



POWER, PROPHECY, AND PROFIT: A CRITICAL INTERDISCIPLINARY ANALYSIS OF RELIGIOUS PRACTICES AND ACCOUNTABILITY IN NIGERIA

By

OLOWU Kemi B A (Hons) MLS, MILD

Principal Librarian: Nigeria Institute of Advanced Legal Studies, Lagos

Email No: kemiking@yahoo.com Tel. No: 08023272016

OLULOWO Segun Ayotunde, PhD

Department of Religious Studies University of Lagos, Nigeria

segunolulowo@gmail.com, +2348035267441, <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-5703-5243>

Abstract

The rapid expansion of religious movements in Nigeria has reshaped the country's spiritual and socio-economic landscape. While this growth reflects an increasing search for meaning, it has also generated concerns about abuse, commercialization, and weak accountability structures. This study examines the interplay between power, prophecy, and profit in contemporary religious practice, focusing on leadership dynamics, the psychological dimensions of prophetic practices, and the commodification of spirituality through financial demands on adherents. Adopting an interdisciplinary theoretical approach grounded in theories of charismatic authority, power, and religious economy, the paper employs critical thematic analysis to interrogate these developments. The findings reveal that weak check-and-balance systems enable financial extraction, prophetic manipulation, and coercive control within religious spaces. The study contributes to ongoing scholarly and policy debates by proposing a multi-level ethical and regulatory accountability framework that preserves religious freedom while addressing systemic abuse. It underscores the need to recalibrate the relationship between faith, authority, and responsibility in order to safeguard adherents and strengthen the integrity of religious practice in Nigeria.

Keywords: *Religious Authority; Prophecy; Religious Economy; Accountability; Nigeria; Psychological Manipulation; Syncretism; Regulation*

Introduction

In recent decades, Nigeria has witnessed an unprecedented expansion of Pentecostal, charismatic, and independent religious movements, reshaping the country's spiritual and socio-cultural landscape. This rapid growth has been accompanied by the increasing visibility and influence of religious leaders who now occupy strategic positions not only in spiritual life but also in economic and political spheres. As noted by scholars such as Kalu (2008) and Marshall (2009), contemporary religious leaders in Nigeria often function as power brokers, shaping public opinion, influencing political outcomes, and commanding vast followings. This growing authority has contributed to what Einstein (2008) conceptualizes as the "religious economy," where faith practices are increasingly structured around market-like dynamics of demand, supply, and competition.

Within this expanding religious marketplace, however, concerns have emerged regarding the ethical implications of certain practices. Gifford (2004) and Ukah (2016) observe that some religious leaders deploy prophecy not merely as a spiritual tool but as a mechanism of influence and



control, often leveraging psychological strategies to sustain followers' dependence and loyalty. This has, in some cases, resulted in patterns of financial exploitation, including mandatory donations, seed sowing, and payments for spiritual services, which place significant economic burdens on adherents. Furthermore, coercive practices such as "Igbele" (The term *Igbele* is derived from the Yoruba language (Southwestern Nigeria). It has been italicized in the explained as a form of religious confinement or isolation used in some spiritual settings, often for purposes of deliverance or discipline.) have been reported in certain contexts, raising critical questions about human rights, consent, and religious authority.

Despite these developments, regulatory frameworks governing religious institutions in Nigeria remain weak, fragmented, or largely absent. As Haynes (2013) argues, the challenge of regulating religion in pluralistic societies often lies in balancing religious freedom with the need to prevent abuse. In Nigeria, this tension has created an environment in which accountability mechanisms are insufficient, allowing problematic practices to persist with limited oversight. While existing studies have examined the growth of Pentecostalism and the dynamics of religious economies, limited attention has been given to the intersection of power, psychological manipulation, coercive practices, and regulatory failure within a unified analytical framework. Against this backdrop, this study addresses a critical gap by examining how the convergence of power, prophecy, and profit shapes religious practices and experiences in contemporary Nigeria. Specifically, the study aims to analyze the dynamics of religious authority, interrogate the use of prophecy as a tool of psychological influence, and evaluate the economic dimensions of spiritual practices within a weakly regulated environment. The study is guided by the following research questions: How do power dynamics within religious institutions shape leader–follower relationships in Nigeria? In what ways are prophecy and financial practices employed as instruments of control and influence? To what extent do regulatory gaps enable exploitative and coercive practices within religious settings?

This study adopts an interdisciplinary theoretical approach, drawing on insights from sociology of religion, psychology, and political economy to provide a holistic understanding of the phenomenon. By integrating these perspectives, the paper offers a nuanced analysis of the structural and behavioural factors that underpin contemporary religious practices in Nigeria. The significance of this study lies in its contribution to ongoing scholarly debates on religion, governance, and ethics, as well as its potential to inform policy discussions on the regulation of religious institutions in pluralistic societies.

The paper proceeds by first reviewing relevant literature on religious authority, prophecy, and religious economies. It then outlines the theoretical framework guiding the study before presenting a critical analysis of key issues, including financial exploitation, psychological manipulation, and coercive practices. The final section discusses implications for policy and proposes pathways for strengthening accountability and ethical standards within Nigeria's religious landscape.

Literature Review

Religious power and authority remain central themes in sociological and theological scholarship, particularly in contexts where charismatic Christianity has become increasingly influential. Max Weber's foundational distinction between charismatic and institutional authority continues to shape contemporary analysis. Weber argues that charismatic authority rests on perceived extraordinary spiritual gifts, while institutional authority is grounded in structured rules and office-bearing legitimacy (Weber, 1978). In the Nigerian religious landscape, this distinction is increasingly blurred, as many leaders derive legitimacy more from perceived spiritual power than formal theological training or denominational accountability (Ojo, 2021; Ukah, 2022).



Recent scholarship shows that the expansion of Pentecostal and independent ministries in Nigeria has intensified the dominance of charismatic authority, often at the expense of institutional checks and balances. These leaders frequently position themselves as divinely appointed, thereby insulating their authority from critique or doctrinal scrutiny (Gifford, 2015; Marshall, 2018). Consequently, religious authority becomes personalized, fluid, and heavily dependent on performance-based spirituality, including healing, prophecy, and deliverance rituals (Adogame, 2020).

Prophecy occupies a particularly significant place in this power structure. Biblically and theologically, prophecy is rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition as a divinely inspired message aimed at moral correction, guidance, and communal accountability (1 Corinthians 14:3; Amos 3:7). Classical theological interpretations emphasize discernment, communal testing of prophetic claims, and alignment with scripture (Yong, 2019). However, contemporary Nigerian Christianity increasingly reflects a shift toward experiential and predictive prophecy, often centered on personal success, financial breakthrough, and protection from perceived spiritual threats (Kalu, 2020; Aina, 2021:).

This modern appropriation of prophecy has raised concerns among scholars who argue that it is frequently detached from its biblical ethical framework and instead shaped by socio-economic pressures and audience expectations (Omenyo & Arthur, 2018). Prophecy, in many cases, functions not merely as spiritual communication but as a mechanism of influence and social control, reinforcing the authority of religious leaders while shaping adherents' decisions in areas such as marriage, finance, and career (Burgess, 2016; Obadare, 2020)

Furthermore, the convergence of charismatic authority and modern prophetic practices has contributed to the commercialization of religion. Scholars note that prophetic declarations are sometimes embedded within economic exchanges, subtly linking divine favor to material contributions (Ukah, 2022). This dynamic raises critical questions about authenticity, accountability, and the boundaries between spiritual guidance and economic exploitation.

In sum, the literature suggests a growing tension between traditional theological understandings of prophecy and authority and their contemporary manifestations in Nigerian Christianity, where charisma, performance, and economic incentives increasingly shape religious legitimacy.

Scholarly discussions on contemporary religious practice increasingly highlight the rise of religion as a form of economic exchange, in which spiritual authority is closely linked to material transactions. Within the framework of the religious economy, scholars contend that faith-based institutions often function in competitive "markets," where the demand for miracles, healing, and deliverance influences the supply-side behaviours of religious leaders (Iannaccone, 1998; Stark & Finke, 2000). In many African contexts, this dynamic has intensified the monetization of faith, evident in structured payments for spiritual services such as prophecy, counselling, and deliverance rituals. These practices reflect what recent analyses describe as the "commodification of spirituality," where access to divine intervention is increasingly mediated by financial capacity rather than doctrinal commitment (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2015; Ukah, 2018).

Closely linked to this is the phenomenon of syncretism and doctrinal hybridization, where elements of indigenous spirituality are blended with Christianity or Islam. While some scholars interpret this as cultural adaptation and contextualization of faith, others caution that it can become a mechanism for exploitation when selectively deployed to reinforce clerical authority or justify questionable practices (Bediako, 2017; Ojo, 2020). This tension highlights the blurred boundary between authentic cultural expression and strategic manipulation within religious systems. The psychological dimensions of religious influence further complicate this landscape. Research in cognitive and social psychology demonstrates how mechanisms such as suggestion, emotional arousal, and fear can foster dependency on religious leaders (Festinger, 1957; Pargament, 2013). In



particular, false prophecy functions as a powerful tool of belief reinforcement, where failed predictions are reinterpreted to sustain credibility and deepen follower commitment (Lindeman, 2018). This cyclical reinforcement strengthens psychological attachment and reduces critical evaluation among adherents.

Globally and within Nigeria, concerns about accountability and regulation in religious practice have gained scholarly attention. Comparative studies suggest that while some countries enforce strict governance structures for religious organizations, many African states, including Nigeria, struggle with weak institutional oversight, allowing charismatic authority to operate with minimal constraint (Marshall, 2014; Haynes, 2021). This regulatory gap contributes to abuses ranging from financial exploitation to coercive spiritual practices.

Despite growing scholarship, significant gaps remain in the literature. First, there is a lack of integrated interdisciplinary analysis that simultaneously examines economic, psychological, and theological dimensions of religious practice. Second, limited attention has been given to the environmental consequences of religious activities, including pollution from ritual practices and mass gatherings. Third, coercive dimensions such as spiritual incarceration and forced confinement remain under-theorized in mainstream academic discourse. Addressing these gaps is essential for developing a more holistic understanding of contemporary religious dynamics and their broader socio-ethical implications.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical backbone of this study rests on Max Weber's theory of charismatic authority and the religious economy approach developed by Stark and Finke, both of which remain highly influential in contemporary sociological and religious studies discourse.

Max Weber first introduced the concept of charismatic authority in his broader typology of legitimate domination in *Economy and Society* (Weber, 1978). For Weber, charisma refers to a form of leadership grounded in perceived extraordinary qualities of an individual, often interpreted by followers as divinely endowed. Unlike traditional or legal-rational authority, charismatic authority is inherently unstable and thrives in moments of social uncertainty. In contemporary Nigeria, this framework is particularly useful for understanding how religious leaders derive legitimacy not from institutional training or doctrinal accountability, but from perceived spiritual power manifested through prophecy, healing claims, and miracle narratives. The theory is significant to this study because it explains why adherents often suspend critical judgment, thereby enabling unchecked authority, psychological influence, and even coercive practices such as spiritual confinement (Marshall, 2014).

Complementing Weber's perspective is the religious economy theory advanced by Stark and Finke (2000), which conceptualizes religion as a system of exchange where religious organizations compete in a marketplace of beliefs and services. Emerging from rational choice theory, this approach argues that individuals "consume" religious goods such as prophecy, healing, and deliverance based on perceived benefits. Over time, this has led to the monetization of faith, where spiritual services are increasingly priced through offerings, seed sowing, and mandatory payments. In the Nigerian context, scholars have shown how religious institutions function within competitive spiritual markets that incentivize innovation, but also open space for commercialization and exploitation (Iannaccone, 1998; Ukah, 2018).

Together, these theories are highly relevant to the objectives of this study. Weber's framework clarifies the power dynamics and psychological submission embedded in prophetic authority, while the religious economy model explains the profit-driven structures and commodification of spirituality. Their combined analytical strength allows for a holistic understanding of how religious authority is constructed, maintained, and monetized.



Importantly, these theories also support the study's expected outcomes: identifying weak accountability systems, exposing the intersection between belief and economic exchange, and proposing regulatory frameworks that balance religious freedom with ethical governance. Recent scholarship further affirms that without institutional check-and-balance mechanisms, charismatic authority and religious market dynamics can converge to produce systemic vulnerability among adherents (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2015; Haynes, 2021). In sum, these theories not only provide explanatory depth but also offer a critical lens for evaluating the urgent need for reform in contemporary Nigerian religious practice.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interdisciplinary theoretical research design aimed at critically examining the intersections of power, prophecy, profit, and accountability within contemporary religious practices in Nigeria. Rather than generating primary empirical data, the study relies on interpretive analysis of existing knowledge systems, allowing for a deeper engagement with conceptual, ethical, and structural issues shaping religious authority (Bryman, 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The research draws exclusively on secondary data sources, which provide a rich and triangulated foundation for analysis. These include peer-reviewed scholarly works on religious authority, religious economy, and African Pentecostalism (Ukah, 2018; Haynes, 2021), media reports documenting cases of spiritual abuse, false prophecy, and financial exploitation, as well as relevant legal and constitutional frameworks governing religious freedom and human rights in Nigeria. Policy documents and judicial pronouncements further provide insight into the regulatory environment surrounding religious institutions.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis and critical discourse analysis (CDA). Thematic analysis is a flexible method used to systematically identify, organize, and interpret recurring patterns (or "themes") within qualitative data. It involves familiarizing oneself with the data, generating initial codes, grouping related codes into broader themes, and refining these themes to capture significant patterns of meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this study, thematic analysis made it possible to highlight consistent issues across the data, such as the monetization of spirituality, forms of psychological manipulation, and the persistence of weak institutional oversight. By doing so, it provided a clear structure for understanding the dominant trends within contemporary religious practices.

Complementing this, critical discourse analysis (CDA) was employed to move beyond patterns and examine how language itself functions as a tool of power. CDA focuses on how words, narratives, and communicative practices reflect and reinforce social inequalities, authority structures, and ideological positions (Fairclough, 2015). In the context of this study, CDA was used to interrogate how prophetic declarations, religious language, and doctrinal narratives are constructed in ways that legitimize authority, encourage compliance, and normalize hierarchical power relations within religious spaces. It also helps uncover subtle mechanisms through which influence is exercised, often without overt coercion.

Together, these methods provide both descriptive and critical insights: thematic analysis identifies *what* is happening across the data, while CDA explains *how* and *why* these patterns are sustained through language and meaning-making practices. This dual approach allows for both structural and interpretive depth in understanding religious practices.

This study adopts a theoretical, non-empirical design. Data were generated through an extensive review and critical synthesis of existing literature, including scholarly publications, policy documents, and credible secondary sources relevant to religious practices in Nigeria. The study is geographically focused on Nigeria due to its dynamic and highly pluralistic religious environment.



It does not rely on primary data such as interviews or surveys; rather, it employs interdisciplinary analysis to examine patterns, concepts, and debates within the literature. While this approach limits direct experiential validation, it strengthens conceptual clarity and enables broad theoretical integration. Consequently, the findings should be understood as analytical interpretations rather than statistically generalizable conclusions.

Discussion and Analysis

The dynamics of contemporary religious practice in Nigeria reveal a complex interplay of power, prophecy, and profit, sustained by weak institutional oversight and strong charismatic appeal. At the core of this system lies what Weber describes as charismatic authority, where legitimacy is derived not from formal structures but from perceived spiritual exceptionalism (Weber, 1978). In many Nigerian religious contexts, this form of authority has become dominant, enabling leaders to operate with minimal accountability. The absence of effective checks and balances within both ecclesiastical and state regulatory frameworks has further intensified this condition, creating environments where personal conviction often overrides institutional ethics (Haynes, 2021).

Within this structure, prophecy functions as a central mechanism of authority and control. Rather than being purely spiritual communication, prophecy is frequently deployed as a tool for behavioural regulation and social influence. When perceived as divinely inspired, prophetic declarations shape decisions related to marriage, finance, health, and career. However, research shows that in some cases, such prophecies are not only unverifiable but strategically framed to reinforce the leader's authority and maintain follower dependency (Marshall, 2014). The phenomenon of false prophecy has significant social consequences, including emotional distress, financial loss, and erosion of trust within religious communities. Cognitive psychology suggests that followers often reinterpret failed predictions in ways that preserve belief, a process consistent with cognitive dissonance reduction (Festinger, 1957; Lindeman, 2018).

Closely tied to prophetic authority is the commodification of religion, where spiritual services are transformed into economic transactions. Practices such as "seed sowing," mandatory offerings, and paid deliverance sessions reflect a growing religious economy in which access to spiritual benefits is mediated by financial contribution. Scholars have noted that this monetization creates a system where religious success is implicitly linked to economic capacity, thereby reinforcing inequality among adherents (Ukah, 2018's; Stark & Finke, 2000). Ethical concerns arise when spiritual vulnerability is exploited for financial gain, raising questions about the moral limits of religious entrepreneurship.

Another dimension of religious practice is syncretism and religious innovation, which in African contexts often reflects cultural adaptation and continuity. However, syncretic practices can also be strategically manipulated to legitimize controversial rituals or reinforce leadership control. While scholars such as Asamoah-Gyadu (2015) view syncretism as a contextual response to indigenous worldviews, its unregulated forms may blur doctrinal boundaries and enable doctrinal exploitation.

The psychological mechanisms of influence within these religious environments are equally significant. Religious leaders often employ fear, hope, and dependency to shape follower's behaviour. Fear-based teachings about curses, spiritual attack, or divine punishment create emotional vulnerability, while promises of miracles and breakthroughs sustain hope and commitment. Over time, repeated exposure to these patterns produces behavioral conditioning, resulting in deep psychological dependency on spiritual authority figures (Pargament, 2013). This dependency limits critical engagement and reinforces compliance even in exploitative situations. More severe manifestations of control include coercive practices such as incarceration (*Igbele*), where individuals are confined under the guise of spiritual deliverance or purification. While often



justified as religious discipline, such practices raise serious human rights concerns. International human rights frameworks emphasize freedom of movement and personal dignity, both of which are violated in coercive religious confinement (Marshall, 2014). The tension between religious justification and legal protection highlights the urgent need for clearer regulatory boundaries.

Finally, the environmental implications of religious practices are increasingly relevant but often overlooked. Large-scale religious gatherings and ritual activities contribute to noise pollution, improper waste disposal, and ecological disruption. Ritual materials are sometimes discarded in rivers or open spaces, contributing to environmental degradation. From an eco-theological perspective, such practices reflect a limited integration of environmental ethics into religious consciousness, despite growing global emphasis on sustainability (Haynes, 2021).

In summary, the intersection of power, prophecy, and profit within Nigerian religious practice reveal a system shaped by weak accountability, psychological influence, and economic commodification. Addressing these challenges requires not only theological reflection but also institutional reform that integrates legal regulation, ethical leadership, and environmental responsibility.

Toward Accountability and Regulation

Efforts to strengthen accountability in Nigeria's religious landscape must move beyond critique to workable reforms that respect religious freedom while protecting adherents from harm. Recent scholarship shows that effective regulation is rarely achieved through a single lever; rather, it emerges from the interaction of internal governance, public law, financial oversight, ethical renewal, and citizen literacy (Marshall, 2014; Haynes, 2021). The following review synthesizes practical pathways across these domains.

1. A credible starting point is reform from within. Many congregations operate around highly personalized leadership, where decision-making authority is concentrated in a single charismatic figure. Studies of African Pentecostalism suggest that such concentration can inhibit accountability unless counterbalanced by institutionalized governance structures (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2015; Ukah, 2018). Practically, this means constituting independent boards of trustees, finance committees, and ethics panels with real oversight powers, including the authority to audit accounts, review disciplinary procedures, and investigate complaints.

Equally important is role differentiation, separating spiritual leadership from administrative and financial control, where pastors or prophets simultaneously serve as chief executive, treasurer, and final arbiter of disputes, the risk of abuse increases. Codified constitutions, term limits for key offices, and transparent decision-making protocols can diffuse power and normalize accountability without undermining spiritual leadership, evidence from faith-based NGOs shows that such hybrid governance, combining spiritual vision with professional management, improves trust and sustainability (Clarke & Jennings, 2008).

2. Internal reforms are necessary but insufficient without an enabling legal environment. Nigeria's constitutional protection of religious freedom coexists with gaps in enforcement of existing laws on fraud, unlawful detention, and public nuisance. Comparative research indicates that states can regulate organizational conduct, not belief, by requiring registration, reporting, and compliance with health, safety, and human-rights standards (Haynes, 2021).

Practical steps include: (a) mandatory registration and periodic renewal for religious organizations; (b) basic disclosure requirements (leadership structure, audited accounts); (c) clear prohibitions against coercive practices, including any form of spiritual incarceration; and (d) collaboration with agencies such as financial intelligence units and environmental regulators. Importantly, regulation should be proportionate and non-discriminatory, avoiding theological intrusion while ensuring that religious spaces are not used to shield criminality. Experiences in countries like South Africa



demonstrate that consultative regulatory bodies, including representatives of faith communities, can improve compliance and legitimacy (Resane, 2017).

3. Given the centrality of offerings, tithes, and fees for spiritual services, financial transparency is a cornerstone of accountability. Research on the “religious economy” highlights how opaque financial systems can enable exploitation, especially among economically vulnerable adherents (Iannaccone, 1998; Stark & Finke, 2000).

Practically, institutions should adopt standard accounting practices, publish annual audited reports, and provide clear giving policies that distinguish voluntary donations from any form of obligatory or fee-based spiritual service. Digital payment systems can enhance traceability, while independent external audits build credibility. At the policy level, governments may require basic financial disclosures for registered religious bodies without imposing excessive bureaucratic burdens. Such measures do not negate generosity; rather, they protect both donors and institutions by aligning spiritual giving with ethical stewardship.

4. Regulation must be complemented by normative renewal within theology and ministerial formation. Scholars note that when success is measured primarily in material terms, wealth, miracles, or visibility, there is a drift toward instrumentalizing faith (Marshall, 2014; Asamoah-Gyadu, 2015). Reorientation involves foregrounding integrity, humility, service, and care for the vulnerable as core ministerial virtues.

Seminaries and ministerial training programs can integrate ethics, counseling psychology, and safeguarding into curricula, equipping leaders to recognize the boundaries between spiritual guidance and manipulation. Denominational bodies should articulate codes of conduct addressing prophecy, deliverance practices, and financial appeals, with sanctions for violations. Importantly, theology can also recover stewardship of creation, encouraging environmentally responsible practices in worship and ritual life, an area often neglected in current debates.

5. Finally, accountability is strengthened when adherents are informed, reflective participants rather than passive recipients. Psychological research shows that suggestibility and fear can heighten dependency on authority, especially in contexts of uncertainty (Pargament, 2013; Lindeman, 2018). Public education can counter this by fostering critical religious literacy, the ability to interpret claims, recognize manipulation, and make informed choices.

Practical initiatives include community workshops, media campaigns, and partnerships between civil society, academia, and faith organizations to disseminate accessible guidance on financial ethics, consent, and personal rights. Universities and theological institutions can host public forums that model respectful dialogue between faith and critical inquiry. When adherents understand that questioning is not synonymous with unbelief, they are better positioned to hold leaders accountable while sustaining meaningful faith commitments.

A balanced framework for accountability in Nigeria must therefore be multi-layered: internal governance that disperses power; legal frameworks that enforce minimum standards; transparent financial practices; ethical-theological renewal that resists commodification; and an informed public capable of discernment. Taken together, these measures can protect religious freedom while curbing abuse, enabling religious communities to contribute positively to social trust and human flourishing.

Implications of the Study

This study carries important implications across theoretical, policy, and practical domains, particularly within the evolving landscape of religion in Nigeria and comparable contexts.

Theoretical Implications: One of the major contributions of this study lies in its effort to bridge fragmented strands of scholarship by integrating insights from sociology, psychology, religious



studies, and political economy. Existing literature has often treated religious authority, economic practices, and psychological influence as separate analytical categories. However, recent scholars argue that contemporary religious phenomena, especially within Pentecostal and charismatic movements are best understood through interdisciplinary synthesis that captures their complexity (Einstein, 2020; Haynes, 2021). By combining Weberian notions of charismatic authority with religious economy perspectives and psychological theories of belief formation, this study responds to calls for more holistic frameworks in the study of religion (Marshall, 2014). It also extends current debates by incorporating underexplored dimensions such as environmental consequences and coercive practices, thereby enriching theoretical conversations around religion as both a social and institutional force. In this sense, the study not only consolidates existing theories but also opens new pathways for future researches that interrogate religion beyond doctrinal boundaries.

Policy Implications: From a policy standpoint, the findings underscore the urgent need for balanced regulatory frameworks that protect citizens while respecting religious freedom. Scholars have increasingly noted that weak governance structures in many African contexts allow religious institutions to operate with minimal oversight, creating opportunities for exploitation (Ukah, 2018; Obadare, 2018). This study reinforces the argument that the absence of effective check-and-balance systems contributes to financial abuse, psychological manipulation, and, in extreme cases, coercive practices. It therefore provides a conceptual basis for policymakers to design context-sensitive regulations that address issues such as financial transparency, fraudulent claims, and human rights violations within religious settings. Importantly, regulation should not aim to suppress religious expression but rather to ensure accountability and ethical conduct. As Haynes (2021) suggests, the challenge lies in achieving a delicate equilibrium between state intervention and religious autonomy, a balance this study highlights as both necessary and achievable.

Practical Implications: At the practical level, the study offers guidance for both religious leaders and adherents. For leaders, it emphasizes the importance of ethical responsibility, transparency, and theological integrity in sustaining trust and legitimacy. Scholars have argued that the long-term credibility of religious institutions depends on their ability to align spiritual authority with moral accountability (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2015). For adherents, the study highlights the need for critical religious literacy, encouraging individuals to engage faith with discernment rather than passive acceptance. Psychological research suggests that awareness of influence mechanisms, such as suggestion, fear appeals, and dependency, can reduce susceptibility to manipulation (Pargament, 2013). By foregrounding these dynamics, the study empowers believers to make informed decisions while maintaining their spiritual commitments. Ultimately, the practical implication is a call for a more reflective and responsible religious culture, where faith serves as a source of empowerment rather than exploitation.

Conclusion

This study set out to critically examine the intersections of power, prophecy, and profit within contemporary religious practice in Nigeria, drawing attention to how these dynamics shape both the lived experiences of adherents and the broader moral landscape of society. The analysis reveals that the rapid expansion of religious movements has not only intensified spiritual engagement but has also created fertile ground for the consolidation of unregulated authority. At the center of this development is the increasing dominance of charismatic leadership, where legitimacy is often derived from perceived spiritual gifts rather than institutional accountability or theological grounding.

A key finding of this study is the growing entanglement between spirituality and economic exchange. The monetization of faith, expressed through payments for prophecy, deliverance, and other spiritual services, has transformed religious spaces into quasi-economic arenas. In such



settings, spiritual needs are frequently framed in transactional terms, thereby reinforcing dependency and, in some cases, enabling financial exploitation. Alongside this, the study highlights how prophetic practices, while deeply rooted in religious traditions, are sometimes deployed in ways that rely on psychological mechanisms such as suggestion, fear, and emotional manipulation. These dynamics can strengthen adherence but may also limit critical reflection and autonomy among followers.

The study further underscores the role of syncretism and doctrinal hybridity, which, although historically significant as forms of cultural adaptation, can become instruments of control when selectively interpreted to legitimize questionable practices. Moreover, issues such as coercive confinement (often framed as spiritual intervention) and the environmental implications of certain ritual practices point to the broader social and ethical consequences of unregulated religious activity. Collectively, these findings demonstrate that the absence of effective internal and external regulatory frameworks allows problematic practices to persist and, in some cases, thrive.

At its core, this study reaffirms a central argument: power without accountability inevitably creates conditions for exploitation. When religious authority operates beyond scrutiny, whether through institutional weakness, societal deference, or legal gaps, it risks shifting from a source of guidance and hope to a mechanism of control and extraction. This is not to dismiss the transformative and positive roles that religion continues to play in Nigerian society, but rather to emphasize that such roles are best sustained within systems that encourage transparency, responsibility, and ethical leadership.

In light of these insights, the study calls for a more balanced and constructive approach, one that carefully upholds religious freedom while strengthening institutional responsibility. Religious expression remains a fundamental right and a vital aspect of human identity; however, this freedom must coexist with safeguards that protect individuals from abuse. Achieving this balance requires a collaborative effort involving religious institutions, state actors, civil society, and adherents themselves. Internal governance structures, ethical training, and financial transparency within religious organizations must be complemented by appropriate legal frameworks and public awareness initiatives.

Ultimately, the future of religious practice in Nigeria depends on the ability to recalibrate the relationship between faith, power, and accountability. By fostering systems that value both spiritual vitality and ethical integrity, religion can continue to serve as a force for social cohesion, moral guidance, and human flourishing rather than a site of vulnerability and exploitation.

Policy Implications and Practical Recommendations

The findings of this study carry significant implications for public policy, institutional reform, and scholarly engagement in Nigeria's religious landscape. Addressing the complex interplay between power, prophecy, and profit requires a balanced framework that safeguards religious freedom while promoting accountability and ethical responsibility.

First, there is a clear need for context-sensitive regulatory frameworks. Policymakers should develop non-intrusive mechanisms for the registration and periodic review of religious organizations and leaders. Such frameworks must not undermine constitutional rights to freedom of worship but should ensure minimum standards of operation, particularly in areas involving financial practices, counseling activities, and the treatment of vulnerable individuals. Regulatory bodies, in collaboration with interfaith councils, can serve as neutral platforms for oversight and conflict resolution.

Second, institutional accountability within religious organizations must be strengthened. Faith-based institutions should adopt formal governance structures, including financial transparency



systems, ethical codes of conduct, and internal disciplinary mechanisms. The establishment of independent advisory boards, comprising theologians, legal experts, and mental health professionals, can provide checks and balances on charismatic authority and doctrinal excesses.

Third, there is a pressing need for public education and congregational empowerment. Adherents should be equipped with basic religious literacy, critical thinking skills, and awareness of their rights. This can be achieved through community programs, media engagement, and collaboration with civil society organizations. An informed religious public is less susceptible to manipulation, coercion, and exploitative financial demands.

Fourth, ethical standardization of spiritual services is essential. While voluntary giving remains integral to many religious traditions, the monetization of prophecy, healing, and deliverance requires clearer boundaries. Religious leaders should be discouraged from transactional representations of spirituality that equate financial contribution with divine favor. Transparent communication about the purpose and use of funds can foster trust and reduce suspicion.

Fifth, the study highlights the importance of professionalizing pastoral care and counseling practices. Incorporating basic training in psychology, conflict mediation, and ethics into religious leadership development can reduce harmful practices rooted in ignorance or manipulation. Partnerships with accredited training institutions can further enhance this process.

Sixth, legal and human rights protections must be reinforced, particularly concerning coercive practices such as involuntary confinement (“*Igbele*”) and other forms of spiritual abuse. Law enforcement agencies should be trained to identify and respond to such cases with cultural sensitivity while upholding legal standards.

Seventh, attention must be given to the environmental impact of religious activities. Regulatory guidelines should encourage environmentally sustainable practices in worship centers, including noise control, waste management, and responsible use of public spaces, thereby promoting harmonious community relations.

Finally, for the academic community, this study underscores the necessity of interdisciplinary research approaches. Future scholarship should integrate perspectives from religious studies, sociology, psychology, law, and environmental studies to provide a more holistic understanding of religious phenomena in contemporary society. In sum, these policy implications advocate a constructive partnership between religious institutions, the state, and civil society, aimed at fostering a religious environment that is spiritually enriching, ethically grounded, and socially responsible.

References

- Adogame, A. (2020). *African Christianity and global Pentecostalism: Intersections of faith and culture*. Routledge.
- Aina, T. A. (2021). Prophecy and prosperity gospel in contemporary Nigerian Christianity. *Journal of African Religious Studies*, 15(2), 45–62.
- Asamoah-Gyadu, J. K. (2015a). *Contemporary Pentecostal Christianity: Interpretations from an African context*. Oxford University Press.
- Asamoah-Gyadu, J. K. (2015b). *Sighs and signs of the Spirit: Ghanaian perspectives on Pentecostalism and renewal in Africa*. Regnum Books.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101.
- Bryman, A. (2016). *Social research methods* (5th ed.). Oxford University Press.



- Burgess, R. (2016). Pentecostalism and the politics of spiritual authority in Africa. *Religion and Society in Africa*, 8(1), 23–41.
- Clarke, G., & Jennings, M. (Eds.). (2008). *Development, civil society and faith-based organizations: Bridging the sacred and the secular*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). Sage Publications.
- Einstein, M. (2020). *Brands of faith: Marketing religion in a commercial age*. Routledge.
- Fairclough, N. (2015). *Language and power* (3rd ed.). Routledge.
- Festinger, L. (1957). *A theory of cognitive dissonance*. Stanford University Press.
- Gifford, P. (2015). *Christianity, politics, and public life in Kenya and Nigeria*. Hurst & Company.
- Haynes, J. (2021a). *Faith-based organizations and development in Africa*. Routledge.
- Haynes, J. (2021b). *Religion and politics in Africa*. Routledge.
- Haynes, J. (2021c). *Peace, politics, and religion*. Oxford University Press.
- Haynes, J. (2021d). *Politics and religion: A very short introduction* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Iannaccone, L. R. (1998). Introduction to the economics of religion. *Journal of Economic Literature*, 36(3), 1465–1495.
- Kalu, O. U. (2020). *African Pentecostalism: An introduction*. Oxford University Press.
- Lindeman, M. (2018a). Biases in intuitive reasoning and belief formation. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 27(5), 355–360.
- Lindeman, M. (2018b). Cognitive dissonance in belief persistence and change. *Journal of Social Psychology*, 158(4), 1–12.
- Marshall, R. (2018). *Political spiritualities: The Pentecostal revolution in Nigeria*. University of Chicago Press.
- Obadare, E. (2018). *Pentecostal republic: Religion and the struggle for state power in Nigeria*. Zed Books.
- Obadare, E. (2020). Pentecostal prophecy and governance in Nigeria: Between faith and power. *African Affairs*, 119(476), 1–22.
- Ojo, M. A. (2021). Charismatic authority and leadership dynamics in Nigerian Pentecostalism. *Journal of Contemporary Religion in Africa*, 12(3), 67–84.
- Omenyo, C. N., & Arthur, W. (2018). *Prophecy in African Christianity: Biblical foundations and contemporary distortions*. Brill.
- Pargament, K. I. (2013). *Spiritually integrated psychotherapy: Understanding and addressing the sacred*. Guilford Press.
- Resane, K. T. (2017). The regulation of religion in South Africa: Challenges and prospects. *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies*, 73(3), 1–7.
- Stark, R., & Finke, R. (2000). *Acts of faith: Explaining the human side of religion*. University of California Press.
- Ukah, A. (2018a). African Pentecostalism and religious economy. *Religion*, 48(3), 1–15.
- Ukah, A. (2018b). Religious economies and Pentecostalism in Nigeria. *African Studies Review*, 61(2), 45–67.
- Ukah, A. (2018c). The Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), Nigeria: Local identities and global processes. Springer.
- Ukah, A. F.-K. (2022). Religion, economy, and power in Nigerian Pentecostalism. *Social Compass*, 69(4), 512–529.
- Ukah, A. F.-K. (2018). Commercialization of Pentecostalism in West Africa. *African Affairs*, 117(466), 1–22.



- Weber, M. (1978). *Economy and society: An outline of interpretive sociology* (G. Roth & C. Wittich, Eds.). University of California Press
- Yong, A. (2019). *Spirit-Word-Community: Theological encounters in Pentecostal Christianity*. Eerdmans