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RELIGION, MORAL HYPOCRISY AND CORRUPTION IN NIGERIA: EXAMINING THE CONTRADICTION BETWEEN RELIGIOUS PROFESSION AND PUBLIC CONDUCT

Sunday Onyema Iherue, Ph. D
Department of Religion and Peace Studies,
Faculty of Humanities,
Imo State University, Owerri

Abstract
Nigeria presents one of the most striking paradoxes in contemporary Africa: a society marked by extraordinary religious devotion alongside persistent, systemic corruption. Nigerians consistently rank among the world's most religious populations, with large majorities describing religion as very important in their lives and supporting a greater public role for religion. Yet Nigeria continues to score poorly on global measures of public-sector integrity, ranking 140th out of 180 countries with a score of 26 out of 100 in the 2024 Corruption Perceptions Index. This journal examines the contradiction between religious profession and public conduct in Nigeria, focusing on moral hypocrisy as a bridge between widespread religiosity and entrenched corruption. Drawing on Christian, Islamic and African traditional moral teachings, as well as theories of corruption, anomie and moral disengagement, the paper argues that corruption in Nigeria is not simply a failure of law enforcement or institutions; it is also a failure of moral internalisation, religious leadership and social accountability. The paper concludes that religious communities must move from public displays of piety to practical ethical formation, transparency, prophetic critique and civic responsibility if religion is to become a genuine force against corruption.
Keywords: Religion, Moral hypocrisy, Corruption, Religiosity, Public conduct, Ethics

Introduction

Religion occupies a central place in Nigerian social life. Surveys repeatedly show that Nigerians regard religion as deeply important to personal identity, national belonging and everyday morality. "In a Pew Research Center survey, 93 per cent of Nigerian respondents said religion was very important in their lives, and 65 per cent believed religion plays a more important role in their country" (Pew Research Centre, 2019, para. 4). "A later survey similarly found that about eight in ten Nigerians considered belonging to Christianity or Islam very important to being truly Nigerian" (Pew Research Centre, 2024, para. 3). Churches, mosques, prayer groups, religious broadcasts, pilgrimages, crusades, revival services and religious social-media platforms are visible features of Nigerian public life.

At the same time, corruption remains one of Nigeria's most damaging social problems. "The National Bureau of Statistics and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime found that, among Nigerians who had at least one contact with a public official in the previous twelve months, 30.2 per cent either paid a bribe or were asked to pay one" (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC] *et al.,* 2019, p. 8). "Transparency International's 2024 Corruption Perceptions Index placed Nigeria 140th out of 180 countries, with a score of 26 out of 100, below both the global average of 43 and the Sub-Saharan African average of 33" (Transparency International, 2025, para. 2).

This coexistence of intense religious profession and widespread corrupt practice raises a fundamental moral question: why does a society so visibly religious continue to tolerate, normalise and reproduce corruption? The answer cannot be that Nigerians are insincere in every instance of religious commitment. Millions of Nigerians genuinely pray, fast, give alms, attend worship and seek divine guidance. Rather, the problem lies in the frequent separation between religious identity and ethical conduct between what people profess in sacred spaces and how they act in offices, markets, elections, classrooms, hospitals, courts and homes.

This contradiction may be described as moral hypocrisy: the gap between publicly claimed moral values and actual behaviour. Atoi, Sadiku and Kume (2020) observe that "Nigeria exhibits "so much religiosity and less morality," arguing that hypocritical and greedy attitudes among some religious adherents, together with the failure to apply religious moral values in daily conduct, help escalate corruption" (p. 115). Similarly, Onuorah (2022) identifies "hypocrisy, commercialisation of religion, manipulation and exploitation of adherents as forms of religious impropriety that undermine Nigerian social development" (para. 1).

This journal examines that contradiction in detail. It asks three related questions. First, what is the relationship between religion, morality and corruption in Nigeria? Second, why do religious profession and public conduct

so often diverge? Third, how can religious communities contribute more credibly to anti-corruption transformation? The paper argues that religion can either restrain corruption or become complicit in it, depending on whether its moral teachings are internalised, modelled by leaders and enforced within communities.

Conceptualizing Religion, Morality and Corruption

Religion as Moral Framework

Religion, in its broadest sense, is a system of beliefs, practices, sacred narratives, moral norms and communal institutions that connects human beings to ultimate reality. In Nigeria, Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Religion constitute the major religious traditions. Each offers moral visions concerning truthfulness, justice, humility, generosity, sexual discipline, respect for life, care for the poor and accountability before God.

Christianity teaches love of God and neighbour, honesty, justice and humility. The Hebrew prophet Micah summarises divine expectation in these words: "He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8, New International Version). Jesus criticises religious leaders who honour God outwardly while neglecting "the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness" (Matthew 23:23, New International Version).

Islam likewise places strong emphasis on justice, honesty and lawful acquisition of wealth. The Qur'an commands believers not to consume wealth unjustly: "And do not consume one another's wealth unjustly or send it [in bribery] to the rulers in order that [they] might [aid] you [to] consume a portion of the wealth of the people in sin, while you know [it is unlawful]" (Qur'an 2:188, Sahih International). It also commands believers to uphold justice even when it is uncomfortable: "O you who have believed, be persistently standing firm in justice, witnesses for Allah, even if against yourselves or parents and relatives" (Qur'an 4:135, Sahih International).

African Traditional Religion, though diverse across ethnic groups, commonly emphasises communal welfare, respect for elders, truthfulness, sacred oaths, social harmony and the moral consequences of wrongdoing. Atoi *et al.* (2020) argue that "Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Religion all contain "core moral values" such as good conduct, discipline, loyalty, patriotism, accountability, transparency, social justice and covenant-keeping" (p. 119). The problem, therefore, is not the absence of moral resources within Nigerian religion. The problem is the frequent failure to translate those resources into public behaviour.

Corruption as Moral and Institutional Failure

Corruption is commonly defined as the abuse of entrusted power for private gain. Nye (1967) defines "corruption as behaviour that deviates from formal duties because of private-regarding motives such as wealth, status or personal influence" (p. 417). This definition captures bribery, embezzlement, nepotism, vote-buying, extortion, and fraud, diversion of public funds and abuse of office.

Corruption is both an institutional and moral problem. Institutionally, it thrives where oversight is weak, sanctions are inconsistent, salaries are inadequate, procurement is opaque and citizens lack reliable avenues for redress. Klitgaard (1988) famously argues that "corruption flourishes when monopoly power, discretion and weak accountability combine" (p. 75). Rose-Ackerman (1999) similarly emphasises that "corruption is sustained by incentives, institutions and the expected costs and benefits of dishonest conduct" (p. 9).

Yet corruption also has a moral dimension. It involves deception, betrayal of trust, selfishness and indifference to the common good. Johnston (2005) describes "corruption as a problem of participation and institutional integrity, showing that corrupt systems often develop their own networks of obligation, loyalty and protection" (p. 12). In Nigeria, corruption is not confined to politicians or senior officials; it can appear in everyday demands for "tips," examination malpractice, falsified documents, illegal tolls, sexual exploitation in exchange for opportunities and manipulation of religious donations.

The moral dimension explains why religion matters. If corruption is merely a technical governance problem, then legal reform and institutional strengthening may suffice. But if corruption is also sustained by values, habits, rationalisations and social expectations, then religious communities which shape conscience, identity and moral imagination—become indispensable actors.

The Nigerian Religious Landscape

Nigeria is one of the most religious countries in the world. Pew Research Center (2019) reports that "96 per cent of Nigerian adults attend religious services at least monthly, while 93 per cent say religion is very important in their lives" (para. 4). The country is roughly divided between Christianity and Islam, with substantial regional, denominational and ethnic variation. Pew Research Centre (2025) estimates that, "in 2010, Muslims constituted about 54.5 per cent of Nigeria's population and Christians about 44.4 per cent (p. 1). These figures should be

interpreted cautiously because religious demography in Nigeria is politically sensitive and estimates vary by source and method."

Religious expression in Nigeria is highly public. Religious language appears in politics, education, business, media and popular culture. Political candidates often invoke divine blessing, religious leaders endorse or criticise governments, and citizens frequently interpret personal success, illness, insecurity and national crisis through spiritual categories. This visibility makes religion a potentially powerful force for public morality.

However, visibility is not the same as transformation. A society may be full of religious activities while remaining ethically fragile. Atoi *et al.* (2020) describe this as "the paradox of "extreme religiosity" alongside "overwhelming corruption" (p. 115). The Nigerian case suggests that religious affiliation, attendance and public devotion do not automatically produce honesty, justice or public integrity.

Moral Hypocrisy: Meaning and Manifestations

Defining Moral Hypocrisy

Moral hypocrisy occurs when a person publicly affirms moral standards while privately violating them or exempting themselves from their demands. It is not simply sin or moral weakness; it involves a performative gap between claimed virtue and actual conduct. In religious contexts, hypocrisy often includes using sacred language, symbols or authority to conceal selfishness, greed, exploitation or injustice.

Hypocrisy is condemned in both Christianity and Islam. Jesus repeatedly criticises the Pharisees for outward piety without inner transformation: "You hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence" (Matthew 23:25, New International Version). The Qur'an also warns against those who say what they do not do: "O you who have believed, why do you say that which you do not do? Great is hatred in the sight of Allah that you say what you do not do" (Qur'an 61:2–3, Sahih International).

In the Nigerian context, moral hypocrisy may take several forms:

- A public official who attends religious services regularly but diverts public funds.
- A religious leader who preaches sacrifice while living extravagantly from offerings.
- A businessperson who tithes or gives alms while evading taxes or selling substandard goods.
- A voter who prays for good leadership but sells his or her vote.
- A teacher or examiner who condemns corruption but accepts bribes for grades.
- A citizen who condemns corruption publicly but offers or accepts bribes privately.

These behaviours reveal a central problem: religion may become a badge of identity rather than a discipline of conduct.

Hypocrisy and Moral Disengagement

Bandura (1999) explains that "people often commit harmful acts by morally disengaging from their own standards. They may justify wrongdoing as necessary, displace responsibility onto others, minimise harm, dehumanise victims or compare their conduct with worse behaviour" (pp. 193–209). These mechanisms are highly relevant to Nigerian corruption.

A civil servant may say, "Everyone collects 'egunje,' so I must survive." A politician may argue, "If I do not take my share, others will take it." A contractor may claim, "Government money belongs to nobody." A religious leader may justify luxury by saying, "God wants His servants to prosper." Such statements do not eliminate moral knowledge; they neutralise it. They allow individuals to continue identifying as religious while participating in corrupt systems.

Merton's (1938) theory of anomie also helps explain this contradiction. Merton argues that "when culturally approved goals such as wealth, success and status—are strongly emphasised but legitimate means of achieving them are unequally available, some individuals turn to deviant means" (pp. 672–682). In Nigeria, the pursuit of wealth, titles, influence and visible success can become so intense that ethical means are treated as optional. Religion may then be used to bless ambition rather than discipline it.

Corruption in Nigeria: Nature and Scale

Forms of Corruption

Corruption in Nigeria takes many forms. It includes grand corruption, such as embezzlement of public funds, inflated contracts, oil-sector fraud and diversion of security resources. It also includes petty corruption, such as bribery at checkpoints, hospitals, schools, motor-licensing offices and passport offices. Political corruption includes vote-buying, electoral manipulation, party financing abuses and the use of state resources for partisan advantage.

The UNODC and NBS (2019) survey provides "important evidence of the everyday character of corruption." "It found that 30.2 per cent of Nigerians who had contact with a public official in the previous year paid or were asked to pay a bribe" (p. 8). The survey also examined bribery, nepotism in public recruitment and vote-buying,

showing that "corruption is embedded not only in elite politics but also in routine citizen-state interactions" (UNODC & NBS, 2019, p. 8).

Corruption also has a religious dimension. Religious institutions may be affected by financial mismanagement, fraudulent miracles, manipulation of prophecy, exploitation of vulnerable believers, unaccountable offerings and the commercialisation of spiritual services. Onuorah (2022) argues that "religious practices in Nigeria have become commercialised and that some religious leaders abandon foundational spiritual precepts in pursuit of economic interests" (para. 5).

Consequences of Corruption

Corruption damages Nigeria in multiple ways. It reduces resources available for education, healthcare, infrastructure and security. It deepens inequality by allowing connected elites to capture public wealth while ordinary citizens bear the cost of poor services. It weakens trust in government, encourages cynicism and makes citizens more likely to seek personal shortcuts rather than rely on fair institutions.

Corruption also has a spiritual and psychological cost. It produces a culture of suspicion, fear and moral fatigue. Citizens may begin to assume that honesty is foolish, that integrity is unaffordable and that public office exists primarily for private accumulation. This cynicism can become self-fulfilling: when people expect corruption, they may participate in it defensively.

Transparency International (2025) notes that "Nigeria's 2024 CPI score of 26 remains far below global and regional averages, indicating continuing perceptions of serious public-sector corruption" (para. 2). While perception indices do not measure every form of corruption directly, they reflect the broader crisis of trust in public institutions.

The Paradox of Religiosity and Corruption

Religiosity Without Ethical Transformation

The central paradox of Nigerian public life is that high religiosity has not produced proportionate public integrity. Atoi *et al.* (2020) find that "many religious adherents place little premium on accountability, transparency, social justice and covenant-keeping in their daily dealings" (p. 119). This suggests that religious practice may sometimes remain external—focused on rituals, miracles, prosperity, protection and social belonging—without penetrating economic and political behaviour.

Several factors may explain this gap.

First, religious identity can become tribalised or instrumentalised. People may emphasise belonging to a church, mosque or denomination while treating ethical teachings as optional. Religion becomes a social marker rather than a moral discipline.

Second, prosperity theology can distort religious values. When wealth is interpreted chiefly as evidence of divine favour, and poverty as evidence of spiritual failure, believers may pursue wealth with less ethical scrutiny. Religious leaders who preach prosperity without accountability may unintentionally sanctify materialism.

Third, corruption may be normalised through repetition. When bribery, nepotism and manipulation become common, individuals may stop experiencing them as moral exceptions. They become "survival strategies," "networking," "appreciation," or "settlement."

Fourth, religious communities may lack internal accountability. A religious organisation may condemn corruption publicly while failing to audit its own finances, disclose income, regulate leaders' lifestyles or discipline abusive clergy.

Religion as Cover for Corruption

Religion can also serve as moral cover for corruption. A corrupt official may donate generously to religious causes, sponsor crusades or pilgrimages, receive public prayers or use religious titles to build legitimacy. Such actions can create an impression of righteousness while obscuring the sources of wealth.

This is not to say that all religious giving is corrupt or that wealthy religious leaders are automatically dishonest. Religious giving can be genuine, generous and socially beneficial. The ethical question concerns transparency, source of wealth, accountability and the relationship between religious authority and material gain. Onuorah (2022) warns that "manipulation and exploitation of adherents can subject people to "laziness, frustration, desperation and poverty," thereby obstructing personal development and social progress" (para. 1).

When religious leaders bless questionable wealth without asking moral questions, they may weaken the prophetic function of religion. Rather than challenging injustice, religion becomes a legitimating institution for the status quo.

Religious Teachings Against Corruption

Christian Ethical Resources

Christianity contains strong anti-corruption resources. The Bible condemns bribery, injustice, greed, oppression of the poor and dishonest gain. Proverbs warns that "a bribe corrupts the heart" and that righteous leadership brings stability. Jesus teaches that human beings cannot serve both God and money (Matthew 6:24, New International Version). The early Christian community emphasised sharing, care for the poor and honesty in communal life.

Christian ethics therefore challenges corruption at several levels. It challenges the individual believer to practise honesty even when dishonesty is profitable. It challenges churches to model transparency in finance and leadership. It challenges Christians in public office to see authority as stewardship rather than ownership. It also challenges religious leaders to speak against injustice, even when powerful members of their congregations are implicated.

However, Christian teaching can be weakened when churches emphasise miracles, prosperity and personal breakthrough more than repentance, justice and stewardship. A Christianity focused mainly on individual success may not equip believers to resist systemic corruption.

Islamic Ethical Resources

Islam also provides powerful resources against corruption. The Qur'an condemns bribery, false measurement, unjust consumption of wealth and betrayal of trust. It commands honesty in trade, justice in judgment and care for the vulnerable. The condemnation of those who cheat in measures—"Woe to those who give less [than due], who, when they take a measure from people, take in full" (Qur'an 83:1–3, Sahih International) speaks directly to economic dishonesty.

Islamic ethics emphasises*amanah*, or trustworthiness, and *adl*, or justice. Public office is understood as a trust, not an opportunity for personal enrichment. Zakat, sadaqah and prohibitions against unlawful consumption encourage ethical economic behaviour. Islamic teachings also stress that leaders will be accountable to God for those under their care.

Yet Islamic values may be undermined when religious identity becomes symbolic rather than ethical. A Muslim may pray regularly, fast during Ramadan and recite the Qur'an while participating in bribery, nepotism or electoral fraud. The contradiction is not between Islam and corruption in principle, but between Islamic profession and un-Islamic conduct.

African Traditional Ethical Resources

African Traditional Religion also contains moral resources relevant to anti-corruption. Many African societies traditionally regarded communal welfare, truthfulness, respect for sacred oaths and social responsibility as essential virtues. Wrongdoing was not merely a private offence; it disrupted harmony between the living, the ancestors, the community and the divine.

Atoi et al. (2020) argue that "Nigeria's tripartite religious heritage contains values capable of restraining corruption if internalised and applied in daily conduct" (p. 119). These include accountability, loyalty, discipline, social justice and covenant-keeping. The decline of these values in modern public life reflects not simply modernisation but also the weakening of moral communities that once reinforced ethical conduct.

Why Religious Profession and Public Conduct Diverge

Weak Moral Internalisation

Religious knowledge does not automatically produce moral character. A person may memorise scriptures, attend worship, know religious rules and still act unjustly. Moral transformation requires internalisation: the movement of values from external instruction into conscience, habit and decision-making.

In Nigeria, religious education sometimes emphasises doctrinal correctness, ritual performance, spiritual warfare or prosperity more than character formation. Sermons may condemn sin in general while avoiding concrete issues such as procurement fraud, tax evasion, exam malpractice, sexual harassment, electoral manipulation or bribery. As a result, believers may know that corruption is wrong in the abstract but lack practical ethical training for real-life situations.

Leadership Failure and Religious Commercialisation

Religious leaders occupy a strategic position in shaping moral conduct. When they model humility, transparency and sacrifice, they strengthen ethical culture. When they model extravagance, authoritarianism, financial secrecy or manipulation, they weaken it.

Onuorah (2022) identifies "commercialisation of religion, manipulation and exploitation of adherents as major forms of religious aberration in Nigeria" (para. 1). Where religious leadership becomes a business, moral

authority may be compromised. Followers may be encouraged to give money for miracles, breakthroughs, protection or status, while questions about accountability are dismissed as attacks on God's anointed.

This does not mean that all religious wealth is illegitimate. Religious organisations require resources for worship, education, charity and administration. The ethical issue is whether wealth is acquired honestly, managed transparently and used for the common good.

Social Pressure and Survival Logic

Corruption is often defended as survival. Citizens may argue that bribery is necessary to obtain services, secure employment or avoid delays. Public servants may argue that low wages justify informal payments. Businesspeople may argue that bribes are necessary to win contracts. Politicians may argue that expensive elections make private fundraising inevitable.

These arguments contain partial truths. Structural poverty, weak institutions and insecure livelihoods can push people toward corrupt practices. However, survival logic can also become a moral excuse. It shifts attention from personal responsibility and collective reform to inevitability. Religion should challenge this fatalism by insisting that no level of hardship removes moral responsibility entirely.

Ethnicity, Patronage and Loyalty

Corruption in Nigeria is often sustained by networks of ethnicity, religion, friendship, patronage and obligation. People may feel morally obligated to favour relatives, church members, mosque members, hometown associations or political allies. In such networks, corruption may be reinterpreted as loyalty, generosity or communal support.

This creates a serious moral confusion. Helping a relative may be good, but helping a relative through fraudulent recruitment, contract manipulation or diversion of public funds is corruption. Religious teaching must distinguish between legitimate communal solidarity and corrupt favouritism.

Religion, Politics and Public Morality

Religion in Nigerian Politics

Religion is deeply present in Nigerian politics. Politicians seek religious endorsement, attend worship services, donate to religious causes and use religious language to mobilise support. Religious leaders sometimes intervene in elections, national debates and governance questions.

This visibility can be constructive. Religious communities can educate voters, monitor elections, defend human dignity, promote peace and demand accountability. Pew Research Center (2024) found that "religion is strongly tied to national identity in Nigeria, with about eight in ten respondents saying belonging to Christianity or Islam is very important to being truly Nigerian" (para. 3). This means religious leaders possess significant moral influence over public attitudes.

However, religious influence can also become partisan or manipulative. When religious identity is used to divide citizens, justify political loyalty or sanctify particular candidates, it may weaken democratic accountability. A religious community that blesses power uncritically becomes vulnerable to capture by political interests.

Prophetic Responsibility

Religious institutions have a prophetic responsibility to speak truth to power. This does not require religious leaders to become politicians. It requires them to defend moral standards consistently, regardless of the political, ethnic or financial status of offenders.

A prophetic religious community should ask difficult questions: Where did this wealth come from? Who benefits from this contract? Are public resources being used for public purposes? Are the poor being protected? Are elections free and fair? Are religious institutions themselves accountable?

When religious leaders remain silent about corruption because corrupt individuals fund their ministries, they lose moral credibility. Silence in the face of injustice is itself a form of complicity.

Institutional Responses and Their Limits

Nigeria has established several anti-corruption institutions, including the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission and the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission. The Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (Establishment) Act, 2004 empowers the EFCC to investigate and prosecute financial crimes, while the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Act, 2000 establishes the ICPC to combat corruption and related offences in public life.

The 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria also contains provisions on public accountability, citizenship duties and the elimination of corruption. Section 15(5) directs the state to abolish corrupt practices

and abuse of power (Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999, s. 15). "At the regional level, the African Union Convention on Preventing and Combating Corruption commits states to preventive measures, transparency, accountability and cooperation against corruption" (African Union, 2003, art. 5).

Despite these frameworks, corruption persists. Laws alone cannot transform conduct where social norms reward dishonesty, enforcement is selective and elites can evade punishment. This is where religion becomes important. Religious communities can reinforce anti-corruption norms by shaping conscience before misconduct occurs, not merely supporting punishment after it is exposed.

Toward Religious Integrity: Recommendations

Moral Formation and Character Education

Religious institutions should make character formation central to religious education. Sermons, Sunday schools, Islamic schools, catechism classes, youth fellowships and religious media should teach practical ethics: honesty in examinations, fairness in employment, refusal of bribes, transparency in business, responsible voting and accountability in leadership.

Moral teaching should be concrete. It is insufficient to say "do not corrupt." Religious teachers should discuss realistic dilemmas: What should a job seeker do when asked for a bribe? How should a contractor respond to pressure to inflate a contract? How should a student respond to examination malpractice? How should a believer respond when a leader demands loyalty against justice?

Transparency within Religious Institutions

Religious organisations must practise what they preach. Churches, mosques and religious bodies should adopt transparent financial systems, publish annual reports where appropriate, establish independent audit mechanisms, regulate leadership compensation and create safe channels for reporting abuse.

A religious institution that demands accountability from government but hides its own finances weakens its moral authority. Transparency is not hostility to faith; it is faithfulness to stewardship.

Responsible Prosperity Teaching

Religious leaders should teach prosperity in ethical balance. Wealth may be a blessing, but it is also a responsibility. Religious teaching should emphasise honest work, modesty, generosity, justice and care for the poor. It should challenge the idea that wealth automatically proves divine favour or that poverty automatically proves spiritual failure.

Prosperity teaching becomes dangerous when it encourages believers to seek miracles while ignoring corruption, exploitation or injustice. A mature religious message should combine faith in God with ethical responsibility.

Civic Education and Voter Responsibility

Religious communities should promote civic responsibility. This includes educating members about their rights, encouraging peaceful participation in elections, rejecting vote-buying and holding elected officials accountable. Religious leaders should avoid partisan manipulation while still defending democratic values.

A believer who sells a vote contradicts the moral claim that leadership should serve the common good. Religious teaching should make clear that vote-buying is not merely political strategy; it is a form of corruption with long-term social consequences.

Protection for Whistleblowers and Victims

Religious communities should protect those who expose corruption, suffer exploitation or refuse dishonest demands. Whistleblowers, victims of extortion and citizens who resist bribery often face intimidation, job loss or social isolation. Religious institutions can offer moral support, counselling, legal guidance and public solidarity.

A religious community that abandons honest members when they suffer for integrity teaches followers that righteousness is costly and unsupported. A community that stands with them teaches that moral courage is valued.

Interfaith Cooperation

Christians, Muslims and adherents of African Traditional Religion should cooperate on shared ethical goals. Corruption is not a Christian problem or a Muslim problem; it is a Nigerian problem. Interfaith councils, joint public statements, shared civic education programmes and collaborative anti-corruption campaigns can strengthen moral consensus.

Interfaith cooperation should avoid superficial unity. It should focus on practical commitments: transparency, justice, peaceful elections, protection of the poor and accountability in public life.

Conclusion

The contradiction between religious profession and public conduct in Nigeria is real, but it is not inevitable. Nigeria's high religiosity demonstrates that religion remains a powerful source of meaning, identity and moral imagination. However, religiosity becomes socially transformative only when religious values are internalised, modelled by leaders and expressed in everyday conduct.

Corruption persists in Nigeria because it is sustained by institutions, incentives, social networks and moral rationalisations. Religious hypocrisy does not cause all corruption, but it helps normalise it by allowing individuals to maintain religious identities while participating in dishonest systems. Atoi *et al.* (2020) rightly argue that "Nigeria's problem is not lack of religion but the insufficient application of religious moral values to daily conduct" (p. 119). Onuorah (2022) similarly shows that "commercialisation, manipulation and hypocrisy within religion can undermine the moral role religion ought to play in society" (para. 1).

The way forward requires a deeper conversion of religious practice into public ethics. Religious communities must teach integrity as worship, transparency as stewardship, justice as devotion and accountability as spiritual duty. Political leaders, businesspeople, civil servants, religious leaders and ordinary citizens must recognise that corruption is not merely a legal offence; it is a betrayal of trust before God and society.

Nigeria does not need less religion; it needs more truthful, humble, accountable and socially responsible religion. When religious profession aligns with public conduct, faith can become a powerful force for national renewal. Until then, the gap between the altar and the public office will continue to expose one of Nigeria's most painful moral contradictions.

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