

ROLES OF CHRISTIAN ETHICS IN ADDRESSING MORAL DECLINE AMONG NIGERIAN YOUTHS

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Abstract

The increasing moral decline among Nigerian youths has become a significant concern for educators, religious leaders, and policymakers, manifesting in juvenile delinquency, substance abuse, academic dishonesty, and erosion of societal values. This study examines the role of Christian ethics in guiding the moral behavior of youths in Nigeria, using a literature review methodology to analyze historical, religious, and social perspectives on youth morality. The review explores the underlying causes of moral decline, including peer influence, exposure to technology and social media, poverty, and weakened family structures, while assessing the contributions of churches, families, and schools in fostering ethical development. Findings indicate that Christian ethical teachings provide a structured framework for value-based behavior, character formation, and ethical decision-making, offering practical guidance for addressing moral lapses among youths. However, challenges such as secularization, inadequate integration of ethics into formal education, limited parental engagement, and cultural conflicts reduce the effectiveness of ethical interventions. The study recommends actionable strategies including structured values education programs, church-based mentorship initiatives, parental involvement, and policy support aimed at reinforcing ethical standards. By integrating Christian ethics into both formal and informal education, stakeholders can enhance the moral resilience of Nigerian youths, mitigate ethical challenges, and promote social cohesion. These insights have significant implications for educators, policymakers, religious organizations, and families seeking to cultivate moral values and guide youths toward responsible citizenship and ethical decision-making.

Keywords: Christian Ethics, Moral Decline, Youths, Values Education, Ethical Challenges

Introduction

Over the past decades, Nigeria has witnessed increasing concerns regarding moral decay among youths, as reflected in rising instances of academic dishonesty, disobedience, corruption, substance abuse, and general social irresponsibility (Okafor, 2021; Adeyemi, 2020; Nwosu, 2022). These behaviors have significant implications for societal cohesion, national development, and the

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ethical foundation of the nation. Factors contributing to moral decline include peer influence, exposure to inappropriate media content, poverty, and weakened family and community structures (Ojo, 2020; UNICEF, 2019). In this context, Christian ethics, grounded in biblical teachings, offer essential moral guidance, promoting virtues such as honesty, integrity, empathy, compassion, and social responsibility (Tunde, 2019; Hauerwas & Willimon, 2018). By providing a framework for ethical reasoning and character development, Christian ethics serve as a vital tool for addressing the moral challenges faced by Nigerian youths, offering both spiritual and practical guidance in daily decision-making processes.

The purpose of this study is to examine the relevance and effectiveness of Christian ethics in shaping youth behavior and mitigating moral decline in Nigeria. Through a comprehensive review of literature on moral education, ethical development, and youth behavior, the paper seeks to identify patterns, causes, and strategies for enhancing moral conduct among youths (Adeyemi, 2020; Okafor, 2021). The significance of this study lies in its potential to inform interventions by families, schools, religious institutions, and policymakers, providing evidence-based recommendations for fostering ethical behavior and responsible citizenship among Nigerian youths (Ojo, 2020; Tunde, 2019). Understanding the interplay between Christian ethical teachings and youth behavior is crucial for developing sustainable programs and policies aimed at promoting social cohesion, ethical resilience, and long-term societal development (UNICEF, 2019; Hauerwas & Willimon, 2018).

Conceptual Clarifications

Christian Ethics

Christian ethics refers to the study and practical application of moral principles derived from the teachings of the Bible and the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. It provides a framework for guiding human conduct and decision-making, emphasizing virtues such as love, justice, honesty, integrity,

responsibility, and compassion (Hauerwas & Willimon, 2018; Tunde, 2019). These core values are essential in both personal and social contexts, helping individuals navigate moral dilemmas, build strong character, and contribute positively to society. Christian ethics also highlights the importance of accountability to God and the integration of spiritual principles into everyday life, ensuring that moral actions align with both divine guidance and societal expectations (Ojo, 2020).

Furthermore, Christian ethics serves as a tool for moral education and character formation, particularly among youths, by instilling values that promote ethical reasoning, empathy, and social responsibility. By emphasizing moral virtues over mere rule-following, Christian ethics encourages individuals to internalize ethical principles and make decisions that benefit both themselves and the wider community (Hauerwas & Willimon, 2018; Adeyemi, 2020). In the Nigerian context, where youth morality is increasingly challenged by societal and technological pressures, Christian ethics offers a stabilizing influence, reinforcing behaviors that support social cohesion, justice, and ethical citizenship (Tunde, 2019; UNICEF, 2019).

Moral Decline

Moral decline is defined as the progressive erosion of ethical standards and societal values, manifesting in behaviors such as dishonesty, disrespect for authority, corruption, violence, substance abuse, and general social irresponsibility (Nwosu, 2022; Okafor, 2021). It reflects a breakdown in the moral fabric of society and is often influenced by multiple environmental and social factors. Peer pressure, media exposure, economic hardship, and inadequate family or community support systems are significant contributors to moral decay among youths (Ojo, 2020; Adeyemi, 2020). Such decline not only undermines individual development but also threatens social cohesion and national progress, making it a critical area for research and intervention.

Addressing moral decline requires a multidimensional approach that includes ethical education, spiritual guidance, and community engagement. Christian ethics, when effectively taught and practiced, can counteract moral erosion by providing a moral compass that emphasizes virtue, integrity, and social responsibility (Hauerwas & Willimon, 2018; Tunde, 2019). Families, schools, and religious institutions play crucial roles in reinforcing these ethical standards, helping youths internalize values that resist negative influences and promote responsible behavior (UNICEF, 2019; Nwosu, 2022). Understanding the causes and manifestations of moral decline is essential for developing targeted interventions that foster moral resilience and ethical citizenship among Nigerian youths.

Youths

Youths are individuals in the transitional stage from adolescence to adulthood, typically ranging from 15 to 30 years of age. This stage is characterized by significant physical, psychological, and social development, making it a critical period for shaping values, behavior, and decision-making (UNICEF, 2019; Adeyemi, 2020). Youths represent the future workforce, leaders, and change agents in society, and their attitudes and actions directly influence social cohesion, economic growth, and political stability. Given their developmental stage, youths are highly susceptible to environmental, peer, and societal influences, which can either positively or negatively affect their moral and ethical orientation (Ojo, 2020; Nwosu, 2022).

Due to their vulnerability and importance to societal progress, providing ethical guidance during youth is crucial. Christian ethics, in particular, can play a significant role in shaping the moral compass of young people, instilling values such as responsibility, integrity, empathy, and social accountability (Tunde, 2019; Hauerwas & Willimon, 2018). Families, schools, religious institutions, and communities have a shared responsibility to nurture and mentor youths, helping

them internalize ethical principles and resist negative influences such as peer pressure, technological distractions, and societal moral erosion (Okafor, 2021; UNICEF, 2019). Ensuring that youths develop a strong ethical foundation during this stage is vital for fostering moral resilience and promoting long-term societal well-being.

Theoretical Framework

Kohlberg's Moral Development Theory

Kohlberg's Moral Development Theory, developed in 1981, explains the progressive stages through which individuals develop moral reasoning, from a focus on self-interest to principled ethical judgment. The theory is structured around six stages, grouped into three levels: pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional morality. At the pre-conventional level, moral reasoning is guided by obedience, punishment avoidance, and personal gain. At the conventional level, individuals internalize societal norms, emphasizing conformity, loyalty, and law and order. Finally, the post-conventional level reflects principled morality, where individuals act according to universal ethical principles and personal conscience, even if these conflict with societal norms (Kohlberg, 1981). The theory's principles emphasize cognitive development, justice, and the role of reasoning in ethical decision-making. Its strength lies in providing a structured framework to understand moral growth and predict behavioral outcomes based on reasoning stages, making it particularly useful for studying youths. However, critics highlight its limitations, including a potential cultural bias toward Western individualistic reasoning, underrepresentation of care-oriented moral reasoning, and limited attention to emotional and situational influences (Gibbs, 2013; Nucci & Narvaez, 2008). Despite these weaknesses, the theory offers valuable insights into the development of ethical consciousness, especially when combined with complementary frameworks such as Social

Learning Theory and Virtue Ethics.

Kohlberg's theory is highly applicable to this study because it provides a lens through which the moral reasoning of Nigerian youths can be analyzed in relation to Christian ethical teachings. By assessing youths' progression through moral stages, educators, families, and religious institutions can design interventions that reinforce ethical principles and guide youths toward higher levels of moral judgment. The framework aligns with the study's focus on moral decline and ethical development, as it allows researchers to identify how environmental, familial, and religious influences shape moral reasoning. Its structured, stage-based approach also makes it possible to evaluate the effectiveness of Christian ethics programs in promoting principled behavior. Among the three theories considered Kohlberg's Moral Development Theory, Virtue Ethics, and Social Learning Theory Kohlberg's framework is the most applicable because it directly addresses the cognitive development of moral reasoning and provides measurable stages for assessing ethical growth, which is central to understanding and mitigating moral decline among Nigerian youths (Kohlberg, 1981; Hursthouse, 2018; Bandura, 1977).

Review of Related Literature

Historical and Religious Perspective

Historically, Nigerian societies have relied on communal values, cultural norms, and guidance from elders to instill moral behavior among youths. Traditional moral education emphasized collective responsibility, respect for authority, honesty, and social cohesion, which were transmitted through storytelling, proverbs, rites of passage, and communal activities (Adeyemi, 2020; Okafor, 2021). Elders and community leaders served as moral exemplars, providing both instruction and correction, ensuring that youths internalized societal expectations. These indigenous frameworks were holistic, combining ethical guidance with social, spiritual, and practical life skills, which helped

maintain societal order and cohesion. Such approaches underscored the interconnectedness of individual behavior and communal welfare, emphasizing that ethical lapses affected not only the individual but the broader society (Nwosu, 2022).

With the advent of Christianity in Nigeria, ethical frameworks became more structured and codified, emphasizing personal responsibility, spiritual accountability, and universal moral principles (Ojo, 2020; Tunde, 2019). Christian teachings introduced concepts such as justice, compassion, honesty, and respect for human dignity, reinforcing and complementing traditional moral guidance. Church-based programs, Sunday schools, and youth fellowships provided systematic avenues for moral instruction, mentorship, and ethical reflection, particularly for the younger generation (Hauerwas & Willimon, 2018). The integration of religious and cultural teachings has historically guided youth behavior, fostering ethical resilience by blending societal expectations with spiritual accountability. This dual influence remains significant in contemporary Nigeria, offering a foundation for moral education initiatives aimed at curbing youth moral decline (UNICEF, 2019; Adeyemi, 2020).

Causes of Moral Decline

i. Peer Influence: Peer influence is one of the most significant factors contributing to moral decline among youths. Adolescents and young adults are highly susceptible to the behaviors, attitudes, and values of their peers, often adopting practices to gain acceptance or avoid rejection (Adeyemi, 2020). When peer groups normalize unethical behaviors such as cheating, dishonesty, substance abuse, or disrespect for authority, youths are more likely to replicate these behaviors, weakening their moral foundations. Peer pressure can therefore create an environment where ethical reasoning is compromised, and short-term personal gains are prioritized over socially responsible behavior.

ii. Technology and Media Exposure: The proliferation of digital technology and social media has exposed youths to inappropriate content, including violence, pornography, and materialism, which can distort ethical perspectives (Nwosu, 2022). Constant exposure to such content may desensitize youths to moral standards and encourage imitation of harmful behaviors. Furthermore, unmonitored access to online platforms often undermines parental and societal guidance, making it difficult for youths to differentiate between acceptable and unacceptable conduct. Technology, therefore, acts as both a tool for learning and a potential source of moral erosion.

iii. Poverty and Economic Hardship: Poverty and economic hardship contribute significantly to moral decline, as youths in disadvantaged settings may resort to unethical or illegal means to meet basic needs (Adeyemi, 2020; Ojo, 2020). Limited access to resources and opportunities can encourage behaviors such as theft, bribery, or academic dishonesty as survival strategies. Chronic economic deprivation can also erode the perceived value of ethical behavior, as immediate material gain is often prioritized over principled action. Hence, poverty indirectly shapes moral reasoning by creating environments where unethical behavior is normalized.

iv. Family Instability and Weak Parental Guidance: Family instability, including divorce, neglect, or inadequate parental supervision, can significantly weaken moral development in youths (Tunde, 2019). When parents or guardians fail to provide consistent ethical guidance, model virtuous behavior, or enforce appropriate discipline, youths lack the foundational support necessary for internalizing moral principles. Such instability often leaves youths vulnerable to external influences, such as peers and media, which may reinforce negative behaviors. Families, therefore, play a critical role in shaping ethical orientation, and their absence or dysfunction directly contributes to moral decline.

v. Cultural and Societal Changes: Rapid cultural and societal changes, including urbanization, materialism, and secularization, can erode traditional moral values and communal ethics (UNICEF, 2019; Nwosu, 2022). As youths adapt to modern lifestyles and individualistic values, traditional systems of accountability and communal moral enforcement weaken. This cultural shift may lead to prioritizing personal gain and immediate gratification over social responsibility and ethical conduct. Consequently, societal transformation can indirectly accelerate moral erosion among Nigerian youths.

Role of Christian Ethics

i. Christian ethics plays a central role in fostering moral reasoning, character formation, and responsible decision-making among youths. Grounded in biblical teachings and the life of Jesus Christ, Christian ethics emphasizes the cultivation of virtues such as integrity, honesty, empathy, self-discipline, and social responsibility (Tunde, 2019; Hauerwas & Willimon, 2018). These virtues equip youths to critically evaluate moral dilemmas, make ethically informed decisions, and resist societal pressures that may encourage misconduct, dishonesty, or social irresponsibility (Adeyemi, 2020; Ojo, 2020). By internalizing these principles, young individuals develop a moral compass that guides their behavior not only in personal matters but also in interpersonal and communal interactions, contributing to ethical resilience and societal cohesion.

ii. The practical application of Christian ethics is evident in church-based programs, Sunday schools, and youth fellowship initiatives, which provide structured platforms for mentorship, moral instruction, and ethical reflection (Tunde, 2019; UNICEF, 2019). These programs combine spiritual teaching with community engagement, encouraging youths to apply ethical principles in real-life situations. Families, schools, and religious institutions collaborate to reinforce these values, ensuring that ethical guidance is consistent across multiple social environments (Okafor, 2021; Nwosu, 2022). Through this multi-layered

approach, Christian ethics serves not only as a theoretical framework for moral development but also as a practical tool to cultivate responsible, virtuous, and socially conscious youths capable of navigating complex societal challenges.

Roles of Church, Families, and Schools

i. Role of the Church: Churches play a pivotal role in moral education by providing mentorship, spiritual guidance, and structured ethical instruction to youths. Through programs such as Sunday schools, youth fellowships, and church-based community projects, youths are taught Christian values including honesty, integrity, compassion, and social responsibility (Tunde, 2019; Hauerwas & Willimon, 2018). Church leaders and mentors act as moral exemplars, reinforcing virtuous behavior through counseling, ethical discussions, and practical engagement in community service. By consistently exposing youths to spiritual and ethical principles, churches help internalize moral values that guide behavior in personal, social, and academic contexts, mitigating moral decline (Ojo, 2020; UNICEF, 2019).

ii. Role of Families: Families are the primary agents of moral formation, providing foundational values, discipline, and behavioral modeling that shape the ethical orientation of youths. Parents and guardians instill principles such as respect, responsibility, honesty, and empathy through daily interactions, guidance, and monitoring (Adeyemi, 2020; Okafor, 2021). A stable family environment that emphasizes moral standards reinforces the teachings of schools and churches, creating consistency in ethical education. Conversely, weak or inconsistent parental involvement can exacerbate moral decline, making youths more susceptible to negative peer and societal influences (Nwosu, 2022). Families, therefore, form the critical first layer of moral guidance, ensuring that ethical values are nurtured from an early age.

iii. Role of Schools: Schools provide structured platforms for formal ethics education, complementing the moral guidance offered by families and churches.

Through curriculum-based lessons, extracurricular activities, civic education, and social engagement programs, schools promote ethical reasoning, character development, and responsible decision-making (Okafor, 2021; Tunde, 2019). Teachers serve as role models and facilitators, reinforcing values such as honesty, fairness, empathy, and social responsibility. When schools, families, and churches coordinate their efforts, the reinforcement of ethical principles across multiple social environments enhances the internalization of moral values among youths, promoting holistic moral development and reducing societal ethical challenges (Ojo, 2020; UNICEF, 2019).

Challenges in Promoting Christian Ethics

i. Secularization and Exposure to Alternative Value Systems:

Secularization exposes youths to lifestyles and value systems that often conflict with Christian ethical teachings (Hauerwas & Willimon, 2018; Nwosu, 2022). Globalized media, social media platforms, and urban cultural influences present materialistic, individualistic, or morally relativistic ideals that compete with Christian values. This constant exposure can dilute youths' commitment to ethical principles and undermine structured moral education, making it harder for them to internalize virtues like honesty, integrity, and social responsibility.

ii. Inadequate Curricular Emphasis on Ethics: Many Nigerian schools offer limited or insufficient structured instruction on moral and Christian ethics (Ojo, 2020; Okafor, 2021). While civic education or religious studies may be included in the curriculum, they often lack depth, practical engagement, or integration into daily school life. Without deliberate and continuous ethical education, students miss opportunities to reflect critically on moral dilemmas, practice virtues, and develop principled decision-making skills.

iii. Limited Parental Involvement and Family Instability: Parental guidance is critical for reinforcing ethical standards at home, but limited involvement or family instability weakens foundational moral support (Adeyemi,

2020; Tunde, 2019). Inconsistent role modeling, neglect, or lack of supervision can leave youths susceptible to peer pressure, social media influence, and other negative environmental factors. Families that fail to provide ethical instruction or discipline reduce the effectiveness of both church-based and school-based moral education programs.

iv. Cultural Conflicts and Value Tensions: Conflicts between traditional cultural practices and Christian ethical principles pose another challenge (Ojo, 2020; UNICEF, 2019). For instance, certain communal norms, rites, or societal expectations may contradict Christian teachings, creating confusion for youths attempting to navigate competing value systems. Resolving these tensions requires culturally sensitive moral education that harmonizes spiritual teachings with local traditions to promote consistent ethical behavior.

Discussion

The literature reviewed highlights that Nigerian youths face complex and multidimensional ethical challenges, arising from both individual and societal factors. Peer influence, exposure to inappropriate technological content, family instability, poverty, and rapid cultural changes all contribute significantly to moral decline (Adeyemi, 2020; Nwosu, 2022; UNICEF, 2019). These factors interact to create environments where unethical behaviors such as dishonesty, substance abuse, disobedience, and disrespect for authority become normalized. The historical and religious perspective indicates that traditional communal values combined with Christian ethical teachings have long provided moral guidance, but contemporary pressures challenge the internalization of these values (Ojo, 2020; Tunde, 2019). Consequently, youths may struggle to reconcile conflicting value systems, making structured ethical education and mentorship critical for moral resilience.

Christian ethics emerges as a coherent framework capable of countering these challenges by emphasizing virtue cultivation, ethical reasoning, and social

responsibility (Hauerwas & Willimon, 2018; Tunde, 2019). Church-based programs, family engagement, and school-based ethical instruction offer complementary avenues for reinforcing moral principles. However, gaps in implementation such as insufficient curricular emphasis on ethics, limited parental involvement, and cultural conflicts reduce the effectiveness of these interventions (Okafor, 2021; Ojo, 2020). To enhance ethical formation, systemic interventions that integrate Christian ethics across educational, familial, and community platforms are necessary. Coordinated efforts by families, churches, schools, and policymakers can strengthen moral guidance, cultivate responsible decision-making, and empower Nigerian youths to navigate societal pressures with principled behavior. This integrated approach underscores the importance of collective responsibility in fostering sustainable moral development.

Recommendations

- i. Integrate Christian ethics into school curricula and extracurricular programs:** Incorporating Christian ethics into school curricula ensures that youths receive continuous moral instruction alongside their academic education. Extracurricular programs, such as ethics clubs, debates, and community service, provide practical opportunities to apply ethical principles. This integration helps students develop consistent moral reasoning and strong character.
- ii. Enhance parental engagement through workshops, mentorship, and consistent moral guidance:** Parents and guardians play a critical role in shaping youths' moral development, and structured engagement can strengthen this role. Workshops, mentorship programs, and regular discussions at home create opportunities for parents to model ethical behavior and instill important virtues. Consistent parental involvement ensures that moral teachings from schools and churches are reinforced at home.
- iii. Strengthen church-led youth programs, including mentorship, community service, and ethical seminars:** Churches provide spiritual guidance

and practical moral instruction, and expanding youth programs enhances their effectiveness. Mentorship, community service projects, and ethical seminars allow youths to experience and apply virtues such as integrity, empathy, and social responsibility. These programs help youths internalize ethical principles and develop moral resilience.

iv. Develop policies that promote value education and support ethical training initiatives: Government and educational policymakers should implement measures that encourage moral and ethical education in schools and communities. Policies can provide resources, training for educators, and frameworks to evaluate the effectiveness of moral programs. Institutional support ensures sustainability and broad reach, helping to systematically address youth moral decline.

v. Utilize technology and social media to disseminate positive moral content and counteract unethical influences: Digital platforms and social media can be used to promote ethical behavior and counteract harmful content. Educational apps, online seminars, moral discussion forums, and value-based campaigns provide accessible avenues for youths to engage with positive messages. When used effectively, technology complements traditional moral education and reaches a wider audience in a digital age.

Conclusion

Christian ethics continues to be a crucial framework for guiding Nigerian youths toward moral integrity, responsible decision-making, and socially constructive behavior. The literature indicates that ethical challenges among youths are multifaceted, stemming from peer pressure, technological exposure, family instability, economic hardship, and cultural influences. By emphasizing virtues such as honesty, empathy, integrity, and social responsibility, Christian ethics provides a structured foundation for character formation and moral reasoning. Churches, families, and schools play complementary roles in

reinforcing these principles, and coordinated efforts across these institutions can create consistent moral guidance that shapes the behavior of youths in diverse social and cultural contexts.

Addressing gaps in moral education, family involvement, and community engagement is essential to mitigating moral decline and promoting ethical resilience among Nigerian youths. Structured school programs, church-led mentorship initiatives, parental engagement, supportive policies, and the effective use of technology can collectively reinforce Christian ethical values and prepare youths to navigate societal pressures with principled behavior. Future research should explore the long-term impact of integrated Christian ethics programs, examining their effectiveness across Nigeria's diverse cultural regions and socio-economic contexts. Such studies will provide valuable insights into best practices for moral education and offer evidence-based strategies for sustaining the ethical development of future generations

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