

## **Examining the Relationships between Religiosity, Spirituality, and Morality in a Nigerian Sample**

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### **Abstract**

Environmental pressure has led to wanton changes that have undermined traditional ethics and created an atmosphere of moral drift. The present study examined the relationships between religiosity, spirituality and morality in a Nigerian sample. One hundred and eighty five participants that took part in the study were sampled from across three religious organisations in Benue state, North-central, Nigeria. As expected, the results of the multiple regression analyses computed revealed that religiosity was not significantly related to morality, whilst spirituality was positively related with morality. The findings of the study portray most religious people in Nigeria as hypocritical because they seem not to match the faith they profess with appropriate actions expected of them. But those who reported high scores on daily spiritual experience are guided by their faith to do right. The findings of the study suggest that individuals may not be religious but sanctimonious, and fail to match words with actions, hence the pervasiveness of immoral behaviours that characterise the Nigerian society.

**Keywords:** religiosity, spirituality, morality, Nigerian sample

### **Introduction**

Whilst globalisation may have ushered in a certain kind of new order, in reality disorder and inequality prevails (Collins & Kakabadse, 2006). Also, Collins and Kakabadse stated that drastic changes in many societies have undermined traditional ethics and created an atmosphere of moral drift. As such, issues of corporate public sector and political scandals related to greed and corruption and in fact social malaise are commonplace. This is typical of Nigeria, where immoral behaviours seem to have been institutionalised. Immorality however, characterises the Nigerian society and when such conducts are unchecked in any society, trust, moral, flexibility, empowerment, creativity, and innovation are stifled; with their attendant consequences such as fear, anxiety, anger, immorality, retaliation and dishonesty (Gilbert & Tang, 1998; Mishra, Mishra, & Spreitzer, 2009). Pervasive immorality seems to have eliminated public trust in Nigeria.

The issues relating to morality have long been of interest to psychologists. Its root could be traced to the works of (Kohlberg, 1969) on moral development. More recently possible origins and neuropsychological bases of moral thinking have been credited to the works of (Hauser, 2006; Krebs, 2008). Kish-Gephart, Harrison and Trevino (2010) recently noted that for the past three decades researchers have been committed to fostering a better understanding of the factors that influence morality. Issues concerning factors that influence individuals' judgments of actions as good versus evil and right versus wrong have been fundamental, and emerged as viable areas of research (Pagano & DeBono, 2011). Despite this huge researchers' interest in morality little empirical studies has been conducted, and regardless of perceived widespread of immoral behaviour in Nigeria, researchers have profoundly neglected morality as a construct that merited investigation. The present study attempts to fill in this gap. This study is therefore unique in many respects. First, it is one of the responses to the call by Cochran, Wood, and Arneklev (1994) and Evans, Cullen, Dunaway, and Burton (1995) to empirically validate the assumption that religiosity and spirituality shields individuals from immoral conduct. Second, the large number of churches in Nigeria and the rate at which new ones grow is phenomenal and not tantamount with perceived high rate of immoral behaviour often reported against Nigerians. Third, previous studies focussed majorly on adolescents, in whom religiosity and spirituality are significantly under the direct influence of their parents (Stack & Kposowa, 2006); the present study examined the relationship between religiosity, spirituality and morality in adult population and in a country where majority of the people seem to be religious and spiritual and where morality is an aberration.

### *Religiosity and Spirituality*

One area that has attracted the interest of researchers in their effort to better understand ethical conduct is that of religion (Corner, 2009). Effort at trying to establish a linkage between religion and ethical conduct is understandable because all religions try to inculcate the values

and principles of moral goodness and individuals' free will to make choices between right and wrong or good and bad and the associated consequences for making any of the choices (Parboteeah, Hoegl, & Cullen, 2008). Religion has always played a significant role in the acquisition of knowledge, belief and value systems and the social normative system in many countries including Nigeria. However, religiosity and spirituality has been assumed to be protective factors against deviant behaviours, but this assumption has been diffused as spurious and requires empirical validation (Cochran et al., 1994; Evans et al., 1995).

Researchers (e.g., Hill et al., 2000) asserted that religiosity and spirituality are heavily intertwined and that they overlap significantly (Davis, Kerr, & Kurpius, 2003). These constructs are often used interchangeably albeit erroneously because they are distinct constructs (Mason, Deane, Kelly, & Crowe, 2009). The present researchers concur with Mason et al., that these two constructs though are related conceptually; theoretically they are distinct and have been defined differently and measured in different ways (e.g., Bert, 2011). Miller (1998) asserted that the purpose of most religions is to cultivate spirituality in its members, which causes an overlap between the concepts of spirituality and religiosity. Also individual attendance to church prayer may be an indicator of spirituality, and that prayer occurs within the context of religious services as part of religious beliefs, yet these explanations do not make religiosity and spirituality the same. According to Delaney, Miller, and Bisoño (2007) most people are characterized by elements of religiosity and spirituality, to varying degrees. Miller (1998) maintained that these two constructs are distinct constructs that can be studied separately.

However, many researchers have joined the crusade to establish a clear divide between religiosity and spirituality (e.g., Brady & Hapenny, 2010). Whilst religiosity is generally characterized by an involvement with a religious institution that contains prescribed theology and rituals (Seidlitz et al., 2002); spirituality is considered to be a predominantly individual

subjective experience with a higher power or sensing the mysteries of existence (Sussman, Nezami, & Mishra, 1997). Simply put, religiosity involves religious affiliation, participation, and association. Spirituality, on the other hand, is viewed from the perspective of the individual and their relationship to, connection with, and feelings about God or some higher power, and how this connection is related to an individual's search for self and meaning (Lesser, 2000). Mann, McKeown, Bacon, Vesselinov, and Bush (2007) asserted that:

“Spirituality pertains to one's sense of connection to a transcendent power or purpose, with or without conformity to a set of prescribed beliefs or practice. Religiosity pertains to one's involvement in a system of worship and doctrine that is shared within a group.” (p. 868).

Spirituality is conceptualized as the engagement with the sacred, whereas believers are united with the sacred and to each other through religiosity (Miller & Thoresen, 2003). Overall, definitions of religiosity focus on participant's engagement with an organized faith tradition, whereas spirituality tends to focus more on personal and private feelings and actions in relation to some transcendent entity (King & Boyatzis, 2004).

In Nigeria, these two constructs are clearly not the same for obvious reasons. The concepts of religiosity and spirituality seem to have been divorced from one another and are increasingly becoming more distinct since the emergence of the New Age spirituality often referred to as 'born again'. Besides, eclectic spiritualities are more common today as individuals choose from the doctrines, practices, and beliefs that suit their interests (Byfield & Byfield, 1998). Although the present researchers agree in part with Delaney and colleagues (2007) that these two constructs differ in varying degrees, they emphasize that these previous explanations do not make the two constructs the same because as Koenig (2001) stated, modernity has separated them and it is now possible to have two groups of religious and spiritual people. It is reasonable to anticipate that people may be both religious and spiritual or that they may be religious but not spiritual.

## *Religiosity and Morality*

Given the current geopolitical and social reality, it is of particular interest to investigate whether or not religiosity indeed serves as a protective factor for Nigerians. Although the situation at hand does not seem to suggest such relationship, but no empirical consideration has been given to religiosity as a protective garb on immoral or unethical behaviour among Nigerians. Religiosity may serve as a protective factor because of healthy interpersonal relationships through involvement in various religious activities. According to Erickson (1965), religious bodies and groups often share goals and similar experiences that foster support and a stable sense of companionship and belongingness through consistent rituals and interaction. Religion is very famous in inculcating standards to adherents by their religious leaders, and provides people with clear and explicit messages of socially approved behaviours. It appears to exert a significant deterrent effect on an individual's criminal and sexual behavior (Baier & Wright, 2001). The presence of trusting parishioners with similar beliefs and values and parents who help to nurture positive characteristics has been observed to function as a protective factor in the lives of many people (Busseri et al., 2006).

Researchers (e.g., Miller, 1998) have attempted to establish a link between religiosity and substance abuse and found a significant relationship between individuals with alcohol and drug problems and a current lack of religious affiliation or participation. Pullen, Modrcin-Talbott, West, and Muenchen (1999) found a similar relationship between church attendance, drug, and alcohol use in juveniles. Bazargan, Sherkat, and Bazargan (2004) found among several religious measures, that religious participation was related to not having used alcohol within six hours of admission and also with abstinence from alcohol use. Michalak, Trocki, and Bond (2007) found that drinking behaviours, especially total abstinence, were significantly correlated to measures of religiosity. Clark and Dawson (1996) found that religious individuals judged two ethically questionable scenarios to be less unethical than those who self-identified

themselves as non-religious. Parboteeah et al. (2008) found a significant relationship between religiosity and ethical behaviours. Conroy and Emerson (2004) found that participants who attended church more often were less likely to endorse seven of 25 ethically questionable business scenarios. Wong (2008) found that participants who described themselves as less religious indicated the ethically questionable scenarios were more acceptable in only six of the 25 scenarios. Longenecker et al. (2004) found that individuals who indicated that their religious interests were of “high importance” or “moderate importance” were significantly less accepting of eight of 16 ethically questionable scenarios than were those who indicated that their religious interests were of “low importance” or “no importance.”

From the foregoing, it could be pointed out that previous empirical research confirming a relationship between religiosity and ethical outcomes yielded inconsistent results, with some studies finding negative relationships between religiosity and ethics, while others found no relationships, and still others have found positive associations. As a result of this inconsistency, Weaver and Agle (2002), Longenecker et al. (2004) and Parboteeah et al. (2008) stated that empirical research confirming a relationship between religiosity and ethical outcomes has not been established. Part of the goal of the current study is to attempt to contribute to literature in this regard. Based on this, we speculate that:

*Hypothesis 1:* Religiosity will be positively related to morality among Nigerians.

#### *Spirituality and Morality*

Recent literature has focused on a new concept within the paradigm of socio-religious research; namely, spirituality (Weaver, Pargament, Flannely, & Oppenheimer, 2006). Spirituality has most often been defined in terms of individual beliefs and practices related to God or a higher power in the universe, although these beliefs may also be entirely secular (Mason, Singleton, & Webber, 2007). Spirituality could be one of the most vital sources of a person’s moral norms. It provides the background for ethical evaluation and influences both

attitude and behaviour. Spirituality is one concept that can hardly be separated from moral authority. When one encounters with the sacred; one acquires a moral sensibility. Though much of individual's moral sensibility is acquired in their early socialization, keeping contact with moral authority enables them to be more morally responsible. According to Hunter (2000), morality is "received by individual, internalised into subjective consciousness, and thus experienced as the basic ordering categories of life" (p. 16). In this respect, spirituality, the deep seated consciousness of human beings, is the sacred place in which a normative universe that compels us to conform to a morally acceptable standard dwells. Therefore it is proposed that spiritual individuals have a capacity to conform to a good moral order and are able to express moral ideal in everyday lives.

Studies (e.g., Pederson, 1998; Kanya, 2000) established a link between spirituality and self-esteem, lower levels of neuroticism. Conroy and Emerson (2004) found that spirituality reduced the acceptability of certain ethically questionable business scenarios. It has been reported to be associated with many positive health outcomes such as longevity (Glass, de Leon, Marottoli, & Berkman, 1999), lower mortality (due to better health practices), (Zhang, 2008), better adaptation to and faster recovery from medical illnesses (Koenig, George, & Peterson, 1998), greater immunity to stressful situation (Graham et al., 2001), lower smoking and alcohol use (Edlund et al., 2009), better quality of life (Underwood & Teresi, 2002), and better cognitive functioning (Reyes-Ortiz et al., 2008). Goff (2010) found that spirituality was not positively related with sexual satisfaction. Since spirituality has been previously related to variables that could predict morality such as higher self-esteem, health and reduced acceptability of some ethically questionable behaviour, it is likely that it could also be related to morality. Hence, it is proposed that:

*Hypothesis 2: Spirituality will be positively related to morality among Nigerians.*

## **Method**

### *Participants and Procedure*

A cluster sampling technique was employed to recruit a total number of 185 parishioners from across 3 different religious groups in Makurdi, Benue state, Nigeria. The researchers selected and trained 3 research assistants for the collection of data. Eighty three 83 (45%) males and 102 (55%) females participated in the study. Their ages ranged between 23 to 68 years with average age of 44 years. The three questionnaires for the study were administered to the participants during their week day's religious meetings. A total of 219 copies of the questionnaire were administered to the participants. Out of this number, only 197 were completed and returned representing a response rate of 90%. Out of this number also, only 12 copies were discarded due to improper completion leaving the valid copies of the questionnaires for data analyses at 185.

### *Measures*

*Religiosity.* The Religious Orientation Scale developed by Allport and Ross (1967) was used to measure individual's religiosity. The scale consists of 20 items divided into two subscales; intrinsic and extrinsic orientations. The intrinsic scale has 9 items, whereas the extrinsic has 11. The questions were answered using a 5-point Likert scale anchored by (1 = strongly disagree and (5 = strongly agree). Sample items include: "The primary purpose of prayer is to gain relief and protection" (extrinsic item), "I try hard to carry my religion over into all my other dealings in life" (intrinsic item). High scores in the scale indicate high religiosity of the individual. Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of the instrument for the present study was set at .82 for the two dimensions.

The 16-item Daily Spiritual Experience Scale (DSES) developed by Underwood and Teresi (2002) was used to measure spirituality. The scale is scored using a 6-point Likert scale, in which response categories ranges from 1 = many times a day to 6 = never or almost never.



Lower scores reflect more frequent daily spirituality experience (e.g., many times a day = 1, never or almost never = 6). Sample items includes: “I feel God’s presence” and “During worship, or at other times when connecting with God, I feel joy, which lifts me out of my daily concerns”. Cronbach’s alpha of the scale for the present study was .91.

Morality was measured with the 28-item Ethical-Moral Self Inventory (EMSI), which is one of the five scales in Tennessee self-concept scale (TSCS) (Fitts, 1965). The EMSI consists of 18 Moral-Ethical self scale items and the 10 self-criticism items of the TSCS. EMSI has been developed into an independent inventory owing to the increasing significance morality has assumed in clinical and social research in Nigeria. The Scale uses 5-point Likert-type response format that ranges from 1 = completely false to 5 = completely true. Sample items include: “Once in a while I think of things too bad to talk about”, “I do not always tell the truth”. Morality in the context of this scale is conceptualized as the tendency by an individual to adopt the principles of fairness, equity integrity, and justice in guiding his or her behaviour in social interactions. Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  correlation coefficient of the EMSI for the present study was established at .88.

#### *Control variables*

The researcher included some demographics as control in our analyses because earlier studies have established that they are related to ethical outcomes. For example, both age and gender have been documented to have moderate to strong relationships with ethical outcomes (e.g., Serwinek, 1992; Peterson, Rhoads, & Vaught, 2001; Akaah, 1989; Cronan, Leonard, & Kreie, 2005).

## Results

The results of the bivariate analyses showed that among the four entered as control, only age ( $r = .15, p < .01$ ) and marital status ( $r = .24, p < .001$ ) that were significantly related to morality. Religiosity was not significantly related to morality. The results of the study also indicated that daily spiritual experience was significantly and positively related to morality ( $r = .22, p < .001$ ).

Moreover, the results of the hierarchical regression computed showed that among all the control variables tested in the study, it was only gender that was not significantly related to morality. However, these control variables contributed a significant 11 percent of the variance in morality. Religiosity was not significantly related to morality, and did not contribute to the variance in morality, and when we checked the regression equation, religiosity was not statistically significant. This is contrary to speculation that religiosity will be significantly related to morality. Spirituality accounted for 3.4 percent of the variance in morality far and above the control variables. When we checked the regression equation, spirituality was significantly and positively related to morality ( $\beta = .19, p < .01$ ). This confirms hypothesis that spirituality will be significantly and positively related to morality.

Table 1: Means, Standard Deviation and Intercorrelations among Study variables

	<b>Variables</b>	<b>Means</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>
1	Morality	63.10	6.50	(0.88)						
2	Age	43.89	11.38	.15**	-					
3	Gender	1.65	.48	-.02	.02	-				
4	Education	1.54	.50	-.06	.02	.06	-			
5	Marital status	1.37	.48	.24***	.07	.09	-.30***	-		
6	Religiosity	66.08	9.12	-.08	.05	.11	.22**	.13*	(0.82)	
7	Spirituality	54.52	6.44	.22**	.10	.13*	.02	-.08	.14*	(0.91)

Note: \* =  $p < .05$ ; \*\* =  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* =  $p < .001$ . Cronbach's  $\alpha$  for applicable scales are reported in parenthesis along the diagonal. Gender was coded 1 = male, 2 = female; marital status (1 = single, 2 = married), Education (1 = high, 2 = low). Age was coded in years. Religiosity and spirituality were coded, such that higher scores indicated high levels of these behaviours.

Table 2. Hierarchical regression results

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Step 1 (<math>\beta</math>)</i>	<i>Step 2 (<math>\beta</math>)</i>	<i>Step 3 (<math>\beta</math>)</i>
Age	.18**	.18**	.16*
Gender	.02	.02	-.01
Education	-.16*	-.15*	-.14*
Marital status	.30***	.30***	.27***
Religiosity		-.02	-.05
Spirituality			.19**
R <sup>2</sup>	.11	.11	.14
R <sup>2</sup> Change	.11**	.01	.03**
F Change	F(4,180) = 5.48**	F(1,179) = .00	F(1,178) = 7.13**
F Value	F(4,180) = 5.48	F(5,179) = 4.38	F(6,178) = 4.96

**Note:** \* =  $p < .05$ ; \*\* =  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* =  $p < .001$

## Discussion

The current study examined the relationships between religiosity, spirituality, and morality in a Nigerian sample. Contrary to speculation, the result of the regression analyses computed showed that religiosity was not significantly related to morality. This implies that being religious does not necessarily guarantee that one observes morals in one's daily living. This result may explain the fact that whilst most Nigerians are religious, immoral behaviour abound in society meaning that most Nigerians may just be church goers who has not allowed their religious doctrine to penetrate and influence their behaviour positively. It shows that although religion is very famous in inculcating standards to adherents, and provides people with clear and explicit messages of socially approved behaviours and also appears to exert a significant deterrent effect on an individual's maladaptive behaviour, it could not significantly relate to morality among Nigerians. The findings seem to be consistent with earlier studies (e.g., Miller, 1998; Pullen et al., 1999) who found a significant relationship between church attendance, drug, and alcohol. However, the finding also seem to oppose many previous findings (e.g., Bazargan et al., 2004; Michalak et al., 2007; Clark & Dawson, 1996; Parboteeah et al., 2008) which found among several religious measures, that religious participation was

related to abstinence from alcohol use, and also a significant relationship between religiosity and ethical behaviours.

Also the result of the present study confirmed my second hypothesized relationship between spirituality and morality. The reason for this result may be that spirituality transcends the flesh as people who are spiritual feels the existence of the Supreme Being in their lives and this could make them to be moral in most of what they do. The result is consistent with previous studies which indicated that spirituality is significantly related to ethical behaviour of individuals. For instance, the result is consistent with that of Conroy and Emerson (2004), which found that spirituality, reduced the acceptability of certain ethically questionable business scenarios. It also agrees with Edlund et al. (2009) who found lower smoking and alcohol use to be related to spirituality. It also agree with Underwood and Teresi (2002) and (Reyes-Ortiz et al., 2008) who found that spirituality is related to better quality of life and better cognitive functioning.

### ***Implications of the Study***

It may not be very surprising that religiosity could not relate positively to morality among Nigerian samples. The only surprising fallout from the study is that despite that Nigerians are arguably the most religious people in the world; immoral behaviour such as corruption of worrying degree has become endemic in the country. Worship centres in one city in Nigeria may outnumber those in the West African sub-region put together yet in this same country is a beehive of immoral behaviours. This is an aberration suggesting that most Nigerians do not practice the faith they profess. This result implies that there should be more intensified efforts from religious leaders to not just observe rituals devoid of any positive dividend but to focus on inculcating morals that will bring about desired and expected change in the lives of adherents and by extension to the society. Religious leaders may also begin to consider publicly exposing individuals, especially those that are highly placed whom have

wilfully refused to drop their immoral behaviours. By so doing such individuals may turn a new leaf for the good of the society. Since spirituality had expected impact on moral behaviours of individuals, it will be beneficial to the society for religious adherents to be encouraged to stop playing religion but to move deeper to become spiritual. Out of this concern, what is demanded from our religious leaders is to re-focus and re-direct their energy from advocating material and financial prosperity of followers to spiritual and heavenly gains. This will have significant influence in the behaviour of their followers to engage more in moral behaviours. More importantly, these religious leaders should endeavour to match their words with actions because followers may not be interested in words they utter, but also in what they observe them do on a daily basis.

### ***Limitations and suggestions for future Studies***

Like many other studies, this study is not without limitations. First, given the nature of the data collected (cross-sectional) the current study is short of establishing any causal effects. It is important to note here that the variables of interest could also have bi-directional effect. Hence, longitudinal data or experimental study is recommended to future researchers to address such concern. In this study, the responses to the measures were obtained from a single source and both the predictor and criterion variables are perceptual measures derived from the same respondents at the same time. This may result in common method variance. Common method variance is the “variance that is attributable to the measurement method rather than to the constructs the measures represent” (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003, p. 879). Although given such situation, some researchers (e.g., Raman et al., 2016) often point at social desirability bias as a weakness, and consent that results are more valid with multiple sources of data. Future studies should consider other (multiple) sources of data to be able to overcome the challenges often pose by common method variance.

In sum therefore, the current study explored the relationships between religiosity, spirituality and morality among Nigerian samples. In the analyses, spirituality was found to be positively related to morality whereas religiosity was not related to morality. Therefore this study exposes the superficial practice of religion. It shows that many people view religious practices as a ritual and that was why religiosity was not related to moral behaviour. The result of the study indicated that not until individuals moved steps deeper into spirituality, immorality in society will continue regardless of the number of worship centres in our society. Another limitation is that the present study considered only individuals from one religious group (Christians). This is a major shortcoming when we want to generalize the findings of the present study to the entire population of religious people. Future studies should consider the inclusion of other religious groups since Nigeria is a multi-religious country.

### ***Conclusion***

The present study examined the relationships between religiosity, spirituality and morality among Nigerian samples. The results indicated that religiosity was not related to morality. The findings also indicated that spirituality was significantly and positively related to morality. These findings underscore the realities in the Nigerian society where many people are religious yet there is widespread of immoral behaviour. This points to the fact that rather than being influenced by the faith they profess, people merely play religion in Nigeria. According to the findings of the present study, before the effect of individuals' faith influences their behaviour, they must have deeper knowledge, where the things of God or Supreme Being determine their actions. That is the only way they can exhibit moral behaviour for the good of the society.

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