



Religious Leaders as Conscience of the Nigerian Society: A Contextual Application of Matthew 14:1-5

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Abstract. The alarming rate at which moral decadence is eating up the Nigerian society has become a very serious problem to social psychologists. From the craze for materialism, to an increase in ritual killings and kidnappings, youths who go by the name Yahoo Boys have polluted the moral atmosphere. Various organizations have been set up by the Government and non-governmental organizations to try to stem the tide. The results do not seem to conform to the enormity of the problem. This work posits another dimension to seeking solution to this problem. Using the encounter between King Herod and John the Baptist as narrated in Matthew 14:1-5 this work interrogates the texts to identify how religious leaders can play the function of the conscience of the society in ensuring that morality prevails in the society. Using the textual critical method of study, the hermeneutics contained in the text were identified and contextualized to the current Nigerian environment. The work identified seven distinct areas in which religious leaders in Nigeria can make their impact felt in becoming the conscience of the society. It is the contention of this work that religious leaders are most appropriately poised to lead the crusade against moral degradation in the Nigerian society.

Keywords: Religious Leaders; Morality; Conscience.

1. Introduction

The present-day Nigerian society exhibits signs of a significant deterioration in moral values. There is a prevalent concern on the ethical dilemma confronting the nation. The objective of this study is to evaluate the fundamental factors contributing to the increasing rate of moral decadence in the Nigerian society. The problem appears to primarily arise from the uncritical adoption of the tenets of foreign cultures, particularly the values of individualism and materialism, across

social, political, and economic domains. One thing that makes Nigeria different from other countries is that it has a system that makes it easy for selfishness to get out of hand, which leads to actions that are bad for everyone. Constitutional protections grant individuals immunity from prosecution, often known as impunity. The presence of immorality within Nigerian politics engenders an environment for the proliferation of corruption, poverty, and insecurity. The significance of religious leaders in the political sphere is paramount to the prudent organisation of the present Nigerian society.

The existing moral approaches, which include moral education, national moral orientation, court prosecution, imprisonment, and governmental anti-policies implemented so far in the Nigerian nation, are often regarded as insufficient in effectively addressing the prevailing moral crisis in the country. In order to rectify these limitations, this research is undertaken as a new approach that can augment the favourable parts of the existing approaches. Therefore, the paper contends that prioritising the role of religious leaders as the conscience of Nigerian society within the context of Matthew 14:1–5 as a moral framework would have the benefit of appealing to a broad range of individuals and exerting a significant influence on Nigerian national life. The paper employed the historical method in analyzing and evaluating historical data that has led Nigeria to where it is today in terms of moral degeneration. The hermeneutical method was used in the interpretation and contextual application of Matthew 14:1-5. The scope of the study is limited to the Delta Central Senatorial District of Delta State. The significance of the study can be situated in the destructive nature of immoral character in the lives of both individuals and the society at large. The study will thus make a significant contribution to the body of materials to be used by both clergy and the National Orientation

Agency in their fight against corruption in the Nigerian polity.

2. Notion of Conscience And Societal Structure

According to Giubilini (2023), the term "conscience," originating from the Latin word "*conscientia*" and the Greek word "*suneidenai*," pertains to an individual's internalized moral awareness. The external entity might manifest in various forms, such as a divine being or societal norms and values. Conscience, when examined through a psychological lens, encompasses the processes of introspection, behavioural awareness, and self-evaluation. While there is often overlap between these qualities, they can be distinguished from one another both mentally and cognitively (Giubilini, 2023). Conscience is an internal mechanism that drives individuals to adhere to their moral convictions, guiding their actions. It is a pervasive moral duty within an individual's cognitive framework, generating strong motivational impulses (Perkins, 2019). Kant's theory of conscience is a motivational framework, focusing on self-evaluation and adverse emotions like guilt, humiliation, and fear (Guyer, 2005). These emotions can influence morally upright behaviour, but they do not always compel individuals to adhere to moral ideals. Positive emotions linked to conscience may also have motivational potency.

Perkins (2019) opined that the religious perspective on conscience frequently associates it with concepts such as innate morality, a benevolent universe, or deity. The prevailing perspectives within secular and scientific discourse argue that conscience is influenced by hereditary factors, acquired through learning processes, or shaped by cultural influences. The concept of conscience has been interpreted differently throughout history, often influenced by philosophical theories, moral considerations, and religious or political motivations. This ambiguity hinders historians and theoretical philosophers, and is evident in legislative strategies, especially in healthcare policy (Heidemann, 2012). Four primary conceptualizations of conscience are self-awareness, self-evaluation, moral discernment, and personal moral convictions. The concept of conscience pertains to an individual's subjective understanding of personal morality, serving as a fundamental component of one's sense of personal identity (Heidemann, 2012). The concept under consideration pertains to an individual's perception of their own identity and the distinctive attributes that define their uniqueness, including character, psychological qualities, and prior experiences (Greene, 2013). The

concept of private space frequently serves as a foundation for the political application of conscience, as individuals assert their entitlement to adhere to their own moral principles. This is notably evident in the practice of conscientious objection, wherein individuals assert their right to refuse compliance with social norms or legal requirements that conflict with their own beliefs.

The concept of conscience holds significant importance in the realm of human behaviour, as it pertains to the consideration of others within social interactions. The utilization of nationalism and the concept of a Brotherhood of human is often employed as a means to mitigate intergroup conflicts, although collective dynamics has the potential to reshape an individual's moral judgement (Kraus, 2019). Fanaticism is incessant, since it has effectively employed conscience to further its cause. The concept of the Amity-enmity complex, originally proposed by Sir Arthur Keith, posits that the development of conscience can be attributed to the evolutionary pressures faced by tribal communities, which often found themselves in close proximity to hostile external groups (Thiel, 2011). This complex is characterised by a dual function, wherein conscience serves to safeguard and support individuals within the in-group, while also manifesting animosity and aggression towards those belonging to out-groups.

According to existing research, individuals and animals demonstrate a tendency to prioritise the preservation of social bonds, leading their conscience to endorse and prompt behaviours aimed at safeguarding these relationships (Brook, 2001). In avian societies characterised by complicated territoriality and cooperative breeding, instances of rule-breaking appear to be occasionally allowed in contexts unrelated to survival. The concept of personal identity is closely interconnected with the ideas of conscience and moral integrity, particularly within the framework of the identity view of integrity (Greene, 2013). The concept, of integrity entails individuals maintaining loyalty to their "identity-conferring commitments," which are regarded as the essential aspects that shape their perception of life. The component of an individual's morals that confers individuality is commonly referred to as conscience by certain individuals.

According to Giubilini (2023), the idea of conscience can be comprehended from two perspectives: firstly, as a collection of fundamental and self-defining moral convictions that are essential to an individual's perception of their own identity or self-conception; and secondly, as a method of engaging with and

establishing a connection to these moral views. The concept of conscience holds significant importance in shaping our self-perception, leading to the recognition of the need to safeguard conscience and conscientious objection in several domains, notably within the healthcare field. Psychopaths exhibit a deficiency in conscience, as they demonstrate an inability to establish a link between their moral understanding and their behaviour through experiences of remorse and disapproval (Giubilini, 2023). Recent empirical research in the field of psychology has indicated that individuals prefer to associate the identity of others less with their memories, as has been conventionally posited, and more with their moral values (Perkins, 2019). The aforementioned findings offer empirical evidence in favour of the notion that conscience plays a crucial role in shaping an individual's perception of personal identity and in making attributions related to personal identity. This research investigates the concept of conscience as the inherent moral code instilled inside rational beings, guiding their understanding of ethical principles and distinguishing between what is morally correct and incorrect.

Conscience entails the utilization of logic within the framework of societal organization, enabling individuals to assess the merits of ideals and behaviours for the collective welfare. Akinwale (2019) asserts that the extent to which religion influences the development of societal conscience is contingent upon the willingness of religious groups to shape the moral compass of their individual constituents. Some individuals, including Augustine of Hippo and Thomas Aquinas, hold the perspective that conscience is representative of the divine will of God, which entails the imperative of obedience and adherence to natural law (Aquinas, q-94; Aquinas, 1994). These philosophers have made significant contributions to the comprehension of conscience and its function in human behaviour. Aquinas (1994) differentiates between everlasting law and divine law, as well as conscience and natural law. The concept of eternal law pertains to the divine intellect that governs the entirety of the cosmos. On the other hand, natural law refers to the inherent human disposition towards the pursuit of goodness, which is discerned via the application of practical reason.

Aquinas posits that all additional precepts of natural law derive from this inherent propensity. Conversely, conscience refers to the utilization of acquired knowledge in a specific context to assess the moral righteousness or wrongfulness of a course of action. The concept of divine rule provides guidance in discerning moral actions and avoiding immoral ones,

particularly in times where our cognitive capacities are insufficient to provide clear guidance. Conscience can be understood as the cognitive process by which individuals utilise their acquired information to make moral judgements and subsequently engage in appropriate actions in a specific context (Jauernig, 2019). This faculty empowers individuals to pursue virtuous behaviour and refrain from engaging in actions that are considered morally reprehensible.

3. The Moral Problems of the Nigerian Nation

The contemporary Nigerian society demonstrates indications of a profound moral decline. There is a prevailing and widespread worry on the moral predicament faced by the nation. The issue seems to mostly stem from the unquestioning embrace of the principles of foreign cultures, specifically the principles of individualism and materialism, within social, political, and economic contexts (Akinaso, 2018; Iheoma, 1985). Corrupt politicians and civil personnel are widely seen as the primary perpetrators in the realm of dishonesty since they engage in embezzlement of public funds, thereby depriving fellow Nigerians of their shared heritage, often without facing significant consequences. Consider, for instance, the persistent accusation of corruption levied against a prominent Senate leader (*Vanguard*, March 25, 2015). According to a report published by *Vanguard* on March 25, 2015, the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) disclosed that Nigerian politicians and their cronies had illicitly appropriated an estimated sum of \$20 trillion (equivalent to approximately N7, 200 trillion) throughout the period spanning from 1960 to 2006.

According to a report by the Socio-Economic Rights and Accountability Project 2015, it has been revealed that an estimated N1.354 trillion was illicitly appropriated from the national treasury over the period spanning from 2006 to 2013 (*The Guardian*, April 19, 2018). In response to the undisclosed sum of money taken during the period from 2013 to 2017, SERAP expressed the viewpoint that there is ample evidence to suggest that judges, judicial officers, lawyers, and military personnel are actively involved in the rampant depletion of the nation's resources.

Dishonesty is not limited to the adult population in Nigeria. Academic institutions, including schools, colleges, and universities, unfortunately encounter instances of academic dishonesty among their students, such as engaging in examination malpractices, engaging in inappropriate relationships in exchange for favorable grades, and committing

crimes of theft (Okebukola, 2012). Furthermore, it is apparent that students face ethical dilemmas when they choose to articulate their frustrations through acts of property destruction within their college campuses, disturbances on highways, and the vandalism of automobiles belonging to unsuspecting individuals. To this group belong a trend that has been nicknamed “Yahoo Boys.” This group of lascivious young men have taken the internet crime known as 419 to a level of display of wealth acquired through questionable means. It would appear that there exists a parallel group to the Yahoo Boys who are called “Yahoo Plus.” There is the prevailing notion that the later group engage in rituals as a means of making their wealth. The nauseating part of this narrative is the aplomb with which the group of young men are welcomed by the society and in the church.

The most apparent form of moral decadence in Nigeria currently is the mode of dressing adopted by both young ladies and older women. There is now a competition among the female folks on which parts of the human anatomy can be exposed to public glare through the clothes they put on. Most young girls now wear pants that expose their thighs to the legs; they wear leggings that give a pictorial view of the private parts even though covered with thin clothing. The exposure of the breast is now the in-thing among the dressing mode of our young girls. For the young men sagging of trousers is the in-thing displaying the type and quality of the underpants the guy is wearing. This is in addition to the bradding of their hair and wearing of all kinds of rings in the nose and ears.

It is erroneous to attribute these activities solely to factors such as lack of knowledge, economic need, food insecurity, emotional distress, systemic malfeasance, or similar circumstances. The presence of dishonest deeds and immoral behaviours might be attributed to a fundamental absence of conscience and moral, guidance. The instances presented suggest that the fundamental underlying cause of the nation's distress has not been effectively addressed (Akinnsaso, 2018; Iheoma, 1985). This implies that the current approach to combating corruption is akin to superficially removing impurities from the water's surface without addressing the root cause of the contamination. In order to accomplish lasting change, it is imperative that we thoroughly examine the ethical foundation of our actions in all areas.

Regrettably, the domain of morality remains beyond the purview of legislation or legal remedies. Bodily practice is a manifestation that is deeply ingrained within the essence of our selves. Hence, it is

imperative that the nation undergo a process of cultural reorientation and attitudinal change in order to transcend the depths of moral degradation. Indeed, effective and intentional leadership is vital in guiding the process of reorientation (Iheoma, 1985). However, it is crucial to acknowledge that the intended transformation can only be realized through the active involvement and engagement of all stakeholders. However, the discussion of that topic will be reserved for a future occasion.

Christians can also feel the same way about religious leaders, who lead large groups of people into fake prayer camps, Miracle Mountains, and chapels where no one really benefits except the pastors. Many adherents faithfully provide their tithes, firmly certain that redemption will be attained in the future, potentially in the near term. Ultimately, the gifts are transformed by ecclesiastical leaders into substantial estates, personal aircraft, and exclusive educational institutions. Paradoxically, the offspring of numerous individuals who actively contribute to these religious congregations find themselves excluded from admission to these institutions of higher education due to their parents' financial incapacity to cover the associated expenses.

4. A Theological Analysis of Matthew 14: 1-5

¹At that time Herod the tetrarch heard the reports about Jesus,

²and he said to his attendants, “This is John the Baptist; he has risen from the dead! That is why miraculous powers are at work in him.” ³Now Herod had arrested John and bound him and put him in prison because of Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife, ⁴for John had been saying to him: “It is not lawful for you to have her.”

⁵Herod wanted to kill John, but he was afraid of the people, because they considered John a prophet.

In the year 4 BC, Herod Antipas, the offspring of Herod I the Great, assumed authority over his father's dominion and proceeded to reinstate two city entities (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 2019). The individual in question dissolved his union with Nabataean in order to enter into matrimony with Herodias, resulting in discontentment and a decline in support. Herod imprisoned John the Baptist and subsequently ordered his execution. John's life came to an end as a result of Herod's actions. According to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 2019, Antipas exercised governance over the regions of Galilee and Perea, assuming responsibility for the implementation of construction projects and the formation of urban

centres. The dissolution of his marital union with Herodias resulted in territorial conflicts and a consequential violent battle of devastating proportions (Keck, 2015). Antipas was subjected to allegations of engaging in a conspiracy against the Roman emperor Caligula, resulting in his subsequent banishment to Spain. The account of John the Baptist's execution by Herod is presented as a narrative device, employing a flashback technique. This narrative choice serves to provoke inquiries into Herod's faith in Yeshua (Jesus) as John, while also exemplifying the inherent clash between celestial and terrestrial realms.

The expression in verse 4 "σοι ἔχειν αὐτήν" can be interpreted as "for you to possess her" and serves as a euphemistic reference to the institution of marriage (Koplitz, 2019). John the Baptist placed significant emphasis on the illegitimacy of Herod's marriage, drawing parallels to the narrative presented in 1 Kings 17–19. Elijah provided admonishment to King Ahab over his transgressions, yet Ahab proceeded to expel him. According to the book of Leviticus, it is prohibited for a man to marry his brother's wife unless the brother passes away without leaving an heir (18: 6) (Keck, 2015). In such circumstances, it becomes obligatory for the surviving brother to marry the widow and ensure the continuation of the deceased brother's lineage.

According to the conspiracy idea, it is posited that Herod Antipas' purported interest in John the Baptist may have been secondary to his primary focus on the religious authority situated in Jerusalem (Keck, 2015). It is plausible that John may have been apprehended on fabricated accusations; however, due to Herod Antipas' partial Jewish heritage, he would not have been obligated to adhere to the legal requirements. The Gospel authors were tasked with providing an explanation for Herod's execution of John; however, the primary sources documenting this incident remain speculative in nature (Davis, 2012). According to the historical account provided by Josephus, it is documented that Herod was responsible for the execution of John.

Regrettably, the prophets of antiquity met their demise as a consequence of disseminating the divine message to the faithful. Also regrettably, this phenomenon is currently occurring, albeit under significantly altered circumstances. The tale delves into the conflict that arises between the realms of celestial and terrestrial domains, shedding insight on the divergent legal frameworks and societal norms that characterise these two spheres (Koplitz, 2019). This dichotomy is exemplified through an

examination of the moral decadence and political crises in Nigeria.

The narrative in Matthew 14: 1–5 recounts the unfortunate account of the demise of John the Baptist, who meets his untimely death at the hands of Herod Antipas. The extent of Herod's authority is constrained in his internal conflict, as John the Baptist delivered divine messages that condemned his transgressions. This narrative underscores the significance of upholding a virtuous conscience across successive generations, as it underscores the imperative of a moral conscience. The apprehension experienced by Herod in verses 1–12 of Matthew chapter 14 serves as a cautionary indication of forthcoming retribution and distress. The act of conscientiously adhering to one's beliefs, as exemplified by John, is of utmost importance, particularly in instances where individuals feign support for the gospel while engaging in immoral behaviour.

John the Baptist, a figure who demonstrated great courage by openly denouncing Herod's evil behaviour, serves as an exemplary model for anyone adhering to the Christian faith. In spite of the potential negative consequences, John demonstrated unwavering dedication to disseminating the gospel through a combination of compassion and veracity, even in the face of a morally flawed and non-religious society (Koplitz, 2019). He engaged in a struggle against moral transgressions and demonstrated compassion towards individuals who committed those transgressions.

5. A Picture of the Modern Nigerian Religious Leader

The discourse centers on the role of religious leaders in the formation of societal conscience, emphasizing the interplay between religion, society, and human characteristics such as religiosity, relationship, and rationality. A religious leader is one who is duly acknowledged by a religious institution and possesses jurisdiction within a religious hierarchy, encompassing clergy members such as priests, cardinals, bishops, and the highest-ranking pontiff in the Catholic faith (Akinwale, 2019). In the present context, religious leaders are commonly associated with the three primary religions observed in Nigeria, namely Islam, Christianity, and African Traditional Religion (ATR). Religious leaders are the most extensive and efficiently structured civil institutions globally, effectively fostering unity across racial, socioeconomic, and national boundaries (HCCC, 2023). Their extensive experience in international

collaborations positions them to make a valuable contribution to the global breastfeeding initiative.

Religious leaders, including Buddhist monks, nuns, imams, pastors, priests, and Punjabis, exert influence over attitudes, opinions, and behaviours by virtue of the trust they command and the attention they receive from both community members and political authorities. Religion exerts a profound impact on all aspects of human existence, spanning from the moment of birth to the eventuality of death (Iheoma, 1985). Within this context, religious leaders assume responsibility for overseeing a wide array of matters, encompassing administrative issues, ceremonial practices, philosophical inquiries, and theological considerations (HCCC, 2023). These individuals possess considerable societal influence, respect, and authority as they deliver sermons at diverse venues and regularly engage with visitors. The presence of religious leaders within a nation contributes to the promotion of peace, security, and sustainable development by imparting moral values to the general population through their sermons.

Throughout the annals of history, certain communities have attained eminence by virtue of their unwavering stability, elevated moral standards, and rigorous adherence to discipline. Civilizations such as Egypt, Greco-Roman, Indo-Chinese, and Western civilizations have incorporated these features (Osajie, 2021). Religion, encompassing traditional, Christian, and Islamic beliefs, exerts a substantial influence on shaping the ethical foundation of individuals residing in countries where reverence for a higher power serves as the origin of sagacity. Esteemed religious leaders fulfill the role of societal moral compass, serving as a reminder to individuals of the need of moral uprightness, empathy, and the impermanence of life (Iheoma, 1985). The diverse geographical features and abundance of religious structures in Nigeria are significant factors that lead to its recognition as a community of nations. In a 2001 book, leaders of major religions were cautioned about the potential for the forces of darkness to exert dominance over the socio-political sphere (Osajie, 2021). The cultivation of spiritual awareness is a profound endeavour that requires fortitude and resilience. It is a divine gift bestowed upon sincere religious leaders and individuals who are earnestly seeking the ultimate Truth from the omnipotent Creator of the cosmos.

Despite being confronted with a significant turning point seven years ago, Nigerian religious leaders have persisted in prioritizing their pursuit of spiritual development, while concurrently directing their

efforts towards disseminating their religious teachings to Western nations (Osajie, 2021). The individuals in question have relinquished their ability to serve as authoritative sources of truth and moral redemption, and their responsibility to lead the nation in the process of moral revitalization has been disregarded (Akinnaso, 2018). Worship establishments have experienced a decline in their adherence to the principles of truth, with the regular utilization of prophetic pronouncements to create an illusion of divine connection and spiritual righteousness. Many contemporary religious leaders exhibit characteristics similar to opportunistic politicians, prioritizing material gain and conforming to deceptive practices.

Moreover, they engage in the construction of substantial physical edifices that cater to the externalities prevalent in our society (Okebukola, 2012). Additionally, certain individuals go as far as providing support to political leaders, instilling them with unfounded optimism, solely to obtain exemptions on customs duties and to associate themselves with influential figures. The Christian Association of Nigeria and the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs have transitioned into temporal entities, with a primary focus on mitigating the tensions arising from sporadic religious conflicts. Additionally, they have engaged in strategic investments in reputable firms and the establishment of higher education institutions. Authentic spiritual leaders are intended to serve as beacons of illumination among the prevailing obscurity enveloping the nation, yet the radiance within the spiritual custodians of Nigeria appears to be waning.

6. The Role of Religious Leaders in Conscientizing the Nigerian Society

The role of religious leaders in Conscientizing Nigerian society can take the following forms:

Upholding Truthfulness and Human Dignity: In order to foster harmonious coexistence within Nigerian society, it is imperative that religious leaders uphold the principles of truthfulness and safeguard the dignity, rights, and values of individuals. It is imperative that individuals do not maintain a detached stance when confronted with matters that have the potential to disrupt societal equilibrium, particularly in instances where leaders amass money while their constituents endure hardship (Akinnaso, 2018). The adherence to truthfulness serves as a guiding principle for both religious leaders and their followers, leading them away from engaging in vices and fostering animosity.

As Moral Agents: Religious leaders assume the role of moral guardians inside a nation, fulfilling the essential function of providing a conscience that promotes peace, security, and ultimately, sustainable development. Religious leaders possess the capacity to exert influence over conduct and behaviour through the dissemination of moral values. This influence can manifest in various societal outcomes, including the promotion of transparency, accountability, job creation, service delivery, and the maintenance of law and order.

Instilling a Sense of Comfort and Reassurance: If these practices are effectively executed, Nigeria will be able to uphold a significant level of peace and security, hence fostering sustainable development. African Traditional Religion (A.T.R) also plays a role in fostering sustainable growth on a psychological level by instilling a sense of comfort and reassurance through the belief in ancestral spirits. The feeling of security has the potential to provide protection against malevolent entities such as witches, wizards, widespread diseases, and influenza, all of which have the capacity to hinder personal and societal progress. During periods of adversity, individuals often seek solace in their own traditional religious and cultural practises, irrespective of the specific principles of their religious beliefs, in order to maintain an illusion of unimpaired adherence to syncretism.

Impartation of Moral Virtues and Values: In order to foster effective leadership in Nigeria, it is imperative that religious leaders make concerted efforts to impart moral virtues inside their respective houses of worship. As educators responsible for instilling moral characteristics, it is imperative that they always uphold the value of truthfulness and approach their duties with diligence. There is a significant level of confidence placed in individuals, indicating that they possess a solid understanding of theological matters. Consequently, the authentic implementation of religious principles will foster the development. Nigeria aspires to become a more prosperous nation characterised by the values of peace, security, and justice. The imperative for religious leaders in Nigeria to actively engage in fostering moral values across society and politics is evident. The phenomenon of corruption has permeated the realm of religion, wherein it has been utilised as a manipulative instrument by both unscrupulous politicians and individuals inside society. The commercialization of predictions can be attributed to the influence of corrupt political and religious systems. The utilization of biblical prophets by Nigerian religious leaders to address the issue at

hand is recommended; nevertheless, comprehending the underlying significance of prophets is a persistent obstacle. It is also imperative for religious leaders in Nigeria to refrain from employing religion as a means for political manipulation and control. The prophets mentioned in the Bible employed their interventions as a means to purify society, steering clear of the contamination that often arises from the realms of politics and religion. These individuals were not fraudulent pretenders, but rather authentic individuals who were divinely chosen and provided constructive criticism and counsel to both monarchs and the broader community. Prophets like as Moses, Samuel, and Nathan were not fraudulent individuals, but rather genuine individuals who were divinely chosen and entrusted by God to provide critical analysis and direction to both monarchs and society at large.

Preaching Tolerance: In a nation such as Nigeria, which is characterised by religious variety, it is imperative to interpret religious legislation in a manner that takes into account the presence of other religions within our shared society. Both Jesus and his Gospel can be understood as having political implications, as demonstrated by the actions of prophetic religious leaders such as John Chrysostom (349–407), who utilized their rhetorical skills to confront the imperial court. During a period of historical significance, Archbishop Oscar Romero of San Salvador emerged as a prominent moral authority in El Salvador, actively confronting a tyrannical regime and urging the government and its armed forces to abstain from perpetrating violence against their fellow citizens. If politics is defined as the astute governance of societal affairs with the objective of promoting collective welfare, then it is inherently intertwined with the concept of goodness. The objective of politics is inherently moral in nature, and engaging in political activities devoid of moral considerations can lead to significant risks and consequences. Nevertheless, if we see the political endeavour as a moral undertaking, given that religions provide moral guidelines, it becomes difficult to disentangle religion from politics.

Maintaining Neutral Stance in Political Matters: The relationship between religion and politics is interconnected, as religious teachings carry moral and political significance. Within the context of Christianity, the paramount directive entails demonstrating love towards God and one's fellow human beings. Consequently, religious communities and their leaders are expected to refrain from disengaging themselves from political affairs. The concept of divine scripture does not maintain a

neutral stance in relation to political orientations, hence imposing a responsibility on religious communities and their leaders to assertively articulate and advocate its principles within the domain of politics. Religion is obligated to establish and advocate for principles of moral excellence and virtue within society while also opposing any elements that are detrimental to the collective welfare. It is imperative that religious leaders refrain from utilizing divine scripture to advocate for or oppose certain political parties or politicians. Instead, they should engage in a discerning analysis of political parties and candidates, drawing from their religious convictions to provide insightful commentary. This phenomenon has the potential to impact the electoral prospects of parties and their candidates; nevertheless, it should be noted that it does not entail explicit directives to endorse or oppose a certain party or candidate.

Fostering Political Unity: Religious leaders should leverage their moral power to foster political reconciliation, delivering sermons that promote unity rather than fostering division. The establishment of peace is of utmost importance within the realms of our individual hearts, familial units, societal structures, and the global community. Furthermore, it is through the sincere efforts of authentic religious leaders that connections and understanding are fostered among diverse religious groups. The primary concern in the 2023 elections revolved around the restoration of Nigeria's sovereignty to its citizens. Nigerian citizens ought to contemplate whether they have elected leaders who possess a comprehensive understanding of democracy or if they have instead chosen individuals who lack the necessary democratic temperament and qualifications. It is imperative to prioritise the selection of legislators and administrators who possess a comprehensive understanding of the pressing necessity for constitutional reforms and have the requisite political determination to enact such reforms. Nigeria necessitates leaders who will diligently endeavour to fortify its nascent and vulnerable democratic system while abstaining from using ethnic and religious heterogeneity for disruptive purposes.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has drawn attention to the importance of religious leaders in the task of moral regeneration of the Nigerian society. Taking a cue from the story of John the Baptist and King Herod, the study examined the concept of conscience and how it affects human behaviour. It equally examined the various roles which religious leaders have played in the past

serving as the conscience of their society. The analysis of Matthew 14:1-5 revealed that the religious leader must be ready to speak truth to authority whatever may be the outcome. On this note the study examined some of the moral ills plaguing the Nigerian nation. The study thus concluded on the note that religious leaders are indeed very important actors in the moral regeneration of Nigeria and they should thus rise up to their divine task. The study suggested some ways by which this task can be achieved.

In concluding this study the writer would like to make a few recommendations.

- Religious leaders in Nigeria so far have not done enough to fulfil their moral compass, which leads to a decline in moral integrity and disillusionment. Religion, when properly cultivated, can guide individuals in socio-political endeavours and uphold ethical standards. Therefore, religious leaders are urged to renounce hypocrisy and choose righteousness to realise their divine God's intentions for the nation.
- Religious leaders should follow the teachings of Jesus Christ, Muhammad, and traditionalists, who advocated for peace, integrity, morality, unity, and security. Inculcating such teachings in the lives of their members will go a long way in the moral regeneration of Nigeria.
- The involvement of religious leaders in politics can help address issues like moral decadence, corruption, poverty, disease, and ignorance. The core of the matter is that religious leaders should be bold and outspoken, like the biblical John the Baptist. A deep reverence for the divine can foster tranquilly, societal cohesion, and a revived national conscience.

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