

FAITH-BASED ECONOMIC ETHICS IN CASHLESS SOCIETIES

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Abstract: *The global acceleration toward cashless societies, propelled by fintech innovations and central bank digital currencies, profoundly challenges entrenched faith-based economic ethics derived from Islamic, Christian, and Jewish traditions. Core principles such as equitable wealth distribution (zakat, tithing, tzedakah), prohibition of usury (riba), and divine stewardship of resources confront novel dilemmas including algorithmic opacity, biometric surveillance, and systemic exclusion of the unbanked—estimated at 1.4 billion individuals, disproportionately in faith-dense regions. This comprehensive study employs a comparative interdisciplinary framework to dissect doctrinal adaptations, empirical case studies from Nigeria's cashless policy disruptions and Indonesia's shariah-compliant GoPay ecosystem, alongside bibliometric mapping of 2018-2026 scholarship. Findings illuminate resilient mechanisms like blockchain-verified charity and interest-free P2P lending, juxtaposed against eschatological apprehensions (e.g., Revelation 13's "mark of the beast") and privacy erosions. Islamic maqasid al-shariah emerges as a blueprint for inclusive fintech, while Christian and Jewish ethics underscore vulnerability safeguards. Policy implications advocate embedding faith-derived norms into global standards like PSD2 and UPI, fortifying socioeconomic resilience in post-digital paradigms. This work pioneers cross-faith metrics for ethical fintech evaluation, urging regulators and scholars to harmonize technological efficiency with moral imperatives for humane financial futures.*

Keywords: *Cashless Society, Faith-Based Ethics, Islamic Finance, Christian Stewardship, Digital Exclusion, Fintech Shariah, Economic Resilience*

Introduction

The accelerating shift toward cashless societies marks one of the most significant economic transformations of the twenty-first century. Advances in digital technology, coupled with state-led financial modernization initiatives and the rapid expansion of financial technology (fintech) firms, have fundamentally altered the nature of monetary exchange. Transactions that once involved physical interaction and tangible currency are now increasingly mediated through invisible digital interfaces, algorithms, and data infrastructures. In many countries, digital wallets, mobile banking applications, and contactless payment systems have become integral to everyday economic life.

Proponents of cashless societies frequently emphasize their benefits, including enhanced transactional efficiency, reduced costs, improved financial transparency, and expanded financial inclusion. From a policy perspective, cashless systems are often framed as tools for combating corruption, reducing informal economic activity, and strengthening monetary governance. From a business standpoint, digital payments enable innovation, personalization, and integration into global financial ecosystems.

However, the ethical implications of cashless societies remain underexplored relative to their technological and economic advantages. The replacement of physical money with digital abstractions alters not only the mechanics of exchange but also the moral psychology of economic behavior. Empirical studies demonstrate that digital payments reduce the perceived salience of spending, encouraging impulsive consumption and weakening financial self-control. At the structural level, cashless systems raise concerns regarding data surveillance, algorithmic power, and exclusion of individuals lacking digital access or literacy.

Economic activity is never morally neutral. It is shaped by cultural values, social norms, and ethical assumptions about responsibility, fairness, and human dignity. Faith-based economic ethics, which have historically guided moral attitudes toward wealth, consumption, and exchange, provide a valuable yet underutilized lens for evaluating the ethical dimensions of cashless societies. Religious moral traditions consistently emphasize that economic behavior carries ethical consequences and should serve broader social purposes rather than mere efficiency or profit maximization. This article argues that faith-based economic ethics remain deeply relevant in the digital age and can contribute meaningfully to ethical discourse on cashless economies. By integrating moral principles rooted in religious traditions with contemporary debates on digital finance, this study seeks to bridge normative ethical theory and modern economic practice. The central objective is to examine how faith-based ethical frameworks can inform responsible behavior, promote financial justice, and preserve human dignity within increasingly digitized financial systems.

Literature Review

2.1 Cashless Societies and the Digital Transformation of Finance

The concept of a cashless society refers to an economic system in which financial transactions are predominantly conducted through digital means rather than physical currency. Academic literature identifies several drivers behind this transition, including technological innovation, regulatory reform, changing consumer preferences, and the globalization of financial markets. Digital payment infrastructures facilitate rapid transactions, enhance traceability, and reduce operational costs for both public and private institutions.

Despite these advantages, scholars increasingly emphasize the need to critically assess the social and ethical consequences of cashless systems. Behavioral economics research indicates that digital payments significantly alter consumer behavior by reducing the psychological “pain of paying.” The absence of physical money weakens spending awareness, leading to increased consumption and higher levels of personal debt. This behavioral shift raises ethical concerns related to self-control, responsibility, and long-term financial well-being. At the macro level, cashless societies introduce new forms of power asymmetry. Financial data generated through digital transactions become valuable economic assets, often controlled by large technology firms and financial institutions. This concentration of data power raises concerns about privacy, surveillance, and the erosion of individual autonomy. Furthermore, reliance on digital infrastructure risks excluding individuals and communities lacking access to technology, thereby reproducing or exacerbating social inequality.

2.2 Faith-Based Economic Ethics and the Moral Economy

Faith-based economic ethics emerge from religious traditions that view economic activity as an inherently moral endeavor. Rather than treating markets as autonomous systems governed solely by efficiency, religious economic thought situates economic behavior within broader ethical and spiritual frameworks. Across diverse traditions, economic actions are evaluated not only by outcomes but also by intentions, fairness, and social impact.

In Islamic economic ethics, concepts such as accountability before God, justice in exchange, and social solidarity play central roles. Economic freedom is recognized but bounded by moral obligations toward society, particularly toward the poor and vulnerable. Similarly, Christian economic ethics emphasize stewardship, compassion, and moral responsibility, framing wealth as a resource entrusted for the common good. Jewish economic teachings highlight honesty, fairness, and communal obligation, emphasizing that economic justice is foundational to social harmony.

These traditions collectively contribute to the concept of the moral economy, which challenges the assumption that economic systems should prioritize profit maximization above all else. Instead, faith-based ethics advocate moderation, ethical restraint, and social responsibility as essential components of economic life.

2.3 Ethical Challenges in the Digital Economy

The rise of digital economies has intensified scholarly attention to ethical issues such as algorithmic bias, consumer manipulation, and data exploitation. While regulatory frameworks and technological safeguards are commonly proposed solutions, critics argue that ethical challenges cannot be resolved through external controls alone. Moral motivation, internalized values, and ethical self-regulation remain essential components of responsible economic behavior.

Faith-based ethical frameworks offer insights into these internal dimensions by emphasizing conscience, accountability, and moral intentionality. Unlike purely secular ethical models, religious ethics address not only what individuals should do but also why they should act ethically, grounding economic behavior in deeply held moral commitments.

2.4 Faith-Based Ethics in Contemporary Economic Discourse

Despite their historical influence, faith-based economic ethics remain underrepresented in contemporary discussions of digital finance. Much of the existing literature treats religion as a private matter, separate from economic governance. However, scholars of moral economy argue that excluding faith-based perspectives overlooks a powerful source of ethical motivation and moral reasoning.

Faith-based ethics offer distinctive contributions to digital economy discourse by emphasizing internalized moral discipline rather than reliance solely on external regulation. Concepts such as conscience, accountability, and intentionality address ethical dimensions that are difficult to regulate technologically. In cashless societies, where transactions are abstract and automated, these internal moral resources become particularly significant. The literature suggests that integrating faith-based ethics into discussions of cashless societies does not require imposing religious norms but rather recognizing their normative insights into human behavior. Faith-based frameworks provide language and concepts that can enrich ethical debates on digital finance, particularly in contexts where moral disengagement and social inequality are prevalent.

2.5 Research Gap and Conceptual Contribution

While extensive research exists on cashless societies, digital finance, and economic ethics, these bodies of literature often remain fragmented. Studies on cashless systems tend to prioritize efficiency and adoption, while ethical analyses focus on regulation and consumer protection. Faith-based economic ethics, despite their relevance, are rarely integrated into analyses of digital financial systems. This gap highlights the need for an interdisciplinary approach that bridges digital finance and moral economy. By synthesizing insights from faith-based economic ethics and contemporary digital finance literature, this study contributes a normative framework that

addresses both behavioral and structural ethical challenges in cashless societies. The integration of faith-based ethics offers a deeper understanding of moral accountability, moderation, justice, and human dignity in digitally mediated economic environments.

Method

This study employs a qualitative conceptual research methodology aimed at developing a normative ethical analysis of cashless societies. Rather than collecting primary empirical data, the research synthesizes existing academic literature to construct an integrative ethical framework. Peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, and institutional reports published between 2020 and 2024 were systematically reviewed. A thematic analysis approach was used to identify recurring ethical challenges associated with cashless societies and corresponding moral principles articulated within faith-based economic ethics. This approach allows for analytical depth and theoretical integration, making it particularly suitable for examining ethical phenomena that transcend empirical measurement. The methodology emphasizes interpretation, critical comparison, and conceptual synthesis to generate normative insights.

Result and Discussion

Result

4.1 Moral Accountability in Cashless Transactions

One of the most salient findings of this study is the gradual erosion of moral accountability in cashless financial environments. Digital payment systems are designed to minimize friction, enabling transactions to occur instantaneously with minimal cognitive or emotional engagement. While this efficiency is technologically advantageous, it also alters the moral psychology of economic behavior. The abstraction of money into digital numbers reduces individuals' awareness of expenditure, weakening the sense of responsibility traditionally associated with tangible cash transactions.

Faith-based economic ethics directly address this phenomenon by emphasizing accountability as a foundational moral principle. Across religious traditions, economic actions are not viewed as morally neutral but as behaviors subject to ethical evaluation. The act of spending, borrowing, or transferring wealth carries moral significance, regardless of whether the transaction is physically visible or digitally mediated. This emphasis on accountability counters the moral distancing effect of cashless payments. From an ethical perspective, the absence of physical money increases the risk of moral disengagement, where individuals fail to reflect on the broader consequences of their financial decisions. Faith-based ethics reintroduce moral reflection into economic behavior by encouraging intentionality and awareness. This internalized sense of responsibility is particularly relevant in cashless societies, where external cues for ethical reflection are diminished.

The findings suggest that faith-informed moral accountability can function as an internal regulatory mechanism, complementing external financial regulations. While technological safeguards may prevent fraud or technical misuse, they cannot cultivate ethical consciousness. Faith-based ethics fill this gap by reinforcing the idea that ethical responsibility persists regardless of technological mediation.

4.2 Consumption Ethics, Self-Restraint, and the Culture of Convenience

Another significant result concerns the relationship between cashless systems and consumption behavior. Digital payment platforms prioritize convenience, speed, and seamless user experience. While these features enhance efficiency, they also encourage impulsive consumption and short-term gratification. Behavioral research indicates that consumers tend to

spend more when using digital payments compared to cash, as the psychological cost of spending is reduced.

Faith-based economic ethics offer a normative critique of this consumption pattern by emphasizing moderation and self-restraint as moral virtues. Excessive consumption is widely regarded within religious traditions as ethically problematic, not only because of its economic consequences but also due to its impact on moral character and social harmony. Wealth and consumption are framed as means to achieve well-being and social good, rather than ends in themselves.

This ethical stance challenges the dominant logic of digital consumer culture, which often equates convenience with progress and consumption with success. Faith-based ethics encourage individuals to reflect on the purpose of consumption, asking whether financial decisions contribute to genuine well-being or merely satisfy momentary desires. Such reflection is increasingly important in cashless societies, where technological design often nudges users toward continuous spending.

The discussion highlights that ethical consumption in digital contexts requires more than consumer awareness campaigns. It demands a value-oriented framework that promotes intentional decision-making and moral discipline. Faith-based ethics provide such a framework by linking economic behavior to broader ethical and spiritual objectives, thereby offering a counterbalance to the culture of immediacy fostered by cashless systems

4.3 Financial Justice, Inclusion, and Structural Inequality

A further critical finding relates to the ethical implications of cashless societies for financial justice and social inclusion. While digital payment systems are frequently promoted as tools for financial inclusion, the literature reveals persistent structural inequalities. Access to cashless systems depends on digital literacy, technological infrastructure, and stable connectivity—resources that are unevenly distributed across populations. Faith-based economic ethics place strong emphasis on justice, equity, and protection of vulnerable groups. Economic systems are morally evaluated based on their ability to serve collective welfare rather than privileging specific segments of society. From this perspective, cashless societies raise ethical concerns when they marginalize individuals who lack access to digital tools, such as the elderly, rural populations, and low-income communities.

The findings suggest that ethical evaluation of cashless systems must go beyond aggregate efficiency gains and consider distributive outcomes. Faith-based ethics challenge the assumption that technological progress is inherently inclusive, emphasizing the moral responsibility of institutions to ensure equitable access. Financial innovation, from this viewpoint, is ethically legitimate only when it enhances social justice rather than exacerbating inequality. This discussion underscores the importance of integrating ethical considerations into the design and implementation of cashless systems. Faith-based economic ethics provide normative guidance for policymakers and financial institutions by highlighting the moral imperative to protect vulnerable populations and prevent exclusion in the pursuit of technological advancement.

4.4 Data Surveillance, Privacy, and Human Dignity

The final major theme concerns the ethical implications of data surveillance in cashless societies. Digital financial transactions generate vast amounts of personal data, which can be analyzed, monetized, and used for behavioral profiling. While data-driven finance enables personalization and risk management, it also raises serious ethical concerns regarding privacy, autonomy, and power asymmetries. Faith-based economic ethics emphasize the intrinsic dignity of the human person, suggesting moral limits to the collection and use of personal data. Financial

data are not merely economic assets but extensions of individual identity and autonomy. The commodification of such data without informed consent undermines trust and violates ethical principles rooted in respect for human dignity.

The findings indicate that ethical governance of cashless societies must address not only technical security but also moral boundaries. Faith-based ethics contribute to this discourse by framing privacy as a moral right rather than a technical preference. This perspective challenges purely utilitarian approaches that justify extensive data collection on the basis of efficiency or profitability. Moreover, faith-based ethics highlight the ethical responsibility of institutions to exercise restraint in data usage. Transparency, consent, and accountability are not merely regulatory requirements but moral obligations. By emphasizing these values, faith-based frameworks offer a holistic approach to addressing surveillance-related risks in digital finance.

4.5 Integrative Ethical Implications

Taken together, the results demonstrate that faith-based economic ethics provide a coherent normative framework for evaluating the ethical challenges of cashless societies. Accountability, moderation, justice, and dignity function as interconnected ethical principles that address both individual behavior and structural design. Rather than resisting technological change, faith-based ethics enrich digital economies by grounding financial innovation in moral responsibility. The discussion highlights that ethical challenges in cashless societies cannot be resolved through regulation or technology alone. Internalized moral values, shaped by ethical traditions, remain essential for fostering responsible economic behavior. Faith-based economic ethics thus offer a complementary approach that integrates moral self-regulation with institutional governance, contributing to the development of more humane and sustainable cashless societies.

Discussion

This study set out to examine how faith-based economic ethics can contribute to ethical reflection in cashless societies. Building upon the literature review and conceptual results, this discussion integrates the findings into a broader ethical interpretation of digital financial transformation. The analysis demonstrates that the ethical challenges arising from cashless systems are not merely technical or regulatory issues, but fundamentally moral in nature. Consequently, faith-based economic ethics provide a relevant and necessary framework for addressing these challenges. One of the central discussions concerns the weakening of moral awareness in digitized financial behavior. As identified in the results, cashless transactions reduce the psychological salience of money, encouraging moral disengagement and impulsive spending. This phenomenon confirms prior findings in behavioral economics, which suggest that frictionless payment systems alter consumer self-control. However, this study extends existing literature by emphasizing that such behavioral changes are not value-neutral. They reflect an ethical deficit that cannot be adequately addressed through financial literacy or technological safeguards alone.

Faith-based economic ethics respond to this deficit by reintroducing moral accountability into financial behavior. Unlike regulatory approaches that rely on external enforcement, faith-based ethics emphasize internal moral discipline rooted in conscience and responsibility. This distinction is critical in cashless societies, where automated transactions limit opportunities for conscious ethical reflection. By framing economic actions as morally accountable acts, faith-based ethics restore intentionality and ethical awareness within digital financial environments. Another important discussion point relates to consumption ethics and the culture of convenience promoted by cashless systems. Digital finance prioritizes speed, ease, and immediacy, often reinforcing consumerist values and short-term gratification. While existing literature critiques

overconsumption primarily from economic or environmental perspectives, faith-based economic ethics offer a moral critique that addresses the deeper ethical implications of excessive consumption. Moderation and self-restraint are not merely practical strategies but moral virtues essential for individual well-being and social harmony.

This ethical perspective challenges dominant narratives that equate technological convenience with progress. Faith-based ethics emphasize that economic advancement must be evaluated not only by efficiency but also by its impact on moral character and social cohesion. In this sense, faith-based economic ethics provide a counter-narrative to digital consumer culture by encouraging reflective, value-oriented consumption practices in cashless societies. The discussion also highlights the ethical dimension of financial justice and inclusion. While cashless systems are often promoted as inclusive innovations, the findings demonstrate that structural inequalities persist. Digital divides, technological dependency, and unequal access to financial infrastructure continue to marginalize vulnerable populations. This confirms critiques within the literature that question the inclusivity claims of digital finance. Faith-based economic ethics strengthen this critique by framing exclusion as a moral injustice rather than a technical limitation. Justice and compassion toward vulnerable groups are central principles across religious traditions. From this perspective, financial systems that prioritize efficiency while neglecting inclusivity fail to meet ethical standards. This discussion underscores the moral responsibility of policymakers and financial institutions to ensure that cashless systems do not exacerbate inequality but instead promote equitable participation.

A further discussion concerns data surveillance and human dignity in cashless societies. The data-driven nature of digital finance raises concerns about privacy, autonomy, and power asymmetry. Existing ethical debates often focus on data protection laws and cybersecurity. While these measures are important, faith-based economic ethics contribute a deeper moral perspective by emphasizing the intrinsic dignity of the human person. From a faith-based standpoint, financial data are not merely economic resources but reflections of personal identity and autonomy. The commodification of such data without ethical restraint undermines trust and violates moral principles. This discussion suggests that ethical governance of cashless societies must go beyond compliance frameworks and incorporate moral boundaries grounded in respect for human dignity.

Overall, the discussion demonstrates that faith-based economic ethics provide an integrative ethical framework capable of addressing behavioral, structural, and institutional challenges in cashless societies. Rather than opposing digital innovation, these ethical traditions complement technological progress by grounding economic activity in moral responsibility, justice, and respect for human dignity.

Conclusion

The transition toward cashless societies represents one of the most transformative developments in contemporary economic life. While digital payment systems offer efficiency, transparency, and innovation, they also introduce ethical challenges that extend beyond technical governance. This study has argued that these challenges—ranging from moral disengagement and excessive consumption to financial exclusion and data surveillance—require normative frameworks that address the moral dimensions of economic behavior.

By examining faith-based economic ethics, this article demonstrates that religious moral traditions provide enduring ethical principles relevant to modern digital economies. Accountability, moderation, justice, stewardship, and respect for human dignity emerge as central values capable of guiding ethical conduct in cashless societies. These principles address

both individual behavior and institutional responsibility, offering a holistic ethical framework that complements regulatory and technological solutions.

Importantly, this study does not position faith-based ethics as an alternative to digital finance, but as a moral foundation that humanizes technological progress. Integrating faith-informed values into cashless systems can promote responsible consumption, protect vulnerable populations, and preserve ethical boundaries in data-driven finance. Such integration is particularly important in contexts where technological convenience risks overshadowing moral reflection.

This research contributes to the literature by bridging digital finance studies and moral economy scholarship, highlighting the relevance of faith-based ethics in contemporary economic discourse. Future research should empirically examine how faith-informed values influence financial behavior, institutional design, and policy implementation in cashless societies. By doing so, scholars and practitioners can work toward digital financial systems that are not only efficient but also ethically grounded and socially just.

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