

## A RELIGIOUS AND MORAL EVALUATION OF THE EFFECTS OF BANDITRY IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN SOCIETY

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### Abstract

Banditry has become a security and humanitarian crisis in contemporary Nigeria, producing killings, abductions, displacement, economic disruption, and the erosion of social trust. Despite extensive attention to its security and socioeconomic dimensions, its religious and moral implications remain underexamined. This study therefore evaluates the effects of banditry from religious and moral perspectives, focusing on human dignity, social cohesion, livelihoods, moral responsibility, and the role of religious institutions in responding to insecurity. The study adopts a qualitative research approach and descriptive-analytical design. Data were collected through documentary sources, including scholarly books, journal articles, religious texts, and studies on banditry, religion, insecurity, and structural violence. The data were analysed thematically and interpreted through Structural Violence Theory. Findings indicate that banditry constitutes both direct and structural violence, causing loss of life, trauma, displacement, livelihood destruction, weakened communal relationships, and moral disorientation. The study is significant because it connects security concerns with religious ethics and responsibility. It recommends moral and religious reorientation, community-based peacebuilding and victim support, improved governance and youth empowerment, and stronger cooperation among security, religious, traditional, and community institutions. The study concludes that peace requires security measures to be complemented by justice, moral accountability, religious engagement, and restoration of social order.

**Keywords:** Banditry; Religion; Morality; Structural Violence; Insecurity.

### Introduction

Banditry has become a serious threat to human security and social stability in many parts of the world, particularly where weak institutions, economic deprivation, resource competition, and limited state presence create conditions in which armed groups can operate with relative impunity. Across Africa, violent forms of rural criminality have increasingly affected communities whose livelihoods depend on agriculture, livestock production and local trade, exposing civilians to killings, abductions, displacement and destruction of property. In Nigeria, these developments have assumed an especially disturbing scale. Banditry has become one of the most persistent dimensions of insecurity, with its effects felt most acutely in the North-West and North-Central regions and, increasingly, in other parts of the country. It encompasses armed robbery, kidnapping for ransom, cattle rustling, village raids, extortion, sexual violence and attacks on homes, farms, schools and other community institutions. Albert observes that the escalation of insecurity has undermined national cohesion, weakened economic productivity, particularly in farming



communities, and eroded public confidence in the state's capacity to guarantee security and justice (45). Recent studies indicate that the problem has become more complex, with armed groups exploiting weak governance, rural marginalisation, ungoverned spaces and criminal economies to sustain violent activities (Amadi and Ugwu 405–19). Ojo, Oyewole and Ainad, for example, describe armed banditry in North-West Nigeria as a multidimensional security problem involving kidnappings, killings, population displacement, cattle rustling and disruption of socio-economic activities (319–346). Ojewale similarly links the persistence of banditry in North-West Nigeria to interconnected governance deficits that have generated a wider crisis of security, development and social protection (990–1005). Thompson's recent analysis further demonstrates the geographical concentration and varied forms of bandit attacks across Nigeria, drawing on a dataset of almost 1,000 attacks recorded over a decade (Thompson).

The consequences of banditry extend well beyond immediate physical violence because the destruction of human lives, livelihoods and community institutions gradually weakens the social conditions necessary for human flourishing. Rural communities affected by persistent attacks often experience displacement, abandonment of farmlands, disruption of markets, declining agricultural production and deterioration in household livelihoods. Recent research has associated armed banditry with serious threats to food security, particularly through killings, kidnapping and the seizure of farmland, which restrict agricultural activity and food supply (Monday et al. 50–64). The effects also extend to education, healthcare, family life and social relationships, while prolonged exposure to violence generates fear, insecurity and mistrust among affected populations. Such consequences make banditry not merely a problem of crime control but a question concerning the moral quality of social life and the responsibilities owed to vulnerable persons. Yet much of the scholarly and public discourse on banditry in Nigeria continues to concentrate on security responses, governance failures, unemployment, poverty, proliferation of arms, resource competition and institutional weaknesses. These explanations are valuable, particularly because recent research has demonstrated the relationship between governance deficits, rural marginalisation and the expansion of banditry. However, they do not fully address the moral questions raised by the deliberate destruction of life, kidnapping of persons, exploitation of victims, violation of property, displacement of communities and erosion of social trust. The significance of these concerns becomes clearer within a society in which religion remains deeply embedded in personal conduct, communal relationships and public morality. Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Religion each contain moral resources concerning the sanctity of human life, justice, compassion, responsibility and peaceful coexistence (Mbiti 209). These traditions therefore provide an important basis for examining not only the conduct of perpetrators but also the obligations of religious institutions, political authorities and communities towards victims and towards the restoration of social order.

The central problem addressed by this study is therefore the limited attention given to the religious and moral dimensions of the effects of banditry in contemporary Nigerian scholarship. Existing studies have made valuable contributions by examining the security implications, governance challenges, socioeconomic consequences, food-security implications and rural dimensions of banditry, but comparatively less attention has been devoted to what the phenomenon means as a moral violation and a religious challenge to the values that sustain human community. The practical importance of addressing this gap lies in the fact that military operations, policing and other security measures, although necessary, cannot by themselves restore trust, rebuild damaged

communities, rehabilitate victims or strengthen the moral commitments required for peaceful coexistence. The practical importance of addressing this gap lies in the fact that military operations, policing and other security measures, although necessary, cannot by themselves restore trust, rebuild damaged communities, rehabilitate victims or strengthen the moral commitments required for peaceful coexistence (Madueke 436–50). A religious and moral perspective offers another dimension of response by examining the virtues, values and responsibilities required to confront violence, protect human dignity and promote the common good. The present study therefore adopts a religious and moral perspective, with Christian Virtue Ethics providing the principal theoretical lens, while Christian, Islamic and African Traditional moral resources are considered in assessing the effects of banditry and possible responses to them. The study consequently evaluates how banditry affects human life and dignity, social cohesion, economic livelihoods, communal relationships and moral consciousness, while also examining the responsibilities and limitations of religious institutions in responding to the crisis. It argues that a meaningful response to banditry requires security and governance measures to be complemented by moral reorientation, religious engagement, justice, accountability, victim support and community-based peacebuilding. In this regard, the study seeks to contribute to contemporary discussions of banditry by bringing the moral and religious dimensions of the problem into closer conversation with its established security, social and economic dimensions.

### Conceptual Clarification

This section clarifies the key concepts around which the study is organised, namely banditry, morality, religion, and insecurity. These concepts are closely connected because the study is concerned not only with the violent activities associated with banditry but also with their consequences for human dignity, moral conduct, communal relationships, and social stability. Clarifying their meanings therefore provides a basis for examining the effects of banditry from a religious and moral perspective.

**Banditry:** Despite its widespread use in contemporary Nigerian discourse, banditry remains a conceptually contested term. Thompson observes that although banditry has been recognised as a global and African phenomenon for centuries, scholars have not arrived at a single definition because the term encompasses a broad range of criminal activities, including village raids, cattle rustling, kidnapping, murder, and extortion (2-3). The diversity of these activities makes the concept particularly difficult to define within the Nigerian context, where criminal groups may engage in several forms of violence simultaneously. A group involved in cattle rustling, for instance, may also engage in kidnapping, ransom collection, attacks on rural settlements, and the imposition of levies on inhabitants. Banditry therefore cannot be understood simply as isolated acts of robbery or rural criminality; its contemporary manifestations often involve sustained violence against civilian populations and the disruption of ordinary community life.

Okoli, Aina, and Onuoha similarly argue that Nigerian banditry has moved beyond simple criminality and developed more organised forms involving quasi-territorial control, what they describe as a “captive population syndrome”, and the structured extraction of resources and labour from besieged rural communities (3-8). Ojewale likewise associates contemporary banditry with organised armed violence involving activities such as kidnapping, cattle rustling, village attacks, and extortion, while recognising its connections with wider ethnic, religious, political, and socioeconomic tensions (20-22). For this study, banditry is therefore understood as organized

armed criminal violence carried out by non-state armed groups against civilian populations, including kidnapping, cattle rustling, village raids, extortion, and related forms of coercion. This definition accommodates the changing character of banditry in Nigeria while distinguishing it from formally organised insurgent movements, even where the two may overlap in their methods, areas of operation, or effects on civilian communities.

**Morality:** Morality refers to the system of principles, values, and standards through which human conduct is evaluated as right or wrong, good or bad. It provides a basis for determining how individuals ought to treat one another and what forms of conduct are considered acceptable within a community. Pojman situates morality within the broader human effort to secure cooperative and flourishing social existence, arguing that moral norms restrain self-interest for the sake of the common good (112). Morality therefore extends beyond private decisions and becomes particularly significant wherever individual actions affect the lives, rights, property, and wellbeing of others. Acts such as killing, kidnapping, stealing, torture, and deliberate destruction of livelihoods raise moral questions because they involve choices that cause serious harm to other human beings and weaken the conditions necessary for peaceful communal life.

Within this study, morality encompasses both the virtues expected of individuals and the shared ethical standards through which communities regulate social relationships. Personal virtues such as honesty, compassion, justice, courage, responsibility, and respect for human life influence how individuals respond to the needs and rights of others, while shared moral norms establish expectations concerning peaceful coexistence and social responsibility. Banditry violates both dimensions of morality because it involves deliberate harm to individuals while simultaneously undermining the values that enable communities to function. The abduction of a farmer, the destruction of a village, the extortion of displaced families, or the killing of an innocent person therefore represents more than a breach of criminal law; each constitutes a violation of fundamental moral obligations towards human beings and the wider community.

**Religion:** Religion is understood as an organised system of beliefs, practices, values, and institutions oriented towards the sacred or transcendent and capable of shaping adherents' conduct, identity, and understanding of their obligations to others. Religion consequently has both a personal and a social dimension. It influences how individuals understand life, suffering, justice, responsibility, and the treatment of other human beings, while religious institutions can transmit moral teachings and organise collective responses to social problems. Mbiti's classic formulation of African religiosity, in which religion permeates virtually every dimension of African life, remains foundational to this understanding (209). In the Nigerian context, Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religion have historically contributed to the formation of moral values and social expectations concerning human dignity, communal responsibility, justice, compassion, and peaceful coexistence.

The relevance of religion to the present study extends beyond the question of whether religious differences cause or intensify violence. Recent scholarship on religious statecraft in Nigeria demonstrates that religious identities, narratives, and institutions can be mobilised by state and non-state actors in ways that influence security governance, conflict, and public perceptions of legitimacy, even where religion is not the principal cause of a particular episode of violence (Gwaza 189–97). Religion can therefore function in contrasting ways within contexts affected by

insecurity: it may reinforce division where religious identities are manipulated, but it may also provide moral resources for reconciliation, social solidarity, and peacebuilding. This study adopts the latter analytical possibility while remaining attentive to the limitations and contradictions of religious engagement. Religion is consequently examined as a source of moral principles through which banditry can be evaluated and as a social institution with responsibilities towards victims, communities, and the wider Nigerian society.

**Insecurity:** Insecurity denotes a condition in which individuals or communities are exposed to threats, danger, harm, or uncertainty affecting their lives, property, freedom, livelihoods, and general wellbeing. Although insecurity is often associated with direct physical violence, its effects can extend into economic, social, psychological, and institutional dimensions of human existence. Igiebor frames Nigerian insecurity as encompassing threats to citizens' rights to life, personal liberty, and socio-economic wellbeing arising from weaknesses within the state's security architecture (2-4). Such a perspective moves the concept beyond the immediate presence of armed attacks and recognises the wider consequences of living without adequate protection, reliable institutions, economic security, or access to justice. A farmer who can no longer cultivate his land because of attacks, for example, faces insecurity even when no physical assault occurs at that particular moment.

This broader understanding is particularly relevant to the religious and moral evaluation undertaken in this study because banditry produces both immediate and enduring forms of insecurity. Killings, kidnappings, armed raids, and destruction of property constitute direct threats to human life and physical safety, while displacement, loss of livelihoods, disrupted education, food insecurity, psychological trauma, and weakened community relationships generate less visible but equally significant forms of harm. Insecurity therefore captures the wider environment created by banditry and provides a useful basis for examining its consequences for human dignity and social wellbeing. The study accordingly considers banditry not only in terms of the immediate violence perpetrated against individuals and communities but also in terms of the structural and social conditions that leave affected populations unable to live secure, dignified, and productive lives.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is anchored on Structural Violence Theory, first articulated by Johan Galtung, which distinguishes between direct violence and structural violence. Direct violence involves physical harm inflicted by an identifiable actor, whereas structural violence refers to harm embedded within social structures, institutions, and patterns of social organisation that systematically restrict people's access to basic needs and life opportunities (Galtung 196). Structural violence may remain less visible than physical attacks because it operates through persistent social, economic, and political conditions rather than through a single identifiable act of aggression (Ajah-Okohu 42–55). Nevertheless, its consequences can include suffering, premature death, deprivation, and the restriction of human potential (Galtung 171). This distinction is particularly useful for understanding banditry in Nigeria, where the immediate violence of killings, kidnapping, rape, extortion, and destruction of property exists alongside conditions of poverty, weak governance, corruption, unemployment, institutional neglect, and inadequate protection of vulnerable communities. Recent scholarship applying this perspective to Nigeria's north-western crisis argues that the dispossession, displacement, and captivity experienced by rural populations cannot be

explained adequately through criminal opportunism alone, since decades of structural neglect, uneven development, and institutional failure have contributed to conditions in which vulnerable communities remain exposed to organised violence (Ejiofor 155-60).

Structural Violence Theory provides an appropriate framework for a religious and moral evaluation of banditry because it connects the immediate acts of violence with the social conditions that enable and sustain them. At the level of direct violence, banditry involves acts such as killing, kidnapping, rape, and destruction of property, all of which constitute serious violations of human dignity and are condemned within the religious and moral traditions considered in this study. At the structural level, however, persistent poverty, injustice, corruption, weak institutions, and the erosion of the rule of law can deepen vulnerability and limit the capacity of communities to protect themselves or recover from violence. Such conditions can generate interconnected forms of economic insecurity, social vulnerability, and diminished access to essential services, thereby extending the effects of violence beyond the immediate incident (Ajah-Okohu 42–55). The limitations of formal security arrangements also make community-based and indigenous mechanisms relevant to the analysis of insecurity, particularly in rural settings where local institutions may possess knowledge, relationships, and forms of legitimacy that formal agencies do not always possess (Usman and Alabi 3). Christian, Islamic, and African Traditional Religious ethics similarly attach moral significance to justice, social responsibility, equitable relationships, and the protection of vulnerable members of the community. The theory therefore provides a useful link between the study's religious-ethical concerns and its examination of Nigeria's wider social and political conditions. It enables the study to assess banditry not only as direct physical violence committed by perpetrators but also as a crisis sustained within social structures that permit deprivation, exclusion, insecurity, and institutional failure to persist. A morally adequate response must consequently confront both dimensions: the immediate violence inflicted on individuals and communities and the structural conditions that continue to expose them to harm.

### **Religious and Moral Perspectives on Banditry**

**Banditry as a Moral Evil:** From a moral standpoint, banditry represents a serious violation of the ethical principles that regulate human conduct and preserve social order. Moral philosophy regards respect for human life, protection of property, justice, and commitment to the common good as essential conditions for a flourishing society (Pojman 112). Banditry contradicts these principles through the deliberate use of violence, coercion, greed, and exploitation against individuals and communities. Murder, kidnapping, rape, cattle rustling, extortion, and the destruction of homes and livelihoods do more than cause immediate physical harm; they weaken trust and solidarity while creating an environment in which fear becomes part of everyday life. A farmer who is prevented from cultivating his land, a family forced to pay ransom for a kidnapped relative, or a community compelled to abandon its homes all experiences forms of harm that extend beyond the immediate criminal act. Banditry therefore constitutes both a breach of law and a profound moral failure because it treats human beings and their livelihoods as objects to be exploited rather than as possessing inherent dignity and worth.

Christian ethics provides a strong basis for condemning such conduct because human beings are understood to have been created in the image of God. The deliberate destruction of human life and the deprivation of another person's means of survival consequently violate a fundamental Christian understanding of human dignity. The Ten Commandments prohibit killing and stealing, while

Jesus' teaching places love of God and neighbour, compassion, justice, and peaceful relations at the centre of moral life (Exod. 20.13-15; Matt. 22.37-40). Banditry, with its reliance on cruelty, intimidation, and disregard for human suffering, stands in direct opposition to these obligations. Recent Catholic social teaching applied to the Nigerian context reinforces this position. Drawing on *Gaudium et Spes*, Osigwe argues that lasting peace cannot be achieved through force alone but requires justice, properly ordered social relations, and respect for human dignity, since violence can emerge from injustice, inequality, and disordered political ambition (Osigwe). This perspective adds an important dimension to the moral assessment of banditry: the violence of perpetrators must be condemned, while the social conditions that allow injustice and insecurity to persist must also receive serious ethical attention.

Islamic moral teaching likewise condemns banditry and violent criminality. The Islamic legal and moral concept of *hirabah* refers to armed violence and brigandage that spread fear, threaten lives and property, and disrupt public order. Such conduct violates the principles of peace (*salaam*), justice (*adl*), and communal wellbeing. The Qur'an expressly condemns those who engage in violent acts that threaten society and provides serious sanctions against such behaviour (Qur'an 5:33). African Traditional Religion also approaches serious acts of violence, theft, and bloodshed through a moral framework centred on communal harmony and the relationship between human beings, the community, and the spiritual order. Idowu explains that conduct that violates fundamental communal values can constitute an abomination capable of disturbing the moral and spiritual order of society (146). Across these traditions, therefore, banditry cannot be reduced to a question of criminality alone. It represents conduct that violates sacred and communal obligations, damages relationships, and weakens the moral foundations of collective life. Considered alongside the Structural Violence Theory adopted in this study, these religious perspectives suggest that an adequate response must confront both the immediate violence of perpetrators and the conditions of injustice, deprivation, and institutional failure that leave communities vulnerable to continued harm.

**Effects of Banditry on Human Life and Dignity:** Banditry has inflicted severe damage on human life and dignity across affected communities in Nigeria. Armed attacks on villages, highways, farms, schools, places of worship, and religious personnel have resulted in deaths, abductions, injuries, displacement, and the destruction of homes and livelihoods (Uroko 174–90). Individuals and families living under the persistent threat of attack are often compelled to alter ordinary patterns of work, movement, education, and social interaction because safety can no longer be taken for granted. Human Rights Watch has documented the serious consequences of armed violence for civilian populations, while more recent empirical assessment indicates that insecurity associated with banditry has substantially undermined citizens' rights to life, personal liberty, and socio-economic progress within the context of a weakened state security architecture (Igiebor 18–20). The consequences therefore extend beyond the number of people killed or abducted. When people cannot safely cultivate their farms, travel to markets, attend school, or remain in their homes, their capacity to live secure and dignified lives is progressively diminished.

The religious and moral significance of this loss is considerable because the sanctity of human life constitutes a central principle within Christian ethics and other religious traditions. Christianity teaches that human beings are created in the image and likeness of God and consequently possess an inherent dignity that cannot legitimately be taken away (Gen. 1:26–27). John Paul II similarly

regards human life as a sacred gift entrusted to humanity and insists that it must be protected from conception to natural death (27). Killing, torture, abduction, and deliberate acts of dehumanisation therefore constitute more than violations of civil law; they represent assaults on a fundamental moral order. The same concern extends to those who survive violent attacks. A person who loses a spouse, child, parent, home, livelihood, or sense of security suffers a profound injury even where physical survival is possible. Banditry thus transforms human beings from persons entitled to protection into targets of coercion, ransom, revenge, or exploitation, contradicting the religious conviction that every human life possesses intrinsic worth.

The harm becomes still deeper when the psychological, emotional, spiritual, and social consequences of violence are considered. Victims of abduction, rape, forced displacement, and prolonged captivity may experience trauma, depression, post-traumatic stress, fear, and a diminished sense of personal identity. Women and children face particular vulnerabilities, including sexual violence, forced marriage, exploitation, and separation from family members. These experiences are incompatible with religious obligations to care for vulnerable persons and to preserve the dignity of those exposed to suffering. Banditry also disrupts family structures and communal support systems when displaced persons are separated from relatives, neighbours, places of worship, schools, and familiar sources of livelihood. Many displaced people are forced to live in conditions where access to food, healthcare, education, shelter, and spiritual support is inadequate. Galtung's concept of structural violence helps explain these less visible forms of suffering, through which prolonged insecurity restricts people's opportunities and diminishes their capacity to realise their human potential (184). Banditry therefore produces a continuum of harm that begins with direct physical violence but can persist through displacement, deprivation, trauma, and social disintegration long after an attack has ended.

### **Social and Economic Effects of Banditry**

**Breakdown of Social Cohesion:** Banditry has severely weakened social cohesion and communal harmony in many parts of Nigeria. Communities that once relied on kinship, neighbourly trust, reciprocal assistance, and shared economic activities increasingly operate within an atmosphere of fear and suspicion. Repeated attacks, abductions, killings, and retaliatory violence can make ordinary social relationships difficult to sustain, as people become uncertain about whom they can trust or where danger may come from. Onwudiwe observes that violence and insecurity can weaken established bonds of solidarity and cooperation within communities (71). Recent analysis of the north-western crisis further indicates that banditry has become intertwined with other forms of armed violence, including ethnic militancy and quasi-insurgent activity, producing what Ojewale describes as a “triad of violence” that complicates communal relations and intensifies mutual suspicion among neighbouring groups (25-28). Where violence is interpreted through ethnic or religious identities, the situation becomes even more difficult because individuals may be judged according to group affiliation rather than personal conduct. Such collective blame can deepen existing divisions and make peaceful interaction increasingly fragile.

The erosion of trust also carries significant moral consequences. African Traditional Religion, Christianity, and Islam place considerable emphasis on communal existence, mutual responsibility, care for others, and the protection of vulnerable members of society (Mbiti 106). These values are weakened when repeated violence encourages people to prioritise individual survival over collective wellbeing. A community in which residents hesitate to assist strangers, fear their

neighbours, or withdraw from communal activities is experiencing more than a security problem; its moral relationships are also being damaged. Banditry can therefore produce a gradual retreat from solidarity, as fear replaces trust and self-preservation replaces mutual responsibility. This pattern is particularly harmful in rural communities where social cooperation is closely connected with farming, trading, religious activities, traditional authority, and informal systems of support. Once these relationships become fractured, rebuilding confidence can be considerably more difficult than restoring physical infrastructure.

The problem is further complicated when communities begin to interpret insecurity through ethnic, religious, or political categories. Such interpretations can produce accusations, reprisals, and exclusion, even where individual members of a particular group have no involvement in banditry. The resulting atmosphere can weaken civic participation and make reconciliation more difficult because communities may approach one another with memories of previous attacks and expectations of future betrayal. From a religious and moral standpoint, this represents a serious departure from principles of neighbourliness, justice, forgiveness, and communal responsibility. Social cohesion cannot be restored merely through the cessation of attacks; it also requires the rebuilding of relationships, confidence, and a shared sense of responsibility for the welfare of others. The social consequences of banditry therefore extend into the moral fabric of communities, making reconciliation and peacebuilding important elements of any meaningful response.

**Economic and Developmental Consequences:** Banditry has produced substantial economic losses across Nigeria, with rural and farming communities bearing a particularly heavy burden, particularly where insecurity restricts agricultural production and access to farmland (Monday 50–64). Persistent insecurity has forced farmers to abandon or reduce cultivation, resulting in declining agricultural production, loss of household income, rising food prices, and increased food insecurity (Akinwale 39). The problem becomes more severe where armed groups steal livestock, destroy crops, demand payments, or restrict access to farmland. Recent research on the “captive population syndrome” demonstrates that some communities in Zamfara and Kaduna states have been compelled to cultivate their own land under the control of bandit groups, with harvests appropriated and informal taxes imposed on residents (Okoli et al. 8-12). Such practices transform agricultural land from a source of livelihood into an arena of coercion and exploitation. Markets and trade routes may also become unsafe, reducing commercial activity and discouraging investment in areas where movement and business operations cannot be conducted with reasonable security.

The economic consequences extend beyond the immediate loss of crops, livestock, property, and income. When families lose their means of livelihood, they may become dependent on relatives, humanitarian assistance, or informal borrowing, while children may leave school because household resources have been depleted. Businesses may relocate or close, transport costs can rise, and local markets can lose both traders and consumers. Public development is similarly affected when insecurity prevents schools from functioning, disrupts healthcare delivery, delays infrastructure projects, and discourages professionals from working in affected communities. These conditions can deepen existing poverty and create a cycle in which deprivation makes recovery more difficult, while continued insecurity further reduces opportunities for economic advancement. Gutierrez's account of structural injustice is relevant here because social

arrangements can become unjust when they systematically deny people the material conditions required for a dignified and productive existence (98).

The destruction of livelihoods therefore has a clear moral dimension. Economic life is not simply concerned with income and production; it is also connected to human dignity, family responsibility, independence, and the capacity to contribute to the wider community. When banditry prevents a farmer from accessing farmland or forces a trader to abandon a market, it removes opportunities through which individuals ordinarily sustain themselves and their families. Persistent economic disruption can also widen inequalities between relatively secure areas and communities trapped in cycles of violence and deprivation. The developmental consequences of banditry thus reinforce its broader moral significance, since the continued denial of livelihood opportunities undermines justice and the common good. Religious values can contribute to a broader conception of national development in which social responsibility, ethical conduct, and concern for communal wellbeing are treated as integral to development rather than as separate religious concerns (Ukpe et al. 225–250). A response to the crisis must therefore protect lives while also restoring access to land, markets, education, healthcare, employment, and other conditions necessary for communities to recover and develop.

**Religious Responsibility and Moral Failure:** The persistence of banditry raises questions about the moral condition of Nigerian society as well as the effectiveness of its security and political institutions. Banditry reflects a serious erosion of values such as respect for human life, justice, honesty, responsibility, and concern for the vulnerable. Weak moral formation, corruption, poor ethical leadership, and the pursuit of material wealth without corresponding concern for social responsibility can create conditions in which violence and criminality become easier to justify (Ukpe and Saluun 36–48). Young people who grow up in environments where wealth is admired without regard to how it is acquired may become particularly vulnerable to distorted ideas of success. Where legitimate economic opportunities are scarce and criminal networks appear capable of providing income or status, moral boundaries can become increasingly difficult to maintain. The persistence of banditry therefore raises a broader question about how individuals and communities develop the moral convictions needed to reject violence, exploitation, and injustice.

Religious institutions have traditionally played an important role in moral formation and the cultivation of conscience. Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religion provide teachings concerning the sanctity of life, justice, honesty, accountability, compassion, and responsibility towards others. Religious leaders therefore possess platforms through which these principles can be translated into practical guidance for individuals, families, young people, and communities. Yet the moral influence of religion can be weakened when religious institutions become excessively politicised, materialistic, or compromised by relationships with powerful interests. Kukah observes that when religious leaders associate themselves uncritically with political power or place material considerations above moral truth, religion risks losing credibility as an independent moral voice (122). The consequence is particularly serious in a society facing insecurity because communities need religious institutions that can speak consistently against wrongdoing, regardless of the identity or political connections of those responsible.



The problem also involves weaknesses within wider systems of governance and accountability, particularly where corruption undermines the capacity of public institutions to protect citizens and maintain social order (Ukpe and Saluun 36–48). An evaluation of the federal government's amnesty programme for repentant bandits in north-western Nigeria found that its transactional character, together with the complicity of some state representatives, weakened its capacity to produce lasting repentance or durable security (Onyia et al. 42–45). Such findings demonstrate that moral responsibility cannot be placed solely on individual perpetrators or religious institutions; political and administrative structures also influence whether wrongdoing is punished, tolerated, or rewarded. Religious silence in the face of corruption, injustice, and insecurity can weaken moral authority, particularly when condemnation appears selective or is influenced by ethnic, religious, or political loyalties. Conversely, courageous and consistent religious leadership can challenge such tendencies, support victims, and encourage communities to reject retaliation and collective blame.

Religious institutions therefore have a significant responsibility to recover their moral and prophetic voice in the face of banditry. This responsibility involves more than condemning violent acts after they occur. Religious leaders can incorporate peace, justice, human dignity, accountability, and responsible citizenship into preaching and religious education, while also supporting victims and participating in community dialogue and reconciliation. They can challenge corruption and abuse of power without regard to political affiliation, ethnicity, or religious identity and encourage young people to pursue legitimate forms of livelihood and service.

Such engagement does not replace the responsibilities of government and security institutions; rather, it complements them through moral formation and social mobilisation. A society seeking lasting security therefore requires institutions capable of addressing both the perpetrators of violence and the values, relationships, and structures that allow violence to become normalised.

### **Religion, Moral Order and the Response to Banditry**

Religion occupies an important place in the moral ordering of Nigerian society because it shapes ideas about human dignity, justice, responsibility, wrongdoing, and the obligations individuals owe to one another. This relationship between religious values and national development provides a broader basis for considering religious ethics as relevant to questions of social responsibility and communal wellbeing (Ukpe et al. 225–250). Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religion each provide moral teachings that condemn unjustified violence and affirm responsibilities towards the vulnerable and the wider community. Christian moral teaching provides particular resources for thinking about justice, responsibility, human dignity, and the protection of vulnerable members of society (Ukpe and Gbinde 111–124). In this sense, religion provides more than a vocabulary for condemning banditry; it offers principles through which individuals and communities can evaluate conduct and determine appropriate responses to wrongdoing. The deliberate killing of civilians, abduction for ransom, destruction of livelihoods, and exploitation of displaced persons violate the moral expectations embedded in these traditions. Religion can therefore contribute to the restoration of moral order when its teachings are translated into responsible conduct, rather than remaining confined to formal religious instruction. Religion can therefore contribute to the restoration of moral order when its teachings are translated into responsible conduct, rather than remaining confined to formal religious instruction (Amase and Ukpe 84–95). This requires religious communities to cultivate virtues such as justice, compassion,

honesty, courage, forgiveness, and respect for human life, particularly among young people who may be exposed to environments in which violence and illicit wealth are normalised.

The relationship between religion and the response to banditry also extends to the social responsibilities of religious institutions. Gwaza argues that structured engagement with religious actors can strengthen conflict prevention, reconciliation, social cohesion, and security governance when such engagement is grounded in constitutional neutrality, human rights, and institutional accountability (189–97). Churches, mosques, traditional religious communities, and faith-based organisations often maintain close relationships with rural populations and possess networks that reach communities where formal institutions may have limited presence (Usman and Alabi 1-2).

These relationships can be used to support victims, encourage peaceful dialogue, provide moral education, and challenge narratives that justify violence or collective retaliation (Amase and Ukpe 84–95). Religious leaders can also contribute to reconciliation when they condemn wrongdoing consistently, regardless of the ethnic, religious, or political identity of the perpetrators or victims.

Such neutrality is essential because selective moral condemnation can deepen mistrust rather than restore social harmony. The responsibility of religion, therefore, is not limited to praying for an end to insecurity; it includes practical engagement with victims and communities, advocacy for justice, and the formation of moral attitudes that discourage violence and revenge.

The Structural Violence Theory adopted in this study also draws attention to the conditions that shape the capacity of communities to respond to insecurity. If banditry is examined only through its visible manifestations, such as killing, kidnapping, rape, and destruction of property, responses may focus primarily on armed enforcement and the apprehension of perpetrators. A broader moral analysis considers the poverty, exclusion, institutional weakness, corruption, and lack of opportunities that leave communities vulnerable to violence and exploitation. Religious institutions can contribute to addressing these conditions through education, youth empowerment, humanitarian assistance, community development, advocacy for accountable governance, and support for peacebuilding initiatives. The limitations of formal security institutions make cooperation with local and traditional structures particularly relevant, especially in rural communities where indigenous security mechanisms may possess local knowledge and legitimacy that can support responses to emerging threats (Usman and Alabi 5). Religious and traditional institutions can therefore contribute to a broader community-based security framework in which local knowledge, moral authority, and formal security capacity reinforce one another. A durable response to banditry consequently requires attention to both moral order and social order: perpetrators must be held accountable for direct violence, victims must receive protection and support, and the structural conditions that leave communities exposed to continued harm must also be addressed.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the religious, moral, social, and economic implications of banditry examined in this study, the following four recommendations are proposed:

1. Religious institutions should intensify moral and ethical education centred on the sanctity of human life, justice, accountability, compassion, and peaceful coexistence. Christian, Muslim, and African Traditional religious leaders should incorporate teachings against

violence, greed, corruption, revenge, and exploitation into sermons, catechetical programmes, Qur'anic instruction, traditional moral education, and youth programmes. Interfaith platforms should also be established at community and state levels to facilitate joint peace campaigns, public condemnation of violence, and dialogue across religious and ethnic boundaries. Such collaboration can reduce the manipulation of religious identities by violent actors and strengthen shared moral opposition to banditry.

2. Faith-based organisations, traditional institutions, community leaders, and civil society organisations should establish coordinated community-based mechanisms for mediation, early dialogue, reconciliation, and victim support in areas affected by banditry. These mechanisms should provide practical assistance to displaced persons, widows, orphans, survivors of abduction and sexual violence, and other affected groups through psychosocial support, spiritual care, livelihood assistance, and referral services. Religious leaders who enjoy sustained contact with local communities should participate in rebuilding trust and facilitating reconciliation while avoiding collective blame or retaliation.
3. Federal, state, and local authorities should address the structural conditions that increase vulnerability to banditry through transparent governance, improved rural security, access to justice, employment opportunities, skills development, and support for agricultural livelihoods. Particular attention should be given to young people in communities affected by poverty and insecurity through vocational training, employment programmes, entrepreneurship support, and sustained mentoring. Political and traditional leaders should also be held to standards of transparency and accountability, since corruption, institutional neglect, and weak governance can deepen the conditions in which criminal networks flourish (Achebe 35). Religious and community institutions should monitor and advocate for these measures while encouraging responsible citizenship among young people.
4. Government should strengthen cooperation among security agencies, religious institutions, traditional authorities, and local communities through credible early-warning systems, responsible information sharing, community policing initiatives, and coordinated conflict-prevention mechanisms. Religious and community leaders can provide locally grounded information that assists preventive security efforts without compromising confidentiality or their moral independence. At the same time, perpetrators of banditry should face fair and transparent prosecution, while victims should have access to justice, restitution, and appropriate rehabilitation. The recent evaluation of the amnesty programme indicates that transactional accommodation of perpetrators and institutional complicity can weaken prospects for lasting security and undermine public confidence. Security interventions should therefore operate within a framework of justice, accountability, and respect for human dignity rather than relying primarily on negotiation or force.

## Conclusion

Banditry in contemporary Nigerian society is more than a security challenge; it is a profound religious, moral, social, and humanitarian crisis that threatens human dignity and the ethical foundations of communal life. Its violation of human life, justice, property, and communal solidarity conflicts with the moral teachings of Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religion, while Structural Violence Theory helps to explain how poverty, weak governance,

institutional neglect, and other forms of structural deprivation can deepen the conditions in which violence persists. The widespread loss of lives, displacement of communities, destruction of livelihoods, psychological trauma, and erosion of social trust demonstrate the limitations of relying on military and security measures alone. Although effective security responses and law enforcement remain necessary, they need to be complemented by moral and religious reorientation, ethical leadership, social justice, youth empowerment, victim rehabilitation, community-based peacebuilding, and accountable governance. Religious institutions have a particular responsibility to strengthen moral formation, condemn violence without political or communal bias, support victims, promote reconciliation, and work with communities and public institutions towards peace. A sustained response to banditry therefore requires the integration of security, justice, moral responsibility, and religious engagement, since lasting peace depends not only on restraining violence but also on rebuilding the social relationships, ethical values, and institutional conditions that enable individuals and communities to live with dignity and security.

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