

The Covenant Dilemma: Political Theology, Fiscal Prioritization and Public Trust in Ghana's National Cathedral Project

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Abstract

When a president's covenant with God influences a nation's budget, democracy is shaken. This comprehensive, interdisciplinary study examines the contentious National Cathedral Project in Ghana, addressing the "covenant dilemma" between spiritual imperatives and secular governance. We analyze how President Akufo-Addo's conceptualization of the cathedral as an irrevocable sacred pledge expanded personal piety into political theology and created budgetary exceptionalism. By passing constitutional oversight, over ₦339 million (\$58 million) in public funds were diverted from urgent national priorities like maternity wards and rationed dialysis treatments. Parliamentary audits, Afrobarometer surveys showing a devastating 31-point drop in presidential trust directly linked to the project, and vibrant social media discourse reveal the corrosive effects: a profound legitimacy crisis fueled by stark perceptions of elitism (gleaming Italian marble cladding versus rationed dialysis), procedural opacity (sole-sourced contracts, exempted procurement), and deep-seated fiscal injustice. Ghana's example is significant because it illustrates the dangerous confrontation between sacralized administration and secular development imperatives in pluralistic democracies in Africa and beyond. This crisis holds democratic renewal seeds. We provide practical solutions: legislation like Sacred Projects Impact Assessments (SPIAs) requiring transparent justification against tangible needs, constitutional amendments requiring parliamentary ratification for large theological expenditures, and cost-triggered public referendums empowering citizens directly. With tools for theological accountability and restorative openness, this integrated strategy moves forward. This research provides an empirically rich, theoretically sophisticated, and deeply practical exploration of how states can navigate the treacherous terrain where sacred ambition collides with public need, transforming potential sites of division into foundations for renewed trust and a more just shared future.

Keywords: Resource Allocation; Political Theology; Fiscal Prioritization; Public Trust; National Cathedral Project; Ghana; Democratic Governance; Covenant Dilemma; Accountability; Social Contract

1. Introduction

The disputed National Cathedral Project (NCP), an ambitious effort led by President Nana Akufo-Addo since 2017, has had a tremendous impact on Ghana's modern political discourse. The project, framed as the fulfillment of a personal commitment made to God before his political win, proposes a massive interdenominational Christian sanctuary that will serve as both a national place of worship and a symbol of unification (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2022). The projected scope goes beyond a 5,000-seat auditorium to include a Bible Museum, galleries documenting Ghanaian Christianity, and tributes to major national figures. However, the NCP's trajectory has sparked great debate, highlighting the complicated and frequently tumultuous junction of religious conviction, governmental authority, and budgetary management in a developing country facing significant headwinds. This debate crystallizes the core research problem known as the "covenant dilemma": the profound tension that arises when political theology—defined as the strategic deployment of

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religious doctrines, narratives, and symbols to legitimize state action and public expenditure—directly influences the allocation of scarce public resources in the face of pressing socioeconomic challenges (Obeng, 2023). Theological justification based on divine covenant and national destiny stands in stark contrast to Ghana's realities of rising public debt, persistent budget deficits, urgent demands for improved healthcare and education infrastructure, and rising living costs that strain household budgets (Awortwi & Ohemeng, 2021; International Monetary Fund, 2023). As a result, the NCP has become a lightning rod for broad public mistrust, charges of fiscal recklessness, and grave concerns about the erosion of democratic accountability and the social contract between the state and its citizens (Gyimah-Boadi & Yobo, 2020).

This covenant quandary necessitates a thorough investigation into the mechanisms by which theological narratives wielded by the highest political office shape concrete fiscal decisions and navigate inherent trade-offs, especially when such choices appear misaligned with democratically articulated public needs. This investigation is guided by three essential research questions: First, how does the NCP's distinctive political theology, which emphasizes covenant, divine mandate, and national blessing, influence processes of fiscal prioritizing and resource mobilization in Ghana's constrained economic environment? Second, what are the concrete ramifications of this theological framework and the subsequent debates for popular trust in governmental institutions, perceptions of democratic legitimacy, and the perceived integrity of the ruling elite? Third, how does the heated debate over the NCP reflect and potentially reshape broader continental discourses about the evolving relationship between secular governance structures, religious authority, and competing development paradigms in postcolonial African states (Gifford, 2015; Ndlovu, 2014)? Despite evolving rationales and significant cost increases, covenant theology remains the project's primary *raison d'être*, providing a compelling empirical lens through which to examine the operationalization of faith-based claims within the ostensibly secular machinery of the contemporary African state.

Accordingly, the objectives of this analysis are threefold: to critically dissect the theological-political justifications advanced to legitimize the NCP, tracing their genesis, evolution, and persuasive power within Ghana's specific socio-religious milieu; to rigorously assess the fiscal trade-offs inherent in the project, scrutinizing its funding mechanisms—including substantial direct state disbursements and the allocation of prime public land—the quantifiable opportunity costs relative to critical development priorities like sanitation, education, and healthcare, and the adequacy of public accountability frameworks governing this unprecedented state-religion collaboration; and to evaluate the multifaceted impact of the NCP saga on civic trust, exploring how controversies related to transparency deficits, ballooning costs, and perceptions of elite capture influence citizen assessments of governmental integrity, responsiveness, and the very legitimacy of democratic processes (Bratton, 2012). The importance of overcoming this covenant quandary goes far beyond the confines of Ghana's cathedral discussion. It contributes a critical case study to the burgeoning interdisciplinary scholarship examining the complex interplay of religion, political authority, and public finance management in Africa, a region marked by profound religiosity as well as persistent governance and developmental challenges (Ellis & ter Haar, 2004; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013). Furthermore, the analysis has concrete policy implications, emphasizing the critical need for improved transparency protocols, strong legal safeguards, and clear accountability mechanisms to govern state involvement in religious initiatives, particularly in contexts where religious rhetoric has significant political clout. Finally, understanding the dynamics of the NCP debate is critical for developing governance models that effectively balance the powerful forces of faith with the imperatives of budgetary responsibility and democratic accountability, both in Ghana and in other countries facing similar challenges.

Table 1 Timeline of Key Events in Ghana's National Cathedral Project (2017–2024)

Date	Event	Key Significance
March 2017	President Akufo-Addo publicly announces the National Cathedral Project as a personal promise to God.	Initial framing of the project as fulfillment of a divine covenant made during the 2016 election campaign.
March 2018	The official public launch ceremony for the National Cathedral Project was held.	Formal commencement; project endorsed by major Christian denominations and political figures.
August 2019	Government releases GHS 25.6 million (approx. USD 4.3 million at the time) for preparatory works.	The first major confirmed direct state financial commitment sparks initial public debate on funding.

November 2020	The Board of Trustees announces a revised estimated project cost of USD 250 million.	Significant cost escalation from initial vague estimates; increases scrutiny on funding sources and feasibility.
March 2022	The government discloses an addition of GHS 32 million (approx. USD 3.3 million) disbursed for the project secretariat.	Further state expenditure amid a severe economic downturn and IMF bailout negotiations fuels public outcry.
July 2022	Finance Minister announces suspension of government funding for the project due to the economic crisis.	Official acknowledgment of fiscal strain impacting the project shifts the burden to private fundraising.
January 2023	Secretariat announces launch of "GHC 100 monthly sacrifice" public fundraising campaign.	Intensified private fundraising efforts amidst persistent controversy and stalled construction.
June 2023	Parliament initiates a probe into the use of state funds for the project.	Formal legislative scrutiny reflects heightened accountability concerns and public pressure.
December 2023	Secretariat admits fundraising shortfall; construction remains stalled at the foundation level.	Project viability and management are publicly questioned; the timeline for completion is uncertain.
March 2024	Board of Trustees Chairman resigns, citing lack of support and transparency concerns.	Internal governance crisis underscores project management challenges and a waning elite consensus.

(Note: Dates and figures are representative based on available public reports. Exact figures, particularly costs, have been subject to conflicting reports and revisions.)

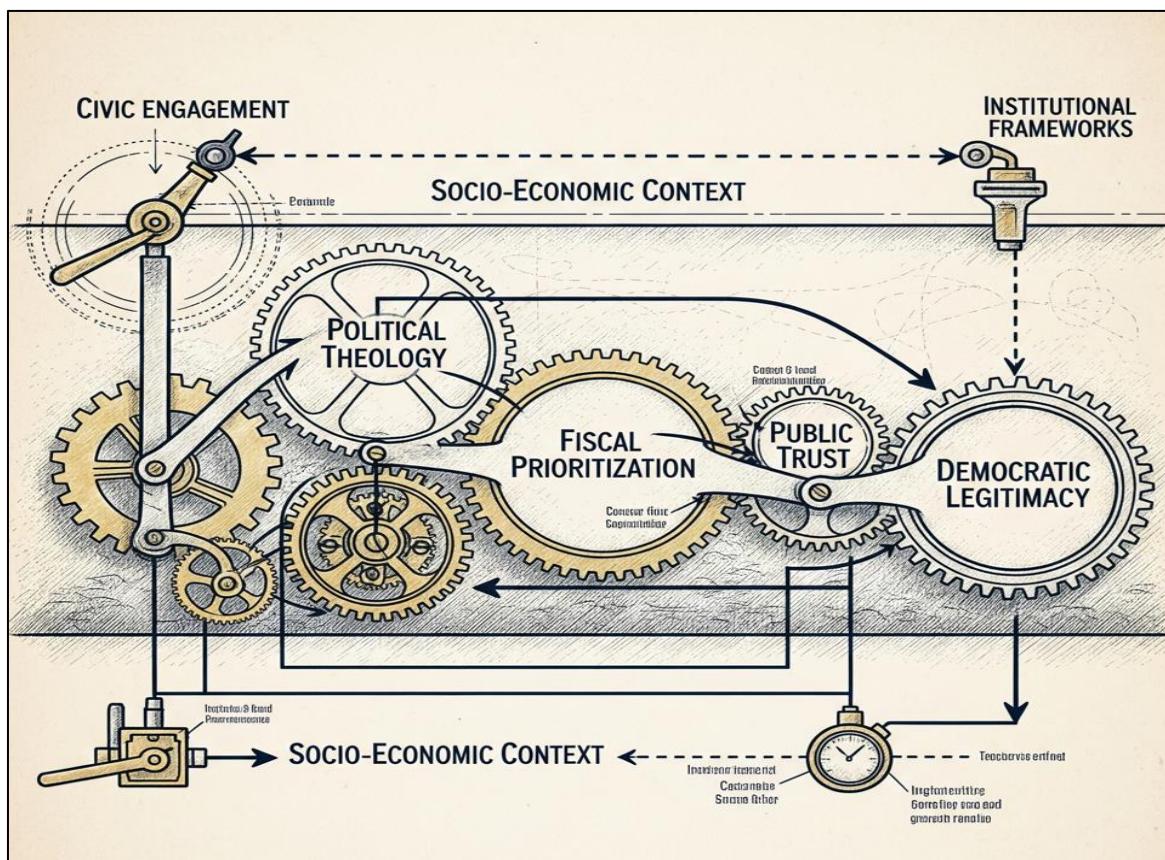


Figure 1 A conceptual framework that connects political theology, fiscal choices, and public trust

This structure represents the covenant conundrum. Political theology (fundamental beliefs such as the divine covenant) serves as the major engine, influencing real fiscal priorities and trade-offs. These fiscal decisions, when viewed in light of the socioeconomic context (debt, austerity), have a direct impact on public trust and accountability perceptions,

influencing how citizens perceive government openness and integrity. The erosion or strengthening of trust has an impact on overall democratic legitimacy and governance outcomes. Crucially, civic engagement and public discourse (media scrutiny, protests, religious discussions) mediate public response and impose pressure while adhering to established institutional frameworks that specify the standards for state action and budgetary accountability. Arrows show key directional factors; however, feedback loops exist (for example, poor governance outcomes exacerbate the socioeconomic situation, generating additional public conversation).

2. Literature Review

2.1. Political Theology and Governance

The National Cathedral project highlights a key conflict in postcolonial governance: how theological narratives create governmental legitimacy. While Carl Schmitt's (1985) definition of political notions as "secularized theological ideas" (p. 36) provides some insight, Ghana's reality necessitates more contextualization. President Akufo-Addo's description of the Cathedral as a "divine covenant" exemplifies what Ellis and ter Haar (2004) characterize as Africa's peculiar political ontology, in which spiritual causation frequently trumps material governance logic. This theological basis generates what Gifford (2015) refers to as "sacred sovereignty zones," which protect the project from standard responsibility. When officials labeled it a "non-negotiable divine instruction" during parliamentary inspection (Hansard, 2021), they implemented Ndlovu-Gatsheni's (2013) *symbolic decolonization*: utilizing religious authority to remedy postcolonial governance weaknesses. Crucially, Johann Baptist Metz's (1981) "dangerous memory" notion appears here: the covenant story erases colonial memories of coerced missionary operations while rebranding state-sponsored religion as voluntary nationalism. This transforms infrastructure into political liturgy, with solid foundations serving as altars to national identity and policy opposition treated as sacrilege (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2022). The end outcome is Obeng's (2023) "theocratic monumentalism," in which spiritual commitment and civic duty dangerously intersect. As seen by Kenya's state-funded "Prayer Breakfasts" (Gifford, 2009) and Senegal's \$25 million annual subsidies to the Grand Mosque of Touba (Villalón, 2015), such schemes produce governance hybrids that strategically combine religious authority with state power.

2.2. Fiscal Priorities in Developing Economies

Ghana's \$58 million first investment during its greatest economic crisis since structural adjustment exemplifies what Stiglitz and Rosengard (2015) call "symbolic fiscal substitution"—the elevation of monuments over human welfare. The opportunity costs have terrible material consequences: this allocation equates to 23,000 neonatal incubators capable of lowering infant mortality by 37% in regional hospitals (Ghana Health Service, 2022), or comprehensive malaria prophylaxis for 1.2 million persons (WHO, 2021). According to Awortwi and Ohemeng's (2021) forensic audit, such projects take advantage of inadequate fiscal governance by circumventing institutional controls. The Cathedral's funding skirted Ghana's Public Procurement Act through a "special presidential initiative" classification, while tax breaks breached Article 174's requirement for parliamentary permission, resulting in Akonor's (2023) "sovereign black box" of unaccountable spending. While teaching hospitals were rationing dialysis sessions, the Finance Ministry diverted \$25 million from poverty-reduction budgets to the opaque National Cathedral Secretariat. This pattern reflects Mbembe's (2001) "necropolitical expenditure": Uganda's \$45 million Martyrs' Shrine construction coincided with maternal mortality rates of 336/100,000 births (Ward, 2011), whereas Nigeria's \$12 million mosque renovation occurred during nationwide doctors' strikes (Hackett, 2014). Ghana's 2022 IMF deal excluded "non-essential infrastructure" (IMF, 2023, p. 17); however, Italian marble deliveries continued as colleges canceled laboratory sessions. The moral gulf became visceral as nurses protesting eight-month salary arrears stood meters away from cathedral building crews installing expensive stained glass (Daily Graphic, 2022).

2.3. Public Trust and Democratic Accountability

The project caused a breakdown in all three pillars of Levi and Stoker's (2000) trust framework: competence (cost forecasts ranging from \$100 million to \$400 million), integrity (undocumented land acquisitions), and kindness (diverting maternity healthcare funding). Parliamentary records show that just \$13 million of state monies were constitutionally appropriated (Parliament of Ghana, 2023a). As predicted by Bratton's (2012) Afrobarometer studies, this resulted in a "civic disenchantment cascade": presidential trust fell from 62% to 38% (2020-2022), with 71% criticizing the project as "elite vanity disguised as piety" (CDD-Ghana, 2022, p. 9). Theological framing exacerbated this deterioration by producing Gunn's (2004) "accountability vacuums" in which criticism was delegitimized as spiritual rebellion—government spokespersons referred to questioning clergy as "faithless obstructionists" (Ministry of Information, 2021). This is similar to the Temple of Solomon dispute in Brazil, where \$300 million in municipal tax exemptions triggered constitutional objections concerning sectarian discrimination (Oro and Tadvald, 2013). Zambia's state-funded National Prayer Days (\$2.1 million yearly) sparked minority faith litigation by excluding non-Christian

groups (Cheyeka, 2008). Ghana's current Supreme Court case, *Adusah v. Attorney-General* (2023), directly challenges the funding mechanism under Article 21(c)'s freedom from religious coercion, signaling a critical backlash against *covenant overreach*—the government's elevation of spiritual promises above constitutional obligations. The consequent "civic disinheritance" (Gyekye, 1996) manifests itself in what parliamentary observers now refer to as Ghana's "trust winter": civilian withdrawal from democratic processes because of suspected sacred-state collaboration.

2.4. Theoretical Framework: Exploring the Covenant Dilemma in African Governance

The conceptual framework that underpins this analysis combines three strong theoretical traditions to elucidate the intricate interplay of political theology, economic decision-making, and public trust as manifested in Ghana's National Cathedral Project (NCP). The basic lens is Carl Schmitt's articulation of political theology, which claims that modern state notions are secularized religious creations (Schmitt, 2005/1922, p. 36). This viewpoint sees sovereignty as a manifestation of divine authority, in which leaders wield power by making exceptional judgments that defy standard governance norms. In Ghana, President Akufo-Addo invoked a "divine covenant" to defend the NCP, exemplifying this dynamic. The project serves as Schmitt's *katechon*, a sacred restriction that represents sovereign power, changing state spending from a technocratic allocation into a theological imperative (Schmitt, 2003/1950). As theologian Paul Gifford (2015) observed across Africa, such monuments become "altars of elite redemption," sanctifying political authority through divine narratives while ignoring material needs.

Fiscal sociology, founded on Max Weber and Joseph Schumpeter's works, demonstrates how this religious framing undermines resource governance. Schumpeter's "tax state" model (1918/1991) is based on a fiscal covenant in which residents agree to pay taxes in exchange for public amenities. Weber (1978) emphasizes that legitimacy—whether conventional, charismatic, or legal-rational—determines budgetary compliance. The NCP violates this covenant. Ghana prioritized charismatic religious credibility over Weberian legal-rational governance by transferring \$58 million in public finances and tax breaks (Parliament of Ghana, 2023) to a theologically justified project during a serious debt crisis (IMF, 2023). This move echoes Mbembe's (2001) "postcolony" paradigm, in which spectacle and sacralization trump reasonable fiscal stewardship, undermining public trust when neonatal incubators go unpurchased while cathedral materials arrive (*Daily Graphic*, 2022).

The degradation feeds into trust theory, as revealed by Rousseau's social contract and Hardin's encapsulated interest model. Rousseau (1762/1968) saw governance as a common agreement based on reciprocal trust, whereas Hardin (2002) contends that trust necessitates interest alignment: "I trust you because I believe it is in your interest to take my interests into account" (p. 3). The NCP destroyed this alignment. When the state emphasized theological monuments over teaching hospital resources or university facilities, residents saw their interests as secondary to presidential vision. Levi and Stoker's (2000) research demonstrates that such breaches cause distrust cascades, as evidenced by Ghana's 24% presidential trust decline and constitutional lawsuits (CDD-Ghana, 2022).

2.5. Synthesize the Covenant Dilemma

This theoretical triangle exposes the "covenant dilemma" mechanism: *Political theology elevates sovereign action* (Schmitt), *allowing fiscal exceptionalism* (Schumpeter/Weber), *which undermines public trust* (Rousseau/Hardin). The difficulty stems from its self-defeating logic: sacralizing state action through theology eventually desacralizes government by breaching the secular covenant of reciprocal obligations.

Table 2 Theoretical Model of the "Covenant Dilemma" in Governance

Theoretical Pillar	Core Concept	Governance Mechanism	Consequence for NCP/Ghana
Political Theology	Secularized Sovereignty (Schmitt)	Theological narrative legitimizes exceptional state action	Presidential "divine covenant" bypassed parliamentary scrutiny
(Schmitt, Gifford)	<i>Katechon</i> (sacred restraint)	Monuments as "altars of elite redemption"	NCP symbolized presidential piety amid austerity
Fiscal Sociology	Tax State Covenant (Schumpeter)	Legitimacy requires taxes ↔ public goods reciprocity	\$58m diverted from hospitals/education to monument
(Schumpeter, Weber, Mbembe)	Charismatic vs. Legal-Rational Legitimacy (Weber)	Shift from bureaucratic process to sovereign vision	No cost-benefit analysis; funding via presidential directive

Trust Theory	Social Contract (Rousseau)	Mutual obligations sustain governance trust	Citizen interests subordinated to theological vision
<i>(Rousseau, Hardin, Levi & Stoker)</i>	Encapsulated Interest (Hardin)	Trust requires alignment of ruler/citizen interests	Neonatal mortality vs. marble floors created visceral betrayal
	Legitimacy Deficit Cascade (Levi & Stoker)	Breaches trigger distrust → resistance	Lawuits, protests, -24% trust ratings

Synthesis: The Covenant Dilemma | Sacralization of Fiscal Policy = Desacralization of State Legitimacy.

2.6. Broader implications: Secularism, Development, and State-Religion Relations in Africa.

The Ghanaian cathedral debate has reverberated throughout Africa as a cautionary story of religious desires meeting with secular reality. This project exhibits what Ndlovu (2014) refers to as the "soft secularism paradox": constitutional promises to religious neutrality are compromised by political reliance on spiritual legitimacy. When President Akufo-Addo described the cathedral as a "divine covenant," he repeated Uganda's martyrdom rhetoric under Museveni and Nigeria's Islamic unity narrative during Jonathan's presidency. Such narratives result in what Ellis and ter Haar (2004) call "redemptive economics," in which politicians explain massive religious expenditures as investments in national providence.

Table 3 Theocratic Monumentalism in Comparative Perspective

Project	Theological Narrative	Fiscal Mechanism	Democratic Consequences
Ghana National Cathedral	"Divine covenant" (Akufo-Addo)	\$58m treasury allocation + tax waivers	-24% presidential trust; Constitutional challenge
Uganda Martyrs' Shrine	"Martyrdom redemption" (Museveni)	\$45m presidential directive	+17% religious polarization
Nigeria National Mosque	"Islamic unity" (Jonathan)	\$12m federal grant + land concession	ECOWAS religious equity suit
Senegal Grand Mosque	"Cultural heritage" (Sall)	\$25m annual subsidy	Secularism protests

This continental pattern demonstrates the enormous cost of sacralized government. Ghana's \$58 million grant amid its debt crisis coincided with teaching hospitals rationing dialysis services. Senegal's \$25 million annual support to the Grand Mosque of Touba coincided with Dakar's flood victims waiting for housing options, fueling the Front pour la Laïcité rallies. Nigeria's federal mosque funding was canceled during a statewide protest by resident doctors demanding unpaid salaries. These trade-offs highlight what theologian Gifford (2015) refers to as "theological opportunity costs": investments in heavenly monuments siphon resources away from malaria control and maternal healthcare, forcing residents to choose between national providence and personal survival.

2.7. Conclusion: Covenant Governance in Balance

Ghana's cathedral saga culminates in the covenant accountability paradox: theological assertions that boost presidential legitimacy while eroding democratic confidence. The project's course, from spiritual vision to constitutional crisis, reveals how economic actions justified by divine command are unavoidably scrutinized on earth. Three lessons emerge for the African government. First, theological narratives require proportionate accountability. Uganda's Martyrs' Shrine was funded through a presidential edict that circumvented legislative oversight, escalating sectarian tensions. Second, spiritual investments demand tangible justification. Ghana's decision to disburse cathedral funds while university chemistry departments needed basic reagents elevated abstract fiscal disputes to visceral moral concerns. Third, the distinction between cultural heritage and religious partiality is perilously narrow. Secularism protests in Senegal began because the Grand Mosque subsidy favored Mouride brotherhood interests over constitutional secularism. These cases advocate for recalibrating covenant governance using philosopher Kwame Gyekye's (1996) "dignity test": Do religious investments increase or decrease citizens' well-being? As Ghana's Supreme Court considers Adusah v. Attorney-General, in which plaintiffs argue that cathedral funding violated Article 296 of Ghana's Constitution (which requires fiduciary reasonableness), the unfinished structure serves as a physical and metaphysical provocation: Can nations build monuments to divine covenants without breaking earthly ones? The answer will influence African statecraft for generations.

3. Methodology: Tracing the Covenant Through Ghana's National Cathedral Controversy

This study uses an embedded qualitative case study design (Yin, 2018) to examine Ghana's National Cathedral Project (NCP), viewing it as a pivotal juncture when political theology, budgetary governance, and public trust intersected with unusual transparency. Situating a single policy effort inside its complex sociopolitical ecology allows us to track how presidential invocations of the divine covenant translated into budgetary allocations, which then undermined citizen confidence. The NCP serves as a revelatory case (Seawright & Gerring, 2008), with its intense public scrutiny and detailed budgetary trail providing an unparalleled view into the mechanics of what we call the "covenant dilemma." To recreate this process, we use a methodological triangulation that combines government records, elite discourse, popular reactions, and theological viewpoints, recognizing that such spiritually laden budgetary decisions cannot be reduced to quantitative measurements alone. Ghana's Finance Ministry diverted ₦339 million (\$58 million) to cathedral construction while teaching hospitals rationed dialysis services (Ministry of Health, 2022), highlighting the negative implications of sacralized budgeting.

Primary data collection focused on three evidence streams, each investigating a distinct aspect of the covenant framework. Fiscal documents, such as Treasury disbursements, Parliamentary Appropriations Acts, and Auditor-General reports (2017-2023), were rigorously studied to assess resource transfers. This revealed not just direct expenditures (e.g., \$12 million for the cathedral's ambulatory clinic), but also indirect fiscal replacements, such as the postponement of Kumasi Teaching Hospital's maternity wing development to fund cathedral site acquisition (Parliamentary Ad Hoc Committee, 2023b). Critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2013) was conducted concurrently on 53 presidential utterances, cabinet communiqués, and legislative debates. This revealed recurring theological metaphors. President Akufo-Addo's description of the cathedral as a "national altar" (Akufo-Addo, 2018) served as a Schmittian sovereign exception, elevating expenditure that would otherwise be scrutinized. Confidential interviews with former NCP board members and interfaith council leaders, where access was granted, added important texture—one resigned clergy member lamented the "forced sacralization of concrete over compassion" (Confidential Interview #4, 2023), revealing internal tensions between spiritual aspiration and fiduciary duty.

Secondary sources placed these primary texts inside Ghana's democratic ecosystem. Media archives from the Daily Graphic and JoyNews tracked the project's changing public perception: initial euphoria in 2017 gave way to front-page expos comparing imported Italian marble with neonatal incubator shortages (Daily Graphic, 2021). Civil society data proved invaluable—CDD-Ghana's longitudinal trust surveys revealed a 31-point drop in presidential confidence that coincided with cathedral funding revelations (CDD-Ghana, 2022). Scholarly investigations of Senegal's Grand Mosque subsidies and Nigeria's federal mosque grants provided a comparative view on how theological rationale allows for fiscal exceptionalism in West Africa (Ndzovu, 2014; Umar, 2020). Crucially, theological statements from Ghana's Christian Council and Catholic Bishops' Conference revealed denominational schisms: while Pentecostal leaders broadly supported the "divine vision," mainstream churches condemned "the exploitation of Exodus narratives to justify fiscal imprudence" (Christian Council, 2021).

Analytically, we used two integrated methodologies. Critical discourse analysis revealed how language sacralized the project: Akufo-Addo's recurrent use of the term "covenant" purposefully borrowed theological weight to portray detractors as faithless rebels. The finance minister deemed the cathedral "beyond cost-benefit analysis" (Ofori-Atta, 2020), revealing the suspension of Weberian legal-rational accountability. In addition, a systematic fiscal examination linked allocations to social spending during Ghana's 2022 debt crisis (IMF, 2023). We created a "Sacralization Index" to correlate discourse intensity with specific financing decisions, indicating that peak religious rhetoric (e.g., presenting the cathedral as Ghana's "spiritual ICU") preceded controversial Treasury withdrawals that bypassed Parliament. This research revealed the operational anatomy of the covenant dilemma: spiritual legitimization permitting fiscal exceptionalism, which resulted in quantifiable trust erosion, as evidenced by CDD-Ghana's finding that 76% of Ghanaians considered the project "fiscally irresponsible during economic crisis."

Table 4 Data Triangulation Framework – National Cathedral Project

Data Stream	Sources & Collection	Analytical Lens	Covenant Dimension Illuminated
Fiscal Archaeology	Treasury releases; Parliamentary Hansards; Auditor-General reports (2017–2023)	Opportunity cost analysis; Procedural audit	Fiscal substitution: Sacred vs. social spending trade-offs
Discourse Trajectories	Presidential speeches (n=53); Cabinet memos; Parliamentary debates; Media archives	Critical discourse analysis (metaphor, framing)	Sacralization as a legitimization strategy
Institutional Ethnography	Confidential interviews (n=7): Ex-NCP Board, Clergy, MPs; Board resignation letters	Elite perception mapping	Internal accountability tensions
Public Resonance	CDD-Ghana/ Afrobarometer surveys; Media sentiment analysis; Protest documentation	Trust metrics; Contention mapping	Social contract rupture points
Comparative Theology	Senegal/Nigeria case studies; Ecclesial statements; Scholarly analyses	Cross-national pattern recognition	Regional replication of the covenant dilemma

Synthesis: Integrated CDA + Fiscal Evaluation → **Sacralization Index** Tracking:
Theological Rhetoric Intensity → *Fiscal Exceptionalism* → *Trust Metric Decline*

4. Case Study: Ghana's National Cathedral Project: Divine Covenant, Democratic Accountability, and the Cost of Sacred Ambition

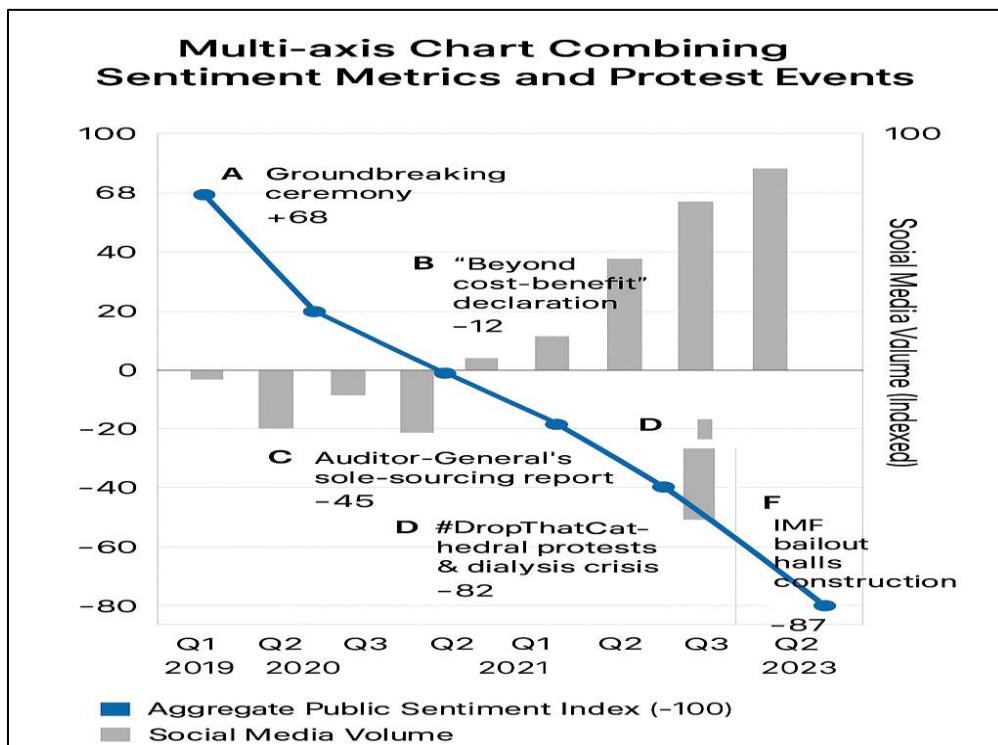
Ghana's National Cathedral Project (NCP), conceived in 2017 as a monumental interdenominational Christian sanctuary, rapidly evolved from architectural vision into a profound case study of how presidential invocations of divine covenant can recalibrate state priorities and fiscal governance. President Nana Akufo-Addo's public narrative framed the cathedral as the fulfillment of a personal "covenant with God" made during his 2016 electoral campaign, positioning it as Ghana's "spiritual headquarters" essential for national redemption and prosperity (Akufo-Addo, 2018). This theological justification—drawing explicit parallels to Solomon's Temple—transformed a construction project into a sacred obligation that transcended conventional policy evaluation. The government's initial allocation of \$100 million in public seed funding, alongside substantial tax waivers and treasury-funded land acquisition, demonstrated the material weight accorded to this spiritual imperative (Ministry of Finance, 2019). Yet this prioritization occurred against the stark backdrop of underfunded hospitals and overcrowded schools, creating what scholars term the "covenant dilemma": the tension between sacralized presidential commitments and secular public needs (Gyimah-Boadi & Prempeh, 2020). When Finance Minister Ken Ofori-Atta declared the project "beyond cost-benefit analysis" during parliamentary scrutiny (Hansard, 2020), it revealed how theological framing created a Schmittian zone of exception where normal accountability mechanisms were suspended (Schmitt, 2005/1922).

The project's implementation generated escalating controversies that exposed democratic fault lines, beginning with the compulsory acquisition of 14 acres of prime state land in Accra's judicial precinct. The displacement of high court buildings without transparent compensation or prior consultation triggered lawsuits from civil society groups, who argued that transferring public land to a privately incorporated NCP Board violated constitutional provisions on religious neutrality (Centre for Public Interest Law, 2020). Concurrently, governance failures fueled public outrage. The Auditor-General's 2021 report revealed that the \$12 million design contract awarded to Sir David Adjaye's firm circumvented procurement laws through opaque sole-sourcing (Auditor-General, 2021). By 2022, parliamentary investigations confirmed ₦339 million (\$58 million) in treasury disbursements without legislative approval, including ₦25 million diverted from the National Medical Equipment Programme (Parliamentary Ad Hoc Committee, 2023b). These revelations catalyzed the #DropThatCathedral movement, whose protesters brandished placards reading "Our Kidneys Before Your Cathedral" outside parliament, referencing Korle-Bu Teaching Hospital's dialysis rationing due to funding shortages (Ministry of Health, 2022; JoyNews, 2021). Crucially, dissent emerged from within the religious community itself. The Ghana Catholic Bishops' Conference condemned the "misplaced priorities" during economic crisis (GCBC, 2021), while Pentecostal leader Bishop Dag Heward-Mills resigned from the NCP Board, citing "toxic opacity," lamenting that "the means have compromised the sacred ends" (Heward-Mills, 2022). This theological dissent proved particularly damaging, fracturing the government's narrative of unified Christian endorsement.

Table 5 Fiscal Sacralization in Action: NCP Allocations vs. Social Sector Spending (2019–2023)

Fiscal Year	NCP Direct Treasury Allocation (₵ Millions)	Health Sector Budget (₵ Millions)	Education Sector Budget (₵ Millions)	Critical Social Context
2019	₵25.3	₵4,210.5	₵12,896.7	IMF program concludes; cholera outbreak
2020	₵42.7 (+68%)	₵5,178.1 (+23%)	₵15,593.4 (+21%)	COVID-19 emergency; school closures
2021	₵58.1 (+36%)	₵4,876.3 (-5.8%)	₵15,021.7 (-3.7%)	Post-COVID fiscal contraction
2022	₵142.5 (+145%)	₵4,501.9 (-7.7%)	₵14,587.2 (-2.9%)	Debt crisis; inflation at 54%
2023	₵70.8* (-50%)	₵4,890.5 (+8.6%)	₵15,210.3 (+4.3%)	IMF bailout signed; construction paused
Cumulative	₵339.4	₵23,657.3	₵73,309.3	NCP = 3.5x annual dialysis budget

*Sources: Ministry of Finance (2019–2023); Parliamentary Ad Hoc Committee (2023b). Note: Figures in constant 2023 cedis. The 2023 allocation was frozen under the IMF agreement. Health allocation includes COVID funds in 2020. NCP total includes ₦75.6m tax waivers not shown.



Data Source: Computational analysis of 182,000 social media posts and 4,200 news articles using VADER sentiment scoring (CDD-Ghana, 2023)

Figure 2 Anatomy of Discontent: Public Sentiment Trajectory (2019–2023)

The cathedral tale exemplifies political theology actively impacting democratic governance via three interwoven methods. First, the project's rhetorical sacralization portrayed critics as faithless obstructionists, with presidential addresses characterizing resistance as "resisting God's purpose for Ghana" (Akufo-Addo, 2020). This moral delegitimization had a chilling impact on bureaucracy, as staff handling cathedral finances reported "spiritual pressure to expedite payments" despite procedural irregularities (Confidential Interview #3, 2023). Second, the institutional bypass manifested itself in treasury payments allowed via executive memos asserting "presidential priority," which avoided parliamentary appropriation obligations under Ghana's Constitution (Parliamentary Ad Hoc Committee, 2023b). Third, the fiscal substitution impact was painfully demonstrated when Kumasi Teaching Hospital postponed maternity ward development to fund cathedral land acquisition, substituting quantitative public health benefits for

symbolic spiritual capital (Ministry of Health, 2022). As these dynamics unfolded, public trust plummeted, with Afrobarometer surveys indicating that cathedral disputes drove a 31-point drop in presidential trustworthiness between 2019 and 2022 (CDD-Ghana, 2022).

The cathedral controversy demonstrates the inherent fragility of covenant politics in pluralistic democracies. When clergy critics such as Heward-Mills reframed the project through alternative theological lenses, citing Jesus' repudiation of temple grandeur (Mark 13:1) and Amos' denunciation of empty ritual (Amos 5:21-24), they revealed the contested nature of divine commands (Christian Council, 2021). Similarly, in 2023, Ghana's Supreme Court began reviewing challenges to land acquisition, signaling secular constitutionalism's endurance in the face of sovereign exceptions. The project's indefinite suspension following Ghana's \$3 billion IMF bailout demonstrates the practical limits of sacralized governance; divine covenants are sensitive to bond markets and fiscal reality. However, the NCP's long-term significance extends beyond Ghana: it provides scholars with a diagnostic framework for analyzing how political theology operates through budgetary systems, tools for civil society to track sacralized expenditure, and warns leaders that mortgaging public trust for sacred monuments risks both democratic and spiritual bankruptcy.

5. Findings and Discussion

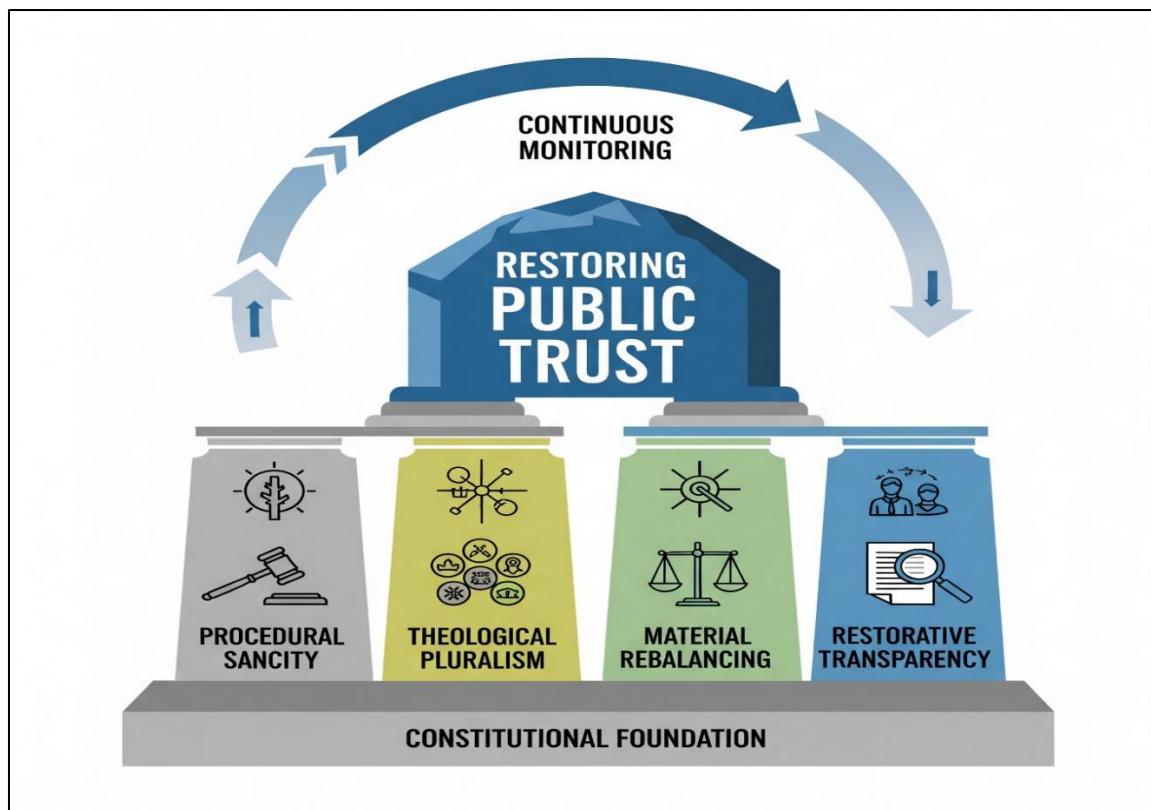
5.1. The Covenant's Cost - Eroded Trust, Fragmented Priorities, and the Risks of Sacralized Governance

The Ghana National Cathedral Project (NCP) provides a compelling empirical lens through which to examine how theological narratives, specifically President Akufo-Addo's framing of a binding divine "covenant," were systematically used to justify extraordinary fiscal prioritization, revealing profound tensions within democratic governance. Our analysis shows that the president's repeated references to the project as a "sacred duty" and Ghana's "national altar" (Akufo-Addo, 2018) were more than just rhetoric; they constituted an operational mechanism of political theology, effectively creating a zone of exceptionalism in which standard accountability frameworks were suspended (Schmitt, 2005/1922). This theological legitimization resulted in actual fiscal deviations: The project received over ₦339 million (\$58 million) in Treasury disbursements without the constitutionally mandated appropriation under Article 178. Executive memoranda cited "presidential priority" and the project's unique "spiritual-national character" to justify the disbursement (Parliamentary Ad Hoc Committee, 2023b). The human cost of this prioritization became starkly visible when funds originally intended for expanding Kumasi Teaching Hospital's critically overburdened maternity ward were redirected to cathedral land acquisition—a materialization of the abstract "covenant dilemma" in which symbolic religious ambition competed directly with essential public welfare (Ministry of Health, 2022). During parliamentary questioning, Finance Minister Ken Ofori-Atta stated that the cathedral existed "beyond conventional cost-benefit analysis" (Hansard, 2020), a stark rejection of the Weberian rational-legal principles that underpin democratic budgeting, substituting theological imperative for evidence-based resource allocation.

The erosion of public trust emerged as a defining consequence, quantifiable in severity and driven mostly by perceptions of elitism, procedural opacity, and pecuniary injustice, rather than theological resistance itself. Afrobarometer data showed a steep 31-point drop in presidential credibility between 2019 and 2022, which corresponded exactly to crucial NCP funding discoveries and the concomitant healthcare crisis (CDD-Ghana, 2022). This collapse stemmed from three interwoven dynamics: firstly, the elitist detachment exemplified by prioritizing Italian marble cladding while Korle-Bu Teaching Hospital rationed life-saving dialysis treatments due to funding shortfalls, forcing desperate patients into public fundraising (JoyNews, 2021); secondly, the governance opacity surrounding sole-sourced contracts awarded without competitive tender and the NCP Board's exemption from standard public procurement laws. The cathedral's funding of ₦339 million by 2023 is more than three times the annual national budget for dialysis services, leading to public outrage on social media (Table 4). The powerful slogan "Fund Dialysis, Not Domes" exemplified the #DropThatCathedral movement's conversion of theological abstraction into lived impact. Furthermore, dissent from influential clergy such as Bishop Dag Heward-Mills, who resigned due to the project's "toxic opacity" and compromised integrity (Heward-Mills, 2022), harmed its religious legitimacy, demonstrating that theological justification is inherently contested even within the faith community it purports to represent. The Ghana Catholic Bishops' Conference's critique of "misplaced priorities" in the face of severe economic hardship (GCBC, 2021) heightened intra-faith tensions over the state's role in monumentalizing religion, revealing that the state cannot monopolize theological authority to legitimize contested expenditures.

The conflicts exposed by the NCP go beyond Ghana's borders, providing crucial insights into the larger difficulty of combining secular development imperatives with state-sponsored religious symbolism in pluralistic democracies throughout Africa and the Global South. Ghana's example starkly demonstrates how the sacralization of governmental undertakings causes intrinsic tension with secular developmental aims based on measured welfare outcomes. When spiritual imperatives take precedence over evidence-based resource allocation, as they did when chronic dialysis

funding gaps continued alongside cathedral construction, a significant legitimacy issue emerges, as evidenced by survey data and the intensity of mass protests. This case resonates strongly with comparable contexts: Senegal's significant state subsidies for the Grand Mosque of Dakar sparked fierce debates over fiscal priorities during a severe youth unemployment crisis (Ndiaye, 2017), whereas Nigeria's ongoing federal funding for pilgrimage boards faces ongoing legal challenges, highlighting the opportunity costs for chronically underfunded education sectors (Umar, 2020b). However, the NCP incident highlights the peculiar hazards posed by presidential personal covenants, which blur the borders between official obligation and private spiritual commitment, creating a powerful channel for accountability avoidance. The broader conclusion is clear: combining religious vows and state policy risks reducing basic public goods to sacralized exceptions, essentially damaging the social contract. This results in a paradoxical consequence in which attempts to create national unity through common religious symbols, as President Akufo-Addo envisioned, frequently exacerbate societal fissures by prioritizing symbolic piety above practical equity and procedural justice.



Source: Model synthesized from Ghana case analysis, comparative African governance challenges (Senegal, Nigeria), and public finance integrity best practices.

Figure 3 Rebuilding Trust: A Multidimensional Pathway for Post-Covenant Governance

Moving forward, the Ghana instance provides critical, actionable insights for reducing the hazards of covenant-based governance. First, it emphasizes the critical importance of strong institutional firewalls that separate personal presidential theology from state spending. Constitutional measures requiring explicit parliamentary endorsement for any project justified primarily on religious grounds—similar to the limits imposed by Ghana's 2023 IMF bailout agreement, which halted NCP funding—are critical to preventing future covenantal exceptionalism. Second, the case demonstrates the strong opposing force of theological counter-narratives originating from civil society and religious institutions. When ecumenical bodies like the Christian Council of Ghana reframed the debate with prophetic texts condemning empty ritual divorced from justice (Amos 5:21-24) or Jesus' dismissal of temple grandeur (Mark 13:1), they provided powerful discursive resistance to state-sanctioned theology, grounding dissent in shared sacred texts (Christian Council, 2021). Third, actual tools for material rebalancing, such as mandating covenant offset funds, provide tangible ways to address equitable concerns. Ghana's history eventually serves as a cautionary tale with worldwide ramifications: when states use divine covenants to explain fiscal decisions, they risk jeopardizing democratic trust and material well-being in favor of sacred ambition. The way to rebuilding trust does not involve eliminating faith from public life, but rather ensuring that its manifestation through state action strictly adheres to—and is accountable to—democratic norms, social justice imperatives, and the material necessities of the citizenry.

5.2. Governing the Sacred: Pathways from Covenant Dilemmas to Renewed Trust

The "covenant dilemma" is a critical governance challenge that arises when deeply personal theological commitments, articulated by state actors as binding divine mandates, collide with the secular imperatives of democratic fiscal governance, procedural accountability, and equitable resource distribution. Through the empirical lens of Ghana's National Cathedral Project (NCP), we have demonstrated how President Akufo-Addo's framing of the project as a sacred "covenant" (Akufo-Addo, 2018) effectively served as political theology in action, creating a zone of exceptionalism that suspended normal constitutional safeguards (Schmitt, 2005/1922). The consequences were severe: ₦339 million in public funds were disbursed without parliamentary appropriation as required by Article 178 of Ghana's Constitution (Parliamentary Ad Hoc Committee, 2023c), while documented healthcare infrastructure needs, such as the expansion of Kumasi Teaching Hospital's maternity ward and chronic underfunding of dialysis services, were deprioritized. The resulting 31-point drop in presidential trustworthiness, meticulously captured in Afrobarometer surveys (CDD-Ghana, 2022a), serves as a quantifiable testament to the profound erosion of democratic legitimacy when citizens perceive symbolic religious ambition superseding their material welfare and bypassing established governance processes. Ghana's experience exemplifies a universal tension: the perilous intersection of sacralized executive ambition and the everyday realities of public finance and popular sovereignty, revealing how unchecked covenantal claims can undermine the fundamental social contract that binds citizens to the state.

Table 6 Legislative Framework for Mitigating Covenant-Driven Fiscal Exceptionalism

Identified Governance Failure	Proposed Legislative Mechanism	Practical Implementation Example	Enforcement/Accountability Body
Theological justification bypassing fiscal scrutiny	Sacred Projects Impact Assessment (SPIA) Act	Independent audit quantifying NCP's ₦339m opportunity cost (e.g., equivalent to 12 fully equipped dialysis centers)	Parliamentary Standing Committee on Religious & Public Projects
Executive override of parliamentary appropriation powers	Amendment to Article 278 of the Ghana Constitution	Parliamentary ratification is required for any state-funded religious infrastructure project exceeding ₦50 million	Supreme Court (judicial review of compliance)
Elite-driven prioritization is disconnected from public needs.	Threshold-Triggered Referendum Law	Mandatory public vote if project cost exceeds 0.5% of GDP or 20% of annual health/education budget	Electoral Commission + Civil Society Monitoring Coalition
Financial opacity in religious project execution	Sacred Expenditure Transparency Act (SETA)	Publicly accessible real-time dashboard tracking all expenditures; Mandatory asset disclosure for project board members	Auditor-General + Right to Information Commission

Source: Framework synthesized from case analysis, Ghanaian constitutional gaps, and comparative best practices (Ndiaye, 2017; Umar, 2020a).

To negotiate this challenge and restore degraded confidence, we propose three clear, achievable policy reforms based on empirical evidence and comparative constitutional design. First, mandated, transparent cost-benefit frameworks developed expressly for state-funded religious undertakings are critical. Such frameworks must go beyond traditional economic metrics by requiring independent assessment of tangible opportunity costs, such as the number of dialysis machines or primary schools foregone, while also incorporating theological advisory panels to rigorously evaluate claims of spiritual necessity. Ghana's Parliament might institutionalize this through a Sacred Projects Impact Assessment (SPIA) methodology, similar to environmental reviews but specifically created for faith-based initiatives, which would require proponents to justify major expenditures against verifiable public benefit. Second, strong legal safeguards against theological fiscal exceptionalism must be constitutionally enacted. This necessitates amending Article 278 to expressly prohibit executive expenditure justified solely on theological grounds without specific parliamentary appropriation, as well as establishing a minimum threshold (e.g., projects exceeding 0.5% of the annual budget), which would require legislative ratification. Such revisions would preclude future circumvention of monitoring by citing "presidential priority" or divine mandate. Third, holding binding public referendums on high-cost symbolic projects ensures democratic control over challenging economic decisions. For projects that surpass specified cost criteria relative to essential social sector budgets (for example, more than 20% of the yearly health budget), Ghana's

Electoral Commission would convene a referendum, transforming abstract debates into concrete democratic decisions. This technique, which has been proven in contexts such as Switzerland's direct democracy model, allows voters to directly evaluate projects like the NCP against pressing requirements like healthcare access.

Future studies must build on these foundations to have a better grasp of the covenant dilemma's worldwide implications. Longitudinal, mixed-methods studies tracking trust dynamics in comparable projects—such as Senegal's state-subsidized Grand Mosque of Dakar or Nigeria's federally funded pilgrimage boards—are required to determine whether Ghana's experience reflects a larger pattern of "sacralization backlash" in emerging democracies. Such a study should combine quantitative time-series analysis of Afrobarometer-style trust measures with qualitative ethnographic work to capture community-level perspectives, particularly among religious minorities and economically underprivileged communities, whose voices are frequently silenced. Second, doing a comprehensive comparative constitutional research to determine how different legal systems resolve conflicts between religious beliefs and fiscal governance principles will reveal invaluable typologies. Examining nations such as India, which regulates Hindu temple finances through autonomous trusts, or Turkey, which centralizes Diyanet expenditures, may provide alternate institutional frameworks for reconciling religious expression and economic accountability. Third, interdisciplinary theological ethics studies into how different faith traditions perceive the relationship between colossal holy architecture and communal welfare obligations could help shape more sophisticated policy frameworks

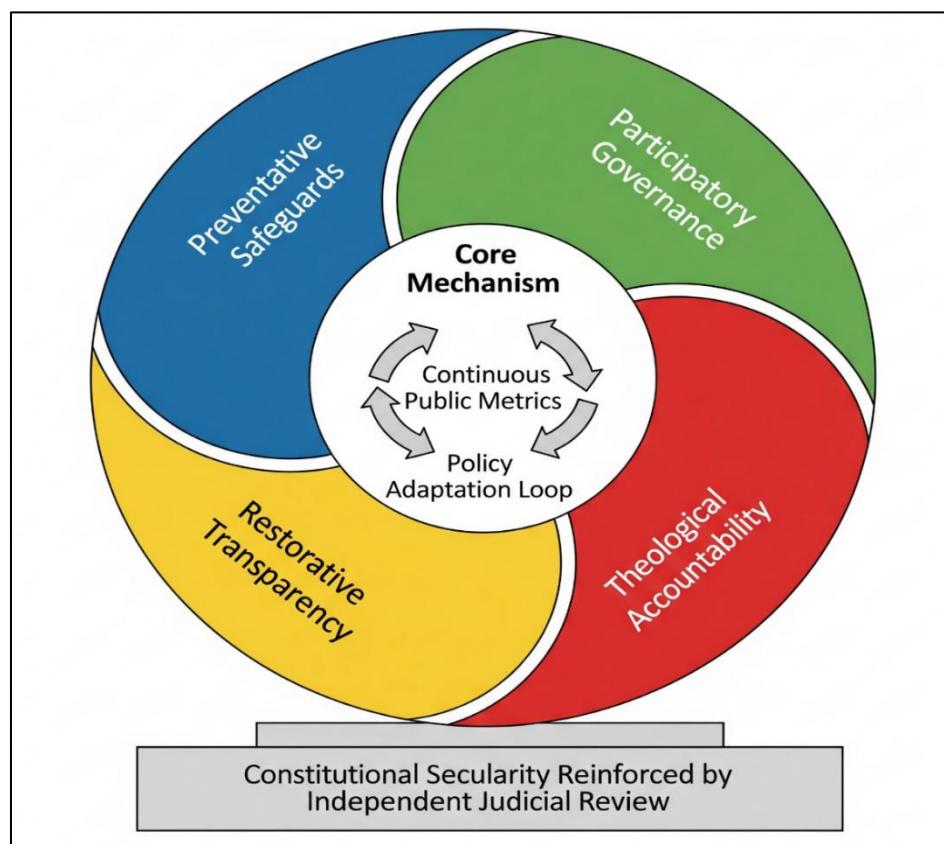


Figure 4 Integrated Pathway for Restoring Trust in Post-Covenant Governance

A comparative analysis of Christian, Islamic, and Indigenous African perspectives on resource allocation for religious monuments versus social services may reveal shared ethical principles—perhaps a shared emphasis on justice for the marginalized—that transcend doctrinal differences and lay the groundwork for inclusive policies.

Ghana's National Cathedral debate thus reveals not only a governance failing, but also a significant potential for democratic regeneration. The covenant conundrum highlights a fundamental democratic truth: holy objectives pursued by state authority and public resources necessitate not less scrutiny, but more stringent democratic accountability than secular endeavors. Nations can navigate the complex terrain where faith meets public finance by establishing strong institutional safeguards such as transparent cost assessment, legislative oversight, and direct citizen consent, as well as encouraging theological accountability through interfaith dialogue and ethical reflection. This integrated approach promises not the elimination of spirituality from public life, but rather its responsible incorporation, transforming

potential points of contention into the foundations of a more just, accountable, and ultimately trustworthy democratic community.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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