

Christian Ethics and Moral Formation in Nigerian Higher Education: A Theoretical Framework for Reviving Ethical Excellence

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Abstract— This paper develops a theoretical framework for applying Christian ethics to the revival of ethical excellence in Nigerian higher institutions through moral formation and institutional transformation. Rather than presenting empirical data on ethical violations, the paper offers a conceptual analysis of the ethical crisis as a moral formation deficit and argues that Christian ethics provides transformative theoretical resources for addressing this deficit. Drawing on theological foundations including the imago Dei, the Decalogue, the Sermon on the Mount, and Pauline ethics, the paper constructs a Moral Formation Model comprising awareness and conscientization, catechesis and ethical instruction, mentorship and peer accountability groups, and liturgical reinforcement of virtues. It further develops institutional transformation mechanisms including Christian-ethics driven policy review, establishment of university chaplaincy ethics desks, whistleblowing protection and restorative justice processes, and integration of Christian ethics into General Studies curricula. The paper addresses theoretical objections concerning religious pluralism, the secularity of state-owned institutions, and the relationship between moral formation and structural change. It also proposes evaluation metrics for assessing the framework's effectiveness and acknowledges the limitations of a purely theoretical approach. The paper concludes that the ethical crisis in Nigerian higher education is fundamentally a moral formation deficit and that Christian ethics, when systematically translated into formative practices, offers a coherent and transformative theoretical framework for institutional renewal. The paper contributes to the growing literature on virtue ethics in higher education and to debates on the role of religion in public institutions in pluralistic societies.

Keywords: Christian ethics; moral formation; ethical excellence; higher institutions; virtue ethics; Nigerian education.

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INTRODUCTION

The Nigerian university system, once celebrated as a beacon of excellence and character formation across the African continent, is widely perceived to be grappling with a profound moral crisis that threatens the very essence of its foundational purpose (Omojuwa & Olukorede, 2025, p. 103). Higher institutions across the country, similar to their counterparts in other parts of Africa, are said to have become arenas where ethical standards are increasingly subordinated to primitive accumulation, sexual exploitation, and violent criminality, creating an environment where the pursuit of knowledge is often overshadowed by the pursuit of illicit gain at all costs (Issa, 2023, p. 47). This perception of moral decay calls for a re-examination of the theoretical resources available for understanding and addressing the ethical challenges facing these institutions.

This paper is a theoretical inquiry, not an empirical study. It does not present original data on the prevalence of ethical violations in Nigerian higher institutions. Instead, it engages in conceptual analysis, drawing on theological, philosophical, and educational theory to develop a framework for moral formation and institutional transformation grounded in Christian ethics. The paper takes as its starting point the widely documented perception of ethical crisis in Nigerian higher education and asks: What theoretical resources does Christian ethics offer for addressing this crisis? How might these resources be systematically translated into a coherent framework for institutional renewal?

The paper argues that the ethical crisis in Nigerian higher education is fundamentally a moral formation deficit. By this, I mean that the problem is not merely one of individual wrongdoing or inadequate enforcement of rules, but of a systemic failure to cultivate the virtues, dispositions, and commitments that constitute ethical excellence. On this view, the proliferation of examination malpractice, sexual harassment, financial malfeasance, and cultism is symptomatic of a deeper failure to form persons in the habits of integrity, justice, and compassion. Christian ethics, with its rich tradition of virtue formation, its emphasis on the transformation of character through spiritual practice, and its vision of human flourishing in relationship with God and neighbour, offers theoretical resources that have been largely untapped in addressing this deficit.

The theoretical framework developed in this paper draws on several strands of Christian ethical thought. From virtue ethics, it takes the insight that moral excellence is a matter of character, not merely of action, and that character is formed through practice, example, and habituation (Atsen, 2021, p. 90). From divine command theory, it takes the insight that moral norms are grounded in the character of God and are therefore not merely conventional or subjective (Olaleye, 2025, p. 92). From transformational ethics, it takes the insight that lasting moral change requires the

renewal of the whole person through encounter with the living God (Bande, 2025, p. 28). These strands are integrated into a coherent framework that addresses both individual moral formation and institutional transformation.

The paper is structured as follows. Following this introduction, the second section presents the theoretical foundations of Christian ethics for moral formation. The third section offers a conceptual analysis of the ethical crisis as a moral formation deficit. The fourth section develops the Moral Formation Model. The fifth section develops the institutional transformation mechanisms. The sixth section addresses theoretical objections and contextual challenges. The seventh section proposes evaluation metrics for assessing the framework's effectiveness. The final section concludes with reflections on the implications of the framework for theory and practice, and acknowledges the limitations of the study.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF CHRISTIAN ETHICS FOR MORAL FORMATION

Defining Christian Ethics: A Theoretical Overview

Christian ethics, from a theoretical perspective, constitutes the systematic reflection upon the moral implications of the Christian faith. It draws on Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience to guide believers toward right living in relationship with God, neighbour, and creation (Okolo, 2016, p. 5). As a discipline, Christian ethics is distinguished from philosophical ethics by its grounding in divine revelation, though it maintains that reason plays an essential role in interpreting and applying revealed moral norms to concrete situations (Atsen, 2021, p. 89).

The theoretical foundations of Christian ethics rest on the character of God as revealed in Scripture. God's holiness, justice, love, mercy, and faithfulness together constitute the ultimate standard against which human conduct is measured (Leviticus 19:2). Within the Nigerian theological academy, scholars have emphasised that Christian ethics must be contextualised to address the specific moral challenges facing the nation, including corruption, ethnic prejudice, religious violence, and the exploitation of the vulnerable by the powerful (Okolo, 2016, p. 12). The festschrift honouring Rev. Msgr. Prof. Dr. Obiora Ike, titled "Prognostic Analysis on Theology, Education, Ethics and Development," provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how theology, education, and ethics intersect in the Nigerian context, arguing that authentic Christian ethics cannot be divorced from the pursuit of justice, the promotion of the common good, and the preferential option for the poor (Okolo, 2016, p. 18).

The theoretical framework for this paper draws on the understanding that moral formation is not an automatic byproduct of intellectual development but requires intentional cultivation through teaching, example, discipline, and spiritual

transformation (Proverbs 22:6). This understanding challenges the assumption, implicit in much contemporary higher education, that cognitive development alone is sufficient for ethical maturation. It suggests that higher institutions must attend explicitly to the formation of character if they are to produce graduates who are not only knowledgeable but also virtuous.

Virtue Ethics and the Formation of Character

Virtue ethics, which has experienced a significant revival in contemporary moral philosophy, provides a foundational theoretical resource for the framework developed in this paper. Virtue ethics focuses on the character of the moral agent rather than the nature of acts or the consequences of actions, asking not “What should I do?” but “What kind of person should I become?” This framework is particularly suited to the challenge of moral formation in higher institutions, as it directs attention to the processes through which virtues such as integrity, honesty, justice, and compassion are cultivated through practice, example, and habituation.

Atsen (2021, p. 91) identifies virtue ethics as one component of the ethical theory implicit in the New Testament, alongside divine command theory. He argues that “the implicit ethical theory of the sermon—and the New Testament in general—is a combination of a virtue ethics and a divine command theory,” suggesting that Christian moral reasoning operates through the integration of character formation, obedience to divine commands, and practical wisdom or *phronesis* that takes full account of both biblical teaching and contextual realities. This integrated understanding is particularly relevant for addressing the ethical challenges facing Nigerian higher institutions, where abstract moral principles have proven insufficient to produce behavioural change without the accompanying formation of virtuous character and the development of practical wisdom for navigating complex moral situations.

Schwartz (2014, p. 348) argues that achieving ethical excellence within organisations requires moving beyond mere code-based compliance toward what he terms “integrative action,” where fidelity to ethical standards becomes internalised as a matter of personal and institutional identity rather than external obligation. This perspective resonates with the Christian understanding of virtue ethics, where right action flows from transformed character rather than mere rule-following. The implication for higher institutions is that ethical excellence cannot be achieved through the proliferation of rules and sanctions alone; it requires the cultivation of virtues that dispose individuals to act rightly even in the absence of external oversight.

Divine Command Theory and the Grounding of Moral Norms

Divine command theory, which holds that moral obligations are grounded in the commands of God, provides a complementary theoretical resource for the framework.

Olaleye (2025, p. 92) notes that the divine command framework asserts that “what is moral is determined by what God commands, and to be moral is to follow his commands.” Within Christian ethics, divine command theory has been subject to philosophical criticism, particularly the Euthyphro dilemma, which asks whether something is good because God commands it or God commands it because it is good. However, most Christian ethicists affirm that God’s commands are not arbitrary but flow from God’s character, which is the ultimate standard of goodness, such that the divine commands and the natural moral law are mutually reinforcing rather than contradictory (Umeh, 2004, p. 45).

The significance of divine command theory for the framework developed in this paper lies in its insistence that moral norms are not merely conventional or subjective. In a pluralistic society where there is no consensus on foundational moral principles, divine command theory offers a grounding for moral norms that transcends human convention. Umeh (2004, p. 48) argues that “human rights are rooted in the natural law and in the Decalogue,” establishing a connection between biblical commandments and the universal moral norms that can be known through reason and that form the basis for just social order. This natural law tradition, which holds that certain moral principles are accessible to all human beings regardless of religious affiliation because they are inscribed in the very structure of human nature, provides a bridge between Christian ethics and the broader project of moral formation in secular institutions.

Transformational Ethics and the Renewal of the Whole Person

Transformational ethics, which emphasises the renewal of the whole person through encounter with the living God, represents a third theoretical resource for the framework. Within this framework, ethical behaviour is not merely the product of character formation or obedience to commands but flows from a transformed identity rooted in relationship with God through Christ. The Anchor University model, implemented under the auspices of the Deeper Christian Life Ministry, exemplifies this approach, seeking to raise “Godly leaders equipped with necessary skills to drive global change” through “holistic, transformative learning” that integrates faith, academic excellence, and character development (Bande, 2025, p. 32).

This transformational emphasis is particularly relevant for addressing the ethical crisis in Nigerian higher institutions, as it recognises that lasting behavioural change requires more than external regulation or even character formation; it requires the kind of deep identity transformation that Christian spirituality claims to offer. The Apostle Paul’s exhortation, “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Romans 12:2), captures this transformational vision. The renewal of the mind is not merely a matter of acquiring new information or adopting

new behaviours; it is a fundamental reorientation of the self in relationship to God and neighbour.

The Imago Dei and Human Dignity

The doctrine of the imago Dei, or the image of God, constitutes the foundational anthropological premise of Christian ethics. It affirms that every human being, regardless of social status, ethnicity, gender, or moral achievement, possesses inherent dignity and worth by virtue of being created in the likeness of the Creator (Genesis 1:26-27). Mufanabadza & Masengwe (2025) says that the Imago Dei doctrine, when properly understood, upholds the equality and worth of all human beings and directly challenges social structures that perpetuate injustice, while also revealing that many Nigerian churches have underemphasised social justice in favour of personal piety and prosperity.

This finding has direct theoretical implications for addressing ethical breakdowns in higher institutions. Sexual harassment, financial exploitation, and cult violence all involve the fundamental denial of the human dignity of victims. The imago Dei doctrine provides a theological foundation for rejecting such practices, not merely as violations of institutional rules but as desecrations of the divine image in the human person. It also provides a basis for affirming the equal dignity of all members of the academic community, regardless of their status or position, and for challenging hierarchical structures that enable exploitation and abuse.

The Decalogue and Natural Moral Law

The Decalogue, or Ten Commandments, represents the most explicit articulation of divine moral law in the Hebrew Scriptures. Within the Christian ethical tradition, the Decalogue has been understood not merely as a set of prohibitions but as a positive articulation of the two great commandments that Jesus identified as the heart of the law: love for God and love for neighbour (Matthew 22:37-40). The commandments against killing, adultery, stealing, false witness, and coveting have direct application to the ethical challenges facing higher institutions. Cult violence violates the command “You shall not murder” (Exodus 20:13); sexual harassment violates the command against adultery and the prohibition against coveting another’s person (Exodus 20:14, 17); financial extortion and certificate fraud violate “You shall not steal” (Exodus 20:15); and the systemic dishonesty that enables examination malpractice violates “You shall not give false testimony” (Exodus 20:16).

Professor Ndubuisi of the University of Lagos, in his 2024 inaugural lecture on “The Providence and the Province: Existentialist Humanism at the Intersection of Science and Jurisprudence,” emphasised “the intrinsic link between law and morality, arguing that laws devoid of moral foundations are inherently flawed” (Ndubuisi, 2024,

p. 22). This insight applies not only to civil law but also to institutional regulations, suggesting that the proliferation of rules and policies in Nigerian universities will remain ineffective unless they are grounded in a shared moral framework that commands the allegiance of institutional members.

The Sermon on the Mount: Character and Virtue

The Sermon on the Mount, recorded in Matthew chapters five through seven, stands as the most comprehensive and challenging presentation of Jesus' ethical teaching. The Beatitudes with which the sermon opens (Matthew 5:3-12) describe the character of those who belong to the Kingdom of Heaven, blessing the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake (Ojeifo, 2018, p. 25). This inversion of worldly values is directly relevant to the ethical crisis in Nigerian higher institutions, where the dominant culture often celebrates the very qualities that the Beatitudes critique: pride rather than poverty of spirit, self-indulgence rather than mourning, aggression rather than meekness, exploitation rather than mercy.

Ojeifo (2018, p. 30) offers a trenchant critique of the prosperity gospel and "miracle hawkers" who "preach a religion without the cross, and without suffering, and assure their followers with itching-ears of the blessed reward of earthly life, without hard work, commitment, discipline, honesty and integrity." He warns that "these religious contractors give spiritual immunity to a bunch of lazy people who do not want to work, yet want to enjoy all the good things of life," noting that "many young people of today have fallen prey to this" and "want to just enjoy without toil and without sweat" (Ojeifo, 2018, p. 32). This diagnosis of religious distortion is crucial for understanding why mere Christian affiliation has not produced ethical behaviour among many students and staff in Nigerian institutions; if their faith has been shaped by a theology that promises blessing without character, success without integrity, and prosperity without justice, then the moral formation deficit is not merely individual but theological.

THE ETHICAL CRISIS AS MORAL FORMATION DEFICIT: A THEORETICAL ANALYSIS

The Nature of Moral Formation

Moral formation, as understood in this paper, refers to the process through which individuals acquire the virtues, dispositions, and commitments that constitute ethical character. It is distinguished from mere moral instruction, which conveys information about right and wrong, and from moral indoctrination, which seeks to impose specific beliefs without critical engagement. Moral formation involves the whole

person—intellect, will, and affections—and occurs through a variety of practices, including teaching, example, habituation, and spiritual discipline (Abolarin & Babalola, 2020, p. 48).

The theoretical framework developed in this paper draws on the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition of virtue ethics, which holds that virtues are acquired through practice and habituation. As Aristotle argued in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, and brave by doing brave acts. This insight is echoed in the Christian tradition, where the cultivation of virtue is understood as a lifelong process of growth in holiness, enabled by divine grace and sustained by spiritual practice. The Apostle Paul's exhortation to "put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires" (Romans 13:14) captures this vision of moral formation as a process of putting off the old self and putting on the new.

The Moral Formation Deficit in Nigerian Higher Education

The theoretical argument of this paper is that the ethical crisis in Nigerian higher education is fundamentally a moral formation deficit. By this, I mean that the institutions have failed to cultivate the virtues, dispositions, and commitments that constitute ethical excellence. This failure is not merely a matter of individual negligence or institutional malfeasance; it is a systemic failure that has multiple dimensions.

First, there is a cognitive dimension: many students and staff lack a clear understanding of ethical principles and their application to academic life. The normalization of examination malpractice, for example, suggests that many students do not understand why cheating is wrong, or if they do, they have developed cognitive strategies to rationalize it. Abolarin and Babalola (2020, p. 52) found that one of the major obstacles to integrity in Nigerian higher institutions is that "many students no longer engage in original thinking" and that "examination malpractice has become a norm in many institutions of higher learning."

Second, there is an affective dimension: many students and staff lack the emotional dispositions and commitments that motivate ethical behaviour. They may know what is right but lack the desire or will to do it. This is particularly evident in cases of sexual harassment, where perpetrators often act from a sense of entitlement and a lack of empathy for their victims. The formation of empathy, compassion, and respect for the dignity of others is an essential component of moral formation.

Third, there is a volitional dimension: many students and staff lack the habits of self-discipline and moral courage necessary to act rightly in the face of temptation and pressure. The cultivation of virtue requires practice, and many students have not had the opportunity to develop the habits of integrity and responsibility. The social

environment of many campuses, which often rewards unethical behaviour and punishes honesty, further undermines the development of virtue.

The Limits of Punitive Approaches

The response of institutional leadership to the ethical crisis has been predominantly reactive and punitive, focusing on disciplinary committees, anti-sorting task forces, and occasional public condemnations that rarely translate into sustained behavioural change (Bande, 2025, p. 35). While such measures are necessary, they are insufficient. They operate on the assumption that deterrence through punishment can substitute for the deeper work of character formation and moral development.

The theoretical basis for this argument is the recognition that external sanctions cannot produce genuine virtue. As the virtue ethics tradition teaches, virtue is not merely a matter of conforming one's behaviour to external rules; it is a matter of having the right dispositions and motivations. A student who refrains from cheating only because they fear being caught has not acquired the virtue of integrity; they have merely developed a prudential calculation. When the likelihood of detection decreases, they will likely cheat. Genuine ethical excellence requires the internalization of moral norms, not merely external compliance.

This does not mean that sanctions are unnecessary. The virtue ethics tradition recognizes that law and punishment can play a role in moral formation by shaping the social environment and providing incentives for right behaviour. However, it insists that law and punishment are supplementary to, not substitutes for, the cultivation of virtue. The primary task of moral formation is the cultivation of character, and this requires positive practices of teaching, example, and habituation, not merely negative sanctions.

The Need for a Positive Vision

The theoretical argument of this paper is that addressing the ethical crisis in Nigerian higher education requires a positive vision of human flourishing, not merely a negative program of prohibition. Christian ethics offers such a vision. It presents the goal of human life not merely as the avoidance of wrongdoing but as the pursuit of holiness, the cultivation of virtue, and the enjoyment of communion with God and neighbour. This positive vision is essential for motivating moral formation, as it gives individuals a compelling reason to pursue ethical excellence beyond mere fear of punishment.

The Beatitudes, with their vision of blessedness as inseparable from righteousness, mercy, purity of heart, and peacemaking, offer a powerful alternative to the culture of self-indulgence and exploitation that characterizes much of contemporary campus life. They present a vision of human flourishing that is not dependent on

material prosperity or social status but on the cultivation of character and the pursuit of justice. This vision has the power to inspire and motivate students and staff who are seeking meaning and purpose in their lives.

THE MORAL FORMATION MODEL: A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Overview of the Model

The Moral Formation Model developed in this paper comprises four interrelated components: awareness and conscientization, catechesis and ethical instruction, mentorship and peer accountability groups, and liturgical reinforcement of virtues. These components are understood as mutually reinforcing, addressing the cognitive, affective, and volitional dimensions of moral formation. The model is designed to be implemented within the context of higher institutions, though it draws on resources from the broader Christian tradition, including the church, para-church organizations, and campus fellowships.

Awareness and Conscientization

The first component of the Moral Formation Model is awareness and conscientization. This involves the development of critical awareness among students and staff regarding the nature, extent, and consequences of ethical breakdown in their institutions. The theoretical basis for this component is the insight, derived from the work of Paulo Freire and the Christian tradition of prophetic critique, that moral transformation begins with the honest acknowledgment of existing failures.

Conscientization, as the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire termed it, is the process of developing a critical consciousness that enables individuals to perceive and challenge the social and political structures that shape their lives. In the context of moral formation, conscientization involves helping students and staff recognize the ways in which their institutions have failed to cultivate virtue and the ways in which they themselves have been complicit in this failure. The Apostle Paul's exhortation, "Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind" (Romans 12:2), captures this vision of critical awareness leading to moral transformation.

The awareness component of the model involves data-driven education about the prevalence and consequences of ethical violations. It uses verified cases, such as those documented in the literature on Nigerian higher education, to demonstrate that ethical breakdown is not an abstract problem but a concrete reality with devastating human costs (ICPC, 2025; Zeb-Obipi, 2025). The conscientization process also addresses the theological distortions that enable religious individuals to compartmentalize their faith from their unethical behaviour. Abolarin and Babalola (2020, p. 56) found that even within a faith-based institution that has "integrity as part of her core values,"

leadership and intentional effort are “essential factors in ensuring integrity,” suggesting that awareness alone is insufficient without the accompanying formation of character.

Catechesis and Ethical Instruction

The second component of the Moral Formation Model is catechesis and ethical instruction. The term “catechesis” is deliberately chosen to distinguish this form of instruction from mere information transfer. Within the Christian tradition, catechesis refers to the process of initiating individuals into a way of life, not merely transmitting a body of knowledge. It involves the whole person—mind, heart, and will—rather than the intellect alone (Ojeifo, 2018, p. 36).

The curriculum for ethical instruction would include modules on the imago Dei and human dignity as the basis for rejecting sexual harassment and exploitation; the Decalogue and natural moral law as the foundation for academic honesty and financial integrity; the Sermon on the Mount as a vision of character formation; and Pauline ethics as a framework for community accountability and conflict resolution (Atsen, 2021, p. 95). The integration of Christian ethics into the formal curriculum of higher institutions is already occurring in some Nigerian universities, providing models that can be adapted for other institutions.

At Nnamdi Azikiwe University, for example, the Department of Religion and Human Relations offers courses including RHR 161 Introduction to Ethics, which treats “the relation of ethics to social, political, economic determinants of the society,” and RHR 262 Religious Ethics, which offers “special studies in the origin, definition and classification of ethical systems, morality and religion, Biblical Ethics, Islamic and African Traditional Religious Ethic” (Unizik, 2018, p. 45). These existing courses provide a foundation upon which more targeted instruction in applied Christian ethics for academic contexts can be built.

Mentorship and Peer Accountability Groups

The third component of the Moral Formation Model is mentorship and peer accountability groups. This component recognizes that ethical formation is fundamentally relational, occurring not primarily through lectures and readings but through relationships with mentors and peers who model virtuous behaviour and provide accountability for ethical decision-making (Abolarin & Babalola, 2020, p. 58).

The Babcock University case study found that “mentorship in character and lifestyle, including integrity, is an important factor in Christian religious education institutions,” with the objectives of such institutions being “to prepare people who would have the characteristics of the Supreme being, able to weave beliefs into character, who would experience holistic education (intellectual, social, and spiritual), and be able to face the challenges of life” (Abolarin & Babalola, 2020, p. 59). Within

Nigerian higher institutions, formal mentorship programmes pairing senior faculty members with junior colleagues and upper-level students with incoming freshmen could provide structured opportunities for moral guidance and accountability.

Peer accountability groups, modelled on the small group structures that have proven effective in church contexts, offer a complementary mechanism for moral formation that leverages the power of peer influence toward ethical rather than unethical ends. The Pauline vision of the church as a body in which “if one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honoured, every part rejoices with it” (1 Corinthians 12:26) provides a theological foundation for peer accountability that stands in sharp contrast to the individualism and isolation that enable ethical misconduct to flourish unchecked.

Liturgical and Ritual Reinforcement of Virtues

The fourth component of the Moral Formation Model is liturgical and ritual reinforcement of virtues. This component recognizes the role of liturgy and ritual in shaping moral character, drawing on the insight that human beings are formed not only by what they believe and think but also by what they do repeatedly in community.

The theological basis for this component is the understanding that worship is not merely an expression of faith but a practice that shapes the character of participants. As the Anglican theologian Stanley Hauerwas has argued, Christian ethics is fundamentally about the formation of character through participation in the practices of the church, including worship, prayer, and the sacraments. The regular practices of Christian worship—prayer, Scripture reading, singing, confession, and the celebration of the sacraments—create spaces in which moral commitments are reinforced, renewed, and celebrated.

Within academic contexts, liturgical reinforcement could take several forms. First, regular chapel services focused on ethical themes could provide opportunities for reflection on the moral dimensions of academic work. Second, special services for the beginning and end of academic terms could emphasize the spiritual significance of education and the moral responsibilities of students and staff. Third, public rituals of repentance and reconciliation could be organized when ethical failures have occurred, providing opportunities for acknowledgment of wrongdoing, forgiveness, and restoration. Fourth, the celebration of the sacraments, particularly baptism and the Eucharist, could serve as powerful reminders of the identity and belonging that sustain moral commitment (Madonna University, 2025, p. 18).

The theoretical basis for this component is the recognition that virtue is not merely a matter of individual effort but is sustained by participation in a community of practice. As Alasdair MacIntyre argues in *After Virtue*, virtues are embedded in social practices and traditions, and their cultivation requires participation in communities that

embody and transmit those virtues. The church, as a community shaped by the story of God's redemption, provides a context in which the virtues of faith, hope, and love can be cultivated and sustained.

INSTITUTIONAL TRANSFORMATION MECHANISMS: A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Overview of the Mechanisms

The moral formation of individuals is necessary but not sufficient for ethical excellence in higher institutions. Institutional structures, policies, and practices can either support or undermine moral formation. The framework developed in this paper therefore includes four institutional transformation mechanisms: Christian-ethics driven policy review, establishment of university chaplaincy ethics desks, whistleblowing protection and restorative justice processes, and integration of Christian ethics into General Studies curricula.

Christian-Ethics Driven Policy Review

The first institutional transformation mechanism is a comprehensive review of existing policies through the lens of Christian ethics. This involves examining admission policies, assessment policies, grievance procedures, promotion criteria, and financial regulations for their consistency with the principles of integrity, justice, servant leadership, and the common good (Zeb-Obipi, 2025, p. 6).

The theoretical basis for this mechanism is the recognition that policies are not neutral instruments but embody particular values and priorities. A policy that permits admission based on ability to pay, for example, embodies a commitment to economic efficiency over distributive justice. A policy that fails to protect victims of sexual harassment embodies a commitment to institutional reputation over human dignity. The policy review process therefore involves asking not only whether policies are effective but whether they are just.

The policy review should be guided by the recognition that policies must address not only student conduct but also faculty and administrative conduct, creating symmetrical accountability structures that apply equally to all members of the institutional community (Issa, 2023, p. 56). It should also address the structural drivers of ethical decay, including the low salaries that incentivize corruption, the overcrowded classrooms that make proper assessment impossible, and the absence of effective grievance mechanisms that leaves victims without recourse.

Establishment of University Chaplaincy Ethics Desks

The second institutional transformation mechanism is the establishment of dedicated ethics desks within university chaplaincies. This draws on the model of

Catholic and Protestant universities that have successfully integrated pastoral care with ethical formation. At Madonna University, for example, “the Madonna University Chaplaincy is overseen by a dedicated University Chaplain appointed by the institution for each Campus,” who “provides spiritual leadership, coordinates liturgical and sacramental life on campus and offers counseling and support to students and staff” (Madonna University, 2025, p. 22).

The chaplaincy ethics desk would extend this model by providing specialized services including confidential counseling for students and staff facing ethical dilemmas, mediation services for conflicts arising from ethical violations, referral services for victims of sexual harassment and other forms of exploitation, and educational programming on Christian ethics for academic contexts. The ethics desk would operate in coordination with existing institutional structures while maintaining sufficient independence to provide confidential services to those who fear retaliation.

The theoretical basis for this mechanism is the recognition that ethical formation requires safe spaces where individuals can discuss moral dilemmas, confess failures, and seek guidance without fear of judgment or punishment. The chaplaincy model is particularly appropriate for Nigerian higher institutions given the high levels of religious identification among students and staff, many of whom would be more comfortable discussing ethical concerns with a chaplain than with a disciplinary officer or police investigator.

Whistleblowing Protection and Restorative Justice Processes

The third institutional transformation mechanism addresses the need for safe reporting mechanisms and just processes for addressing ethical violations when they occur. The fear of retaliation is one of the most significant barriers to reporting ethical violations, particularly in cases of sexual harassment where victims may fear academic penalties, social stigma, or physical harm (Ndifon, 2025, p. 62). Institutions should therefore establish clear whistleblowing policies that protect reporters from retaliation, provide multiple channels for reporting (including anonymous options), and ensure that reports are investigated promptly and impartially.

The theoretical basis for whistleblowing protection is the recognition that ethical accountability requires the courage to speak truth to power, and that this courage is more likely to be exercised when individuals are confident that they will not suffer retaliation for doing so. The African Union Convention on Preventing and Combating Corruption, which Nigeria has ratified, provides a framework for whistleblower protection that can be adapted to academic contexts (Musa-Rafsanjani, 2025, p. 8).

Restorative justice processes, which focus on repairing the harm caused by ethical violations rather than merely punishing offenders, offer an alternative to purely retributive approaches that may be more consistent with Christian ethics. Restorative

justice involves bringing together offenders, victims, and community representatives to acknowledge harm, determine appropriate reparations, and develop plans for preventing future violations. This approach is particularly appropriate for addressing cases of financial extortion, where the victim may be satisfied with restitution rather than punishment, and for cases of examination malpractice, where the goal is to restore academic integrity rather than merely to punish individual students.

The theological basis for restorative justice is the biblical concept of *shalom*—a vision of wholeness, harmony, and right relationship—and the Christian understanding of justice as the restoration of broken relationships and the healing of wounds. Restorative justice practices, when properly implemented, can contribute to the moral formation of both offenders and victims, creating opportunities for repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

Integration of Christian Ethics into General Studies Curricula

The fourth institutional transformation mechanism is the integration of Christian ethics into General Studies curricula. The General Studies programme reaches every student regardless of their major field of study and could provide a common foundation in ethical reasoning and Christian moral values.

The proposed GST course in Christian ethics for academic contexts would include modules on the biblical and theological foundations of Christian ethics, the application of Christian moral principles to academic integrity, sexual ethics, financial stewardship, and community relations, and the development of practical skills for ethical decision-making in situations of moral ambiguity (Atsen, 2021, p. 98). The course would incorporate case studies drawn from the Nigerian higher education context, allowing students to analyse real-world ethical failures through the lens of Christian moral reasoning. The goal of the course is not indoctrination but formation, equipping students with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to navigate the ethical challenges they will face in their academic and professional lives.

The theoretical basis for this mechanism is the recognition that ethical formation requires not only practical experience and relational accountability but also cognitive understanding. Students need to understand the principles and reasoning that underlie ethical norms if they are to apply them thoughtfully in novel situations. The GST course provides this cognitive foundation, while the other components of the framework provide the practical and relational contexts in which moral formation occurs.

ADDRESSING THEORETICAL OBJECTIONS

The Objection from Religious Pluralism

The first objection to the framework developed in this paper is that it imposes a particular religious perspective on a pluralistic institution. Nigerian higher institutions,

like all public universities, serve students and staff from diverse religious backgrounds, including Muslims, adherents of African Traditional Religions, and individuals with no religious affiliation. Critics might argue that a framework grounded in Christian ethics is inappropriate for such a context, as it privileges one religious tradition over others.

In response to this objection, I argue that the framework distinguishes between the content of Christian ethics, which is offered as a resource for moral formation, and the requirement that all community members affirm Christian beliefs, which is not required. The framework proposes that Christian ethics be offered as one resource among others for moral formation, that chaplaincy services be available to all who wish to use them, and that the content of ethics education be presented in a manner that is academically rigorous rather than confessionally dogmatic.

The distinction between the secularity of the state and the religious freedom of individuals and voluntary associations is crucial for navigating this challenge. While the state-owned university cannot establish Christianity as its official religion, it can permit and even encourage the voluntary formation of Christian fellowships, the provision of chaplaincy services to those who desire them, and the inclusion of Christian ethics in the curriculum alongside other ethical traditions. The key is to ensure that participation in religious activities is voluntary, that no one is disadvantaged for refusing to participate, and that the academic study of Christian ethics meets the same standards of rigor as the study of any other subject.

Moreover, the framework draws on the natural law tradition, which holds that certain moral principles are accessible to all human beings regardless of religious affiliation because they are inscribed in the very structure of human nature. The virtues of integrity, justice, and compassion are not distinctively Christian; they are recognized as goods by people of all faiths and no faith. The framework therefore offers resources for moral formation that are accessible to all people of goodwill, even as it draws on the distinctive resources of the Christian tradition.

The Objection from Structural Determinism

The second objection to the framework is that it focuses on individual moral formation while neglecting the structural factors that shape ethical behaviour. Critics might argue that the ethical crisis in Nigerian higher education is fundamentally a structural problem—rooted in poverty, inequality, corruption, and institutional decay—and that focusing on individual character is a form of victim-blaming that lets the system off the hook.

In response to this objection, I argue that the framework does not neglect structural factors but addresses them through the institutional transformation mechanisms. The policy review component addresses the structural drivers of ethical decay, including the low salaries that incentivize corruption and the absence of effective

grievance mechanisms. The whistleblowing protection and restorative justice components address the institutional cultures that enable misconduct to go unpunished. The chaplaincy ethics desks provide safe spaces for individuals to seek guidance and report violations.

The framework therefore takes a holistic approach that addresses both individual and institutional dimensions of the ethical crisis. It recognizes that individual moral formation is necessary but not sufficient for ethical excellence; it also recognizes that institutional reform is necessary but not sufficient without the formation of virtuous persons. The two dimensions are mutually reinforcing, and addressing one without the other is unlikely to produce lasting change.

The Objection from Moralistic Reductionism

The third objection to the framework is that it reduces the complex problem of ethical breakdown to a matter of individual moral failure, ignoring the social, economic, and political factors that shape behaviour. Critics might argue that the framework is moralistic in the pejorative sense—that it preaches personal virtue while ignoring the systemic injustices that make ethical behaviour difficult or impossible.

In response to this objection, I argue that the framework is not moralistic but theological. It does not reduce the ethical crisis to individual moral failure; it locates the crisis in the failure of institutions to cultivate virtue and the failure of society to provide the conditions for human flourishing. The theological framework recognizes that sin is not merely individual but social and structural, and that redemption requires the transformation of both persons and institutions.

The Christian tradition has always recognized the social dimensions of sin and salvation. The prophets of Israel condemned not only individual sins but also the systemic injustices of their society. Jesus announced the coming of the Kingdom of God, a new social order characterized by justice, peace, and reconciliation. The Apostle Paul wrote of the cosmic scope of redemption, in which all creation groans for liberation from bondage to decay (Romans 8:22). The framework developed in this paper is therefore not moralistic but prophetic, calling for the transformation of both individuals and institutions in light of the vision of God's reign.

EVALUATION METRICS FOR ETHICAL EXCELLENCE

The Challenge of Evaluating Moral Formation

Evaluating the effectiveness of the framework requires attention to multiple dimensions of ethical excellence. However, evaluating moral formation is inherently challenging, as the virtues are difficult to measure directly and the effects of formation may not be apparent for years. Unlike cognitive outcomes, which can be assessed through examinations and standardized tests, moral formation involves the

transformation of character, which is not easily quantified. Moreover, the effects of moral formation are often indirect and long-term, manifesting in the choices that individuals make over the course of their lives rather than in immediate behavioural changes.

Despite these challenges, it is possible to identify indicators of ethical excellence that can be used to evaluate the framework's effectiveness. These indicators operate at both the individual and institutional levels.

Individual-Level Indicators

At the individual level, indicators of ethical excellence might include self-reported measures of moral reasoning, virtue identification, and ethical behaviour. For example, students and staff could be asked to complete surveys that assess their understanding of ethical principles, their commitment to academic integrity, and their engagement in ethical practices. Peer and mentor assessments could provide additional perspectives on individuals' character and conduct.

Qualitative methods, including interviews and focus groups, may be necessary to capture the nuanced ways in which individuals are transformed by moral formation. These methods can elicit rich accounts of how individuals have grappled with ethical dilemmas, how their understanding of virtue has deepened, and how their behaviour has changed over time. Longitudinal studies, which track individuals over extended periods, could provide valuable insights into the long-term effects of moral formation.

Institutional-Level Indicators

At the institutional level, indicators of ethical excellence might include the prevalence of reported ethical violations, the speed and fairness of grievance procedures, and the perceptions of ethical climate among students and staff. A reduction in the incidence of examination malpractice, sexual harassment, and financial malfeasance would be a positive indicator. Similarly, an increase in the reporting of ethical violations, if accompanied by fair and prompt investigation, could indicate that the institutional culture has become more supportive of accountability.

Surveys of ethical climate, which ask students and staff to assess the extent to which their institution values integrity, justice, and compassion, could provide valuable data on institutional culture. These surveys could be administered periodically to track changes over time. Additionally, the establishment of chaplaincy ethics desks could be evaluated by tracking the number of individuals who seek their services, the types of issues they bring, and the outcomes of the support they receive.

The Limits of Evaluation

It is important to acknowledge the limits of evaluation. Moral formation is not a linear process, and its effects may not be immediately apparent. Moreover, the virtues are not easily measured, and any attempt to quantify them risks reducing them to something less than they are. The evaluation of moral formation should therefore be approached with humility, recognizing that the most important outcomes may be those that cannot be measured.

Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations. First, as a theoretical paper, it does not present empirical data on the prevalence of ethical violations in Nigerian higher institutions or on the effectiveness of the proposed framework. The framework is a proposal that requires empirical testing. Second, the framework is developed primarily from within the Christian tradition and does not engage extensively with other religious or secular approaches to moral formation. While the natural law tradition provides some basis for dialogue with non-Christian perspectives, further work is needed to develop a more fully interreligious and interdisciplinary approach. Third, the paper focuses on individual and institutional dimensions of moral formation and does not address broader structural factors, such as poverty and inequality, that also shape ethical behaviour. Fourth, the paper does not address the practical challenges of implementing the framework in resource-constrained institutions, where the lack of trained personnel, adequate facilities, and financial resources may pose significant obstacles. Fifth, the paper relies primarily on English-language sources, and perspectives from other languages may be underrepresented. Future research should address these limitations through empirical studies, comparative analysis, and practical implementation trials.

Recommendations for Further Research

This study suggests several directions for further research. First, empirical research is needed to establish baseline data on the prevalence and nature of ethical violations in Nigerian higher institutions, using validated survey instruments and rigorous sampling methods. This research should include both quantitative measures of behaviour and qualitative exploration of the attitudes, beliefs, and social norms that shape ethical decision-making. Second, pilot implementation studies are needed to test the framework's effectiveness in real institutional contexts, using quasi-experimental designs that compare outcomes in intervention and comparison institutions over time. Third, comparative research is needed to examine the effectiveness of different approaches to moral formation in higher education, comparing Christian-ethics-based frameworks with secular ethics education, Islamic ethics education, and integrated

approaches that draw on multiple religious and philosophical traditions. Fourth, longitudinal research is needed to track the long-term impact of moral formation interventions on graduate outcomes, including professional conduct, civic engagement, and personal flourishing. Fifth, research is needed on the role of religious institutions in advocating for ethical renewal in higher education, examining the conditions under which such advocacy is effective. Sixth, research is needed on the structural factors that shape ethical behaviour in higher institutions, including the impact of funding, governance, and institutional culture on ethical outcomes.

CONCLUSION

This paper has developed a theoretical framework for applying Christian ethics to the revival of ethical excellence in Nigerian higher institutions through moral formation and institutional transformation. The framework addresses both individual and institutional dimensions of the ethical crisis, recognizing that genuine ethical excellence requires the cultivation of virtue in persons and the reform of structures that enable or constrain ethical behaviour.

The paper has argued that the ethical crisis in Nigerian higher education is fundamentally a moral formation deficit. By this, I mean that the institutions have failed to cultivate the virtues, dispositions, and commitments that constitute ethical excellence. The proliferation of examination malpractice, sexual harassment, financial malfeasance, and cultism is symptomatic of a deeper failure to form persons in the habits of integrity, justice, and compassion. Christian ethics, with its rich tradition of virtue formation, its emphasis on the transformation of character through spiritual practice, and its vision of human flourishing in relationship with God and neighbour, offers theoretical resources that have been largely untapped in addressing this deficit.

The theoretical framework developed in this paper makes several contributions to the literature. First, it integrates insights from virtue ethics, divine command theory, and transformational ethics into a coherent framework for moral formation in higher education. Second, it develops a comprehensive model that addresses the cognitive, affective, and volitional dimensions of moral formation. Third, it proposes institutional transformation mechanisms that address the structural drivers of ethical decay. Fourth, it addresses theoretical objections concerning religious pluralism, structural determinism, and moralistic reductionism, demonstrating that the framework is both theologically grounded and contextually appropriate. Fifth, it proposes evaluation metrics for assessing the framework's effectiveness, acknowledging both the importance and the challenges of evaluating moral formation. Sixth, it acknowledges the limitations of a purely theoretical approach and identifies directions for future research.

The framework has implications for theory and practice. For theory, it contributes to the growing literature on virtue ethics in higher education and to debates on the role of religion in public institutions in pluralistic societies. For practice, it provides a roadmap for institutional leaders, policymakers, church denominations, and student movements who are seeking to address the ethical challenges facing Nigerian higher education.

The task of moral formation is never complete; it is a lifelong process of growth in virtue and holiness. But with the resources of Christian ethics and the commitment of all stakeholders, the ethical crisis in Nigerian higher institutions can be addressed, and these institutions can become communities of integrity, justice, and compassion. The framework proposed in this paper is offered as a contribution to that ongoing task, in the hope that it will stimulate further reflection, research, and action.

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