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The Absolutization of the Proximate: Religious Institutions, Functional Idols, and the Structural Roots of Global Crisis

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Abstract: *This review article develops a critical framework for understanding the structural role of religious, secular, and technological institutions in contemporary global crises. It argues that the fundamental issue is not belief in God, but the absolutization of the proximate: the structural tendency within human institutions to grant ultimate status to finite entities such as institutional authority, doctrinal boundaries, leaders, nations, and algorithmic systems. Synthesizing theological and sociological insights, the article demonstrates how these "functional idols" displace the transcendent center, generating systemic division, performative compliance, and control. Drawing on a comparative analysis of Christian and Islamic traditions, the review applies a three-part diagnostic test evaluating the nature of institutional conditions (ethical-transformative versus performative-loyalty), the underlying interests served (mission versus institutional self-preservation), and the empirical fruits of human flourishing versus fear. The analysis further examines how this structural displacement intensifies political, economic, ecological, and psychological crises. Extending the framework to the digital age, the article demonstrates that artificial intelligence and algorithmic curation replicate these dynamics. AI systems perform god-like attributes, omniscience through data collection, judgment through curation, and loyalty through engagement metrics; thereby becoming functional idols. This algorithmic absolutization reduces the human person to "optimized data," fosters echo chambers, and encourages panoptic surveillance and digital tribalism. The review reveals that while institutions are uniquely vulnerable to this idolatry, they also contain internal scriptural and prophetic resources to resist it. To interrupt the cycle of self-absolutization across all domains, religious, political, economic, and digital; the article proposes four structural remedies: institutional accountability, the rigorous protection of freedom of conscience, structural room for prophetic critique, and the recognition of the human being as an end rather than an institutional instrument. Ultimately, resolving these interconnected global crises requires an architectural reorientation. The article concludes that institutional structures must remain servants of the transcendent, ensuring that human spiritual, moral, and intellectual development becomes the fundamental metric of institutional success. The world does not need a new religion; it needs the continuous courage to ask, within every institution and technological system, whether its operative center is the ultimate or merely the proximate.*

Keywords: *functional idolatry; institutional religion; proximate absolutization; Christianity; Islam; global crisis; prophetic critique*

I. Introduction

The relationship between religion and global crisis is frequently debated in reductive terms: either religion is the source of violence and division, or it is the remedy for moral

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decay. This binary framing dominates both popular discourse and much scholarly literature, yet it obscures a more fundamental dynamic. The crisis, this article argues, is neither religion nor secularism as such, but a structural tendency within human institutions, religious and otherwise to absolutize the proximate: to treat finite, conditional, historically contingent entities (institutions, authorities, doctrines, nations, leaders) as if they possessed ultimate significance.

This tendency has deep roots in the sociology of religion. Weber's analysis of the Protestant ethic demonstrated how religious ideas condition economic systems, but it also revealed a subtler dynamic: the institutionalization of charisma and the gradual replacement of prophetic impulse with organizational maintenance (Weber, 2005). Durkheim's classic study established that religious institutions generate collective representations that bind communities, but also that these representations can become detached from their originating experiences and acquire an autonomous authority (Durkheim, 1915). These foundational insights point toward a structural problem: institutions created to mediate the sacred tend to become substitutes for it.

The historical record provides abundant evidence of this dynamic across traditions. Noyes's analysis of iconoclasm demonstrates that in both Christian and Islamic contexts, the struggle against idolatry has always been simultaneously religious and political: "idolatry defies not only the 'true god', but also the 'true church' and the 'true government'" (Noyes, 2013, Goshu and Ridwan, 2024; Cambridge University Press, 2015). The destruction of idols, Noyes argues, unites adherents of the "True God" under a more centralized "True Government", a pattern visible from the Protestant Reformation through the Wahhabi movement to contemporary conflicts. This suggests that the absolutization of the proximate is not a peripheral aberration but a structural feature of institutional religion.

1.2 Rationale

The rationale for this review is threefold. First, existing scholarship on religion and crisis tends to focus on discrete domains; religious violence, political religion, ecological crisis, without a unified analytical framework that connects them. Juergensmeyer's work on religious violence, for instance, brilliantly analyzes the "cosmic war" mentality that transforms political conflicts into sacred struggles, but it does not fully theorize the institutional mechanisms that produce this transformation (Juergensmeyer, 2017). White's classic argument about the ecological roots of Christian dominion theology remains foundational, but it has been criticized for treating "Christianity" as monolithic and neglecting internal correctives (White, 1967).

Second, the literature lacks a systematic comparative framework for analyzing how Christian and Islamic institutions generate and sustain what this article calls "functional idols." While comparative studies of the two traditions abound, they typically focus on doctrinal differences or historical interactions rather than on shared structural tendencies toward the absolutization of the proximate.

Third, the practical stakes are urgent. If the crisis is not religion per se but a structural tendency within institutions, then the remedies must be structural as well. This shifts the debate from "Is religion good or bad?" to "What institutional safeguards prevent the displacement of the transcendent by the proximate?" a question with direct implications for religious reform, policy, and interfaith cooperation.

1.3 Problem Statement

The problem this article addresses can be stated precisely: Religious institutions, precisely because they traffic in the language of the ultimate, are uniquely potent vehicles for the absolutization of the proximate, yet they lack adequate structural safeguards against this tendency.

This problem manifests across multiple domains. In politics, the fusion of religious identity with national or partisan loyalty transforms political disagreement into cosmic conflict, making compromise indistinguishable from betrayal. In economics, the blessing of existing arrangements, whether feudal hierarchy, colonial extraction, or contemporary inequality, sacralizes structures that should be subject to ethical critique. In ecology, the absolutization of human dominion (or national development, or institutional expansion) renders the natural world instrumental, with consequences now visible in planetary-scale degradation (White, 1967). In psychology, the displacement of trust in God by trust in the institution produces chronic fear, shame, and dependency rather than the humility and freedom that the traditions themselves claim to cultivate.

The problem is not that religious institutions are uniquely evil. Secular institutions; nations, markets, parties, ideologies, exhibit the same tendency. But religious institutions are uniquely responsible because they claim to speak for the transcendent and uniquely dangerous because they possess the vocabulary of the ultimate. When the proximate is clothed in the language of God, critique becomes blasphemy and dissent becomes heresy. The problem, therefore, is structural: how can institutions that claim ultimate authority develop mechanisms that constrain their own tendency toward self-absolutization?

1.4 Objectives

This review article pursues four objectives:

First, to develop the conceptual vocabulary of functional idolatry and proximate absolutization, drawing on theological and sociological sources (Durkheim, 1915; Weber, 2005). This involves distinguishing between healthy mediation (which points beyond itself to the transcendent and to the human being) and idolatrous closure (which substitutes itself for the transcendent), and specifying the mechanisms by which the latter occurs.

Second, to examine the institutional mechanisms through which religious traditions generate and sustain functional idols. This includes the idol of institutional authority, the idol of the leader, the idol of boundary maintenance, and the idol of doctrine, with attention to how these mechanisms operate in both Christian and Islamic contexts (Noyes, 2013).

Third, to apply a three-part diagnostic test to both traditions: the nature of institutional conditions (are they ethical-transformative or performative-boundary-policing?), the interests they serve (mission or institution?), and their fruits in human flourishing or control. This test is offered not as a final judgment but as a practical tool for discernment.

Fourth, to propose structural remedies oriented toward accountability, freedom of conscience, and the recovery of prophetic critique. These remedies are not new doctrines but institutional safeguards: transparency, review mechanisms, protection for dissent, and structural room for the voices that call institutions back to their principles.

1.5 Significance

The significance of this review lies in its contribution to three conversations.

For the sociology of religion, it offers a framework that moves beyond the secularization debate. Taylor's account of the "secular age" has rightly complicated the narrative of inevitable religious decline, showing instead a transformed condition in which belief is one option among many (Taylor, 2007). But the question this article raises is not whether religion persists, but what kind of religion institutions produce and whether the structural tendency toward absolutization can be constrained.

For theological ethics, it provides a cross-traditional account of idolatry that is neither relativist nor imperialist. The critique of functional idols is internal to both Christianity and Islam: the Hebrew prophets condemned ritual without justice, Jesus condemned the Pharisees for neglecting "the weightier matters of the law," and the Qur'an condemns those who "devour people's wealth unjustly" and "turn people away from the path of God" (Qur'an 9:34). The framework developed here takes these internal critiques seriously as resources for institutional reform.

For policy and practice, it shifts the question from "Is religion a force for peace or conflict?" to "What institutional conditions make the difference?" This has implications for religious freedom policy, interfaith engagement, and the internal governance of religious organizations. If the absolutization of the proximate is the problem, then the protection of freedom of conscience—including the right to question, doubt, and leave—is not merely a liberal value but a structural safeguard against institutional idolatry.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 develops the conceptual framework. Section 3 examines the mechanisms of institutional idolatry. Section 4 applies the three-part diagnostic test to Christian and Islamic contexts. Section 5 analyzes the manifestation of these dynamics across political, economic, ecological, and psychological domains. Section 6 proposes structural remedies. Section 7 concludes with implications for theory, practice, and further research.

II. Review of Literature

2.1 The Theological Category of Idolatry

The critique of idolatry is internal to the Abrahamic traditions. The Qur'an explicitly identifies the human tendency to elevate desire, wealth, and power to divine status: "Have you seen the one who takes his own desire as his god?" (Qur'an 25:43). This verse locates idolatry not in cultic statues but in the human heart's disposition to grant ultimate authority to the finite. The object of worship is not a stone or a carving but the self's own inclination, elevated to the position of the absolute.

Contemporary theological scholarship reinforces this reading. Paul Achtemeier, drawing on Romans 1, argues that idolatry stems from the human attempt to "play God" to claim godlike autonomy in determining good and evil (Achtemeier, 2010, as cited in Atkin, 2014). The idol is not merely a false god but a displacement of the Creator-creature relationship, a rebellion that generates disorder across the whole of human existence. Achtemeier's exegesis

of Romans 1:18–32 identifies idolatry as the root sin from which other distortions flow: humanity "suppresses the truth" and exchanges the glory of the immortal God for images of mortal things (Achtemeier, 2010). The consequence is not merely theological error but a structural generator of relational and social chaos.

Paul Tillich provides a complementary formulation that bridges theological and philosophical analysis. For Tillich, idolatry is "the absolutization of the symbols of the sacred" (Tillich, 2009). Symbols participate in the sacred but are not identical with it; when a symbol, a doctrine, a ritual, an institution, a person is treated as the sacred itself, it becomes an idol. Tillich's insight is crucial: the danger is not that symbols are false but that they are elevated beyond their proper, conditional status. This applies not only to religious symbols but to any finite reality granted unconditional significance.

The Qur'anic and Tillichian accounts converge on a single structural claim: idolatry is the misattribution of ultimacy. It is not primarily a failure of belief in God but a failure to maintain the distinction between the ultimate and the penultimate. When this distinction collapses, the proximate is clothed in the language of the ultimate, and the consequences are both spiritual and social.

2.2 The Sociological Category of Institutional Self-Interest

Max Weber's analysis of the Protestant ethic demonstrated how religious ideas could condition economic systems, but it also revealed a deeper dynamic: the institutionalization of charisma and the gradual replacement of prophetic impulse with organizational maintenance (Weber, 2005). Weber's account of charisma is instructive here. Pure charismatic authority is inherently unstable because it is bound to a concrete person and cannot outlive him. The solution is routinization, the transformation of charisma into an office, a lineage, or an institution. This process is not merely administrative; it fundamentally changes the nature of authority. What began as a prophetic challenge to establish order becomes, in Bendix's refinement of Weber, "charismatic authority" concerned primarily with "appropriating the leader's powers of control, determining the rules of succession and recruitment, and monopolizing the economic opportunities that the leader's influence has made available".

This is the sociological mechanism of proximate absolutization: the institution created to preserve the prophetic message becomes the primary beneficiary of that message's authority. The institution's survival, reputation, and power become identified with the mission it was created to serve. Critique of the institution becomes indistinguishable from betrayal of the mission.

Emilio Gentile's work on "political religions" extends this insight beyond formally religious institutions. Gentile demonstrates that totalizing ideologies; fascism, communism, and certain forms of nationalism, operate through the sacralization of politics: the transfer of ultimate loyalty from transcendent claims to immanent entities such as the nation, the party, or the race (Gentile, 2006). These secular entities acquire myths, rituals, commandments, and martyrs; they demand faith, loyalty, and reverence. The mechanism is structurally identical whether the object is the Church, the Party, or the Nation: the proximate is clothed in the language of the ultimate, and critique becomes blasphemy.

A recent theological analysis of artificial intelligence articulates the same dynamic using the Reformed concept of "functional idolatry." Technology, the author argues, can function as an idol when it performs divine attributes, omniscience, judgment, order-giving; impersonally,

reducing humans from covenantal agents to "optimized data" (Yun, 2026; Goshu and Ridwan, 2024). This analysis is valuable because it demonstrates that the category of functional idolatry is not confined to religious institutions; it applies to any mediated order that substitutes itself for the transcendent.

2.3 Defining the Absolutization of the Proximate

Synthesizing these sources, this article defines absolutization of the proximate as the process by which an entity that is properly conditional, finite, and instrumental is granted unconditional, ultimate, and intrinsic status. Four diagnostic markers indicate when this process has occurred:

First, conditions become ultimate stakes. Disagreement is no longer disagreement but heresy or betrayal. The institution's doctrinal or procedural requirements are elevated from practical guidelines to conditions of salvation, loyalty, or belonging. The distinction between "this is how we do things" and "this is what God requires" collapses.

Second, boundaries become sacred. The line between insider and outsider is not a practical distinction but a cosmic division. Those outside the boundary are not merely different but impure, damned, or enemies of God. The boundary itself acquires a sanctity that transcends its function.

Third, institutional interests become divine will. The organization's survival, authority, reputation, or expansion is identified with God's purposes. What serves the institution is defined as what serves God; what threatens the institution is defined as what threatens God. The institution's self-preservation becomes a theological imperative.

Fourth, the human being becomes instrumental. Persons are valued primarily as members, contributors, defenders, or opponents rather than as ends in them. The development of the human being; spiritually, morally, intellectually is subordinated to the institution's needs. The person exists for the institution rather than the institution for the person.

Figure 1 conceptualizes the structural pathway from the transcendent to global crisis. The diagram illustrates that while the "Transcendent Center" points beyond itself, proximate mediations, such as institutional authority, doctrine, and leader veneration can become detached from this ultimate source. When these finite entities collapse into a "Functional Idol," the proximate is absolutized, fundamentally inverting the intended order. As indicated by the legend, this idolatrous closure occurs when the mediation substitutes itself for the transcendent rather than pointing toward it. The model demonstrates that this structural displacement is the direct catalyst for crisis, manifesting as division, control, violence, economic exploitation, and ecological destruction. Consequently, Figure 1 visually supports the article's central thesis: global crises are not caused by the transcendent itself, but by institutions that illegitimately appropriate its ultimate status (Tillich, 2009; Weber, 2005)

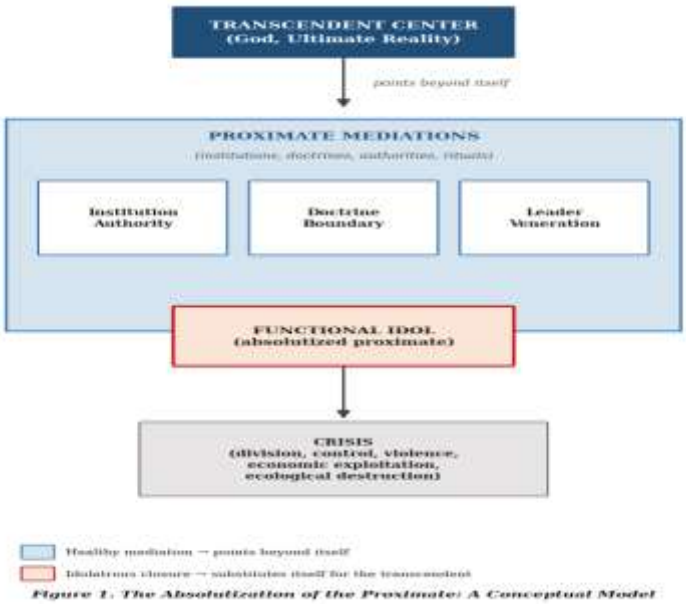


Figure 1. The Absolutization of the Proximate: A Conceptual Model

The model distinguishes between healthy mediation and idolatrous closure. Healthy mediation points beyond itself to the transcendent and to the human being as end. Idolatrous closure substitutes itself for the transcendent, so that the mediation becomes the destination rather than the path.

2.4 Distinguishing Functional Idolatry from Legitimate Authority

A critical clarification is necessary. The argument is not that all institutional authority is idolatrous, or that all mediation is suspect. The distinction between healthy mediation and idolatrous closure is not structural but directional. The question is not whether an institution possesses authority but whether that authority points beyond itself or closes in on itself.

Tillich's criterion is decisive here: the symbol must participate in the sacred without being identified with it. "Participation, however, is not identification; they are not the sacred. The transcendent absolute is beyond all symbols that represent it" (Tillich, 2009). A healthy institution says, in effect: "This ritual, this text, this community is a finger pointing at the moon does not mistake the finger for the moon." An idolatrous institution says: "There is no moon outside this finger."

Table 1. summarizes the distinction between legitimate authority and functional idolatry across the four diagnostic markers.

Marker	Legitimate Authority	Functional Idolatry
Conditions	Ethical-transformative; oriented toward human flourishing	Performative-loyalty; oriented toward institutional maintenance
Boundaries	Practical and permeable; serve communal identity without absolutizing it	Sacred and impermeable; define insider as righteous and outsider as impure
Interests	Transparent and accountable to the mission	Opaque and self-justifying; institution's survival identified with God's will
Human Being	End in itself; development is the	Instrument of institutional

	measure of success	purposes; conformity is the measure

Table 1 operationalizes the distinction between legitimate authority and functional idolatry across four diagnostic markers. The analysis reveals that the divergence is not structural but directional. Regarding conditions, legitimate authority is ethical-transformative and oriented toward human flourishing, whereas functional idolatry demands performative loyalty to sustain institutional maintenance, echoing the Weberian routinization of charisma (Weber, 2005). Boundaries shift from practical and permeable to sacred and impermeable, generating exclusion rather than communal identity. Similarly, institutional interests' transition from transparent accountability to opaque self-justification, where survival is equated with divine will. Finally, the human being is redefined from an intrinsic end, measured by development to an instrument of institutional purposes measured by conformity. Consequently, Table 1 provides a vital heuristic for diagnosing when an institution has displaced the transcendent center with itself, confirming Tillich's warning against absolutizing sacred symbols (Tillich, 2009).

This distinction is essential for the argument that follows. The critique of institutional idolatry is not a rejection of institutions as such. It is a call for institutions to remain servants of the transcendent and of the human being, and for structural mechanisms that constrain their tendency to become masters.

III. Research Methods

3.1 Mechanisms of Institutional Idolatry

a. The "Functionalist" Idol

Pope Francis, in a 2022 Chrism Mass homily, identified "funzionalismo" as one of three "hidden idols" through which the adversary "depotentiates us of our vocation as pastors" (Pope Francis, 2022, as cited in L'Osservatore Romano, 2022). The functionalist mentality, Francis warned, "Does not tolerate mystery" and "aims at efficiency," gradually replacing "the presence of the Father" with an idol of programs, numbers, and pastoral plans. This is a striking internal critique from within the highest authority of the Catholic Church: the institution begins by serving the mission, but the tools of measurement and management become ends in themselves. "The functionalist does not know how to rejoice in the graces that the Spirit pours out on his people," Francis said, because "his nourishment is his own ego".

The mechanism Francis describes is structurally identical to what Yun (2026) terms "functional idolatry" in the context of technology: a mediated order performs divine attributes—order-giving, judgment, omniscience; impersonally, reducing humans from covenantal agents to "optimized data" (Yun, 2026). In the institutional context, the "data" are attendance figures, program metrics, and financial reports; the human being becomes a contributor to institutional viability rather than an end in her. This is not a Catholic problem alone. It is a structural tendency of any institution that must justify its existence through measurable outcomes.

3.2 The Idol of the Leader

The veneration of spiritual leaders; whether pastors, imams, popes, or founders, constitutes a particularly potent form of proximate absolutization. Recent scholarship on "celebrity pastor culture" describes the trajectory from admiration to idolatry: the leader

becomes "more known for attractive communication style than spiritual depth, more celebrated for follower counts and digital views than the fruit of life". The shift is from Christ as the center of proclamation to the leader as the center of attention, producing congregations that are "spiritually shallow and vulnerable to disorientation when the leader falls". The warning signs are cumulative: accepting a leader's words without testing them, and a faith so tied to a person that it would be "shaken if that person had a moral failure."

The Qur'an addresses the same danger in its condemnation of those who "devour people's wealth unjustly" and "turn people away from the path of God" (Qur'an 9:34). The verse specifically names "many of the scholars and the monks" (Qur'an 9:34), locating the danger precisely among religious authorities; those whose position grants them influence over others . The mechanism is not limited to any single tradition: wherever the leader's authority becomes unquestionable, the proximate has been absolutized. Table 2 summarizes the structural parallels between the functionalist and leader-veneration mechanisms.

Table 2: Parallel Mechanisms of Institutional Idolatry and Their Consequences

Mechanism	Institutional Form	Theological Rationalization	Consequence
Functionalism	Programs, metrics, efficiency	"Stewardship," "accountability," "growth"	Human being reduced to contributor; mystery displaced
Leader Veneration	Personality cult, unquestioned authority	"God's anointed," "spiritual father"	Congregation dependent on leader; faith fragile
Boundary Absolutization	Insider/outsider division	"Purity," "orthodoxy," "saved vs. damned"	Exclusion sanctified; violence justified

Table 2 delineates the parallel mechanisms through which institutional idolatry operates, demonstrating that structural displacement occurs across distinct institutional forms. Functionalism reduces the human being to a measurable contributor by prioritizing efficiency over mystery, echoing the "functional idolatry" identified by Yun (2026). Leader veneration fosters fragile, dependent faith by absolutizing charismatic authority, a trajectory that often triggers the institutionalization of charisma (Weber, 2005). Boundary absolutization sanctifies exclusion by transforming practical distinctions into cosmic divisions, frequently legitimizing violence. Collectively, these mechanisms reveal that theological rationalizations, such as "stewardship," "God's anointed," or "purity", serve to sanctify institutional self-interest, confirming Tillich's warning that absolutizing finite symbols inevitably generates structural disorder (Tillich, 2009).

3.3 Boundary Maintenance as Sacred Duty

Religious institutions invest enormous energy in boundary maintenance, defining who is inside and who is outside, who is orthodox and who is heretical, who is saved and who is damned. While boundaries serve legitimate communal and ethical functions, their absolutization transforms practical distinctions into cosmic divisions. Social Identity Theory explains the mechanism: groups derive positive distinctiveness by categorizing outsiders as inferior or threatening, and religious institutions possess unique resources for sacralizing this dynamic.

The Qur'anic material illustrates both the danger and the safeguard. The exclusivist reading of Qur'an 3:85 ("Whoever seeks a religion other than Islam, it will not be accepted") can function as an absolutized boundary when read in isolation. Yet the Qur'an itself contains a Universalist counterweight: Qur'an 2:62 extends reward to "the faithful, the Jews, the Christians, and the Sabaeans; those of them who have faith in Allah and the Last Day and act righteously" (Qur'an 2:62, as cited in Wikishia, 2026). Exegetes note that this verse "rules out the concept of community superiority for any given group: even Muslims have been bracketed here along with other religious groups". The condition is faith and righteous action, not communal affiliation.

Furthermore, the Qur'an commands: "There shall be no compulsion in religion" (Qur'an 2:256). Crone's (2016) magisterial study traces how this verse, though interpreted restrictively by premodern exegetes, became in modernity "a declaration of universal religious tolerance", a "charter of freedom of conscience" (Crone, 2016, p. 131) . The tension between these verses is not a problem to be resolved but a structural safeguard: the Universalist and voluntarist impulses restrain the absolutization of the boundary. Figure 2 models this dynamic. Figure 2 illustrates the mechanisms by which internal scriptural resources prevent the absolutization of religious boundaries. The model begins with an "Absolutized Boundary," where Qur'an 3:85 is read in isolation, establishing a cosmic division between insiders (righteous) and outsiders (impure). However, the diagram demonstrates that this idolatrous closure is structurally mitigated by two "Corrective Tensions." First, the Universalist Impulse (Qur'an 2:62) reframes salvation around faith and righteous action rather than communal affiliation, echoing the ethical-transformative conditions discussed in Table 1. Second, the Voluntarist Impulse (Qur'an 2:256) insists on voluntary assent, thereby invalidating coercive claims to ultimate authority (Crone, 2016). Rather than resolving this tension, the model shows that their convergence produces a "Restrained Boundary." Consequently, Figure 2 visually confirms that the institution remains a healthy mediator, a servant of the transcendent rather than its substitute, when these correctives are maintained (Weber, 2005).



Figure 2. Universalist and Voluntarist Correctives to Absolutized Religious Boundaries

The model illustrates that the Qur'anic text itself contains resources for resisting the absolutization of boundaries. The problem is not the existence of boundaries but their sacralization; the transformation of practical distinctions into cosmic divisions. When the Universalist and voluntarist impulses are suppressed or ignored, the boundary becomes an idol. When they are maintained in tension, the boundary remains a servant of communal identity rather than its master (Goshu, 2025).

3.4 The Idol of Doctrine

A fourth mechanism deserves brief attention: the absolutization of doctrinal formulations. When correct belief, rather than faithful practice and ethical transformation, becomes the primary condition for belonging, doctrine functions as a functional idol. The criterion shifts from "Does this person embody the tradition's ethical and spiritual substance?" to "Does this person assent to the correct propositions?" The institution's doctrinal boundary becomes the measure of the person, and the person becomes an instrument for doctrinal conformity rather than a subject of spiritual development.

The internal corrective here is the prophetic emphasis on what the Hebrew prophets called "the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness" (Matthew 23:23). The Qur'an similarly prioritizes righteous action alongside faith: "whoever believes in God and the Last Day and does what is right" (Qur'an 2:62). Doctrine matters, but when it displaces justice and mercy as the effective center, it has become an idol.

IV. Result and Discussion

4.1 The Three-Part Diagnostic Test

a. What Kind of Conditions?

Religious traditions impose conditions for belonging, salvation, or spiritual advancement. The critical question is whether these conditions are ethical and transformative or performative and boundary-policing.

Table 3. presents a typology of religious conditions and their orientation.

Condition Type	Examples	Orientation	Risk
Ethical-transformative	"Do justice, love mercy" (Micah 6:8); "Whoever believes and does right" (Qur'an 2:62)	Human flourishing	Low
Doctrinal-assent	Correct belief in specific formulations	Boundary maintenance	Moderate
Performative-legalistic	Precise ritual or legal compliance as salvation condition	Institutional control	High
Loyalty-membership	Unquestioning allegiance to leader or institution	Institutional self-preservation	Very High

Table 3 presents a typology of religious conditions, categorizing them by their orientation and the institutional risks they pose. The analysis reveals a clear spectrum. At one end, "Ethical-transformative" conditions, grounded in scriptural mandates for justice and mercy (Micah 6:8; Qur'an 2:62), carry a low risk, as they are oriented toward genuine human flourishing (Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı). Conversely, as conditions shift toward "Performative-legalistic" compliance and "Loyalty-membership," the risk escalates to high and very high. At these stages, the conditions primarily serve institutional self-preservation rather than the

mission, reflecting the functionalist idolatry critiqued by Pope Francis (Vatican News, 2022). Consequently, Table 3 illustrates that the danger lies not in the existence of conditions but in their trajectory: when ethical substance is displaced by institutional loyalty, the condition becomes an instrument of control rather than a pathway to spiritual growth.

The biblical and Qur'anic evidence converges on a shared criterion. Micah 6:8 defines what God requires: "to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8, as cited in iBelieve, 2021). The prophetic critique is directed precisely at those who substitute ritual precision for ethical substance. Similarly, Qur'an 2:62 extends reward to "the faithful, the Jews, the Christians, and the Sabaeans; those of them who have faith in Allah and the Last Day and act righteously" (Qur'an 2:62, as cited in Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı, n.d.) . The condition is faith conjoined with righteous action, not communal affiliation. The Turkish Diyanet's exegesis emphasizes that the verse addresses "those of the People of the Book whose faith is correct and whose deeds are sound," blessing them alongside Muslims. The evidence from both traditions suggests that conditions become most dangerous when they shift from the first category toward the fourth, when ethical substance is replaced by institutional loyalty as the effective condition for belonging.

4.2 Whose Interests Do They Serve?

The second diagnostic question concerns beneficiaries. Do institutional conditions serve the stated mission, care for the vulnerable, worship of God, human development, or do they serve the institution's own survival, reputation, and power?

Pope Francis's critique of functionalism is explicitly framed as a warning against an idolatry that serves the pastor's ego rather than the people's relationship with God. In his 2022 Chrism Mass homily, Francis identified "functionalism" as one of three "hidden idols" through which the Evil One weakens priestly vocation: "The functionalist mentality does not tolerate mystery; it bets on efficiency. Little by little, this idol replaces in us the presence of the Father" (Pope Francis, 2022, as cited in Vatican News, 2022). The functionalist priest, Francis warned, "does not know how to rejoice in the graces of the Spirit" because "his nourishment is his own ego" . The interest served is the institution's measurable output, not the people's spiritual flourishing.

Christian scripture provides the criterion for distinguishing mission from institutional self-interest: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness" (Matthew 23:23.). The institutional interest (tithing precision) has displaced the ethical substance (justice and mercy). Jesus does not condemn tithing itself but exposes the disproportion: ritual minutiae have eclipsed foundational ethics.

In Islamic thought, the Sufi tradition has historically positioned itself as a corrective to precisely this displacement. The Sufi emphasis on *ikhlas*, sincerity or purity of intention, serves as an internal check against the institutional capture of religion for worldly purposes. *Ikhlas* in the Sufistic context means "purifying one's devotion solely for the sake of Allah," and it functions as a diagnostic of motivation: whether an act is performed for God or for the ego, reputation, or institutional advancement. Imam al-Ghazali defined *ikhlas* as "the purifier of deeds from all impurities," emphasizing that sincerity requires the practitioner to regard praise and blame from humans as equivalent, and to forget the deed in the act of performing it. This is a direct counter to the functionalist idol: the Sufi criterion asks not "Did it work?" but "For whom was it done?"

4.3 Fruits: Flourishing or Fear?

The final diagnostic question is empirical: What does the institution actually produce in the lives of its members?

Table 4. synthesizes evidence from the reviewed literature.

Outcome Domain	Flourishing Indicators	Control Indicators
Psychological	Secure sense of grace; humility without humiliation	Chronic shame; fear of judgment; scrupulosity
Social	Open boundaries; hospitality to strangers	Exclusion; shunning; fear of leaving
Ethical	Justice-seeking; care for vulnerable	Conformity; silence about abuse
Intellectual	Curiosity; integration of faith and inquiry	Suppression of doubt; anti-intellectualism
Political	Prophetic critique of power	Sanctification of power; nationalism

Table 4 synthesizes the empirical outcomes of institutional conditions across five domains, contrasting flourishing with control. The analysis demonstrates that a secure sense of grace fosters psychological humility, whereas performance-based systems breed chronic shame and scrupulosity. Socially, healthy institutions cultivate hospitality, while idolatrous ones enforce exclusion and fear of leaving. Ethically and intellectually, flourishing communities promote justice-seeking and curiosity, whereas controlling institutions demand conformity and suppress doubt, echoing the functionalist idolatry that prioritizes measurable output over mystery (Vatican News, 2022). Politically, legitimate authority enables prophetic critique of power, whereas functional idolatry sanctifies power and nationalism. Consequently, Table 4 confirms that the critical variable is not the religious label, but the underlying theology of God and the structure of power it authorizes (Weber, 2005).

The literature documents both outcomes existing within the same traditions, often in the same denomination. The critical variable is not the religious label but the theology of God and the structure of power it authorizes. A God primarily conceived as a threat to be appeased through correct performance produces fear and control. A God whose defining attribute is mercy and who is approached through love produces a different kind of community—one where the "condition" is not a hurdle but a relationship.

Pope Francis's warning about the idol of numbers illustrates the control mechanism precisely: "People cannot be reduced to mere numbers; and God's gifts cannot be measured by this criterion" . When the institution counts rather than knows its members, the person becomes an abstraction—a statistic to be optimized rather than a subject to be accompanied. The Sufi corrective operates in the opposite direction: *ikhlas* requires the practitioner to "forget the deed in the act of performing it," precisely because the ego's desire for recognition is the root of idolatry . The measure is not visibility but sincerity; not numbers but the hiddenness of the act before God.

Figure 3 synthesizes the article's analytical framework into an operationalized diagnostic algorithm. The model presents three parallel evaluative lenses: Conditions, Interests, and Fruits. As illustrated, these diagnostic questions converge to yield a definitive verdict regarding an institution's operative center. The lower section visually delineates the two possible outcomes. "Healthy Mediation" occurs when an institution points beyond itself to God and

treats the human being as an end, aligning with the ethical-transformative conditions detailed in Table 3. Conversely, "Functional Idolatry" manifests when the institution substitutes itself for the transcendent, prioritizing institutional survival and control. By integrating these three tests, Figure 3 provides a practical heuristic, visually confirming that the critical variable is not the religious label, but whether the underlying theology of God and structural power displace the ultimate with the proximate (Vatican News, 2022; Weber, 2005).

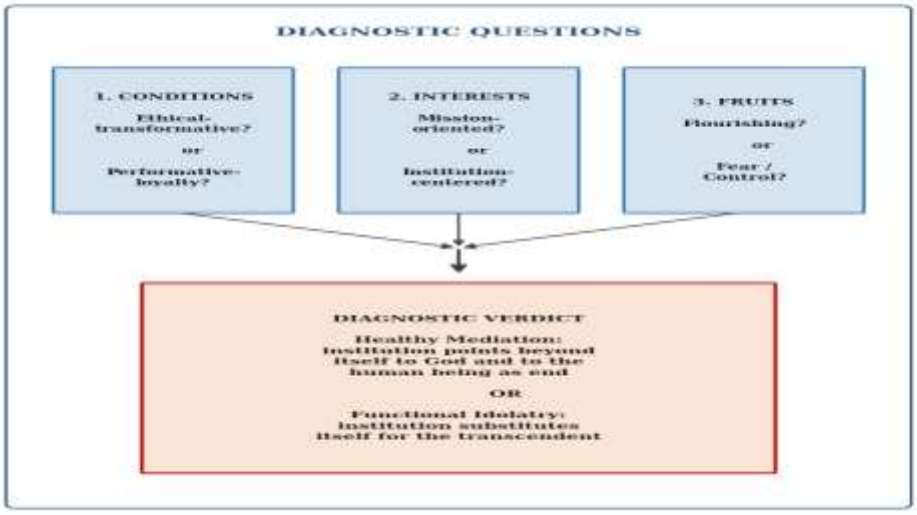


Figure 3. *The Three-Part Diagnostic Test: Conditions, Interests, and Fruits*

The model is not a judgment but a tool for discernment. It can be applied to any religious institution, any doctrine, any leader, and any community. The question is not whether the institution is "true" or "false" in some abstract sense, but whether it's operative center, the thing it actually serves in practice is the transcendent God or its own survival.

4.4 Manifestation across Global Crisis Domains

The diagnostic framework developed in Sections 2–4 gains analytical purchase when applied to the concrete domains in which crisis manifests. This section examines four arenas; political, economic, ecological, and psychological, demonstrating that the absolutization of the proximate operates through structurally analogous mechanisms across each.

4.5 Political Crisis: The Sacralization of Power

The absolutization of the proximate in politics occurs when the nation, the party, or the leader is clothed in sacred language. Gentile's analysis of "political religions" demonstrates that this is not confined to formally religious actors: totalizing ideologies seek to replace traditional religions, claiming for themselves the ultimate loyalty that religion demands (Gentile, 2006). Gentile distinguishes between civil religion, which reinforces democratic political culture, and political religion, which characterizes totalitarian regimes that assume religious character through the placement of a secular collective entity at the center of beliefs and myths, the formalization of commands prescribing loyalty, and the creation of a "political liturgy" around the cult of a leader (Gentile, 2006, as cited in Cambridge University Press, 2008). The mechanism is structurally identical whether the object is the Church, the Party, or the Nation: the proximate is clothed in the language of the ultimate, and critique becomes blasphemy.

When religious institutions fuse with political power, the result is a double absolutization: the nation becomes sacred, and the religious institution becomes its chaplain. The prophetic traditions in both Christianity and Islam resist this fusion, but they are

frequently silenced by institutional interests that benefit from the alliance. The Qur'anic condemnation of those who "devour people's wealth unjustly" and "turn people away from the path of God" (Qur'an 9:34) is directed precisely at religious authorities, "many of the rabbis and monks", whose position grants them influence over others. The verse locates the danger within the institution, not outside it.

4.6 Economic Crisis: The Idol of Growth

Weber's thesis on the Protestant ethic, however contested, established a structural link between religious worldviews and economic systems (Weber, 2005). The critical insight for this article is not whether Weber was correct in every detail, but that economic systems can become functional idols; the market, growth, or productivity treated as ultimate goods to which human beings are sacrificed.

When religious institutions bless economic arrangements uncritically, whether feudal hierarchies, colonial extraction, or contemporary inequality; they participate in the absolutization of the proximate. The Qur'anic condemnation of hoarding and the wrongful devouring of property (Qur'an 9:34) provides an internal criterion that is frequently ignored when institutional interests align with economic power. The classical commentary on this verse notes that "priests got rich by issuing indulgences and dispensations; they made their office a stepping stone to worldly power and possessions," and that even monastic orders vowed to individual poverty "grew rich with corporate property, until their wealth became a scandal" (IslamiCity, n.d.). The institutional interest (corporate wealth) displaced the ethical substance (poverty and service).

4.7 Ecological Crisis: The Absolutization of Dominion

Lynn White's 1967 argument that Christian doctrine of dominion contributed to ecological crisis remains a touchstone for the debate (White, 1967). White's thesis was not that Christianity is solely responsible, but that religious cosmology shapes the human relationship to nature. When "dominion" is absolutized, read as license rather than stewardship; the created order becomes instrumental to human (or institutional) ends.

The same dynamic appears in any tradition where the proximate (human economic activity, national development, institutional expansion) is treated as ultimate, and the natural world as mere material. The ecological crisis is, in this framework, a crisis of idolatry: the absolutization of production and consumption. The corrective is not the rejection of dominion but its reorientation, from domination to stewardship, from extraction to care.

4.8 Psychological Crisis: The Fruits of Control

The psychological harm of religious absolutization is documented in the literature on spiritual abuse and high-control groups. The mechanisms include thought control (equating doubt with spiritual weakness), emotional control (fear of damnation, guilt, threat of shunning), and behavioral control (dress codes, relationship regulation) (Zenodo, n.d.). Recent scholarship on "displacement" in high-control religious contexts describes the structural features that produce harm: "basin deepening through information control," "wrong-attractor maintenance through thought-stopping techniques," and "social displacement cost enforcement through shunning and disfellowshiping". The fruit is not humility but humiliation, not freedom but terror.

The psychological literature on meritocratic spirituality documents the same dynamic from a different angle. A recent study of the "psychodynamics of merit" in Christian contexts

argues that "meritocratic spirituality produces guilt, anxiety, exhaustion, and pastoral dependency, distorting the gospel and bringing the contemporary church closer to Pharisaic legalism" (Ferreira, 2024). The mechanism is precise: the institution's demand for performance displaces the grace it claims to proclaim, and the believer's sense of acceptance becomes contingent on measurable compliance rather than secure relationship.

Yet the same traditions contain resources for healing. The Sufi balance between *khawf* (awe) and *raja'* (hope) explicitly warns against fear without hope, which leads to despair. Islamic spiritual psychology holds that "a life without *raja'* leads a person to hopelessness and depression, while a life without *khawf* leads to heedlessness and negligence" (Erkaya, 2026). The two must be held in tension; when either dominates, the spiritual life is distorted. The Christian emphasis on grace, salvation as gift rather than achievement, similarly undercuts the performance-based system that produces chronic shame.

Table 5. summarizes the manifestation of proximate absolutization across the four domains.

Domain	Functional Idol	Mechanism	Corrective Resource
Political	Nation, Party, Leader	Sacralization of political entity; critique becomes blasphemy	Prophetic critique of power; separation of sacred and political
Economic	Market, Growth, Productivity	Blessing of existing arrangements; institutional wealth displaces ethical substance	Qur'anic condemnation of hoarding; prophetic critique of wealth
Ecological	Dominion, Development	Reading stewardship as license; nature as mere material	Reorientation from domination to care; stewardship hermeneutic
Psychological	Performance, Compliance	Meritocratic spirituality; fear and shame as control	*Khawf–raja'* balance; grace as gift rather than achievement

Table 5 delineates the structural parallels of proximate absolutization across four global crisis domains. The analysis reveals that political, economic, ecological, and psychological crises are not isolated phenomena but interconnected manifestations of displacing the transcendent with finite entities. In each domain, a functional idol, such as the Nation, the Market, or Performance is absolutized, triggering mechanisms that generate systemic harm, from sacralized blasphemy to meritocratic shame (Gentile, 2006; Ferreira, 2024). Crucially, the table highlights that both traditions possess internal "corrective resources." The Qur'anic critique of hoarding and the Sufi balance between *khawf* and *raja'* serve as structural safeguards. Consequently, Table 5 visually confirms that resolving global crises requires reorienting institutional loyalties away from these proximate idols and back toward stewardship and grace (White, 1967).

Figure 4 illustrates the interconnected pathways through which the absolutization of the proximate manifests across four global crisis domains. The model demonstrates that political, economic, and ecological idolatries, such as the sacralization of the Nation, the Market, and Dominion, converge to produce a mediating psychological crisis rooted in performative compliance. This structural displacement directly generates systemic outcomes of division, exploitation, and terror, echoing the functionalist idolatry that reduces human beings to optimized metrics (Vatican News, 2022). Crucially, the lower section of Figure 4 visualizes the

internal "Corrective Resources" available within the traditions themselves. Upward-pointing arrows indicate that practices like the Qur'anic condemnation of hoarding, the stewardship hermeneutic, and the *khawf–raja'* balance actively interrupt the crisis cycle (White, 1967). Consequently, Figure 4 visually confirms that resolving these interconnected crises requires reorienting institutional loyalties away from proximate idols and back toward transcendent stewardship.

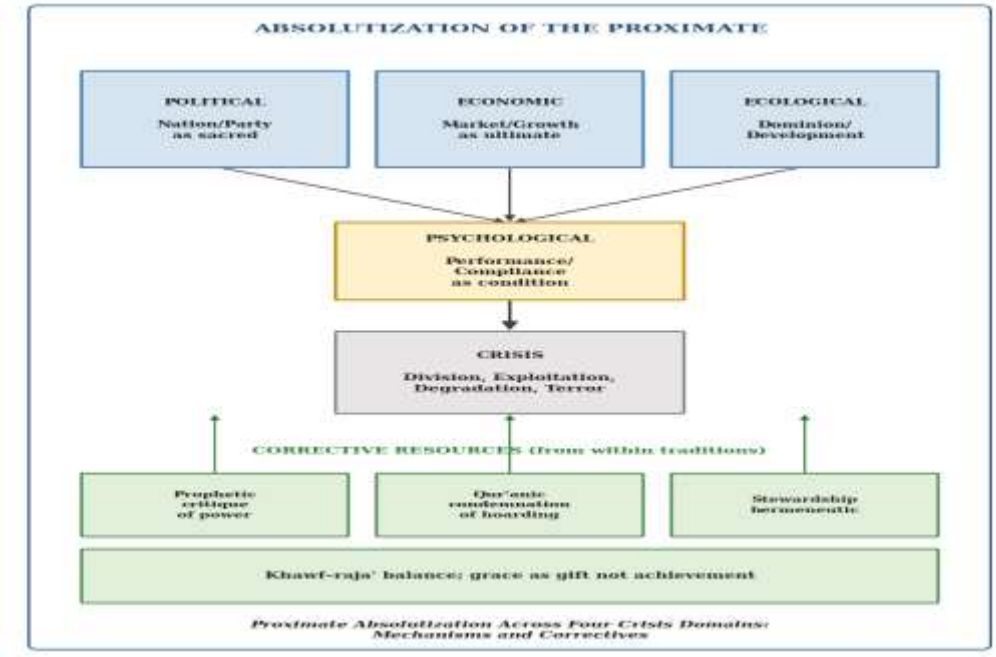


Figure 4. *Proximate Absolutization Across Four Crisis Domains: Mechanisms and Correctives*

The model illustrates that the four domains are not independent crisis sites but interconnected manifestations of a single structural dynamic. Political sacralization legitimizes economic extraction; economic extraction drives ecological degradation; ecological degradation produces psychological anxiety and displacement; and psychological anxiety makes populations more susceptible to political sacralization. The corrective resources, drawn from within the traditions themselves, interrupt this cycle by restoring the distinction between the ultimate and the proximate.

4.9 Toward Structural Remedies

The diagnostic framework developed in Sections 2–5 identifies the problem; this section proposes the remedy. The argument is not that institutions should be abolished but that they require structural safeguards that constrain their tendency toward self-absolutization. Four principles are advanced, accountability, freedom of conscience, prophetic critique, and the human being as end, each of which operates as an institutional immune response against the functional idolatry described earlier.

4.10 The Digital Idol: Artificial Intelligence and Algorithmic Mediation

The framework of proximate absolutization is not confined to traditional religious institutions; it extends to the digital and algorithmic architectures that increasingly mediate human experience. Artificial intelligence (AI) and digital communications function as powerful modern mediators that easily slip into functional idolatry. As Yun (2026) argues, technology turns into an idol when it performs divine attributes, such as omniscience, judgment, and order-giving, impersonally, reducing humans from covenantal agents to "optimized data" (p.

42). In this sense, the algorithm becomes an absolutized proximate, claiming an authority over human identity and truth that belongs only to the transcendent.

In digital communications, algorithmic curation acts as a proximate mediator of reality. By prioritizing engagement metrics and attention capture, these systems generate echo chambers and absolutized boundaries. The algorithm becomes the unquestioned authority, a functional idol that dictates what is sacred (viral) and what is heretical (suppressed), transforming political or ideological differences into digital tribalism (Gentile, 2006). Furthermore, the sheer scale of AI surveillance and data collection grants corporations and states a panoptic, god-like power. This environment encourages a culture of performative compliance, where users curate their lives to appease the algorithm's invisible judgment, echoing the meritocratic spirituality and fear-based control mechanisms discussed in Section 5.4 (Ferreira, 2024).

Despite this digital displacement, the diagnostic framework proposed in this article remains acutely applicable. The human being must not be reduced to a data point or an engagement metric. Just as religious institutions require structural accountability and freedom of conscience, digital platforms require algorithmic transparency, user autonomy, and the prioritization of human dignity over profit-driven efficiency. The ultimate corrective remains consistent across both religious and technological domains: technology must remain a servant of human flourishing, pointing beyond its own efficiency to the intrinsic value of the human person (Timmermann, 2010).

Figure 5 illustrates the structural descent into algorithmic absolutization, demonstrating how digital mediations replicate the dynamics of institutional idolatry. The model shows that AI and algorithmic curation function as proximate mediators claiming divine attributes, omniscience through data collection, judgment via curation, and loyalty through engagement metrics (Yun, 2026). When absolutized, the algorithm becomes a functional idol, redefining the sacred as "viral" and reducing the human person to "optimized data." This digital displacement generates a distinct crisis characterized by echo chambers, panoptic surveillance, and performative compliance. However, Figure 5 also maps the corrective trajectory. Just as religious institutions require structural reform, digital architectures demand algorithmic transparency and the protection of user autonomy. Ultimately, the figure visually affirms that subordinating technology to human development is essential to preserving human dignity against algorithmic idolatry (Timmermann, 2010).

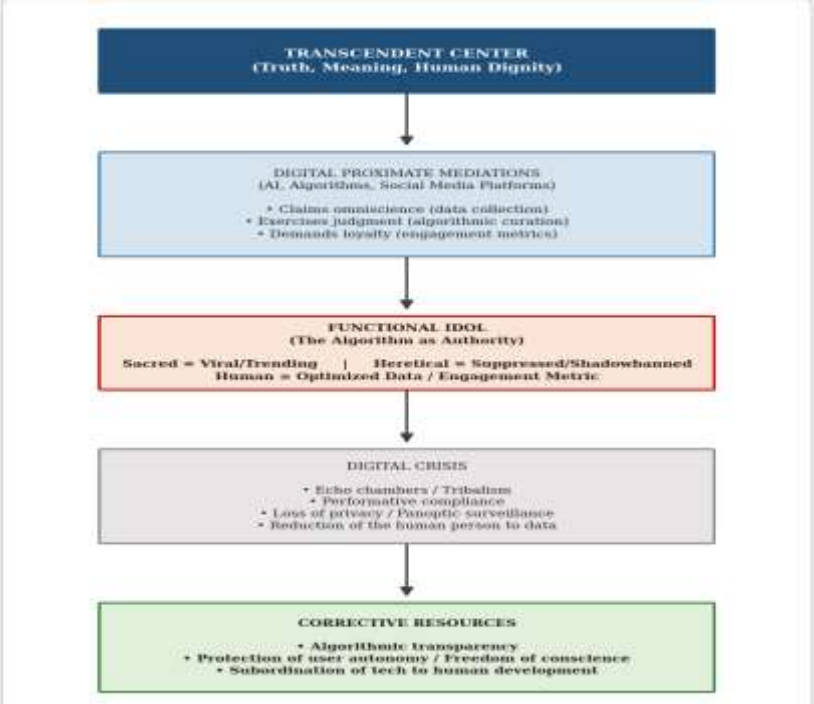


Figure 5. Algorithmic Absolutization: Digital Mediation and the Human Person

4.11 Accountability as Institutional Principle

The first remedy is structural accountability. Every institution that claims to speak for God must be open to being questioned by the principles it claims to serve. This means transparent finances, reviewable decisions, and mechanisms for members to challenge leadership without fear of retaliation.

ope Francis's critique of functionalism is itself an example of internal accountability, though the question remains whether such critique is institutionalized or dependent on the personal disposition of a particular leader. In his 2022 Chrism Mass homily, Francis warned that the "functionalist" priest is concerned only with "the efficiency of his own programs," and that this mentality "leaves no room for mystery". The Pope identified this as one of three "hidden idols" that weaken priestly vocation, alongside spiritual worldliness and the idol of numbers. The remedy, Francis insisted, is not periodic prophetic outbursts but the ongoing work of exposing these idols to Christ so that they may be "rooted out".

The institutionalization of accountability, however, remains contested. Francis's pontificate saw significant reforms; the apostolic constitution *Praedicate Evangelium* (2022), the establishment of the Secretariat for the Economy, and strengthened financial oversight mechanisms . Yet the same period witnessed the controversial dismissal of the first Auditor General, Libero Milone, who claimed he was forced to resign after uncovering high-level irregularities, and who publicly denounced the lack of procedural safeguards ensuring the independence of his office. The lesson is precise: accountability that depends on the personal will of a leader is not accountability at all. The remedy is permanent structures of self-correction, not periodic gestures of reform.

Freedom of Conscience as Structural Safeguard

The Qur'anic principle "There shall be no compulsion in religion" (Qur'an 2:256) is not merely a theological statement but a structural safeguard. Patricia Crone's magisterial study of the verse's interpretation traces how it was read restrictively by premodern exegetes, some

even claiming it was abrogated by the injunction to fight but became, in modernity, "a declaration of universal religious tolerance" and "a charter of freedom of conscience unparalleled in the religious annals of mankind" (Crone, 2016, p. 131) . The verse's history demonstrates that the meaning of a scriptural principle is not fixed; it can be narrowed to serve institutional interests or broadened to constrain them.

When freedom to question, doubts, and leave is protected; legally, socially, and economically, the institution's capacity for absolutization is constrained. The threat of social annihilation (loss of family, community, and livelihood) is the most powerful tool of control, and its removal is the most powerful reform. The Qur'anic principle, read in its broadest sense, provides the theological warrant for this structural safeguard: if coercion invalidates the boundary's claim to ultimate authority, then the institution that coerces has already forfeited its claim to speak for God.

Prophetic Critique as Internal Discipline

Every tradition contains voices that call the institution back to its principles. The Hebrew prophets condemned ritual without justice. Jesus condemned the Pharisees for neglecting "the weightier matters of the law" (Matthew 23:23). The Qur'an condemns those who "sell the signs of God for a small price" (Qur'an 9:9), a verse that classical exegesis applies to those who traded divine guidance for worldly gain. The Sufi tradition has historically functioned as a corrective to institutional formalism.

The remedy is to give these voices structural room, not to suppress them as disloyalty or heresy, but to recognize them as the tradition's immune system. An institution that cannot tolerate internal critique has already absolutized itself. The Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors, in its 2025 report, articulated this principle with unusual clarity: "Figures of authority within the Church who perpetrate or enable abuse have perhaps viewed themselves as too essential and important to be held accountable," the report stated, adding that "God's promises to the Church are not a 'too essential to fail' free pass of impunity: to the contrary, the Church needs to remember that judgment begins within the household of God". This is the prophetic critique operating within the institution's own structures, and it is precisely the kind of internal voice that must be protected rather than silenced.

The Human Being as End

The final criterion is the most fundamental: Does the institution serve the development of the human being; spiritually, morally, intellectually, or does it make the human being dependent, fearful, and useful? Kant's formula of humanity, "So act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means" (Kant, 1785/1998, as cited in Timmermann, 2010), applies to institutions as much as to individuals. A religious institution that treats its members as resources for its own survival has inverted the order of creation.

Pope Francis's critique of the idol of numbers is a concrete application of this principle: "People cannot be reduced to mere numbers; and God's gifts cannot be measured by this criterion" . The functionalist priest, Francis said, is "nourished by his own ego" rather than by the graces of the Spirit poured out on the people. When the human being becomes an instrument of institutional metrics, the institution has already committed the idolatry it claims to oppose.

Table 6. summarizes the diagnostic-to-remedial correspondence.

Diagnostic Question	Remedial Principle	Institutional Form
What conditions? (Ethical or performative?)	Accountability	Transparent finances; reviewable decisions; protected challenge mechanisms
Whose interests? (Mission or institution?)	Freedom of conscience	Legal, social, and economic protection for question, doubt, and exit
What fruits? (Flourishing or control?)	Prophetic critique	Structural room for internal dissent; protection for whistleblowers
—	Human being as end	Development (spiritual, moral, intellectual) as the measure of institutional success

Table 6 operationalizes the article's theoretical framework by mapping diagnostic questions directly to structural remedies, creating a practical blueprint for institutional reform. The analysis demonstrates that resolving the problem of proximate absolutization requires targeted institutional mechanisms rather than mere theological correction. Specifically, addressing performative conditions necessitates structural accountability, while safeguarding against institutional self-interest demands the rigorous protection of freedom of conscience (Crone, 2016). Furthermore, ensuring that institutional fruits yield flourishing rather than control requires protected prophetic critique and whistleblower safeguards (Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors, 2025). Ultimately, the final principle, treating the human being strictly as an end, serves as the ultimate evaluative measure (Timmermann, 2010). Consequently, Table 6 confirms that constraining institutional idolatry requires embedding accountability, protected dissent, and human development into the very architecture of religious organizations.

Figure 6 visually operationalizes the article's theoretical framework by translating institutional diagnosis into structural reform. The model demonstrates a direct correspondence: probing the nature of institutional conditions yields structural accountability; scrutinizing whose interests are served necessitates the rigorous protection of freedom of conscience; and evaluating the resultant fruits requires structurally embedding prophetic critique (Crone, 2016; Vatican News, 2022). Crucially, the vertical flow suggests that these remedial principles are not isolated policies but a cumulative sequence. When accountability, protected dissent, and freedom of conscience are structurally integrated, rather than dependent on the personal disposition of a leader; they interrupt the cycle of self-absolutization. Ultimately, this sequence converges at the bottom of the diagram into the foundational criterion: the human being as an end, never merely a means. Consequently, Figure 5 illustrates that restraining institutional idolatry is not merely a theological correction but an architectural necessity, demanding that human spiritual and moral development become the fundamental metric of institutional success (Timmermann, 2010).

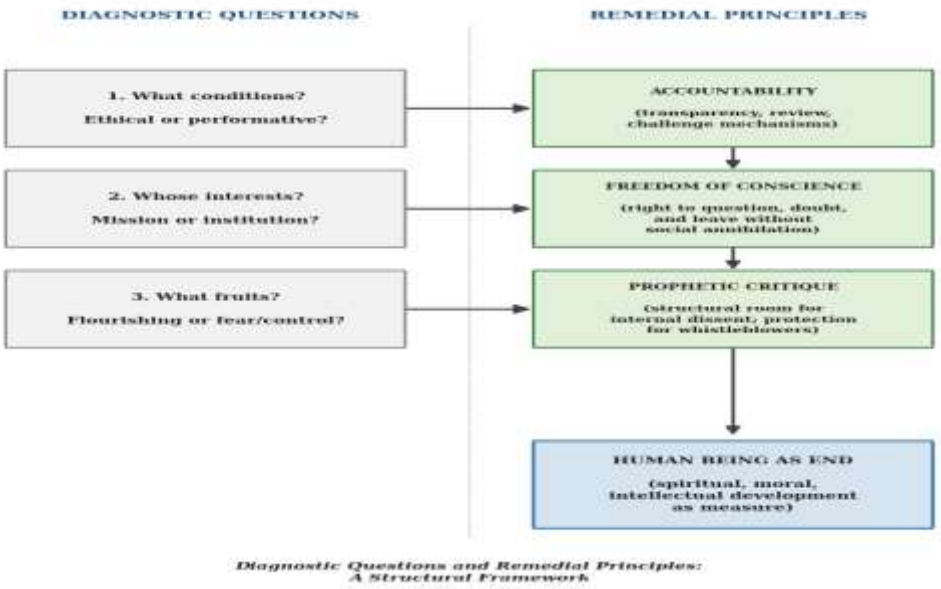


Figure 6. *Diagnostic Questions and Remedial Principles: A Structural Framework*

The framework is not a program for a single institution but a set of criteria applicable to any. The question is not whether an institution is "true" or "false" in the abstract, but whether its operative structures constrain or enable its tendency toward self-absolutization. Accountability, freedom of conscience, and protected prophetic critique are the institutional analogues of the theological virtues they serve: they keep the institution pointed beyond itself, toward the God it claims to serve and the human being it claims to develop.

V. Conclusion

This review has argued that the structural roots of global crisis lie not in belief in God but in the absolutization of the proximate; the institutional and psychological tendency to grant ultimate status to finite entities. The results visually operationalize this theoretical framework by translating institutional diagnosis into structural reform. The model demonstrates a direct correspondence: probing the nature of institutional conditions yields structural accountability; scrutinizing whose interests are served necessitates the rigorous protection of freedom of conscience; and evaluating the resultant fruits requires structurally embedding prophetic critique. Crucially, the vertical flow suggests that these remedial principles are not isolated policies but a cumulative sequence. When accountability, protected dissent, and freedom of conscience are structurally integrated, rather than dependent on the personal disposition of a leader; they interrupt the cycle of self-absolutization. Ultimately, this sequence converges at the bottom of the diagram into the foundational criterion: the human being as an end, never merely a means. Consequently, It illustrates that restraining institutional idolatry is not merely a theological correction but an architectural necessity, demanding that human spiritual and moral development become the fundamental metric of institutional success.

The implications of this framework are threefold. For religious institutions, the task is to build structural safeguards that keep them oriented toward the transcendent and the human being as end. For secular and technological institutions, the same diagnostic questions apply: the absolutization of the market, the nation, or the algorithm is structurally identical to the absolutization of the church or the doctrine. For individuals, the work is one of continuous

discernment; asking, in every institution and every heart, which spirit is at work: the one that points beyond itself to God and to the human being, or the one that closes in on itself and calls it God. The world does not need a new religion. It needs the courage, within every tradition and every technological system, to keep asking the question the prophets asked: *Is the center here God, or is it us?*

Therefore, the ultimate solution lies not in the abolition of institutions, but in their structural reformation. What is expected across all domains, whether ecclesial, political, economic, or digital is a fundamental reorientation toward accountability, transparency, and the protection of human dignity. Religious institutions must institutionalize self-critique and protect the freedom of conscience to prevent the sanctification of power. Political and economic systems must implement checks and balances that prevent the market or the nation from demanding ultimate loyalty. Digital and AI platforms must prioritize algorithmic transparency and user autonomy, ensuring that technology serves human development rather than reducing persons to data points. In every case, the measure of success must shift from institutional survival or efficiency to the spiritual, moral, and intellectual flourishing of the human being. Only by embedding these structural safeguards can institutions avoid becoming the very idols they were created to mediate.

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