SPIRITUALISING THE SECULAR: RELIGION AND ACCOUNTABILITY EVASION IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT: In Nigeria, political elites increasingly employ a mechanism termed "spiritualising the secular" to evade accountability. By framing governance failures—such as corruption, economic instability, and insecurity—as spiritual issues or divine will, state actors successfully shift responsibility away from institutional mismanagement. Utilizing Postcolonialism and Strategic Rhetoric/Framing theories, this study analyzes political discourse, public statements, and policy justifications. It examines the correlation between religious rhetoric and major governance crises through historical analysis and specific case studies. The research identifies specific mechanisms of evasion, including divine punishment framing and state-sponsored religious rituals. This instrumentalization of faith serves to pacify public discontent and delegitimize dissent. The findings reveal a destructive cycle where spiritualisation erodes institutional trust, deepens ethno-religious polarization, and entrenches political impunity. To restore democratic accountability, the article proposes a multi-pronged approach: enhancing civic education to foster critical thinking, facilitating interfaith dialogue for inclusive governance, and implementing legal reforms to protect secular boundaries. Addressing this metaphysical reframing of state failure is essential for advancing transparent, performance-based governance and ensuring long-term socio-political stability in Nigeria.

Keywords: Spiritualising the Secular, Accountability Evasion, Postcolonialism, Strategic Rhetoric, Governance Failures

INTRODUCTION

In February 2024, as Nigeria reeled from soaring inflation and widespread protests over economic hardship, the nation's First Lady, Senator Oluremi Tinubu, urged citizens that the solution was not to criticise the government but to "look unto God" for help (Vanguard News, 2024). This call for divine intervention was not an isolated incident. Just over a year later, in June 2025, as the country grappled with its worst economic crisis in decades, the Ministry of Agriculture directed its staff to observe three days of fasting and prayer to "achieve food security" (BBC, 2025). These episodes are stark illustrations of a pervasive feature of Nigerian public life: the routine substitution of religious appeals for concrete governance. When faced with systemic failures ranging from infrastructural decay and rampant corruption to violent insecurity, the political class frequently frames these secular problems as spiritual battles, thereby shifting the burden of responsibility from state actors to a divine entity and the piety of the citizenry.

This strategic deflection constitutes a significant research problem. The consistent and deliberate framing of governance failures in religious terms creates a political culture where public officials are shielded from scrutiny and accountability. By attributing economic collapse, security lapses, or public health crises to "God's will" or the nation's collective sin, leaders effectively depoliticize issues that are the direct consequence of policy failure, corruption, or state incapacity (Obadare, 2018). This phenomenon obstructs the development of a civic culture where citizens demand performance-based legitimacy from their leaders, instead fostering a sense of political helplessness that can only be resolved through metaphysical, rather than

political, action. The result is a populace conditioned to pray for solutions that elected officials are mandated and paid to provide, creating a dangerous cycle of inaction and impunity (Ukah, 2020).

This article argues that the Nigerian political elite strategically employs religious rhetoric and symbolism to "spiritualise" secular governance failures, thereby evading public accountability, entrenching impunity, and hindering socio-political development. By analysing political discourse, policy justifications, and public statements from key officials, this study will demonstrate that this instrumentalization of religion is not merely a reflection of a pious society but a calculated political tool. It serves to pacify the public, delegitimize dissent, and ultimately perpetuate the very conditions of underdevelopment that necessitate accountability in the first place.

The article will employ Postcolonialism theory and Strategic Rhetoric/Framing theory. Postcolonial theory is essential to this analysis for understanding the unique Nigerian (and broader African) context and for explaining how current power structures and state-religion dynamics are not inherent but a legacy of colonialism. While strategic rhetoric/framing theory moves from the historical context to the precise mechanism of action, providing the analytical tools to dissect how politicians use language to shape public perception and evade accountability. By synthesizing these perspectives, this article aims to expose the instrumentalization of religion in Nigeria's governance and suggest actionable solutions for meaningful change.

Methodologically, this study is rooted in a qualitative, interpretive research design that prioritizes Strategic Framing Analysis. Rather than viewing language as a neutral medium, this approach treats it as a tool for constructing reality, specifically focusing on how political elites deploy rhetorical devices to redirect accountability from secular governance to the spiritual realm. By examining these communicative strategies, the research aims to uncover the systematic patterns used to bypass democratic oversight.

The data selection process relies on purposively sampled political discourses and public statements sourced from a variety of authoritative archives. This includes official state communications, such as public addresses and policy justifications from the Presidency and Federal Ministries, alongside reports from credible news outlets like the BBC and Premium Times. To ensure the findings are grounded in objective reality, these statements are cross-referenced with institutional reports from organizations like Transparency International and Afrobarometer, which provide the necessary context regarding the governance failures being discussed.

This study adopts a longitudinal perspective spanning 2010 to 2025. By covering the administrations of Goodluck Jonathan, Muhammadu Buhari, and Bola Tinubu, the study observes how "spiritualisation" persists as a political tactic regardless of party affiliation or the leader's specific religious background. To maintain a rigorous focus, data were selected based on three specific benchmarks: the presence of a documented governance crisis, the explicit use of metaphysical attribution to explain secular problems, and the involvement of high-level state actors or influential religious advisors.

The analytical process moves through three distinct phases to ensure the findings are both systematic and theoretically grounded. Initially, collected statements are coded into recurring motifs, such as "Divine Punishment" or "Collective Sin." These themes are then mapped against

specific socio-economic failures to determine how the framing functions as a tool for avoiding accountability. Finally, the research utilises theoretical triangulation—viewing these frames through the lenses of Post-colonialism and Strategic Rhetoric—to connect historical legacies with contemporary communicative intent, ensuring the study moves beyond mere anecdote to reveal a consistent pattern of political behaviour.

Conceptual Review

Spiritualising the Secular

"Spiritualising the secular" is the deliberate rhetorical process of framing tangible, worldly problems in metaphysical or religious terms. It involves the consistent and strategic use of religious language, symbols, and concepts to explain events that would otherwise be attributed to human action, policy decisions, or systemic failures. In the Nigerian context, this is not simply a reflection of the populace's high religiosity but a calculated political communication strategy used by the elite to manage public discontent and evade technical or political accountability (Obadare, 2018; Afolayan, 2013). The mechanism operates by shifting the cause of a problem from the observable (e.g., failed economic policy) to the unobservable (e.g., "God's mysterious ways" or demonic opposition).

This reframing is often achieved through two primary means: rhetorical framing and symbolic acts. These processes effectively create a public discourse in which complex socioeconomic and political problems are reduced to a cosmic struggle between good and evil, thereby demanding prayer as the primary civic duty rather than political protest or calls for policy change.

Escape from Accountability

The primary function of spiritualising secular issues is to facilitate an escape from accountability. Accountability in a democratic context requires that public officials are answerable for their actions and performance, with mechanisms for sanctioning failure (e.g., removal from office through elections) (Chimaobi & Musa, 2024). By spiritualising a problem, political elites fundamentally alter the terms of accountability (Akpanika, 2017). If the root cause of a nation's economic hardship is its collective sinfulness rather than fiscal mismanagement, then the finance minister, the central bank governor, or even the president cannot logically be held responsible (Sahara Reporters, 2020; Within Nigeria, 2024). This evasion mechanism operates on several levels, including: shifting the locus of responsibility, delegitimizing dissent, and lowering performance expectations.

Governance Failures

"Governance failures" are the specific, tangible crises from which political actors seek to escape accountability through spiritualisation. These are not abstract concepts but the lived realities of citizens. In Nigeria, these failures are chronic and span multiple sectors, including economic mismanagement, insecurity, corruption, and infrastructure decay. In each case, the act of "spiritualising" these failures serves as a powerful discursive tool for managing public anger and perpetuating a system in which performance is not the primary basis of political legitimacy.

LITERATURE AND THEORETICAL REVIEW

Current scholarship on Nigerian governance and religion primarily focuses on the high religiosity of the populace or the general role of faith in the public sphere. While authors like Obadare (2018) and Ukah (2020) have established that religion is a potent political tool, much of the existing literature remains descriptive, documenting that religion and politics intersect without fully dissecting the strategic rhetorical architecture used to dismantle accountability. This study moves beyond descriptive summaries to analyse the specific mechanisms of "spiritualisation" as a deliberate technology of governance.

Postcolonial theory is an interdisciplinary framework that examines the cultural, political, and economic legacies of colonialism and imperialism, particularly how these legacies continue to shape colonized societies in the contemporary world. Emerging prominently in the late 20th century, it critiques the power imbalances between colonisers and the colonised, focusing on issues such as identity, representation, and resistance. Drawing from literary criticism, history, and social sciences, the theory analyses how colonial discourses persist in neocolonial forms, influencing global inequalities and cultural hybridity (Said, 1978; Ashcroft et al., 2006; Loomba, 2015).

Empirically, postcolonial studies often rely on case studies from regions like Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean to illustrate ongoing effects of colonial rule, such as economic dependency and cultural erasure (Rodney, 1972; Ngũgĩ, 1986; Fanon, 1963).

Postcolonial theory rests on several core assumptions. First, it posits that colonialism was not merely a political or economic enterprise but a cultural one that imposed Western epistemologies, languages, and identities on colonized peoples, creating lasting hierarchies (Said, 1978; Ngũgĩ, 1986). Second, it assumes that decolonization is incomplete, with neocolonialism perpetuating exploitation through global capitalism and institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank (Nkrumah, 1965). Third, concepts like "othering" and hybridity underscore how colonized subjects are constructed as inferior, yet resistance emerges through cultural blending and subversion (Bhabha, 1994; Said, 1978). Finally, it assumes that knowledge production is inherently biased toward Western perspectives, marginalizing indigenous voices and histories (Spivak, 1988; Tuhiwai Smith, 2021).

One major strength of postcolonial theory is its ability to challenge dominant power structures and highlight marginalized narratives, fostering a more inclusive understanding of global history and culture (Said, 1978). It provides critical tools for analysing identity formation in multicultural societies, promoting empathy and resistance against ongoing imperialism (Bhabha, 1994). Empirically, it has influenced fields like education and policy by encouraging the decolonization of curricula and institutions, as seen in movements across Africa and Latin America (Ngũgĩ, 1986; Tuhiwai Smith, 2021). Additionally, its interdisciplinary nature allows for robust critiques of globalisation, revealing how cultural imperialism sustains economic disparities (Young, 2003).

Critics, however, argue that postcolonial theory often overemphasizes cultural and discursive elements at the expense of material and economic analyses, potentially romanticizing pre-colonial pasts or ignoring class struggles (Ahmad, 1992). It has also been accused of elitism and theoretical obscurity, as many of its leading theorists are based in Western academia and use jargon that may limit its accessibility and relevance to grassroots movements (Dirlik, 1994). Empirically, its abstract concepts, such as hybridity, can be difficult to operationalize for concrete policy or quantitative research, leading to vague applications (Chibber, 2013). Furthermore, some critics suggest it can homogenize diverse colonial experiences, overlooking significant variations between the practices of British, French, Portuguese, and other empires (Loomba, 2015).

Postcolonial theory can be applied to analyse how Nigerian political elites "spiritualise" secular governance failures, such as economic crises or corruption, by invoking religion to evade accountability, viewing this as a legacy of colonial strategies that manipulated religious identities for control. In Nigeria, colonial divide-and-rule policies exacerbated ethno-religious divisions, which postcolonial leaders inherited and exploited, using faith-based rhetoric to deflect blame from systemic issues rooted in neocolonial dependency (Obikaeze, 2023; Animashaun, 2009). For instance, attributing hardships to "divine will" or collective sin mirrors colonial representations of Africans as spiritually primitive, perpetuating epistemic violence by prioritizing metaphysical explanations over material accountability mechanism such as transparent elections or audits (Mamdani, 1996; Fanon, 1963).

This application highlights hybridity, where indigenous religions blend with imposed Christianity and Islam to form tools of governance, entrenching impunity and hindering development (Sen, 2013). Empirically, studies show this in post-independence Nigeria, where religious identity serves as a political bargaining tool, masking failures in sectors such as education and infrastructure inherited from colonial underdevelopment (Nnonyelu, 2013; Obikaeze, 2023). Postcolonial critique thus reveals how such spiritualisation sustains neocolonial power structures, calling for decolonizing governance through secular accountability and the integration of indigenous knowledge (Yagboyaju, 2019).

Strategic rhetoric and framing theory, on the other hand, are interconnected frameworks in communication and political science that explore how messages are constructed and presented to shape perceptions, influence decision-making, and guide audience interpretations of issues.

Framing theory, originating from sociology and psychology, posits that frames (organisational structures for meaning) act as cognitive shortcuts, emphasizing certain aspects of reality while omitting others to promote specific problem definitions, causal interpretations, moral evaluations, or solutions (Goffman, 1974; Bateson, 1972). When applied strategically, framing becomes a rhetorical tool in public relations, politics, and media, where communicators deliberately select and make salient attributes to achieve persuasive goals, such as mobilizing support or deflecting criticism (Entman, 1993; Hallahan, 2008).

Empirically, the theory has been tested through content analyses, experiments, and surveys, demonstrating its effects on public opinion across domains like policy debates and crisis management (Chong & Druckman, 2007). Framing theory assumes that reality is multifaceted, and frames organise it by promoting certain interpretations over others, influencing how individuals process information through salience and selection (Entman, 1993; Goffman, 1974). It posits that attitudes form via an expectancy-value model, where frames alter the weight of considerations, making some beliefs more accessible or applicable (Chong & Druckman, 2007). Strategically, it assumes communicators act as frame sponsors, using rhetoric to define situations, attributes, choices, actions, issues, responsibility, or news in ways that align with goals (Hallahan, 2008). Frames are culturally resonant and can be competitive, with effects moderated by audience knowledge and context (Scheufele, 1999).

A key strength of the theory is its interdisciplinary applicability, bridging psychology, media studies, and politics to explain message effects on behaviour and opinion (Chong & Druckman, 2007). It also provides robust tools for analysing strategic communication, such as in public relations, where frames enhance persuasion and agenda-building (Hallahan, 2008). Empirically, it has demonstrated predictive power in experiments showing framing's influence on policy support, like welfare reform (Chong & Druckman, 2007). It also highlights deliberation's role in mitigating manipulation, fostering more informed publics (Scheufele, 1999).

Critics, however, note the theory's conceptual fragmentation, with inconsistent definitions across disciplines leading to measurement challenges (D'Angelo, 2002). Again, its effects may be short-lived or context-dependent, overemphasizing elite influence while underplaying audience agency (Tewksbury, 2003). In strategic applications, it raises ethical concerns like manipulation, and its abstract nature complicates operationalization in research (Scheufele, 1999). Finally, its overlap with concepts like priming and persuasion blurs boundaries (Chong & Druckman, 2007).

Framing theory applies to how Nigerian elites "spiritualise" secular failures such as economic mismanagement or corruption by rhetorically framing them as divine will or collective sin, shifting responsibility and evading accountability. In politics, leaders use responsibility and morality frames to attribute governance issues to spiritual causes, deflecting blame from systemic flaws to metaphysical ones, as seen in media coverage of crises like farmer-herder conflicts (Obikaeze, 2023). This strategic rhetoric exploits religious identities, framing secular problems through conflict or consequence lenses to mobilize support along ethno-religious lines, entrenching impunity.

Empirically, Nigerian media often amplify such frames, disconnecting from ethical journalism by escalating tensions rather than promoting accountability, as in election coverage or religious clashes (Nnonyelu, 2013). This application reveals how framing sustains governance failures by constructing narratives that prioritize religious discourse over transparent policy solutions.

Nigeria's Unique Model of Secularism and its Postcolonial Context

Nigeria's relationship with secularism is defined by a foundational paradox. Section 10 of the 1999 Constitution explicitly states, "The Government of the Federation or of a State shall not adopt any Religion as State Religion" (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999). However, this prohibition does not equate to a strict separation of religion and state, as seen in France (laïcité) or the United States. Instead, Nigeria practices a model of "accommodating" or "procedural" secularism, where the state avoids adopting a single religion but actively engages with and patronizes multiple religions, primarily Christianity and Islam (Ilesanmi, 2001).

Empirical evidence of state-religion entanglement includes: State-funded pilgrimages where federal and state governments annually allocate public funds to sponsor Christian and Muslim pilgrimages to Jerusalem and Mecca, respectively (Suberu & Diamond, 2002). Public religiosity, where government functions, from local council meetings to presidential addresses, routinely begin with Christian and Islamic prayers. Public officials often display their faith to build political capital and institutional entanglement, where the state collaborates with religious bodies such as the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA) and the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) for political mediation and social mobilisation (Obadare, 2018), which is common. This framework does not erect a wall between religion and politics but creates a permeable membrane, positioning the state as a neutral arbiter and patron of faiths. This structure allows political actors to leverage religious capital for secular political objectives (Ilesanmi, 2001).

Postcolonial theory provides a critical lens for understanding the persistence of religion in Nigerian public life. The modern Nigerian state inherited a colonial framework that instrumentalized religion for administrative control (Falola, 2009). In northern Nigeria, the British policy of "Indirect Rule" empowered existing Islamic Emirates, fusing religious and political authority and legitimizing emirs within the colonial structure (Mamdani, 1996). In southern Nigeria, Christian missionaries pioneered Western education and healthcare, creating an elite whose social and political standing was tied to their Christian faith and education. The church became a parallel institution of social governance (Olupona, 1993).

The colonial state was multi-religious and pragmatic, co-opting religious structures to achieve its aims. Post-independence, political elites continued to view religious leaders as stakeholders representing powerful constituencies, thereby ensuring that religion remained a primary field of political contestation and mobilization (Falola, 2009). The politicisation of religion in this context has enabled elites to use religious identity for political bargaining and to shield themselves from accountability, often framing secularism as hostile to religious values to degrade its legitimacy (Okoronkwo et al. 2025).

Specific Rhetorical and Practical Mechanisms used by Nigerian Political Actors to Spiritualise Secular Governance Failures

Nigeria's political landscape is characterized by the strategic intertwining of religion and governance, where political elites routinely frame secular governance failures as spiritual phenomena. This phenomenon is rooted in Nigeria's postcolonial history of religious diversity (with a near-even split between Christians and Muslims, Pew Research Centre, 2015), which elites exploit to shift focus from human agency to divine or communal spiritual failings, thereby perpetuating impunity and hindering democratic progress (Obadare, 2018; Ukah, 2014; Yagboyaju, 2017).

This empirical review synthesizes scholarly analyses, media reports, and empirical data to examine the specific rhetorical and practical mechanisms employed by these actors to deflect blame and evade responsibility for systemic failures in economic management, corruption, insecurity, and infrastructural decay. The analysis demonstrates how these mechanisms perpetuate governance deficits by redefining policy failures as spiritual faults, thereby obstructing democratic accountability and perpetuating impunity.

Rhetorical Mechanisms

Divine Punishment Framing: Political actors frequently attribute national crises to "collective sins" or divine retribution, thereby absolving leaders of material accountability. This rhetoric was prominent during economic hardship under President Muhammadu Buhari (2015–2023), where officials framed poverty and underdevelopment as divine punishment for societal moral decay rather than policy failure. This framing is a strategic tool for elite power maintenance, a mechanism where leaders deploy religious narratives to reposition corruption and incompetence as symptoms of a societal spiritual crisis, thereby deflecting blame from themselves (Ilesanmi, 2001; Obadare, 2018). This rhetoric resonates with the public; data from the Afrobarometer Round 7 survey shows that a significant portion of the Nigerian population attributes national problems to spiritual or divine causes, a belief influenced by elite political discourse (Afrobarometer, 2019).

Ethno-Religious Polarisation: Leaders weaponised religious identity to deflect blame for governance failures onto rival groups. Content analyses of farmer-herder conflict coverage reveal systematic framing of these disputes as "Christian vs. Muslim wars," despite evidence of economic and ecological root causes such as land scarcity and climate change. The International Crisis Group (2018) has documented how politicians in states like Plateau and Kaduna deliberately amplify religious narratives to obscure failures in security policy and resource management. This strategy is further reinforced during elections, where candidates invoke "God's will" to spiritualise electoral outcomes and delegitimize opposition as "unholy" (Ukah, 2014; Yagboyaju, 2017).

Religious Fatalism and Supernatural Causality: Political discourse routinely employs phrases like "only God can solve this" to justify inaction on secular crises. During terrorist attacks by Boko Haram, for instance, officials have attributed security failures to divine inscrutability rather than intelligence gaps or institutional weakness. This rhetoric is a core aspect of how Nigerian elites frame crises, redirecting accountability away

from the state and toward supernatural causality (Ukah, 2014; Yagboyaju, 2017). This fatalism erodes institutional trust: public opinion surveys consistently show that Nigerians have very low trust in government institutions to address major problems like corruption and insecurity, a sentiment that aligns with the widespread belief that these issues have spiritual causes beyond human control (Afrobarometer, 2019).

Practical Mechanisms

State-Sponsored Religious Rituals: Governments institutionalize spiritual responses to secular crises through official prayer sessions and fasting directives. During the 2020 food insecurity crisis, documented examples show state governments mandating nationwide prayers and fasting instead of implementing agricultural reforms. For example, the Kano State government organized a "National Day of Prayer and Fasting" for economic revival, a move that critics argued diverted attention from subsidies mismanagement and failed crop policies (Ajayi, 2021). The political use of religious rituals and symbols to manage material crises is a well-documented practice that substitutes divine intervention for evidence-based policy, normalizing spiritual solutions for material problems (Obadare, 2018).

Clergy-Politician Alliances ("Religious Cartels"): Politicians cultivate relationships with religious leaders to shield themselves from scrutiny. In Northern Nigeria, governors fund mosques and Islamic schools in exchange for clerical endorsements that spiritualise governance failures. Scholars have documented these "religious cartels," where religious leaders justify corruption by framing it as a divine matter and condemning critics as "enemies of God," effectively silencing dissent (Obadare, 2018). Similarly, in the 2019 presidential election, political parties partnered with Muslim and Christian clerics to frame opposition figures as "satanic forces," easing accountability for electoral malpractices (Human Rights Watch, 2019). These alliances institutionalize religious legitimation of corruption, with public opinion surveys reflecting a widespread belief that religious leaders are important moral guides, even amid perceptions of widespread corruption (Afrobarometer, 2019).

Legal Manipulation of Hybrid Secularism: Nigeria's constitutional secularism is subverted through the instrumentalization of Sharia and customary law to bypass secular accountability mechanisms. In states implementing Sharia, leaders exploit religious courts to dismiss corruption audits as "un-Islamic," while invoking "national unity" to evade responsibility for religiously driven violence. The International Crisis Group (2018) has found that the political use of religion in these conflicts often masks underlying failures in security and resource management, thereby hindering accountability. This hybridity enables prebendalism treating public offices as religious spoils where graft is framed as "God's providence," a phenomenon rooted in Nigeria's post-colonial political culture (Joseph, 1987).

Spiritual Warfare Rhetoric Against Dissent: Political actors deploy "spiritual warfare" narratives to delegitimize critics as supernatural adversaries. During the 2020 #EndSARS protests against police brutality, the federal government accused demonstrators of being "agents of the devil," while some religious leaders jointly labelled activists "anti-God" (Premium Times, 2020). Human Rights Watch (2020) documented numerous cases where security forces used religiously charged language to justify violence against protesters, framing criticism as "spiritual rebellion" and transforming political dissent into blasphemy to protect leaders from accountability.

Nigerian political actors systematically use rhetorical and practical mechanisms to spiritualise secular governance failures, reframing human agency as divine or communal fault. Rooted in Nigeria's religious pluralism and institutionalized through alliances, ritualization, and legal manipulation, these strategies perpetuate impunity by diverting attention from policy failures to metaphysical explanations. Empirical data

from Afrobarometer (2019) and the International Crisis Group (2018) confirm that this dynamic correlates with declining trust in democratic institutions and entrenched corruption.

Extent of the Use of Religious Discourse Correlating with Major Governance Failures

In recent Nigerian political history (roughly 2010–2025), religious discourse has been extensively employed by political actors to correlate with, deflect from, or legitimize governance failures and corruption scandals (Yagboyaju, 2017; Obadare, 2018; Ukah, 2014). Empirical studies, including qualitative analyses of political rhetoric, media content, and historical case studies, reveal a high degree of correlation, where religion serves as a tool for evading accountability, mobilizing sectarian support, and masking systemic issues like embezzlement, electoral fraud, and policy inaction (Ilesanmi, 2001; Obadare, 2018; Yagboyaju, 2017).

Surveys and deconstructive analyses confirm that the Nigerian public perceives corruption as deeply intertwined with the country's social fabric and, paradoxically, its religious life (Chatham House, 2021). While religious leaders are generally more trusted than politicians, a significant portion of the public, over one-quarter (26-30%) still perceives religious leaders themselves as corrupt (Afrobarometer, 2020; 2024). Moreover, studies indicate that a notable percentage of citizens (20% in one survey) consider it acceptable for officials to misappropriate public funds if the money is used for their religious community's benefit (Chatham House, 2021). This complicity by certain religious leaders in endorsing corrupt regimes and the subsequent erosion of public trust are major factors in perpetuating impunity (Obadare, 2018).

Empirical research further demonstrates a strong correlation between religious discourse and corruption, with numerous qualitative and deconstructive studies showing that Nigerian politicians strategically invoke faith-based narratives to shift blame for personal or institutional failures to divine will, the work of 'enemies,' or a general sense of collective moral decay (Obadare, 2018; Uche, 2017). This strategic use of religion, often by highly visible Pentecostal or Islamic figures, serves as a powerful smoke-screen for material corruption by reframing systemic failure as spiritual warfare (Obadare, 2018), thereby undermining secular accountability mechanisms and protecting the political elite (Yagboyaju, 2017). For instance, the Chatham House survey under the Social Norms and Accountable Governance (SNAG) project (published in 2021 and based on 2018 data) found that religious norms significantly influence corruption perceptions. The research noted that, despite general opposition to corruption, 20% of respondents found it acceptable for officials to misappropriate public funds if the funds were used for their religious community's benefit (Chatham House, 2021). This finding underpins the claim that anti-corruption efforts are often complicated by the reality that, while many Nigerians view religious leaders as moral authorities, those same leaders are sometimes seen as having alliances with corrupt elites, thereby limiting the effectiveness of faith-based interventions (Chatham House, 2021).

Some key examples from recent Nigerian history include:

i. Goodluck Jonathan Administration (2010-2015) and Divine Anointment Rhetoric: During the 2011 elections, President Jonathan was widely portrayed as "divinely anointed," including public endorsements from high-profile Christian leaders like Pastor Enoch Adeboye of the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) (Adelakun, 2020). This discourse coincided with governance failures, such as the major oil revenue misappropriation scandal publicly estimated by figures like the then CBN Governor at approximately $20 billion (ThisDay Live, 2014), where religious allies like Pastor Ayo Oritsejafor, as President of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), often defended Jonathan (Egbefo, 2015). Empirical case studies show that this rhetoric served to deflect blame by framing criticism as an attack on "God's anointed" rather than a matter of accountability,

thereby helping insulate the administration from sustained public pressure (Adelakun, 2020; Obadare, 2018).

ii.   Arms Procurement Scandal (2014-2015) Involving Religious Figures: The high-profile "Dasukigate" scandal, involving the alleged misappropriation of $2.1 billion meant for anti-Boko Haram arms (Udeaja, 2018), directly implicated religious figures when Pastor Oritsejafor's private jet was seized for illegally transporting $9.3 million in cash to South Africa (Premium Times, 2014). As CAN president, Oritsejafor publicly denied any personal knowledge or involvement, claiming the jet was leased and suggesting "enemies of Christians" were fueling division (Vanguard, 2014). This use of religious solidarity to dismiss allegations correlated with broader governance failures in national security and corruption (Udeaja, 2018).

iii. Muhammadu Buhari Administration (2015-2023) and Silence of Religious Endorsers: Muhammadu Buhari's 2015 victory was widely hailed as "God's will" by religious leaders across faiths (Adelakun, 2020). However, amid major scandals like the alleged $25 billion NNPC contract fraud (2017) and an economic recession, many prominent religious figures, who had served as high-profile endorsers, either remained silent or attributed the nation's failures to "divine testing." Transparency International data confirms Nigeria's score on the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) dropped to 24/100 by 2022 (Transparency International, 2023), with analysts arguing that such religious endorsements often provide a crucial shield that enables an administration to evade critical scrutiny (Obadare, 2018).

iv.   Bola Tinubu's selection of Kashim Shettima as running mate in the 2023 presidential election deviated from Nigeria's unwritten religious balancing norms, leading to widespread controversy and strong opposition from Christian religious leaders (Chigbu et al., 2024; Hassan, 2023). This decision was met with rhetoric, particularly from proponents, that framed the ticket as a necessary, politically expedient choice or even a "divine strategy" (Igboin, 2023; Akpe et al., 2024). This religious discourse was deployed despite lingering corruption allegations against Tinubu from his Lagos governorship era (1999-2007), notably concerning the Alpha Beta Consulting tax contract (Africa Confidential, 2025; ICIR Nigeria, 2020). Content analyses of the campaign revealed that politicians strategically incorporated religious sentiments and emotional appeals to mobilize supporters and counter opposition (Adebayo, 2025). This tactic of deploying religious rhetoric to deflect from governance critiques and political controversies persisted into the post-election period, notably during crises such as the contentious fuel subsidy removal.

v.   Prosperity Gospel and Church Leader Complicity (2010s-2020s): Prominent Pentecostal preachers, like David Oyedepo and Enoch Adeboye, have often criticised political corruption while amassing substantial wealth, a dichotomy that links the theology of the prosperity gospel to governance failures in poverty alleviation (Olupona, 2018). This correlation is reinforced by documented cases where churches and religious figures have received significant donations, sometimes framed as "tithes," from individuals later implicated in major corruption scandals (e.g., the EFCC's investigation into funds allegedly disbursed by Diezani Alison-Madueke, in 2015) (Udeaja, 2018).

Impact of "Spiritualisation" of Governance on the Quality of Democratic Discourse and Public Trust in Nigeria

The strategic invocation of religious rhetoric to address secular policy failures has emerged as a prominent feature of the Nigerian political landscape. This "spiritualisation of governance" involves the intentional blurring of lines between religion and state affairs in a constitutionally secular republic to deflect political accountability (Obadare, 2018). While Nigeria's religious pluralism—marked by a near-even split between Christianity and Islam—offers a potential foundation for ethical governance, this potential is frequently subverted by elite exploitation for political gain.

Data from Afrobarometer (2024) reveals a profound "Trust Gap" in Nigeria: religious leaders command a 60% trust rating, while secular institutions languish at 27% for the Presidency and 19% for the National Assembly. This trust, however, is sect-dependent, with 77% of Muslims expressing confidence in religious institutions compared to 47% of Christians.

This disparity informs corruption perceptions. While approximately 62% to 65% of the public view the Presidency and Parliament as corrupt, only 26% hold similar views regarding religious leaders. Despite this high institutional religiosity and the fact that 70% of the population practices their faith multiple times a week, Nigeria continues to struggle with systemic graft. The 2024 Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) ranks Nigeria 140th out of 180 countries, with a marginal score of 26/100 (Transparency International, 2025).

Spiritualisation also manifests through "policy displacement" and social "othering." Roughly 11% of citizens report frequent unfair treatment by the government based on religion, while 34% perceive their group as being treated unfairly at least "sometimes" (Afrobarometer, 2024). In practical terms, state governments in regions like Kano or Zamfara have been documented substituting technical policy—such as economic and security reform—with spiritual mandates like "National Days of Prayer" or the expansion of Sharia law to bypass secular audit mechanisms (THISDAY, 2025; Ostien, & Mustapha, 2018).

Furthermore, content analyses of the 2015 and 2023 election cycles show that "God's will" and "prophetic" rhetoric dominated media discourse, particularly regarding the controversial "Muslim-Muslim ticket," which correlated with heightened sectarian tensions (Igboin, 2023).

The empirical findings suggest that spiritualisation is not merely a cultural by product but a deliberate political technology used for elite preservation.

The interpretation of the "Trust Gap" suggests that political elites "outsource" their legitimacy. By leveraging the 60% trust rating of religious leaders, politicians frame economic hardship as "divine testing" rather than policy failure. This shifts the burden of proof from the state's effectiveness to the citizenry's moral standing, effectively neutralizing secular criticism and redirecting accountability toward the supernatural (Obadare, 2018).

The use of Sharia implementation and "divine strategy" rhetoric suggests that Section 10 of the 1999 Constitution—mandating a secular state—has become a "hollow mandate." This "hybrid secularism" allows leaders to treat public office as "religious spoils," a phenomenon that extends Joseph's (1987) theory of Prebendalism. In this context, graft is reframed as "providence," and institutional oversight is dismissed as a spiritual attack on the faith community.

The institutionalisation of these mechanisms has profound negative consequences for the quality of democratic discourse and public trust.

i. Erosion of Public Trust

Spiritualisation erodes trust by substituting metaphysical explanations for transparent accountability. This disconnect between pervasive religiosity and persistent corruption (as seen in the 2024 CPI scores) creates a perception of government as fundamentally unaccountable. The problem is compounded by low inter-religious trust—recorded at only 51% overall, with Christians (37%) being significantly less trusting than Muslims (70%) (Afrobarometer, 2024).

ii. Entrenchment of Political Impunity

By framing failures as divine lapses, elites are shielded from material sanctions. This weaponisation of religion and ethnicity leads to exclusion and marginalization, enabling the embezzlement of funds meant for development projects (Olumide, 2022). Historical cases illustrate how invoking "God's will" in elections or using religious courts to dismiss corruption audits violates constitutional mandates and promotes a "herd mentality" where religious leaders overlook corruption in exchange for political influence.

iii. Degradation of Democratic Discourse

Finally, spiritualisation degrades discourse by polarising debates along religious lines and suppressing rational policy engagement (Ukah, 2025). The focus on faith-based identities during the 2023 election fuelled division and heightened tensions. In this pluralistic setting, "othering" becomes a dominant theme, with 34% of Nigerians believing the government should regulate worship-place discourse for security purposes. This reflects a tension that stifles inclusive dialogue and transforms political dissent into a form of blasphemy.

Conclusion and Recommended Pathways to Secular Accountability

This study has examined the strategic "spiritualisation" of secular governance in Nigeria, demonstrating how political elites employ religious rhetoric to bypass institutional accountability. By framing policy failures—ranging from economic instability to systemic insecurity—as metaphysical trials or divine retribution, state actors successfully depoliticize secular crises and pacify public discontent. Through the dual lenses of postcolonialism and strategic framing, the research highlights that this phenomenon is not merely a by-product of a naturally pious society, but a deliberate communicative technology that entrenches political impunity and erodes trust in democratic institutions. Addressing this metaphysical reframing of state failure is not an attack on faith, but a necessary step toward ensuring that Nigerian governance remains transparent, measurable, and answerable to the citizens it serves.

While this research provides a detailed mapping of the rhetorical mechanisms of evasion, its scope is primarily qualitative and discourse-based. The analysis focuses on the intentionality behind the public statements of elites and the framing of media-reported crises. Consequently, this study does not claim to quantify the precise degree to which religious rhetoric shifts voter behaviour, nor does it account for the private, non-discursive motivations of the actors involved. Furthermore, while the study captures a wide temporal range (2010–2025), its findings are specific to the Nigerian socio-political landscape and may require significant adaptation if applied to other multi-religious postcolonial contexts.

Based on the identified patterns of accountability evasion, the following measures are proposed to reinforce secular governance and mitigate the instrumentalization of faith.

i. Enhanced Education and Critical Civic Engagement

Education serves as the foundational tool for fostering the critical thinking necessary to dismantle deceptive political frames. Empirical data in Nigeria indicates that expanded primary education

increases pro-democratic engagement, with a one-year increase in schooling boosting voter turnout and political discussion by 3% (Larreguy & Marshall, 2017).

Crucially, civic education must be decolonized to reveal how religious and political structures can be co-opted by imperial interests. History demonstrates that nothing—including religion—is off-limits for geopolitical interests seeking to maintain subjugation through local proxies. Similar to documented historical interventions in South America, the Middle East, and across Africa, local elites often use "divine frames" to mask material exploitation. To counter this:

Curriculum Reform: Mandatory modules on interfaith ethics and secular governance should be implemented. Research shows such interventions make participants 25% more likely to prioritize policy over religious identity (Wilson Center, 2022).

Fostering Critical Literacy: Education must empower the masses to see through the deceptions of both local elites and external interests, shifting the focus from metaphysical "tests" to the demand for improved material conditions.

Global Best Practices: Nigeria should adopt "Open Classroom Climates" to protect minority viewpoints (Hess & McAvoy, 2015) and "Continuous Civic Competence Training" to move beyond single-event voter education (Katusiimeh, 2003).

ii. Legal and Institutional Reforms

To create structural barriers against spiritualised evasion, the operational independence of secular institutions must be guarded:

Secular Reporting Standards: Public communication policies should mandate that official responses to crises prioritize technical data and policy milestones over prayer directives.

Institutional Independence: Bodies like the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) must be legally insulated to ensure audits cannot be delegitimized through religious optics (Onyema et al., 2018).

Financial Transparency: Greater transparency in political party financing is required to prevent the use of public funds to "purchase" religious endorsements (Olanrewaju, 2023).

iii. Interfaith Dialogue for Inclusive Accountability

Interfaith dialogue must move beyond symbolic gestures toward collective pressure for governance. Structured Christian-Muslim dialogues, as seen in Plateau State, have successfully created community-led accountability charters that prioritize secular solutions over religious arbitration (Kwaja, 2009). By mapping elite manipulations of faith, these forums can build intergroup social capital that prevents violence and focuses public discourse on resource allocation and transparent governance (Appleby, 2000; Hayward & Marshall, 2015).

iv. Establishment of Accountability Charters

Religious institutions should be encouraged to develop "Interfaith Accountability Charters." These codes would explicitly condemn the use of religious platforms to shield state actors from scrutiny, ensuring that religious morality is aligned with, rather than used to circumvent, legal compliance and integrity.

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