



**PUBLIC SCRUTINY AND MORAL GOVERNANCE:
THE POWER OF MORAL VALUES IN SHAPING POLITICAL
ACCOUNTABILITY IN GHANA**

Isaac Brako (Ph.D.)

Department of Political Science, University of Education, Winneba.

Email: ibrako@uew.edu.gh

Cite this article:

Isaac Brako (2025), Public Scrutiny and Moral Governance: The Power of Moral Values in Shaping Political Accountability in Ghana. African Journal of Culture, History, Religion and Traditions 8(2), 23-40. DOI: 10.52589/AJCHRT-OTAQ4SG2

Manuscript History

Received: 20 Sep 2025

Accepted: 29 Oct 2025

Published: 17 Nov 2025

Copyright © 2025 The Author(s).

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0), which permits anyone to share, use, reproduce and redistribute in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

ABSTRACT: *This study examines how Ghanaian religious and moral values function as a de facto “court of public opinion,” influencing public perceptions of political accountability. Motivated by the 2023 Cecilia Abena Dapaah scandal, where public outrage over alleged misuse of public resources contributed to her resignation and legal investigation, the study explores how citizens invoke ethical and religious norms to demand accountability from public office holders. Drawing on Moral Community Theory, Habermas’ public sphere, and Social Accountability Theory, the analysis highlights how communal moral values, public deliberation, and citizen-driven oversight collectively shape leaders’ behavior. Findings reveal that while moral claims can pressure leaders, their effectiveness is contingent upon institutional mechanisms capable of enforcing accountability. The study underscores the importance of integrating moral norms with formal governance structures, civic education, and platforms for deliberation, suggesting that the interplay between moral authority and institutional oversight offers a culturally grounded pathway to ethical governance and strengthened public trust in Ghana.*



INTRODUCTION

Post-independence Ghanaian society casts itself as a secular society with a very high religious population. This situation creates what some have referred to as ambivalence in the public domain (Tweneboah, 2020). On the one hand, as a secular society, the state draws its legitimacy and sovereignty from the supremacy of the constitution and other legal instruments of national and international effect. Ghana's 1992 Constitution establishes a framework of government, which shall secure for the people and posterity the blessings of liberty, equality of opportunity and prosperity. Article 1 (2) projects the Constitution as the supreme law of Ghana, and any other law found to be inconsistent with any provision of this Constitution, it says, should, to the extent of the inconsistency, be void.

On the other hand, too, the Ghanaian public domain is deeply rooted in religious and moral values that transcend individual beliefs and permeate public life (Pobee, 1980; Dovlo, 2005). These values, drawn from the plurality of religious traditions, especially Christianity, Islam, and African traditional religion, collectively form a moral compass that shapes community expectations and judgments. In the public domain, these religious and moral values operate as an informal yet potent "court of public opinion," capable of both safeguarding and dismantling reputations, particularly of public office holders. In the last two years, some key high-profile cases have necessitated the need to interrogate how Ghanaian moral values affect the way public office holders are perceived. The first relates to the case of Cecilia Abena Dapaa, an erstwhile minister of Sanitation and Water Resources. In July 2023, two former maids of Dapaa were arraigned before an Accra Circuit Court on charges of stealing \$1 million, €300,000 and millions of cedis, as well as other valuable items worth millions from the minister's residence somewhere between July and October of 2022. When the news broke, it threw the public domain into a state of frenzy. Agitated Ghanaians demanded to know why such huge amounts of money would be kept at her house. Some suspected that if the minister had \$1 million cash inside her house, then her "bank accounts would be brazy." Others demanded to know the source of this money (Myjoyonline, 2023). Following public agitations, on July 22, 2023, Dapaa tendered her resignation as a minister of state (Allotey & Atawoge, 2023). While a section of the public hailed her decision to resign, it did little to dissuade public angst over her scandal. Many were unsatisfied. Keeping over a million dollars in her bedroom while serving as a public office holder was something Ghanaians could not let go of straightforwardly. Some argued that the stolen \$1 million could build 14 six-unit classrooms (Acheampong, 2023). Much of the public disappointment emanated from the manner in which episodes of corruption and siphoning of public resources have impoverished a large section of the Ghanaian population. As such, some pushed for her resignation or her appointment to be terminated (Allotey & Atawoge, 2023; July 22; MyJoyOnline, 2023). On July 24, 2023, the Office of the Special Prosecutor stepped in by placing Dapaa under arrest for suspected corruption and corruption-related offences. This episode demonstrates the power of public opinion, informed by religious and moral values, to shape reputations and trigger accountability.

It is against this backdrop that this paper investigates the role of Ghanaian religious and moral values as a court of public opinion. Specifically, the paper pursues two interrelated goals. First, it examines how religious and cultural virtues, such as honesty, humility, and communal responsibility, frame public discourse about political accountability. Second, it explores how the Ghanaian masses, operating within a moral environment shaped by religious expectations, hold public office holders to account. In doing so, the paper interrogates the kinds of moral



claims the masses advance when demanding accountability and how these claims reflect indigenous moral philosophies and religious doctrines. The argument advanced here is that in a context where moral rectitude is inseparable from religious obligation, the masses become powerful agents of moral judgment, capable of both safeguarding and undermining reputations. By drawing on qualitative narratives and interviews, this study demonstrates how collective moral reasoning functions as an informal but formidable check on political authority in Ghana.

To frame this inquiry, the study adopts three theoretical perspectives. Habermas' Public Sphere Theory provides a lens to understand how citizens engage in moral reasoning through communal spaces such as radio discussions, religious gatherings, and social media. Moral Community Theory highlights how shared values create collective standards that bind communities together in mutual accountability. Finally, Social Accountability Theory underscores the mechanisms through which ordinary citizens, outside formal legal frameworks, mobilize religious and moral claims to demand transparency, ethical conduct, and justice. Together, these theories situate the Ghanaian "court of public opinion" within a broader discourse on the interplay between religion, morality, and governance. The paper thus contributes to ongoing scholarship on religion and public life in Ghana by illuminating how religious and moral values not only shape individual behavior but also function as informal checks and balances on political authority.

This study employed a qualitative case study design to investigate how Ghanaian religious and moral values influence public accountability, with a focus on the Cecilia Abena Dapaah scandal (2023). Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with purposively selected participants, including religious leaders, community elders, civic activists, nurses, and teachers knowledgeable about morality, religion, and governance. Ethical principles, including informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation, were strictly observed. Supplementary data were drawn from media reports and scholarly literature. Using thematic analysis, the study combined deductive coding informed by *Habermas' Public Sphere Theory*, *Moral Community Theory*, and *Social Accountability Theory* with inductive analysis to identify emergent patterns. This approach provided deeper insights into how moral authority and communal values serve as informal mechanisms of accountability, reinforcing the link between public morality, religious ethics, and governance in Ghana.

LITERATURE AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper depends on three interrelated theoretical perspectives: Habermas' Theory of the Public Sphere, Moral Community Theory, and Social Accountability Theory. These frameworks provide analytical lenses for understanding how Ghanaian religious and moral values serve as a court of public opinion, shaping both the reputations of public office holders and the broader governance environment.

Public Sphere

Jürgen Habermas introduced the idea of the public sphere in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* to describe a historical arena in which private individuals, gathered as a public, engage in rational-critical debate about matters of common concern (Habermas, 1962/1989). For Habermas, the bourgeois public sphere of the eighteenth and nineteenth



centuries which was rooted in coffee houses, salons, and print culture enabled citizens to deliberate independently of the state and market. This led to the generation of public opinion that could constrain governmental authority. Central to the concept are the norms of inclusivity (access to participation), publicity (issues brought into a common discursive space), and rational-critical argumentation (claims justified by reasons rather than status or coercion) (Habermas, 1962/1989).

Analytically, Habermas highlights several mechanisms through which a functioning public sphere produces political effects. First, communicative action: participants orient to mutual understanding through speech acts that appeal to reasons. Second, institutional channels: print media, periodicals, and other communication infrastructures aggregate dispersed opinions and make them publicly visible. Third, the translation mechanism: public opinion, once formed, can be articulated to and taken up by political institutions and decisionmakers, exerting normative pressure on authority (Habermas, 1962/1989; Calhoun, 1992).

Scholars have used Habermas' framework as both an analytic tool and normative benchmark. Empirically, the concept has guided studies of media systems, social movements, and deliberative arenas—helping to map where and how citizens form shared concerns and influence policy (Calhoun, 1992). Theoretically, Habermas' work has been foundational for deliberative-democratic theory. This has become useful in the operationalization of the normative ideal of reasoned public deliberation as a requisite for legitimate democratic decisions (Dryzek, 2000). Habermas' public-sphere thesis is valuable for its clarity in linking communicative practices to political legitimation. It provides a basis for the role of discourse in democratic life rather than treating politics solely as an aggregation of preferences. The model also offers concrete evaluative criteria in terms of access, publicity, rationality, etc. that scholars can use to assess the quality of public deliberation in different contexts (Calhoun, 1992).

Some concerns, however, have been raised about Habermas' theory. Subsequent scholarship has produced influential critiques that both refine and problematize Habermas' account. Nancy Fraser argued that Habermas' historical ideal masks exclusions: the bourgeois public sphere systematically marginalized women, the working class, and colonial subjects, necessitating a reconceptualization as multiple and often contested publics (Fraser, 1990). Michael Warner developed the idea of *publics* and *counterpublics*, emphasizing how subordinated groups form alternative discursive arenas in response to marginalization (Warner, 2002). Empirical critics also point out Habermas' privileging of textual/print media and rationalist norms while underestimating oral, performative, and affective modes of public expression; they argue that power asymmetries, institutional capture, and mediascapes structured by ownership and political economy can impede genuinely inclusive deliberation (Fraser, 1990; Dryzek, 2000).

Moral Community Theory

Moral Community Theory, drawing on the sociological work of Émile Durkheim and later scholars, emphasises that communities are bound together by shared moral codes, norms, and values that regulate behavior and reinforce solidarity. For Durkheim, religion serves as the foundational basis of the moral community, offering sacred symbols and practices that unify individuals into collective moral frameworks (*The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 1912/1995). The theory posits that moral communities function as powerful agents of social regulation by creating consensus on acceptable conduct and imposing sanctions—either



symbolic, reputational, or material—on those who deviate. Where Durkheim emphasized the sacred profane distinction and the binding force of collective rituals, later sociological research (e.g., Stark, Kent & Doyle, 1982; Stark, 1996) developed the theory by applying it to contexts such as religiosity and social behavior. These works emphasize the ways in which moral community affiliation influences individual conduct and public life. The central insight is that morality is not simply a personal matter but a communal and institutionalized force, shaping the expectations, judgments, and cohesion of a society.

Alasdair MacIntyre, for example, highlighted how communities cultivate virtues through shared practices, narratives, and institutions that shape moral reasoning (MacIntyre, 1981). Subsequent scholars have also applied moral community theory across contexts to explain why religious congregations, civic associations, and local networks often produce higher rates of prosocial behaviour, civic engagement, and mutual monitoring (Putnam & Campbell, 2010; Wuthnow, 1994). In development and governance studies, the concept helps explain how local moral economies can discipline public actors. When communities share strong norms against corruption, social sanctions (withdrawal of support, public condemnation) can function as informal accountability mechanisms where formal institutions are weak (Stark & Finke, 2000).

Researchers studying health, education, and collective action frequently find that community moral capital such as trust, shared norms, and active associational life, predicts cooperative behaviour and collective problem-solving more reliably than measures of individual religiosity alone (Putnam & Campbell, 2010). Moral Community Theory excels at linking micro-level normative commitments to macro-level social outcomes. It captures how moral reasoning is situated in social contexts and explains the durability of norms through ritualized practice and institutional reinforcement. The theory is particularly useful in settings where formal legal enforcement is weak, because it illuminates non-legal repertoires of social control that nonetheless produce high costs for norm-violators. For example, in Ghana, religious and cultural norms provide the standards by which individuals, particularly leaders, are evaluated. Public officials are not only assessed by their policy performance but also by how well their conduct aligns with communal expectations of honesty, humility, and accountability. Violations of these moral standards often trigger community sanctions, ranging from public shaming in churches and mosques to social media criticisms that appeal to religious virtues. This, as the findings show, underscores the collective role of the Ghanaian masses as custodians of morality in public life.

Social Accountability Theory

Social Accountability Theory emerges from political science and development studies, particularly as articulated by Jonathan Fox (2015) and the World Bank (2004, 2011). It refers to the broad range of actions and mechanisms through which ordinary citizens, civil society organizations, and non-state actors hold public officials and institutions accountable. Unlike formal accountability, which operates through electoral or legal channels, social accountability relies on informal and collective pressures, such as advocacy, public protest, citizen monitoring, and media scrutiny. At its core, the theory rests on the idea that governance is not only shaped from above by institutional frameworks but also from below by citizen engagement. Social accountability highlights mechanisms such as transparency initiatives, participatory governance, and community-driven monitoring, which enhance the responsiveness of state actors to public concerns.



Social accountability has emerged as a critical framework for understanding how citizens and civil society actors can demand responsiveness from public institutions outside formal electoral or judicial processes. Baez Camargo and Jacobs (2013) argue that accountability itself is a dynamic process. Early operationalizations, indeed, focused on practical tools, such as citizen report cards, which enabled service users to monitor delivery and publicly disseminate findings. In this way, they leverage naming-and-shaming strategies to encourage provider responsiveness (Paul, 1992). Building on these practical roots, Fox (2015) distinguished between “tactical” (localized, one-off) and “strategic” (institutional and systemic) approaches to social accountability, stressing that citizen “voice” (citizen expression and demand-making) alone is insufficient unless complemented by state “teeth”—the capacity and willingness of institutions to compel or influence action. Empirical research has demonstrated the potential of such strategies: large-scale social audits tied to India’s Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) and participatory budgeting in Brazil have been shown to increase transparency and influence public spending decisions, though their effectiveness is highly dependent on implementation fidelity and institutional buy-in (de Renzio & Wampler, 2021; Aiyar, 2010).

Despite these promising cases, systematic reviews and randomized control trials have revealed mixed outcomes. Some interventions improved service delivery and accountability relationships, while others had minimal or no impact, largely due to elite capture, weak enforcement, or the exclusion of marginalized voices (Fox, 2015; Joshi, 2017). More recent scholarship emphasizes that social accountability must be situated within broader political economy dynamics. These studies highlight how power relations, incentive structures, and mediating institutions shape the success of accountability mechanisms (Fox, 2015; Joshi, 2017; de Renzio & Wampler, 2021). The literature thus cautions against viewing social accountability as a technical fix. Instead, it underscores that effectiveness rests on design features (e.g., verification, disclosure, follow-up), the responsiveness of state actors, and the extent to which collective action is inclusive and sustained. As will be shown later, while formal institutions such as parliament, the judiciary, and the media play key roles in governance, Ghanaian citizens also rely on moral and religious discourses to enforce accountability. Sermons, proverbs, communal forums, and online debates often serve as platforms for articulating demands for good governance. Religious values, therefore, become a vital instrument of social accountability, providing legitimacy to popular claims against corruption, abuse of power, and negligence by public officials.

Overall, these theories reveal that Ghanaian public life cannot be fully understood through secular political frameworks alone. The fusion of Habermas’ public sphere with communal moral expectations and citizen-led accountability practices illuminates the centrality of religion and morality in shaping public discourse, policy outcomes, and leadership legitimacy. This theoretical framework, therefore, situates Ghanaian moral and religious values as both a cultural resource and a practical mechanism through which the masses act as the court of public opinion.



Religious and Moral Values: Foundations and Cultural Context

Religion and morality remain deeply interwoven in Ghanaian society. They shape not only private conduct but also the broader contours of public life. Although Ghana constitutionally presents itself as a secular state that derives its legitimacy from the supremacy of the 1992 Constitution and other legal frameworks, the lived reality reflects a profound entanglement between secular governance and religious morality (Tweneboah, 2020). Religious traditions such as Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religion collectively generate a moral compass that informs individual behavior and sustains community expectations. These traditions operate less as isolated belief systems than as cultural frameworks through which moral reasoning, identity formation, and notions of accountability are constantly negotiated.

The foundations of these moral values are both historical and cultural. Long before colonial rule and the adoption of Christianity and Islam, Akan and other indigenous Ghanaian societies had developed elaborate moral systems rooted in kinship structures, cosmological beliefs, and communal norms. Concepts such as truthfulness (*nokware*), respect (*obuo*), solidarity, responsibility, and patience (*abotare*) formed the core of indigenous moral philosophy, enforced through sanctions, taboos, and communal rituals (Wiredu, 1996). The arrival of Christianity and Islam introduced new layers of moral discourse, often reinforcing pre-existing indigenous norms while also contesting and reinterpreting them in light of scriptural and theological authority. Over time, this fusion produced a religiously plural moral environment in which public judgment and accountability are mediated by both traditional and imported values.

This moral environment extends into the public sphere, where religion and morality function as powerful arbiters of legitimacy. Religious leaders often occupy influential positions in public debates, framing corruption, misconduct, or poor governance as moral failings with spiritual consequences (Tweneboah, 2025). Citizens, in turn, rely on religious and cultural values to evaluate the credibility and integrity of public officials, often invoking biblical, Qur'anic, or indigenous maxims as tools of critique. As an informant, describing the influence of Ghanaian religious and moral values on everyday life, observes: "Honestly, I feel that religion has a strong influence over many aspects of life in Ghana. People often begin meetings with prayer, politicians frequently quote the Bible, and even in business settings phrases like "by the grace of God" are common. Religion provides guidance and reassurance, but sometimes it seems excessive, as people may rely on it too heavily instead of applying common sense or following the law." In this sense, religious and moral values function as an informal "court of public opinion," capable of protecting reputations or dismantling them altogether. One informant expressed the view that, because of prevailing moral values, "we perceive public holders to be people with integrity, punctual, hardworking, respectful and responsible people."

Culturally, these values are sustained through oral traditions, proverbs, and community practices that embed moral reasoning in everyday life. The persistence of storytelling, ritual, and communal sanctioning demonstrates that Ghanaian moral life is not confined to formal institutions but thrives in shared spaces where religion, culture, and morality intersect. Thus, the foundations of Ghanaian religious and moral values must be understood not only as individual commitments to faith or ethics, but also as collective resources that shape the dynamics of power, accountability, and legitimacy in the broader national context.



The high-profile scandal already narrated above illustrates the potency of these moral resources. The case of Cecilia Abena Dapaah, Ghana's former Minister of Sanitation and Water Resources, revealed how swiftly public opinion can mobilize around religious and moral expectations. When reports emerged in 2023 that more than \$1 million had been stolen from her residence, citizens turned to moral reasoning rooted in both religious and cultural narratives to question the legitimacy of her wealth and her suitability for public office. Calls for accountability invoked not only the language of corruption but also deeper cultural values concerning responsibility, stewardship, and fairness. The resulting public outcry, resignations, and ongoing investigations underscore how Ghanaian society wields moral values as a decisive instrument of judgment, turning the informal court of public opinion into a potent force that rivals formal institutional checks.

Previous studies have pointed out the influence of religious leaders, and this study also sought to capture the public's perception of how such leaders and other moral authorities shape opinions on political accountability. The responses from informants point strongly to this. One informant explained:

"These people, I may say, have influence because people respect them. However, sometimes, religious leaders are afraid to criticize politicians or speak against government actions simply because they do not want to lose favor. So, while they are powerful, they are not always bold."

Another informant shared a similar thought:

"I believe some pastors and various chiefs in our communities teach their people to know that the people we voted for are there to serve us and not themselves. Therefore, if they fail us, we have the moral right as citizens to vote them out of power when the time is due for election."

This was further supported by another informant who reflected on a personal experience:

"Well, when a pastor, imam, or chief talks about an issue, people listen. Religious leaders also remind political leaders to serve the people with honesty. I remember one Sunday in my Methodist church; the pastor educated us on things that should not happen during elections, like violence and malpractice. So yes, they play a big role."

These field accounts illustrate how the religious and moral values embedded in Ghanaian culture are not merely abstract ideals but lived realities that guide public expectations of leaders. As discussed, the authority of pastors, imams, and chiefs reflects the enduring role of moral virtues in shaping community life, reminding both citizens and political office holders that public service must align with honesty, accountability, and collective well-being.

Public Accountability and Moral Claims

Public accountability in Ghana cannot be fully understood without reference to the religious and moral frameworks that permeate public life. While the 1992 Constitution projects the state as secular and grounds legitimacy in law, as we have also seen, everyday perceptions of leadership are mediated through communal moral expectations. Ghanaian society, shaped by Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religion, collectively operates as a moral community where political leadership is evaluated not only in terms of legal compliance but also moral integrity. Habermas' conception of the public sphere (1989) helps us appreciate how these moral expectations are articulated in civic discourse.



Ghanaian moral values emphasize honesty (*nokwaredie*), selflessness, service to community, and stewardship over resources. These values create expectations that public officials should embody integrity and eschew corruption or ostentation. When officials deviate, they are judged harshly by the public. In this sense, religious and cultural morality acts as a “yardstick” for evaluating leadership. Studies show that, in Ghana, perceived corruption and moral lapses erode legitimacy more quickly when framed in religious terms (Tweneboah, 2020). In response to the question of how Ghanaian moral values affect the perception of public office holders, informants emphasized that such values shape expectations of leadership and accountability. One participant noted that public officials are generally perceived to be “people with integrity, punctual, hardworking, respectful, and responsible.” Another explained that these values “directly or indirectly shape our public holders’ accountability,” since leaders who fail to live morally upright lives are quickly criticized. As the informant put it, “Ghanaians don’t like leaders who are arrogant or indirectly corrupt,” and there is a strong expectation that officials should live as role models for society. A third informant reinforced this view, remarking that corruption or dishonesty is considered “a big disgrace because people expect leaders to be self-controlled and honest.” At the same time, however, this informant acknowledged a degree of ambivalence, observing that “some Ghanaians also praise leaders who use tricks to get rich,” showing that while moral values are powerful in shaping perceptions, they are not always applied consistently. Taken together, these reflections reveal how the court of public opinion, grounded in Ghanaian religious and moral values, functions as a potent but sometimes inconsistent mechanism of moral accountability.

There are notable instances where public opinion, shaped by moral claims, has influenced the behavior of public figures. The case of Cecilia Abena Dapaah in 2023 illustrates this: public outrage over revelations that over \$1 million cash was stored in her home framed the incident as a moral breach of trust, not just a legal question. This public condemnation, amplified by media and religious discourse, pressured her to resign within days (Myjoyonline, 2023). Similarly, religious leaders’ critiques of electoral malpractice have often compelled electoral bodies and politicians to adopt more transparent processes, even if partially, to maintain public legitimacy (Ayee, 2016).

On the question of whether public opinion, rooted in religious and moral expectations, has influenced the behavior of public figures, informants offered telling reflections. One respondent explained that when leaders act contrary to cultural or moral values, “pressure may mount on them to either apologize or step aside,” particularly in cases of misuse of public funds where officials “were heavily criticized in the media.” Another emphasized how ordinary citizens often frame accountability in explicitly moral terms, insisting that “leaders must fear God and must not lie ... if you are a Christian, you should not steal.” A different informant recalled that “some years back, a minister who was accused of corruption had to resign because the pressure was too much on radio, in churches, and everywhere.” Collectively, these accounts suggest that while formal institutions may adjudicate corruption, it is the moral authority of public opinion—expressed through media, religious platforms, and community discourse—that often compels leaders to respond. This underscores how Ghana’s court of public opinion operates as a powerful mechanism of moral accountability.

Closely related to the above was the interest in examining the kinds of moral claims citizens often invoke when demanding accountability from public officials. Informants consistently framed these claims in explicitly religious and ethical terms. As one observed, “the first moral



claim is the fear of God in their lives,” explaining that a leader who truly fears God would not “take what is meant for the public or the state” for private gain while others suffer. Others emphasized love of community and country as a recurring moral standard, with one participant noting that “people often say a leader must fear God and live a good life ... if you are a leader, you shouldn’t steal.” A particularly striking observation came from another informant who recalled how citizens frequently remind leaders of their oaths of office: “People often say things like, ‘You swore an oath before God, so keep your promise,’ or ‘You can’t spend the nation’s money because it is a sin.’” These accounts demonstrate how public discourse mobilizes religious language—invoking divine judgment, communal responsibility, and moral rectitude—as a way of holding leaders to account. Theoretically, this resonates with Habermas’ notion of the public sphere as a site of moral discourse, with moral community theory’s emphasis on shared values as binding norms, and with social accountability theory, which shows how citizen claims, grounded in moral reasoning, can pressure leaders beyond formal institutional checks.

Finally, it is observable that the effectiveness of moral claims in influencing accountability is mixed but significant. On the one hand, such claims have the power to delegitimize leaders, provoke resignations, and trigger investigations, especially when amplified by media and religious institutions. On the other hand, structural challenges such as elite capture, weak institutional enforcement, and partisan polarization limit their long-term impact. Fox’s (2015) distinction between “tactical” (short-term, symbolic) and “strategic” (sustained, institutional) accountability resonates here. Ghanaian moral claims often succeed tactically by forcing responses but face obstacles in translating outrage into systemic reforms.

The study also explored perceptions of the effectiveness of moral claims in shaping public accountability. Responses revealed mixed but insightful positions. One informant dismissed their effectiveness outright, remarking: *“Personally, I see it to be ineffective because when I look at what is going on in Ghana, especially with public office holders, I will say it is not effective and even if it is there, it is with very few people.”* Another took a more balanced stance, observing that such claims can work indirectly: *“Well, they are effective to some point. Leaders don’t want to be lambasted in the public space. So sometimes they change their behavior in order to be in the societal values. But some still adhere to these values and that carries us through life.”* A third informant offered a structural critique, noting the limits of moral suasion in the absence of institutional checks: *“These moral claims can shape leaders a bit, but not always. Some leaders just pretend to listen and then go back to the same behavior. Real accountability comes from strong institutions. If our institutions are not strong enough to enforce discipline, moral claims alone cannot achieve much.”* The responses on the effectiveness of moral claims in shaping accountability highlight a critical tension between public expectations and actual political practice. While some informants felt that these claims were largely ineffective, others acknowledged their limited influence in curbing excesses, at least insofar as leaders fear public shame or desire to maintain moral legitimacy. This resonates with Habermas’ notion of the public sphere, where citizens engage in discursive practices to hold power accountable through shared moral and rational arguments (Habermas, 1989). In this sense, everyday Ghanaians, through appeals to God’s judgment, honesty, and love of country, constitute a form of moral discourse that seeks to regulate leadership conduct, even if its outcomes are uneven.



At the same time, the data also reflect insights from Durkheim's theory of the moral community, which sees shared values and norms as essential for social cohesion and collective accountability (Durkheim, 1912/1995). The frequent invocation of religious language—such as “fear of God,” “oath before God,” or “God is watching”—reinforces how the Ghanaian moral community relies on sacred values to establish ethical boundaries for leadership. Yet, as informants pointed out, these norms have limited force unless backed by institutional enforcement, suggesting that the moral community's influence depends on its interaction with the institutionalized public sphere. Thus, moral values in Ghana not only shape the perception of public office holders but also serve as a potent, if uneven, instrument of accountability. Religious and cultural moral claims articulated in sermons, media discourse, and everyday conversations constitute the backbone of the “court of public opinion,” providing both symbolic judgment and real political consequences for leaders who violate community expectations.

The Masses as Agents of Accountability

The role of the masses in Ghanaian democratic life cannot be understated. Ordinary Ghanaians, through their collective voice, form a powerful moral constituency that influences how public office holders are perceived and judged. While some argue that citizens' influence is limited by structural weaknesses in political and legal institutions, others emphasize that the moral pressure generated by communal expectations remains a significant force in shaping leaders' behavior. This reflects the logic of Moral Community Theory, where individuals are bound together by shared ethical frameworks that set the standards against which public figures are evaluated (Etzioni, 2000). When leaders transgress these moral codes, they are often subject to communal sanction, ranging from public criticism to demands for resignation.

When the question, “Do you believe that ordinary Ghanaians have a strong influence on the accountability of public office holders?” was posed, interesting responses were gathered. One informant affirmed the role of citizens, stating: *“I would say yes, because ordinary Ghanaians, through elections, demonstrations, and other means, hold public officials accountable for their actions.”* Another also emphasized the growing role of public scrutiny in the digital age: *“Oh yes, why not? Ordinary people monitor us closely, especially through social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and radio discussions. When issues are raised, leaders sometimes feel pressured to respond to public opinion. However, there are times when leaders ignore the voices of the people because they know citizens cannot easily remove them from office. I am a teacher and if something goes on in the media, people do talk about it. At times, this action from the people makes teachers be careful and take certain decisions that help them. In some cases, public pressure even pushes matters further until the law steps in to take its course.”*

These responses reveal a tension between popular participation and institutional responsiveness. On the one hand, ordinary Ghanaians draw on democratic tools such as elections, demonstrations, and media platforms to make their voices heard. On the other hand, informants also recognized that public opinion alone does not always yield accountability, especially when leaders perceive citizens as lacking the direct power to remove them from office. As an informant, offering a more cautious perspective put it: *“I would say not really, because ordinarily people often talk a lot on the radio, but leaders don't always take them seriously, and the public tends to forget quickly. It is only when strong pressure comes from civil society organizations and the media that leaders feel compelled to act.”* This highlights



the crucial mediating role of civil society organizations, the press, and social movements in amplifying citizen demands and translating them into actionable pressure.

From a theoretical standpoint, these insights echo Habermas' notion of the public sphere (1989), where ordinary citizens deliberate and express demands, but also align with Chabal and Daloz's (1999)¹ observation that, in African political life, public discourse can shift between symbolic protest and effective accountability. The findings thus suggest that while ordinary Ghanaians are not powerless, their influence is often most effective when combined with institutional and organizational mechanisms that sustain pressure on leaders. Community dialogue serves as a central mechanism through which this accountability is exercised. Platforms such as radio talk shows, political debates, and public forums provide ordinary citizens with the space to articulate grievances, debate moral expectations, and build collective judgments about leadership. Thus, the study also revealed that community dialogue, especially through radio discussions and public forums, serves as a powerful means by which the masses hold leaders accountable. This was strongly confirmed by field data. One informant explained: *"Community dialogue enlightens us on who is supposed to do what at certain points and who we should hold accountable on certain issues. For instance, through these forums we get to know that the construction of roads is not the responsibility of my MP but rather my DCE."* Another participant emphasized the centrality of mass media in this process: *"Well, what I can say is that radio is a very powerful medium in Ghana. From the late 1990s into 2000, with stations like Peace FM and Adom TV, people would discuss issues openly on air. This public discussion often compels leaders to respond. Sometimes, they even run to the radio stations themselves to clarify doubts or explain issues more clearly. It often works like that."* At the same time, some informants were cautious about the political dynamics that accompany these discussions. As one put it: *"These discussions just keep leaders on their toes. Radio talk shows can force leaders to explain themselves, but they can also be politicized."*

These observations reinforce the idea of the masses as active agents of accountability rather than passive recipients of governance. In line with Habermas' (1989) notion of the public sphere, mass media platforms like radio create spaces where citizens collectively deliberate, contest, and demand transparency from leaders. This resonates with Chazan's (1991) argument that civic participation in African contexts often relies on informal mechanisms of accountability rooted in communal practices. However, the caution about politicization points to Fraser's (1990) critique of the public sphere, reminding us that access and framing of dialogue are often mediated by partisan interests, which can dilute the accountability function. From all that has been said, the data show that community dialogue enables ordinary citizens to reassert their agency in governance. By engaging in debates, naming responsibilities, and demanding explanations from leaders, the masses transform everyday conversation into a tool of political accountability, even if its effectiveness is sometimes limited by politicization. In Habermas' terms, these sites represent modern iterations of the *public sphere*, where discourse mediates the relationship between civil society and state power (Habermas, 1991). In Ghana, popular radio discussions, in particular, have become both a watchdog and a tribunal of sorts. These discussions amplify the voices of ordinary citizens while exerting pressure on leaders to adhere to public values of honesty, fairness, and service.

¹ Chabal, P., & Daloz, J.-P. (1999). *Africa works: Disorder as a political instrument*. James Currey.



The study also reveals that religious leaders and moral authorities play a complementary role in this process. By drawing on the pervasive religious sensibilities of the Ghanaian public, they frame political accountability in ethical and spiritual terms. Their sermons, public pronouncements, and symbolic acts often translate abstract political issues into moral claims that resonate widely with communities. This aligns with the cultural embedding of religion in Ghanaian moral life, where public expectations are not merely secular demands for good governance but are also couched in language of divine obligation and moral rectitude (Gyekye, 1996). In effect, the voices of religious authorities amplify the moral judgments of the masses, enhancing the reach and legitimacy of popular calls for accountability.

Informants highlighted the pivotal role of religious and traditional leaders in shaping civic expectations and holding public officials accountable, though opinions varied regarding the extent of their influence. One participant emphasized the educative and mobilizing role of community authorities, stating, *"I believe some pastors and various chiefs in our communities teach their people to know that the people we voted for are there to serve us and not themselves; therefore, if they fail us, we have the moral right as citizens to vote them out of power when the time is due for election."* Another highlighted the practical impact of moral guidance in public life, observing, *"Well, when a pastor, imam, or chief talks about an issue, people listen. Religious leaders also remind political leaders to serve the people with honesty. I remember one Sunday in my Methodist church, the pastor educated us on things that shouldn't happen during elections, like violence and malpractice. So yes, they definitely have a voice and influence."* However, some informants also pointed to the limits of such influence. One noted, *"These people, I may say, have influence because people respect them. However, sometimes religious leaders are afraid to criticize politicians or speak against government actions simply because they do not want to lose favor. So, while they are powerful, they are not always bold."*

These reflections illustrate how the masses, operating within Ghanaian moral and religious frameworks, act as agents of accountability, drawing on the authority of trusted leaders to amplify collective moral expectations. The accounts resonate with Habermas' concept of the public sphere, where discourse among citizens and moral authorities mediates political judgment, and with Moral Community Theory, which situates religious and traditional leaders as custodians of shared norms (Durkheim, 1912/1995). At the same time, the limitations noted—leaders' occasional hesitancy to confront elites—underscore the insight from Social Accountability Theory that citizen influence is most effective when moral claims intersect with institutional capacity (Fox, 2015). In this way, the narratives underscore the dual dynamic of Ghana's court of public opinion: moral authority and public voice combine to hold leaders accountable, yet their efficacy is mediated by broader structural and institutional realities.

What these dynamics mean is that ordinary Ghanaians are not passive observers of politics but active agents in shaping the moral climate of accountability. Their influence may be constrained by weak institutions and elite resistance, yet the power of communal discourse, moral sanction, and religious framing continues to make the court of public opinion a central arena for negotiating political responsibility in Ghana.



Socio-Political Implications

The interplay of religious and moral values with public accountability in Ghana carries profound socio-political implications. The fear of public shaming rooted in moral and religious norms functions as a potential deterrent against corruption, even when formal institutional enforcement may be weak. Scholars note that moral and ethical expectations can shape behavior by generating reputational costs for leaders who violate communal norms (Fox, 2015; Tweneboah, 2020). In this way, public moral judgment serves as an informal regulatory mechanism, influencing decisions and conduct within the public sphere (Habermas, 1989).

The idea of the fear of how public shaming based on moral values deters corruption among public officials is essential to a discussion of this nature. In Ghana, moral and religious norms create informal mechanisms of accountability that operate alongside formal institutions. Scholars argue that the reputational costs associated with public shaming can deter unethical behavior, even in contexts of weak institutional enforcement (Fox, 2015; Tweneboah, 2020). As we have seen so far, public scrutiny framed through moral expectations, such as honesty, integrity, and fear of divine judgment, generates social pressure that can influence officials' conduct. Habermas' (1989) concept of the public sphere provides a useful lens to understand how collective discourse, grounded in shared values, functions as a regulatory mechanism: when leaders anticipate moral condemnation from the public, they may adjust their behavior to avoid reputational harm.

When the study explored perceptions of how public shaming, grounded in moral values, deters corruption among public officials, the responses were thought-provoking and varied. One informant affirmed its impact, noting, *"Yes, to some extent. Nobody wants their name dragged through the mud. If people think you're corrupt, it can destroy your reputation, and protecting your family name becomes very important."* Another highlighted the role of religious and moral authorities in shaping these dynamics, observing, *"These people, I may say, wield influence because people respect them. However, sometimes, religious leaders are afraid to criticize politicians or speak against government actions simply because they do not want to lose favor. So, while they are powerful, they are not always bold."* A contrasting perspective came from another participant who questioned the overall effectiveness of moral shaming, stating, *"No, not in Ghana. I don't think so. Even if it is the case, it applies to very few. Most public officials are shameless and don't care what others think about them."*

These reflections illustrate the complex interplay between communal moral norms and institutional accountability. Drawing on moral community theory, we can see that they highlight how shared religious and ethical values imbue leaders' reputations with social significance, making public perception a powerful, albeit uneven, lever of accountability (Durkheim, 1912/1995). At the same time, social accountability theory reminds us that the moral authority of the masses only translates into tangible constraints on leaders when aligned with institutional mechanisms, such as anti-corruption agencies or formal investigations (Fox, 2015). From a Habermasian perspective, these responses show that public discussions through media, religion, and everyday talk affect how leaders are seen, even when laws are not strongly enforced (Habermas, 1989). Thus, the perceptions captured here reinforce the broader argument that the masses act as agents of accountability, wielding moral and social pressures that complement formal mechanisms, while also revealing the limits of such influence in contexts where institutional strength and political will are uneven.



It was also observable that reputation in Ghana is inseparable from moral and religious values and is a key determinant of political legitimacy. Leaders perceived to violate communal ethical norms risk loss of public trust, political support, or electoral defeat (Ayee, 2016). Moral and religious frameworks, therefore, operate as a form of social sanction: They define what is acceptable conduct and signal to both constituents and peers the boundaries of legitimate behavior. Moral Community Theory (Durkheim, 1912/1995) emphasizes that shared normative expectations maintain social cohesion, and in the political domain, reputation mediates the extent to which citizens trust and endorse leaders.

Moreover, collective moral judgment guides citizen evaluations of candidates' competence and ethical conduct. Moral claims, grounded in religious and cultural norms, shape public debates, voter expectations, and campaign discourse. Citizens use moral frameworks to assess whether leaders are worthy of electoral support, while Social Accountability Theory underscores how such citizen-driven evaluations can translate into political consequences when combined with institutional processes (Joshi, 2017; Fox, 2015). Habermas' (1989) notion of communicative rationality in the public sphere further illuminates how discourse among citizens—centered on moral and ethical reasoning—serves as a conduit through which collective judgment impacts political outcomes. In this sense, an argument can be made that Ghanaian moral and religious values exert significant socio-political influence. They can deter unethical behavior, shape reputational stakes, and inform electoral decision-making, while also highlighting the interplay between collective moral judgment and institutional structures. The court of public opinion, as an informal yet potent arena of moral accountability, thus functions as a crucial driver of political accountability and governance in Ghana.

REFLECTION AND FUTURE IMPLICATIONS

Reflecting on the intersections of religion, morality, and public accountability in Ghana, it becomes evident that strengthening religious and moral values has the potential to improve governance outcomes. At the same time, however, it is only within a framework that integrates both communal norms and institutional rigor. Theoretically, this study has been useful in demonstrating that strongly shared ethical values serve as a cohesive force. They also shape expectations and regulate behavior even in contexts where formal institutions are weak (Durkheim, 1912/1995; Stark & Finke, 2000). By fostering a collective moral consciousness that emphasizes integrity, stewardship, and service to the public, citizens can create normative pressures that incentivize ethical political leadership. In parallel, using Habermas' conception of the public sphere, this study has highlighted the critical role of discursive engagement. As the various responses show, transparent, reasoned debate within the public sphere allows moral arguments to gain traction and transform into societal standards for accountability (Habermas, 1989). One informant reflecting on this suggested that religion has the potential to enhance accountability, but emphasized the importance of sincerity in practice, noting that "religion can improve accountability but only if people practice what they preach ... many people hide behind religion but still do wrong things. If religion is practiced sincerely, it can indeed promote accountability."

Social Accountability Theory further complements this perspective by emphasizing the importance of converting moral and civic discourse into actionable oversight mechanisms (Fox, 2015; Joshi, 2017). While religious and moral norms can shape expectations and



reputational incentives, their long-term impact on governance depends on channels that link citizen voice to institutional enforcement, such as anti-corruption agencies, electoral oversight bodies, and civic monitoring initiatives. An informant emphasized that the effectiveness of moral and religious values in promoting accountability is closely linked to their integration with formal leadership structures. He suggested that, “If we are strengthening it through or with political leaders and public officials, then I think it will be very effective in deepening the accountability in the country.” At the same time, the informant reflected on the limitations of current practices, arguing that ordinary citizens have little leverage alone, and proposed culturally specific mechanisms, such as swearing oaths, rather than the Bible or Quran, to instill a tangible sense of fear and moral responsibility in public office holders. “As a traditional man, I strongly believe we should encourage swearing of oath with schnapps and eggs for public office holders rather than the Bible and the Quran. This helps put some kind of fear in these people and they will not be corrupt.”

This perspective resonates with social accountability theory, which emphasizes that citizen-driven moral and ethical norms are most effective when combined with institutional or procedural mechanisms that translate societal expectations into enforceable accountability (Fox, 2015; Joshi, 2017). In this view, moral norms function as a tool of social pressure, but their impact is amplified when linked to formalized practices and leadership structures, highlighting the interplay between communal moral authority and institutionalized oversight in shaping ethical governance. Strengthening these channels ensures that moral claims are not merely symbolic but have the potential to influence policy and administrative behavior systematically.

CONCLUSION

This study was motivated by high-profile cases, such as the 2023 Cecilia Abena Dapaah scandal, which highlighted how Ghanaian religious and moral values operate as a powerful mechanism of public accountability. When news emerged that over \$1 million in cash and other valuables were kept in Dapaah’s residence, public outrage—framed through religious and cultural norms—compelled widespread demands for accountability, contributing to her resignation and subsequent legal investigation (Allotey & Atawoge, 2023; Myjoyonline, 2023). This case exemplifies the symbolic and practical influence of the “court of public opinion,” showing how collective moral scrutiny can complement formal institutional processes and shape political behavior. The study explored the intersections of religion, morality, and public accountability in Ghana, demonstrating that communal values significantly shape perceptions of political leadership. Informants’ reflections indicate that the masses, through moral critique, public shaming, and religious guidance, act as active agents of accountability, invoking principles such as fear of God, stewardship of resources, and communal responsibility. These mechanisms reflect Moral Community Theory, highlighting the normative power of shared ethical values (Durkheim, 1912/1995), and align with Habermas’ public sphere, in which public deliberation and discourse generate reputational incentives for ethical conduct (Habermas, 1989). Social Accountability Theory further underscores the need for institutional channels that translate moral and social pressures into tangible governance outcomes (Fox, 2015; Joshi, 2017).



The study also emphasizes the limits of moral authority, noting that while moral claims can influence leaders, their effectiveness depends on robust institutions and enforcement mechanisms. Strengthening governance in Ghana thus requires a combination of ethical education, platforms for public deliberation, and integration of moral norms with formal accountability structures, such as anti-corruption bodies and participatory governance initiatives. The study concludes that Ghanaian religious and moral values, when strategically aligned with institutional oversight, constitute a dynamic mechanism for ensuring ethical governance. By leveraging both reputational pressures and structural mechanisms, the country can reinforce integrity, enhance public trust, and hold leaders accountable to the moral and civic expectations of society.

REFERENCES

- Acheampong, T. (2023, July 22). Stolen \$1 million from Cecilia Dapaah's house can build 14 six-unit classrooms. *MyJoyOnline*. Retrieved from <https://www.myjoyonline.com/cecilia-dapaah-should-resign-she-shouldnt-wait-to-be-sacked-sam-george>
- Aiyar, Y. (2010). *Invited spaces, invited participation: Effects of greater participation on accountability in service delivery*. *India Review*, 9(2), 204–229. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14736481003765771>
- Allotey, G. A., & Atawoge, A. (2023, July 22). Cecilia Dapaah resigns as Sanitation Minister after huge cash theft scandal. *Citi Newsroom*. https://citinewsroom.com/2023/07/cecilia-dapaah-resigns-as-sanitation-minister/#google_vignette
- Ayee, J. A. (2016). The roots of corruption: The Ghanaian enquiry revisited." *The Institute of Economic Affairs*, 21(4), 22–30.
- Baez Camargo, C., & Jacobs, E. (2013). Social accountability and its conceptual challenges: An analytical framework (Working Paper No. 16). Basel Institute on Governance. Retrieved from https://baselgovernance.org/sites/default/files/2019-06/biog_working_paper_16.pdf
- Calhoun, C. (Ed.). (1992). *Habermas and the public sphere*. MIT Press.
- Chabal, P., & Daloz, J.-P. (1999). *Africa works: Disorder as political instrument*. James Currey.
- de Renzio, P., & Wampler, B. (2021). Participatory governance and citizen engagement: From participatory budgeting to open government and beyond. *World Development*, 140, 105–198. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2020.105198>
- Dovlo, E. (2005). Religion in the public sphere: Challenges and opportunities in Ghanaian lawmaking, 1989–2004. *Brigham Young University Law Review*, 25(3), 629–658.
- Dryzek, J. S. (2000). *Deliberative democracy and beyond: Liberals, critics, contestations*. Oxford University Press.
- Durkheim, E. (1995). *The elementary forms of religious life* (K. E. Fields, Trans.). New York: Free Press. (Original work published 1912)
- Fraser, N. (1990). Rethinking the public sphere: A contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy. *Social Text*, (25/26), 56–80. <https://doi.org/10.2307/466240>
- Fox, J. A. (2015). Social accountability: What does the evidence really say? *World Development*, 72, 346–361. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2015.03.011>
- Habermas, J. (1989). *The structural transformation of the public sphere: An inquiry into a category of bourgeois society*. MIT Press. (Original work published 1962).



- Joshi, A. (2017). Legal empowerment and social accountability: Complementary strategies toward rights-based development in health? *World Development*, 99, 160–172. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2017.07.008>
- MacIntyre, A. (1981). *After virtue: A study in moral theory* (2nd ed.). University of Notre Dame Press. MyJoyOnline. (2023, July 22). Cecilia Dapaah should resign, she shouldn't wait to be sacked –
- Sam George. MyJoyOnline. Retrieved from <https://www.myjoyonline.com/cecilia-dapaah-should-resign-she-shouldnt-wait-to-be-sacked-sam-george>
- Pobee, J. S. (1992). *Religion and politics in Ghana: A case study of the Acheampong era, 1972–1978*. Ghana Universities Press.
- Paul, S. (1992). *Accountability in public services: Exit, voice and control* (World Bank Discussion Paper No. 614). The World Bank.
- Putnam, R. D., & Campbell, D. E. (2010). *American grace: How religion divides and unites us*.
- Simon & Schuster. Stark, R., & Finke, R. (2000). *Acts of faith: Explaining the human side of religion*. University of California Press.
- Tweneboah, S. (2020). *Religion, law, politics and the state in Africa: Applying legal pluralism in Ghana*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Warner, M. (2002). *Publics and counterpublics*. Zone Books.
- Wiredu, K. (1996). *Cultural universals and particulars: An African perspective*. Indiana University Press.
- Wuthnow, R. (1994). *Sharing the journey: Support groups and America's new quest for community*. Free Press.