

# Political-Religious Cartels and the Crisis of Moral Authority in Nigeria: An Ethical Appraisal

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## Abstract

## Original Research Article

This study examines the crisis of moral authority in Nigeria, precipitated by the emergence of political-religious cartels—networks of elites who exploit the intersection of politics and religion for power and wealth. These cartels, characterized by patronage, manipulation of religious sentiments, and the commodification of spiritual leadership, have eroded public trust and destabilized Nigeria's ethical landscape. Through the lenses of Virtue Ethics and Consequentialism, this study appraises the moral failings of leaders who prioritize self-interest over public good, leading to corruption, social division, and disillusionment. Historically rooted in colonial legacies, these cartels have evolved into sophisticated alliances that undermine the integrity of both political and religious institutions. Contemporary manifestations, such as electoral endorsements and the misuse of religious platforms, highlight the ethical breaches that fuel this crisis. The study argues that the betrayal of virtues like justice and integrity, coupled with detrimental societal outcomes, has created a moral vacuum, enabling phenomena like extremism and corruption to thrive. Recommendations include strengthening institutional independence, promoting ethical leadership, enhancing civic education, enforcing regulatory oversight, and fostering interfaith dialogue to restore moral authority. By addressing these issues, Nigeria can rebuild trust in its institutions and foster a society grounded in ethical governance and spiritual authenticity. This appraisal underscores the urgent need for systemic reforms to counteract the pervasive influence of political-religious cartels.

**Keywords:** Political-Religious Cartels, Moral Authority, Nigeria, Virtue Ethics, Consequentialism.

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## INTRODUCTION

In Nigeria, a nation pulsating with cultural diversity and spiritual fervour, the interplay between politics and religion has long been a double-edged sword, shaping societal values while exposing deep-seated contradictions. The convergence of political power and religious influence has birthed political-religious cartels—networks of elites leveraging the sacred and secular to consolidate power, wealth, and influence. These cartels, often cloaked in moral authority, have precipitated a profound crisis in Nigeria's ethical landscape, eroding public trust and undermining societal cohesion.

The manipulation of religious sentiments for political gain, coupled with the commodification of spiritual leadership, has created a moral vacuum where integrity is sacrificed for expediency. This study conducts an ethical appraisal of these

dynamics, exploring how the unholy alliance between political and religious institutions destabilizes Nigeria's moral authority. By examining theoretical underpinnings, historical context, and contemporary manifestations, this study unravels the complexities of this crisis and proposes pathways for restoring ethical governance and spiritual authenticity in Nigeria.

## Conceptual Clarification

To ensure a clear and precise analysis, this section defines key concepts underpinning the study:

1. **Political-Religious Cartels:** Informal networks of political and religious elites collaborating to consolidate power, wealth, and influence through the manipulation of religious and political institutions (Adebanwi & Obadare, 2010). These cartels

prioritize personal or group interests over public welfare.

- ii. **Moral Authority:** The legitimacy and trust conferred upon individuals or institutions to guide ethical behaviour, traditionally vested in Nigeria's religious and political leaders (Metz, 2010). Its erosion leads to a crisis of trust and ethical decay (Oladipo, 2009).
- iii. **Virtue Ethics:** A framework emphasizing moral character and virtues like justice and integrity, relevant for assessing leaders' moral failings (MacIntyre, 1984).
- iv. **Consequentialism:** An ethical lens evaluating actions based on their outcomes, focusing on the greatest good for the greatest number (Bentham, 1789; Mill, 1861).
- v. **Commodification of Religion:** The transformation of religious practices into marketable commodities, where spiritual favour is traded for gain (Obadare, 2018).
- vi. **Ethical Governance:** The application of ethical principles like transparency and accountability in public affairs, undermined by cartels (Osaghae, 2011).
- vii. **Social Contract:** An implicit agreement where leaders uphold ethical standards in exchange for citizens' trust, weakened by eroded moral authority (Afolabi, 2015).

## Theoretical Framework

To understand the crisis of moral authority in Nigeria, this study adopts two complementary ethical frameworks: Virtue Ethics and Consequentialism. Virtue Ethics, rooted in the works of Aristotle and later expanded by scholars like MacIntyre (1984), emphasizes the importance of moral character and virtues such as justice, integrity, and prudence in guiding human actions. This framework is particularly relevant in assessing the moral failings of political and religious leaders who prioritize personal gain over public good, thus betraying the virtues expected of their roles. Consequentialism, as articulated by Bentham (1789) and Mill (1861), evaluates actions based on their outcomes, focusing on the greatest good for the greatest number.

This lens is critical in analyzing the societal impacts of political-religious cartels, whose actions often lead to widespread disillusionment, corruption, and social fragmentation. Additionally, the concept of Moral Authority is central to this appraisal. According to Metz (2010), moral authority refers to the legitimacy and trust conferred upon individuals or institutions to guide ethical behaviour. In Nigeria, this authority is traditionally vested in religious and political leaders, who are expected to embody exemplary moral conduct. However, when these leaders form cartels that exploit their positions, moral authority erodes, leading to a crisis of trust and ethical decay (Oladipo, 2009).

## Literature Review

The intersection of politics and religion in Nigeria has been a focal point of academic inquiry, with scholars across disciplines—political science, sociology, religious studies, and ethics—exploring its implications for governance, societal cohesion, and moral authority. This literature review synthesizes these contributions to provide a comprehensive understanding of political-religious cartels and their impact on Nigeria's ethical landscape, highlighting historical roots, contemporary dynamics, ethical frameworks, and gaps in existing research. The nexus of politics and religion in Nigeria is deeply rooted in the country's colonial history.

Falola (1998) argues that British colonial administrators instrumentalized traditional and religious leaders to maintain control, particularly in northern Nigeria, where Islamic institutions were co-opted to enforce indirect rule. This laid the foundation for a symbiotic relationship between political and religious elites, a dynamic that persisted post-independence. Adebani and Obadare (2010) note that politicians in the post-independence era increasingly relied on religious endorsements to legitimize their authority, while religious leaders sought political alliances to expand their influence. This mutual dependence has fostered the emergence of political-religious cartels, characterized by networks of elites who exploit the sacred and secular for personal gain (Kukah, 1993). These cartels thrive on patronage, with politicians providing funding or appointments to religious leaders in exchange for spiritual validation and voter mobilization, a practice that undermines the impartiality of religious institutions (Osaghae, 2011).

The politicization of religion has exacerbated ethnic and religious tensions, as politicians exploit religious identities to garner votes. Kukah (1993) provides a seminal analysis of this phenomenon, highlighting how the manipulation of religious divisions has fuelled conflicts, particularly between Christians and Muslims. For instance, the push for Sharia law in northern Nigeria during the late 1970s and early 2000s was often supported by political elites to secure Muslim votes, intensifying regional tensions (Harnischfeger, 2008). Similarly, the rise of Pentecostal Christianity in southern Nigeria has seen pastors aligning with political candidates, with churches serving as platforms for electoral campaigns (Kalu, 2008). These dynamics have blurred the lines between spiritual guidance and political campaigning, eroding the moral authority of religious institutions (Adebani & Obadare, 2010).

The concept of moral authority is central to understanding the ethical implications of these cartels. Metz (2010) defines moral authority as the legitimacy and trust conferred upon individuals or institutions to guide ethical behaviour. In Nigeria, this authority is traditionally vested in religious and political leaders, expected to embody virtues such as integrity and justice. However, Oladipo (2009) argues that the complicity of these leaders in corrupt practices has led to a crisis of trust, as citizens lose faith in institutions meant to guide their moral and civic lives. This erosion is exacerbated by the commodification of religion, where spiritual favour is traded for financial or political gain.



Obadare (2018) critiques the rise of the prosperity gospel in Pentecostal churches and the commercialization of Islamic clerics' services, which have turned religion into a marketplace, violating core ethical principles of humility and selflessness. The societal impacts of this crisis are profound. Afolabi (2015) argues that the loss of moral authority undermines the social contract, weakening governance structures and reducing civic engagement. Adebayo (2016) examines the 2015 presidential election, where religious endorsements polarized the electorate and raised questions about the impartiality of religious institutions. Similarly, Onuoha (2014) analyzes the rise of Boko Haram, arguing that the group's exploitation of Islamic teachings reflects the broader consequences of a weakened moral authority, where extremist ideologies fill the ethical void left by compromised religious leaders.

Ethical frameworks provide critical lenses for analyzing these dynamics. MacIntyre's (1984) virtue ethics emphasizes the importance of moral character, arguing that leaders who lack virtues such as justice and integrity fail to fulfill their roles as moral exemplars. Adeshina (2017) applies this framework to Nigeria, highlighting the moral failings of political and religious leaders who prioritize self-interest over public welfare. Consequentialist ethics, as articulated by Bentham (1789) and Mill (1861), evaluates actions based on their outcomes, focusing on the greatest good for the greatest number. Onuoha (2014) employs this lens to argue that the societal consequences of political-religious cartels—corruption, division, and violence—undermine the common good, perpetuating a cycle of ethical decay.

Despite these insights, several gaps remain in the literature. First, there is a lack of studies integrating virtue ethics and consequentialism to provide a holistic ethical appraisal of political-religious cartels. Most analyses focus on either individual moral failings or societal outcomes, but few combine these perspectives. Second, the role of grassroots religious communities in resisting or perpetuating these cartels is underexplored. While much attention is given to elite actors, the agency of ordinary citizens in shaping religious and political dynamics warrants further investigation.

Third, the potential of interfaith dialogue as a strategy for mitigating the crisis of moral authority remains underdeveloped. Existing studies focus on conflict rather than cooperation between religious groups, limiting the exploration of collaborative solutions. Finally, the economic dimensions of political-religious cartels, particularly their reliance on patronage networks, require more detailed analysis to understand their sustainability and impact on Nigeria's political economy (Falola & Ihonvbere, 1985). This review establishes a robust foundation for understanding the crisis of moral authority in Nigeria, highlighting the interplay of historical, political, and religious factors. By addressing these gaps, this study aims to contribute to the literature by offering a comprehensive ethical appraisal that integrates multiple perspectives and proposes actionable solutions.

## Historical Context of Political-Religious Cartels in Nigeria

The roots of political-religious cartels in Nigeria trace back to the colonial era, where British administrators co-opted religious leaders to enforce control (Falola, 1998). Post-independence, this evolved as politicians sought religious endorsements, and religious leaders leveraged political alliances. The 1970s and 1980s saw the rise of charismatic religious movements, with Sharia politicization in the north and Pentecostal alignments in the south (Kukah, 1993; Kalu, 2008). Military regimes, like Babangida's (1985–1993), used patronage to secure religious loyalty (Osaghae, 2011).

Economic decline further entrenched these cartels, as religious institutions relied on political funding (Falola & Ihonvbere, 1985). The democratic era since 1999 has seen elections become battlegrounds for these alliances, with religious endorsements fueling polarization (Human Rights Watch, 2011). The rise of Boko Haram highlights the consequences of compromised moral authority, as extremist ideologies exploit the resulting ethical void (Onuoha, 2014).

## Contemporary Manifestations and Ethical Implications

Politico-religious cartels in contemporary Nigeria manifest in multifaceted ways, each carrying significant ethical implications that exacerbate the crisis of moral authority. These manifestations reflect the entrenched nature of these cartels and their detrimental impact on Nigeria's social, political, and ethical fabric.

1. **Patronage and Corruption:** Political patronage is a cornerstone of these cartels, with religious leaders receiving financial incentives, land allocations, or political appointments in exchange for support. For instance, state-sponsored religious projects, such as funding for Hajj or Christian pilgrimages, often serve as tools for securing loyalty from religious institutions (Osaghae, 2011). This practice compromises the independence of religious leaders, who are expected to uphold virtues like impartiality and justice (MacIntyre, 1984). The ethical implication is a betrayal of public trust, as religious institutions, meant to be moral exemplars, become complicit in corruption, undermining their legitimacy (Afolabi, 2015).
2. **Manipulation of Religious Sentiments:** Politicians exploit religious divisions to mobilize voters, often inciting ethnic and religious tensions. During the 2011 and 2015 elections, candidates used religious rhetoric to polarize voters, with slogans and campaigns emphasizing Christian or Muslim identities to garner support (Human Rights Watch, 2011). This manipulation fosters social discord, as communities are pitted against each other, undermining the common good central to consequentialist ethics (Mill, 1861). The ethical implication is a fractured society where unity is sacrificed for political expediency, perpetuating cycles of conflict and mistrust.

3. **Erosion of Public Trust:** The complicity of religious leaders in political corruption has led to widespread disillusionment. When clerics endorse corrupt politicians or remain silent on governance failures, they forfeit their moral authority, leaving citizens skeptical of both religious and political institutions (Afolabi, 2015). For example, the failure of prominent religious leaders to condemn electoral malpractices in the 2019 elections further eroded public confidence (Adebayo, 2019). This erosion weakens the social contract, as citizens lose faith in the systems meant to guide their moral and civic lives, leading to apathy and reduced civic engagement (Metz, 2010).
4. **Commodification of Religion:** The rise of the prosperity gospel in Pentecostal churches and the commercialization of Islamic clerics' services have turned religion into a marketplace. Pastors and imams often offer spiritual blessings in exchange for donations or political allegiance, violating virtues of humility and selflessness (Obadare, 2018). For instance, the proliferation of "miracle centers" and paid prayer sessions reflects a transactional approach to spirituality, where faith is commodified for profit or influence. This practice not only undermines the spiritual authenticity of religious institutions but also alienates worshippers seeking genuine moral guidance.
5. **Weakening of Institutional Accountability:** Political-religious cartels often shield corrupt leaders from accountability, as religious endorsements provide a veneer of legitimacy. In some cases, religious leaders have defended politicians accused of embezzlement, citing divine favor or forgiveness, which discourages legal and ethical accountability (Adeshina, 2017). This weakens governance structures, as the lack of accountability perpetuates corruption and erodes public trust in institutions meant to uphold justice.
6. **Exacerbation of Extremism:** The moral vacuum created by compromised religious authority has facilitated the rise of extremist groups like Boko Haram and ISWAP. These groups exploit the disillusionment of marginalized communities, offering alternative narratives that challenge the legitimacy of mainstream religious and political leaders (Onuoha, 2014). The failure of religious institutions to counter these narratives, due to their own ethical compromises, has allowed extremist ideologies to gain traction, with devastating consequences for Nigeria's security and social cohesion.

These manifestations highlight the pervasive influence of political-religious cartels and their role in perpetuating a cycle of ethical decay, social division, and governance failures in Nigeria. To further elucidate the crisis of moral authority, two

detailed case studies highlight the real-world implications of political-religious cartels in Nigeria.

### i. Religious Endorsements in the 2015 Presidential Election

The 2015 presidential election serves as a stark example of how political-religious cartels undermine moral authority. During the campaign, prominent religious leaders, including Pentecostal pastors and Islamic clerics, openly endorsed candidates, often in exchange for financial inducements or promises of political favors (Adebayo, 2016). For instance, reports emerged of pastors receiving large donations from political campaigns to mobilize their congregations, while some northern clerics were granted government contracts in exchange for endorsements (Human Rights Watch, 2015). This polarized the electorate, as religious communities were divided along Christian-Muslim lines, exacerbating tensions in an already volatile political climate.

From a virtue ethics perspective, these endorsements reflect a failure of integrity, as religious leaders prioritized personal gain over their role as impartial moral guides (MacIntyre, 1984). Consequentially, the polarization fueled post-election violence, particularly in northern Nigeria, where clashes between supporters of opposing candidates resulted in significant loss of life (Human Rights Watch, 2015). The ethical breach lies in the betrayal of public trust, as religious institutions, meant to foster unity, became instruments of division. This case underscores the broader societal impact of political-religious cartels, as their actions not only undermined the electoral process but also deepened Nigeria's social and religious divides.

Moreover, the aftermath of the election revealed the long-term consequences of these endorsements. Public trust in religious institutions declined, with many Nigerians expressing skepticism about the motives of their spiritual leaders (Afolabi, 2015). This disillusionment has had lasting effects, as citizens increasingly view religious institutions as extensions of political machinery rather than bastions of moral authority. The case highlights the need for religious leaders to maintain neutrality and prioritize ethical principles over political alliances.

### ii. Boko Haram and the Exploitation of Religious Authority

The rise of Boko Haram, a jihadist group founded in 2002, illustrates the catastrophic consequences of a weakened moral authority. Boko Haram exploited the ethical vacuum created by compromised religious and political leaders, manipulating Islamic teachings to justify violence and challenge the legitimacy of the Nigerian state (Onuoha, 2014). The group's leader, Mohammed Yusuf, capitalized on widespread disillusionment with corrupt governance and the failure of mainstream Islamic leaders to address socio-economic grievances, particularly in northern Nigeria (Harnischfeger, 2008).



The complicity of political-religious cartels in creating this vacuum is evident in their failure to counter extremist narratives. Many northern religious leaders, reliant on political patronage, remained silent or equivocal on Boko Haram's early activities, fearing loss of influence or funding (Onuoha, 2014). This silence allowed the group to gain traction among marginalized youth, who viewed Boko Haram as a viable alternative to a corrupt system. From a consequentialist perspective, the outcomes were devastating: thousands of lives lost, millions displaced, and entire communities destabilized (Human Rights Watch, 2016).

The ethical implications are profound. Virtue ethics highlights the failure of religious leaders to embody courage and justice, as their dependence on political patronage compromised their ability to challenge extremist ideologies (MacIntyre, 1984). Consequentially, the rise of Boko Haram exacerbated Nigeria's security crisis, eroded trust in religious institutions, and highlighted the dangers of a moral authority vacuum (Metz, 2010). This case underscores the urgent need for religious leaders to reclaim their role as ethical exemplars and actively counter narratives that exploit religious sentiments for destructive ends. These case studies illustrate the tangible consequences of political-religious cartels, from electoral polarization to the rise of extremism, highlighting the urgent need to address the crisis of moral authority in Nigeria.

## Ethical Appraisal

The crisis of moral authority in Nigeria, driven by political-religious cartels, is a profound ethical challenge that can be analyzed through the lenses of virtue ethics, consequentialism, and deontological perspectives to provide a comprehensive appraisal. From a **virtue ethics** perspective, the actions of political and religious leaders within these cartels reflect a profound failure of moral character. MacIntyre (1984) argues that virtuous leadership requires justice, integrity, and courage—qualities conspicuously absent in leaders who prioritize personal gain over public welfare. Religious leaders who accept financial inducements to endorse corrupt politicians lack integrity, betraying their role as moral exemplars. Similarly, politicians who manipulate religious sentiments for votes lack the virtue of justice, as they prioritize power over societal unity. This failure undermines their legitimacy, as moral authority depends on the consistent demonstration of virtuous behaviour (Metz, 2010). The absence of these virtues creates a cycle of ethical decay, where leaders model self-interest rather than public good, further eroding trust in institutions (Oladipo, 2009).

Consequentialist ethics highlights the detrimental societal outcomes of these cartels. Bentham (1789) and Mill (1861) emphasize the greatest good for the greatest number, yet the actions of political-religious cartels produce outcomes that undermine this principle. The manipulation of religious sentiments fuels division, as seen in election-related violence and inter-religious conflicts (Human Rights Watch, 2011). Corruption facilitated by patronage networks diverts resources from public welfare, exacerbating poverty and inequality (Osaghae, 2011). The rise of extremist groups like Boko Haram, enabled by a weakened moral authority, has led to

widespread suffering, with significant human and economic costs (Onuoha, 2014). These consequences demonstrate the far-reaching harm caused by cartels, as they destabilize Nigeria's social fabric and hinder ethical governance.

A deontological perspective, rooted in the works of Kant (1785), adds further depth to this appraisal. Deontological ethics emphasizes duties and moral rules, such as the obligation to act with honesty and respect for others' autonomy. Political and religious leaders have a duty to uphold the trust placed in them by their communities, yet cartels violate this duty by engaging in deceitful practices, such as endorsing candidates for personal gain or remaining silent on corruption (Afolabi, 2015). This breach of duty not only undermines their moral authority but also violates the categorical imperative to treat others as ends, not means, as citizens are manipulated for political ends (Kant, 1785). Moreover, the ethical appraisal must consider the broader systemic implications.

Political-religious cartels create a culture of impunity, where unethical behaviour is normalized, and accountability is undermined (Adeshina, 2017). This culture perpetuates a cycle of mistrust, as citizens become cynical about the motives of their leaders, leading to disengagement from civic processes. The commodification of religion further exacerbates this crisis, as spiritual authenticity is sacrificed for transactional gain, alienating worshippers and weakening the moral foundation of religious institutions (Obadare, 2018). The interplay of these ethical failures—character-based, outcome-driven, and duty-bound—underscores the complexity of the crisis and the urgent need for reform.

## Conclusion

The crisis of moral authority in Nigeria, driven by political-religious cartels, represents a profound ethical challenge. By intertwining the sacred with the secular, these cartels have commodified religion, eroded public trust, and undermined the virtues and duties that should guide leadership. The integration of virtue ethics, consequentialism, and deontological perspectives reveals the depth of this crisis, highlighting the moral failings of leaders and the societal harm caused by their actions. Addressing this crisis requires a concerted effort to restore integrity, transparency, and accountability in both political and religious spheres.

## Recommendations

- 1. Strengthening Institutional Independence:** Religious institutions must reject financial inducements and maintain neutrality in political matters (Kukah, 1993).
- 2. Promoting Ethical Leadership:** Training programs should emphasize virtues like integrity, justice, and humility for religious and political leaders (Afolabi, 2015).
- 3. Enhancing Civic Education:** Public campaigns should educate citizens on the dangers of political-

religious manipulation, empowering them to demand accountability (Osaghae, 2011).

4. **Regulatory Oversight:** Enforce regulations to prevent the misuse of religious platforms for political purposes, such as monitoring campaign-related activities in religious spaces (Adebanwi & Obadare, 2010).
5. **Interfaith Dialogue:** Promote dialogue between Christian and Islamic leaders to reduce polarization and foster a shared commitment to ethical governance (Falola, 1998).

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