leadership capacity, and supporting whistleblower protection. The study concludes that integrating Christian ethical principles with secular anti-corruption strategies can significantly bolster efforts to enhance integrity, accountability, and governance in Nigeria.

Keywords Corruption, Christianity, Christian Ethics, Ethics, Nigeria.

Introduction

This study investigates the pervasive issue of corruption in Nigeria, focusing on its deeply embedded socio-political, economic, and cultural aspects. Transparency International defines corruption as the abuse of power for personal gain (Wang & Rosenau, 2001, p.25-49), and in Nigeria, systemic corruption has led to declining infrastructure and a rise in corrupt individuals across various sectors (Nmah, 2017, p. 116-131). Fraud and corruption refer to dishonest actions designed to unlawfully strip

others of money, property, or legal rights. Although scholars and policymakers have made multiple efforts to combat corruption, many approaches have overlooked the role of Christian ethical frameworks in conjunction with secular strategies, and the primary concern is the normalization of corruption, which persists despite numerous reforms. Therefore, this paper aims to address this gap by exploring how Christian ethical principles, grounded in biblical teachings of honesty, integrity, and justice, can serve as a moral framework to address and mitigate corruption in a predominantly religious society like Nigeria.

Corruption severely hinders Nigeria's growth by depleting resources, stalling development, eroding public trust in government, and also diminishing human dignity (Umaru, 2020, p. iv). Undoubtedly, the Nigerian church has influenced societal values, yet its response to corruption has been inconsistent, with some leaders speaking out while others remain silent or complicit. Nonetheless, this research examines how Christian organizations can strengthen secular anti-corruption efforts in Nigeria, offering a more comprehensive solution, and emphasizing the impact of faith-based initiatives in fostering integrity and accountability to achieve lasting socio-political reform. Social ethics examines the ethical dimensions of decision-making in human behavior (Devon & Van de Poel, 2004, p. 461-469), and aligns with virtue ethics by highlighting the need to cultivate moral character and virtues like integrity and accountability within social systems. This study adopts the theoretical framework of virtue ethics, emphasizing the importance of moral character and the cultivation of virtues such as integrity, honesty, and accountability. with a mixed-method research approach, combining historical, theological, and phenomenological analyses to

explore how Christian ethics influence behavior and institutions in combating corruption in Nigeria.

Overview of Corruption in Nigeria

Corruption in Nigeria has deep historical roots, beginning in pre-colonial times with bribery and nepotism among local leaders, and escalating during the colonial era as British practices prioritized personal gain over local welfare. After independence in 1960, corruption became further entrenched through military coups and weak governance, leading to significant embezzlement, especially following the discovery of oil in the 1970s. Fraud, deceit, and misrepresentation are closely associated with collusion, broadly defined as deceptive conduct (Fischer, Adams & Henry, 2022, p.1-40). Corruption poses a major challenge to all societies and is a primary driver of human suffering and deprivation (Murray & Spalding, 2015, p. 1), with its various forms present in all societies (Amundsen, 1999, p. 1-3), and its deviant behaviours encompass bribery, extortion, fraud, embezzlement, nepotism, cronyism, including the misappropriation of public assets, and influence peddling (Myint (2000, p. 33-58).

Historically, fraud and corruption have existed for centuries, but in the last two decades, they have become more prominent in Nigeria, drawing increased attention from policymakers and scholars (Imohiosen & Adeolu, 2024, p. 347). This history underscores the complexity of eradicating corruption, requiring not only governance reforms but also the integration of ethical frameworks, especially Christian teachings, into society. Promoting a culture of accountability and integrity is crucial for breaking the cycle of corruption and achieving sustainable development in Nigeria. Despite returning to democracy in the late 1990s, corruption continues to obstruct socio-economic development across politics, business, and public service, perpetuated by a lack of accountability, weak legal frameworks, and ineffective law enforcement, alongside institutional complicity that erodes public trust. Significantly, corruption is a major issue worldwide, including in Nigeria, hindering sustainable development and growth in both the country and Africa as a whole (Kalama, 2018, p. 177).

The cultural and socio-political factors surrounding corruption in Nigeria are interconnected, with societal norms often prioritizing personal connections and patronage over ethical conduct. This

environment fosters a culture of impunity, making corrupt practices seem acceptable and diminishing trust in public institutions. Moreover, socio-economic challenges, such as poverty and unemployment, further worsen corruption, pushing individuals to engage in unethical behavior for financial reasons. Corruption is a pervasive societal issue that has deeply rooted itself in Nigeria (Bello-Imam, 2005, p. 45-66), Transparency International regularly ranks Nigeria among the most corrupt nations globally (Goodling, 2003, p. 997-1023), and it continues to dominate public discussions (Smith, 2007, p. 33-45). Additionally, the merging of traditional values with modern governance promotes tribalism, resulting in selective enforcement of anti-corruption laws. Consequently, addressing corruption effectively in Nigeria requires not only legal reforms but also a cultural transformation toward transparency, accountability, and ethical governance.

While various anti-corruption initiatives have been introduced, systemic corruption persists, highlighting the need for comprehensive reforms to tackle the underlying socio-political and economic factors. The historical trajectory of corruption in Nigeria illustrates its entrenched nature and the complexities involved in eradicating it. In Nigeria, like many African nations, ethnic and linguistic divisions affect peasants' behavior, creating barriers that prevent them from organizing for their interests (Declan, 2008, p. 32 -50). These divisions play a crucial role in shaping individuals' attitudes, behaviors, and values. Addressing this challenge requires not only robust governance reforms but also a concerted effort to integrate ethical frameworks, particularly those rooted in Christian teachings, into the fabric of society. Ultimately, fostering a culture of accountability and integrity will be essential for breaking the cycle of corruption and promoting sustainable development in Nigeria.

Corruption in Nigeria is driven by socio-political factors, including weak governance, political patronage, and a lack of accountability. The concentration of power among political elites, coupled with widespread nepotism, undermines merit-based systems and perpetuates corrupt practices. Since Nigeria's post-colonial era, successive governments have pledged to fight corruption, recognizing its detrimental impact on governance, development, and democracy (Oarhe, 2013, p.111-134). Unfortunately, the intersection of politics and ethnicity often leads to favoritism, hindering efforts to achieve transparency and good governance.

Additionally, the ineffective enforcement of anti-corruption laws and the inadequacies of the judicial system encourage individuals to engage in corrupt activities without fear of repercussions. In many African countries, including Nigeria, it is expected that public officials will use their positions to amass wealth and assist their relatives, often leading to corrupt practices (Oguejiofor, 2001, p. 36). Moreover, political instability and competition for scarce resources further fuel corruption, as leaders often prioritize personal or regional interests over national development. Meanwhile, the political landscape obstructs governance structures, imparting policy implementation and political decisions (Adekoya, 2024, p. 93-108). These socio-political dynamics contribute to a cycle of corruption that significantly impacts governance, erodes public trust, and disrupts the fair distribution of resources in Nigeria.

Corruption in Nigeria severely undermines economic growth by eroding public trust and deterring investment, leading to the misallocation of resources from critical sectors like education and healthcare. African society is patriarchal, characterized by personalized political power and a self-recruiting oligarchy that ensures permanent leadership (Seteolu, 2005, p. 34-42). Corruption in Nigeria has become a social epidemic and economic pathology, with those who claim to be its healers ironically becoming victims themselves (Ahmed, 2017, p. 214). Hence, this perpetuates poverty, exacerbates inequality, and creates inefficiencies in public services while limiting opportunities through a lack of transparency and merit-based job acquisition. Moreover, to foster sustainable growth and equitable prosperity, Nigeria must implement effective anti-corruption measures that restore integrity in governance, unlock resources, and improve citizens' quality of life for national development.

Cultural perspectives on corruption in Nigeria are influenced by historical, social, and economic factors that normalize unethical behavior as a survival strategy in a resource-scarce environment. Corruption is a key factor behind Nigeria's persistent issues of poverty, disease, hunger, and overall developmental challenges (Ogundiya, 2009, p.281-292). Sadly, many consider corruption acceptable for personal gain, reinforced by a patronage culture prioritizing loyalty over ethics, leading to public apathy and a sense of powerlessness. Therefore, to combat this, it is crucial to promote accountability and integrity while emphasizing communal responsibility, particularly through engaging religious and community leaders in discussions on corruption's negative

impacts. Fundamentally, changing societal attitudes toward corruption is vital for creating a more transparent and accountable future in Nigeria.

Christian Ethics and Theological Reflections on Corruption

Christian ethical principles, grounded in biblical teachings, highlight values such as honesty, justice, compassion, and integrity, guiding individuals and communities to make morally sound decisions by their faith. At the heart of these principles is the concept of love, which inspires selfless behavior and emphasizes truthfulness and accountability, urging believers to denounce dishonesty and support marginalized groups. Christian spirituality is lived out through "spiritual practices," intentional disciplines shaping a way of life. Paradoxically, Wuthnow (2001, p. 306–320) distinguishes "between devotional practices enriching one's spiritual life, those expressing spirituality, and those rooted in one's relationship with the sacred". Furthermore, Christian ethics stress the importance of stewardship in responsibly managing resources for the common good, promoting active involvement in justice and anti-corruption efforts by cultivating a culture of forgiveness and reconciliation that enables communities to address past injustices and strive for a more equitable society.

The relationship between Christianity and morality is strong, as Christian teachings establish a foundation for ethical behavior based on love, justice, and compassion. These principles guide believers to make decisions that enhance individual and societal well-being while emphasizing the dignity of all people and the need to care for the marginalized. Emphasizing virtue and character helps Christian ethics comprehend the new life of grace. Although virtue ethics is criticized for perfectionism and personal moral focus, these concerns can be mitigated by anchoring virtuous living in love for God and neighbor (Meilaender, 1984, p. 74-88). The teachings of Jesus and the apostles encourage self-reflection and commitment to justice and integrity, underscoring Christianity's crucial role in shaping ethical behaviour and accountability in society.

Christian spirituality seeks to shift self-centered living to a theocentric existence, culminating in eschatological transformation, and the biblical narrative provides a standard for evaluating human actions as a fitting response to God's love and self-revelation (Dykstra and Bass, 2002, p. 13–32). The theological foundations of ethics assert that moral principles stem from divine authority and

religious teachings, emphasizing values like justice, compassion, and integrity to guide ethical decision-making. By drawing on sacred texts and doctrines, theological ethics provides a framework for navigating moral dilemmas, highlighting virtues such as love, humility, and forgiveness. This integration of theological principles fosters accountability and a deeper commitment to living in alignment with one's beliefs and values within the community.

Theological reflections on corruption stress the moral obligation of believers to uphold ethical responsibility as taught in the Scripture. Biblically, corruption is seen as a breach of God's mandate for justice and integrity, compelling individuals to honor God and serve the common good. Theological ethics aids believers in understanding the gospel's demands and refining their behavior for better communication with non-believers (Spohn, 2005, p. 269-285), and these insights also emphasise the transformative nature of repentance and forgiveness, fostering personal and communal restoration. Although no country can satisfy all the requirements for a successful anti-corruption effort meeting a significant number is vital for its effectiveness, and the successful initiatives rely on the involvement of all stakeholders, especially Christians, given the strong ethical teachings inherent in their faith.

Moreover, the theological perspectives emphasize community accountability, highlighting that believers are responsible for their actions and for fostering an environment that promotes ethical behavior. Christian churches that focus on comprehensive spiritual growth programs are well-positioned to thrive (Wuthnow, 2003, p. 35-66). This reinforces the church's role in moral education and advocacy, equipping members to confront corruption, while, Jesus' teachings on servanthood and humility guide leaders to understand that true authority comes from selflessness and serving the common good. Ultimately, these reflections support a holistic approach to ethics, encompassing personal conduct, communal responsibility, and a commitment to justice in the fight against corruption.

Christian Ethical Response to Corruption

Christian education is vital for ethical transformation, instilling values like integrity, honesty, and justice from an early age. By emphasizing biblical teachings and moral reasoning, it helps students recognize and resist corrupt practices. Biblical Humanism teaches that humans should view others

as God views them, and Christian education is called to address this need (Fernando et al, 2023, p. 265). Additionally, fostering critical thinking and ethical decision-making empowers individuals to apply their faith in real-world situations, enhancing accountability and transparency.

Prioritizing Christian education enables communities to develop morally upright leaders committed to combating corruption. Discussions on corruption's implications and the importance of ethical behavior further enrich this education. Christian education is designed to form Christian living, not just intellectual beliefs. Its purpose is to prepare students for a different way of life, not simply to present new ideas (Chandler, 2015, p. 314-332). Integrating service-learning and community engagement reinforces ethical conduct in daily life while involving parents and community members creates a supportive environment that values integrity. Ultimately, Christian education establishes a strong foundation for ethical leadership and societal change in the fight against corruption.

Religion is central to social life in Nigeria, affecting both the public and private spheres. Although its influence isn't always seen positively, many Nigerians believe that its significance should help curb corruption tendencies (Simbine et al., 2011, p. 239-276). The Church plays a crucial role in combating corruption by promoting Christian ethical teachings that emphasize integrity, accountability, and social responsibility. Through advocacy, education, and community engagement, it challenges corrupt practices and fosters a culture of transparency while empowering marginalized groups. Fragile states like Nigeria, Burundi, Afghanistan, Sierra Leone, Haiti, and Somalia exhibit high corruption, a breakdown of the rule of law, lack of legitimate power mechanisms, and weak institutions, all evident in Nigeria (World Bank, 2006, p. 15-34). Nonetheless, the church's collaboration with civil society and government in denouncing unethical behavior enhances accountability and promotes ethical leadership, positioning it as a key player in fostering a corruption-free society that upholds human dignity.

Strategies for ethical leadership based on Christian values emphasize servant leadership, prioritizing community needs over personal gain. This approach fosters transparency and accountability, with leaders expected to make integrity-driven decisions. Open communication and collaboration enhance diverse perspectives and collective responsibility in combating corruption. Leaders are responsible for managing organizational energy, influencing others by how

they handle their own energy and how they focus and renew the collective energy of their team (Gu & Day, 2013, p. 22-44). By embodying humility, honesty, and justice, ethical leaders build trust and commitment, contributing to a culture of integrity. Furthermore, mentoring future leaders in ethical conduct is vital, as it instills moral responsibility and awareness of corruption's impact. Encouraging accountability and reporting corrupt practices within organizations are key strategies for improving leadership effectiveness and fostering a more ethical, transparent society aligned with Christian values.

Practical Christian solutions to corruption in Nigeria focus on enhancing transparency and accountability in church and government, encouraging ethical behavior among congregants. In 1998, the World Council of Churches, at its Harare meeting, condemned corruption and called on member churches to advocate for government legislation against it (Beets, 2007, p. 69–85). Churches can promote awareness through outreach and education, while partnerships with civil society strengthen advocacy for good governance, and Christian leaders can mentor youth to foster integrity, civic engagement, and leadership accountability. By promoting transparency and a culture of prayer, the Church underscores the importance of ethical conduct, positioning the Christian community as a key player in fostering integrity in Nigeria.

Christian groups have made significant anti-corruption strides through advocacy, education, and community mobilization to promote transparency. Organizations such as the Christian Association of Nigeria lead campaigns to raise awareness and encourage ethical conduct, while churches mentor members in integrity and civic responsibility. The Nigerian Laity Council can mobilize the laity, especially the youth, for grassroots sensitization, as it did in the 1970s/80s. Groups like the Life Action Committee and Leaven Club International could be revived to lead grassroots anti-corruption campaigns (Ngwoke, 1991, p. 208). In partnership with civil society, they advocate for governance reforms and support whistleblowers. These efforts are vital in building a more just and equitable Nigeria, highlighting the influence of faith-based initiatives. Civil society organizations play a key role in combating corruption by advocating for underrepresented groups and addressing government shortcomings, using their community connections to mobilize those doubtful of the government's anti-corruption efforts (Tonwe & Oarhe, 2015, p. 16-30). However, a major limitation for civil society organizations is insufficient financial resources, which restricts their ability to fight corruption. They typically depend on external donors for support, as seen with

SERAP, which receives funding from groups like the National Endowment for Democracy and the MacArthur Foundation (Adetokunbo, 2010).

Secular efforts to curb corruption have seen limited success, as the issue persists. In contrast, from a theological view, lasting solutions lie in addressing the root cause, which is the human heart (Jere, 2018, p. 1-10). Invariably, faith-based interventions in Nigeria have achieved varying levels of success in fighting corruption, while, community mobilization and education have shown impactful effects, but challenges such as poor implementation, limited collaboration, and political resistance persist. Ultimately, these mixed results highlight the need for improved planning, inclusivity, and continuous evaluation to promote a more just society. In 1987, Ibrahim Babangida's regime launched MAMSER to address socio-economic challenges in Nigeria. In response, the Catholic Youth of Nigeria introduced a campaign for Religious and Spiritual Recovery, asserting that MAMSER would fail without it (Ojo, 1990, p. 22). Today's corruption crisis calls for a similar approach in enhancing dialogue between religious groups and civil society that can strengthen anti-corruption initiatives.

Corruption permeates politics, government, business, and every facet of social, economic, and political development (Munzhedzi, 2016, p. 1–8). This "virus of corruption" has deeply infiltrated the functioning systems of stakeholders both locally and globally (Majanga, 2015, p. 2374-2410; Treisman, 2000, p. 399–457). A comparative analysis of Christian and secular anti-corruption strategies highlights their distinct approaches to tackling corruption. Botswana's anti-corruption reform, regarded as Africa's best example, is attributed to its effective economic policies (Drielsma, 2000, p. 44-56). In contrast, Nigeria, despite having abundant human and material resources, ranks poorly on economic indices, prompting political actors to engage in rent-seeking rather than productive investment. However, Christian strategies prioritize moral imperatives derived from faith, promoting integrity and communal responsibility through grassroots mobilization and mentorship programs that encourage ethical conduct and civic engagement. There is growing support for using religion to combat corruption, as religious people are seen to prioritize ethics, despite many corrupt countries being highly religious (Marquette, 2012, p. 11-26).

Religious and faith-based organizations have been vocal in denouncing corruption worldwide. Yet, incidents such as a prominent footballer's church in Brazil being involved in money laundering (Azzoni, 2008, p. 7), and a pastor in Nigeria suspended for embezzling church funds (Friday, 2006) reveal inconsistencies. The calls for religious leaders to intensify the fight against corruption are easily undermined by such cases. Conversely, secular strategies emphasize legal reforms and institutional accountability, employing data-driven methodologies, transparency initiatives, and collaborations with civil society to monitor and prevent corrupt practices. Corruption's global presence is reflected in the creation of key international agencies to combat it, and these efforts have been institutionalized within major organizations like the United Nations, European Union, African Union, and various international anti-corruption bodies (Alabi & Fashagba, 2010, p. 1–2; Webb, 2005, p. 191–224). Although both strategies share the goal of combating corruption, they differ in their motivations and implementation methods, with Christian groups aligning their efforts with biblical teachings and secular strategies depending on empirical data and legal frameworks. Integrating both approaches could strengthen Nigeria's anti-corruption initiatives by merging ethical principles with effective policy measures, resulting in a more comprehensive response to corruption.

Advocacy and social responsibility within the Christian community play a crucial role in fighting corruption by promoting ethical standards and social justice. Churches and Christian organizations can mobilize their congregations to push for transparency, accountability, and reforms in governance. Civil society acts as a watchdog, holding the government accountable and actively monitoring initiatives and spending to ensure transparent and effective resource allocation, thus reducing corruption and mismanagement (Olowu, 2003, p. 41-52). By addressing systemic issues like poverty and inequality, the Christian community can combat the root causes of corruption and empower marginalized groups. Embracing social responsibility allows them to promote integrity, challenge corruption, and support ethical governance in Nigeria through public campaigns, partnerships with civil society, and participation in policy-making.

Religious leaders are not immune to corruption with clerics facing allegations of fraud and immoral behavior, implicating some Christian leaders in this issue (Nnorum & Abone, 2023, p. 252-253). In Nigeria, anti-corruption initiatives have largely focused on high-profile figures rather than the general populace (Paden, 2004, p. 17-37), while, corruption has impeded industrial

development in areas such as metallurgy, petrochemicals, and automobiles (Lewis, 2004, p. 99-124). Furthermore, the rentier structure of the Nigerian state has led to past leaders' inability to account for over \$400 billion in oil revenue since independence (Ikubaje, 2006, p. 3-15). Frederick Bird's theories indicate that social morality is linked to individual private morality, suggesting that African societies can improve probity and accountability through the moral regeneration efforts of religious communities, which should promote moral awareness and ethical behavior (Agbiji & Agbiji, 2020, p. 501-523). Therefore, grassroots initiatives can raise awareness of corruption's harms and the need for ethical conduct. Together, Christian communities can effectively advocate for legislative changes that uphold justice and integrity, addressing immediate corruption issues while fostering long-term transformation based on love, justice, and accountability.

Conclusion

This study explores the issue of corruption in Nigeria through Christian ethics and governance, highlighting how theological principles and church-led initiatives can foster integrity, accountability, and social responsibility. It demonstrates that promoting ethical behavior through community engagement and moral education empowers individuals and organizations to confront corruption. Ultimately, this research contributes to the academic discourse on religion's role in social transformation and provides a framework for incorporating ethical principles into governance for a more just society.

Recommendations

i. Strengthening Faith-Based and Secular Partnerships: Christian organizations and civil society groups should form stronger alliances to leverage their combined influence. This collaboration would unify efforts, drawing on faith-based moral authority and secular expertise to create a more cohesive anti-corruption strategy, ensuring greater reach and impact in the larger society.

ii. Integrating Ethical Education in Religious Institutions: Churches and Christian groups should integrate ethics and anti-corruption teachings into their sermons, Bible studies, and community programs. This is crucial to raise awareness among congregants about their moral and civic responsibilities, ensuring a faith-driven commitment to integrity and accountability.

iii. Advocacy for Policy Reforms: Christian organizations should advocate for reforms in governance and transparency laws, targeting policymakers and government institutions. By actively engaging in policy dialogue, these groups can help create stronger legal frameworks to curb corruption and hold public officials accountable.

iv. Capacity Building and Leadership Training: Christian groups should focus on leadership training for both clergy and lay leaders, equipping them with the knowledge and skills to actively participate in anti-corruption initiatives. This would empower local leaders to drive ethical governance and inspire their communities to resist corrupt practices.

v. Promoting Whistleblower Protection: Christian organizations, in collaboration with civil society, should push for policies that protect whistleblowers. This would encourage individuals to report corruption without fear of retaliation, strengthening accountability systems and fostering a culture of transparency across sectors.

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