



Journal of Natural Language and Linguistics (JNLL)

ISSN: 2995-9837 (ONLINE)

VOLUME 4 ISSUE 1 (2026)



PUBLISHED BY
E-PALLI PUBLISHERS, DELAWARE, USA

Priests' Sermon: A Cohesion Analysis

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Article Information

Received: February 04, 2026

Accepted: April 26, 2026

Published: June 20, 2026

Keywords

*Cohesion Analysis, Philippines,
Priest Sermon, Qualitative*

ABSTRACT

The sermon is an important form of religious discourse that plays a significant role in shaping believers' faith, morality, and unity. This study aims to examine cohesion in the sermons of Filipino priests using a qualitative approach, specifically discourse analysis based on the theory of Halliday and Hasan. The analysis revealed the widespread use of cohesive devices such as reference, conjunction, ellipsis, substitution, reiteration, and collocation, which serve as the foundation for semantic connectedness and coherence of the message. Reference emerged as the most frequently used strategy, contributing to a clear and continuous flow of ideas, while conjunction and reiteration play a crucial role in reinforcing the logical and rhetorical relations of statements. The study shows that the effective use of cohesive devices positively influences the audience's understanding and engagement. Therefore, a deeper and broader examination of cohesion in various forms of religious discourse in the Philippines is recommended, as well as the integration of the identified linguistic strategies into the training of seminarians and communication instructors.

INTRODUCTION

The sermon is a central form of religious communication through which priests convey spiritual teachings, moral guidance, and doctrinal interpretation to the faithful. As emphasized by Obielosi and Mgbemena (2019), preaching is not only a theological responsibility but also a communicative practice that requires effective methods to meaningfully engage listeners and convey the message of the Word of God. Similarly, Ezeanya and Enweonwu (2022) highlight that Catholic priests play a vital role in the Church's divine mission, serving as mediators of spiritual instruction within the broader ecclesiastical community. From a discourse perspective, sermons are structured forms of language that reflect both linguistic organization and social meaning. Taiwo (2007) explains that discourse is not neutral, as it carries ideological meanings that shape audience interpretation and response. In multilingual contexts such as the Philippines, language use in discourse is further shaped by sociolinguistic realities, including code-switching and linguistic adaptation (Bautista, 2008). These factors demonstrate that religious discourse is influenced not only by theological intent but also by linguistic and cultural contexts.

In the study of discourse analysis, cohesion is a key linguistic mechanism that ensures textual unity and logical flow. Halliday and Hasan (2014) define cohesion as the set of linguistic resources that connect parts of a text into a unified whole through devices such as reference, conjunction, ellipsis, substitution, and lexical cohesion. Supporting this, Asiamah and Israel (2022) found that sermons exhibit cohesive patterns that organize spoken religious discourse into meaningful and logically structured messages, enhancing clarity and comprehension among listeners.

Despite the recognized importance of sermons as communicative acts and the established role of cohesion in discourse organization, there remains limited linguistic research focusing specifically on how cohesive devices function in Filipino priestly sermons. This gap highlights the need for a more detailed examination of how linguistic cohesion contributes to the clarity, unity, and effectiveness of sermon discourse in the Philippine religious context. This study therefore examined the cohesion of sermons delivered by priests in the Philippines. Specifically, it identifies the cohesive devices used in selected sermons and analyzes how these linguistic features contribute to textual unity and meaning-making. By focusing on the structural aspects of sermon discourse, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how religious messages are linguistically organized and effectively communicated.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sermons are structured forms of religious discourse that function as primary vehicles for the transmission of moral values, theological teachings, and community guidance. In Christian worship, preaching is not only a ritual practice but also a communicative act that requires careful organization and delivery to effectively convey the Word of God. Obielosi & Mgbemena (2019) emphasize that effective preaching involves deliberate communicative strategies that help ensure religious messages are meaningfully delivered to audiences. Similarly, Carter *et al.* (2018) note that sermon preparation and delivery are highly structured processes that require the logical arrangement of ideas to achieve clarity and audience engagement. From this perspective, sermons may be understood as planned discourse events where language

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plays a central role in shaping meaning and facilitating understanding.

Beyond their religious function, sermons can also be viewed as socially constructed discourse that reflects ideology, identity, and institutional power. Fairclough (2015) explains that discourse is a form of social practice in which language both reflects and shapes social realities, while van Dijk (2014) further argues that discourse encodes ideology through linguistic choices that influence how meaning and power relations are interpreted. Gee (2014) similarly emphasizes that language use is always context-dependent and socially situated, suggesting that sermon discourse is shaped by cultural and institutional expectations. Taiwo (2007) also demonstrates that discourse structures may carry implicit ideological meanings that influence audience interpretation. Taken together, these perspectives suggest that sermons are not neutral texts but are embedded within broader social and ideological systems that shape how religious messages are constructed and understood.

At the linguistic level, cohesion is widely recognized as an important feature of discourse that contributes to clarity, unity, and logical flow. Halliday & Hasan (2014) define cohesion as the set of linguistic devices that connect sentences into a unified text through reference, conjunction, substitution, ellipsis, and lexical cohesion. These cohesive devices allow ideas to be interconnected, enabling listeners or readers to follow the progression of meaning in a text. McNamara *et al.* (2014) explain that cohesive devices may improve comprehension by making relationships between ideas more explicit, particularly in complex discourse. Biber *et al.* (2011) also emphasize that cohesive patterns are important in both spoken and written language because they help structure information delivery, while Tanskanen (2006) highlights the role of lexical cohesion in maintaining semantic continuity through repetition and collocation. Collectively, these studies suggest that cohesion plays a crucial role in producing coherent and meaningful discourse, including sermons.

Empirical studies further support the presence and importance of cohesive devices in discourse, including religious communication. Asiamah & Israel (2022) found that sermons exhibit systematic use of cohesive devices such as reference, conjunction, ellipsis, collocation, and reiteration, which contribute to logical organization and audience comprehension. Similarly, Hibatulloh *et al.* (2024) & Zhou (2024) indicate that cohesive strategies may enhance textual clarity and thematic unity, although their studies primarily focus on academic writing contexts. Rizki *et al.* (2022) also show that grammatical cohesion contributes to discourse coherence in student texts. While these studies are not exclusively focused on sermons, they suggest that cohesive devices can function as general linguistic resources that support clarity and meaning construction across different discourse types, including religious discourse.

In addition to linguistic structure, sermons are increasingly influenced by technological transformation.

Campbell (2020) explains that digital religion has reshaped traditional worship by relocating religious communication into online platforms where meaning and authority are negotiated through mediated interaction. Hutchings (2017) similarly notes that digital environments extend religious participation beyond physical churches, allowing sermons to reach wider audiences. Cheong *et al.* (2012) emphasize that digital media enables new forms of religious engagement that integrate communication, identity, and technology, while Hjarvard (2008) argues that media actively shapes religious discourse by influencing how messages are structured and interpreted. These developments suggest that sermons now operate within both physical and digital communicative spaces, requiring adaptability in language use and discourse organization. Despite the growing body of research on discourse cohesion and digital religion, there remains limited linguistic investigation focusing specifically on how cohesive devices function in sermon discourse, particularly within the Filipino context. While studies such as Rizki *et al.* (2022), Zhou (2024), and Hibatulloh *et al.* (2024) examine cohesion in academic and educational texts, and Asiamah & Israel (2022) provide insight into cohesion in sermons, there is still a noticeable gap in detailed analysis of how Filipino priests use cohesive devices to construct meaning in homiletic discourse. This gap suggests the need for a closer examination of sermon cohesion in the Philippine setting to better understand how linguistic devices contribute to clarity, organization, and audience engagement in religious communication.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Data

The study used 20 sermons delivered by Catholic priests, sourced from publicly available platforms such as social media and official church websites. This sample size was considered sufficient to allow for in-depth qualitative analysis while maintaining manageability of the dataset. Creswell and Poth (2018) emphasize that an adequate amount of qualitative data is necessary to identify recurring linguistic patterns and discourse structures. The use of online platforms provided access to contemporary sermons that reach diverse audiences, reflecting current practices in religious communication.

The sermons were selected based on specific inclusion criteria. First, only sermons delivered in Filipino (Tagalog-based discourse) were included to ensure linguistic consistency in analyzing cohesion (Bautista, 2008). Second, only sermons delivered by priests with at least one year of preaching experience were included to ensure consistency in discourse style and message organization. In addition, only sermons with clear structure and observable cohesive elements were selected to ensure suitability for discourse analysis.

Halliday and Hasan's (2014) theory of cohesion served as the primary analytical framework of the study. This framework explains cohesion as the set of linguistic resources that create semantic connections within a text,

including reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction, and lexical cohesion. These cohesive devices contribute to textual unity and meaning-making, particularly in spoken discourse such as sermons.

Research Design and Procedure

This study employed a qualitative research design using discourse analysis to examine cohesion in the sermons of Filipino priests. Qualitative research is appropriate for exploring meaning-making processes in naturally occurring language, especially in religious and culturally situated discourse (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study focused on how cohesive devices contribute to clarity, coherence, and logical organization in sermon discourse. Through discourse analysis, the study identified and examined cohesive devices such as reference, conjunction, ellipsis, substitution, reiteration, and collocation. These linguistic features were analyzed in relation to how they establish semantic relationships and maintain textual flow in sermons. This approach allows for a deeper understanding of how language structures contribute to meaning construction in religious communication.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data were collected from publicly available sermons and transcribed into textual form for analysis. A systematic coding procedure was then conducted, wherein segments of the transcripts were categorized according to types of cohesive devices, including reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction, reiteration, and collocation.

The analysis focused on identifying patterns of cohesion and examining how these linguistic features contribute to discourse coherence and semantic continuity. Coding was conducted at the sentence level to ensure precise identification of cohesive elements.

During transcription, spoken discourse was carefully converted into written form. Sentence boundaries were determined using grammatical structure and speech cues such as pauses and intonation patterns when necessary. However, priority was given to preserving meaning and natural discourse flow rather than strict punctuation rules. To ensure trustworthiness of the analysis, the study followed qualitative validation strategies such as credibility and consistency through repeated review of transcripts and continuous checking of coded categories (Shenton, 2004). This process helped ensure that the identification of cohesive devices remained systematic and reliable throughout the analysis.

Ethical Consideration

This study adhered to the ethical standards set by the University of Mindanao Ethics Review Committee. Participation was voluntary, and individuals had the right to withdraw at any time. The study ensured the privacy and confidentiality of all data, and an informed consent process was implemented to clearly explain the purpose, methods, potential risks, and benefits of the research.

Appropriate and respectful procedures were followed

in data collection, and potential risks were carefully assessed and minimized to ensure that the benefits of the study outweighed any possible harm. Ethical standards such as honesty, integrity, and transparency were strictly observed. Data were collected and reported accurately, and any form of falsification or misrepresentation was avoided.

Plagiarism was strictly prohibited, and proper citation of sources was maintained throughout the study. Any potential conflicts of interest were disclosed. In cases where public data were used, permissions were obtained from relevant platforms or institutions when necessary. Furthermore, provisions were established for the secure storage and handling of online data. Authorship was appropriately assigned based on individual contributions to ensure fairness and accountability in the research process.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the results and discussion of the study, showcasing the sermons of the priests.

Characteristics of Linguistic Cohesion in Priests' Sermons

Table 1 presents the analysis of linguistic cohesion in selected priests' sermons. The findings show that the sermons exhibit a coherent and interconnected discourse structure, achieved through the systematic use of cohesive devices such as reference, conjunction, ellipsis, substitution, reiteration, and collocation, as originally proposed by Halliday and Hasan (2014). This observation is consistent with general discourse studies emphasizing that cohesion contributes to textual clarity, continuity, and comprehensibility (McNamara *et al.*, 2014; Tabari & Johnson, 2023; Zhou, 2024).

The analysis suggests that cohesive devices play a central role in organizing ideas within the sermons, supporting the smooth flow of meaning across utterances. This aligns with discourse research highlighting that cohesion enhances both written and spoken communication by guiding audience interpretation (Rizki *et al.*, 2022; Tafuli *et al.*, 2023). While these studies are not specific to priests' sermons, they provide a strong theoretical basis for understanding how cohesion operates in discourse.

First, reference appears to be the most frequently observed cohesive device in the sermons analyzed. Personal and demonstrative references are consistently used to maintain continuity of meaning. For instance, in the statement "He wants us to be productive, but He also wants us to rest" (S1), the pronoun "He" refers implicitly to God. Similarly, in "This is the reason why He has given us freedom..." (S7), "this" refers to a previously stated idea. The frequent use of reference reflects its established role in maintaining textual unity and continuity in discourse (Hibatulloh *et al.*, 2024; Tafuli *et al.*, 2023). In this study, reference functions as a key mechanism for maintaining shared understanding between the speaker and the audience.

Second, conjunctions are extensively used to establish logical relationships among ideas. Expressions such as “ngunit,” “habang,” “dahil,” and “sapagkat” indicate contrast, cause-effect, and temporal relationships. This supports general findings that conjunctions play a crucial role in structuring discourse and improving logical progression of ideas (Zhou, 2024). In the sermons, conjunctions contribute to the systematic development of theological and moral arguments.

Third, ellipsis is used to enhance brevity while preserving meaning, particularly in spoken discourse. For example, in “However, He also wants us to rest” (S9), certain elements are omitted but remain contextually understood. Although previous studies have identified ellipsis as a feature of efficient discourse processing (Rizki *et al.*, 2022), its use in the sermons similarly reflects the spoken nature of preaching, where conciseness supports audience engagement.

Fourth, substitution is employed to avoid repetition and maintain fluency. Words such as “this” (S7) and phrases like “many things” (S8) replace longer expressions without loss of meaning. This is consistent with findings that substitution enhances cohesion by reducing redundancy while preserving semantic clarity (Ali, 2023). In the sermons, substitution supports smoother delivery and prevents linguistic redundancy.

Fifth, reiteration is evident through the repetition of key lexical items and synonymous expressions such as “gusto” and “nais,” as well as recurring thematic concepts like “rest.” This repetition reinforces central messages and enhances memorability. Lexical repetition has been widely recognized as a major cohesive strategy that strengthens discourse unity and emphasis (Zhou, 2024; Martin, 2024). In the sermons, reiteration functions

as a rhetorical device that reinforces moral and spiritual teachings.

Finally, collocation is observed in the grouping of semantically related words such as “freedom, talent, ability, strategy, and wisdom,” as well as “nutrition, exercise, and rest.” These lexical clusters demonstrate semantic association and thematic unity. Studies on lexical cohesion confirm that collocation contributes significantly to the semantic integration of discourse (Tabari & Johnson, 2023; Tanskanen, 2006). In the sermons, collocation helps structure ideas around coherent thematic fields.

The findings indicate that priests’ sermons rely heavily on cohesive devices to maintain clarity, logical flow, and thematic unity. The predominance of reference suggests that sermons are anchored on shared participants and central theological concepts, particularly God and the collective identity of the audience. This reflects the role of cohesion in establishing continuity in discourse (Gee, 2014).

The frequent use of conjunctions further indicates that sermons are structured as logically organized discourse, rather than isolated statements. Meanwhile, ellipsis and substitution reflect the spoken and performative nature of sermons, where brevity and efficiency enhance audience comprehension. Finally, reiteration and collocation demonstrate strong thematic emphasis, which enhances message retention and reinforces religious teachings.

In sum, the analysis shows that linguistic cohesion is systematically employed in priests’ sermons to ensure clarity, coherence, and persuasive effectiveness. While existing literature primarily focuses on cohesion in general written and spoken discourse, the present findings extend its application to religious sermon discourse, demonstrating similar cohesive patterns in a faith-based communicative context.

Table 1: Characteristics of Linguistic Cohesion in Priests’ Sermons

Code	Sentence	Cohesive Devices Used
1	He wants us to work, but He also wants us to rest.	Reference (he, he), Conjunction (but) Reiteration (wants, want)
2	This is not merely about stopping work; rather, as we work and strive, we expand our trust that any deficiency on our part will be made up by Him.	Reference (him), Conjunction (rather, while)
3	God does not favor the lazy; He wants us to work and strive.	Reference (he), Conjunction (and) Reiteration (work and strive)
4	In fact, from the moment God created the first human, He has governed them over the world.	Reference (he), Conjunction (from the)
5	As Saint Paul said in 2 Thessalonians 3:10, “Anyone who does not work should not eat.”	Reference (said)
6	God wants us to cultivate, develop, and take care of the world He has given us.	Reference (he)
7	This is the reason why He has given us freedom, talent, ability, resourcefulness, and wisdom- to fulfil our responsibilities.	Reference (this, he) Substitution (this) Collocation (freedom, talent, ability, resourcefulness, and wisdom)
8	Don’t we enjoy many things today because of human effort, innovation, and development?	Conjunction (because) Substitution (many things) Collocation (effort, innovation, and development)

9	However, He also wants us to rest.	Reference (he), conjunction (however) Ellipsis (aside from working)
10	Let us remember that God knows our capabilities, especially our body, because He created and designed it.	Reference (he)
11	He designed us to need proper nutrition, exercise, and rest in order to become better in doing what is good, proper, and excellent.	Reference (he) Collocation (nutrition, exercise, and rest)
12	A good example of this is the story of the Prophet Elijah in 1 Kings 19.	Reference (this)
13	When he was extremely tired, God instructed him to eat and rest, and because of this, he was able to accomplish many great things for God.	Reference (he)
14	In our Gospel, He says, “Come to me, all of you who are weary, and I will give you rest.”	Reference (he)
15	This is good news because we all long for rest.	Conjunction (because)
16	This rest does not require money or travel- we only need to approach Him with faith.	Reference (him)
17	When we approach Him, our trust in His power, goodness, and love should be complete.	Reference (him, his) Collocation (power, goodness, and love)
18	Often, we approach Him, but we are still full of fear and worry.	Reference (we) Conjunction (but)
19	So even if we have prayed or attended Mass, we do not feel true rest because we still carry our worries.	Reference (we) Ellipsis (we)
20	So, how can we feel true comfort?	Conjunction (so)
21	The solution is complete trust in Him.	Reference (him)
22	We cannot do everything, but He has endless power and ways.	Reference (he)
23	Let us not worry because He takes care of us.	Reference (he, us)
24	As the Scriptures says, worry does not prolong life; instead, it causes stress and various illnesses.	Reference (says)
25	When He says, ‘Come and rest,’ it does not mean that we should neglect our duties.	Reference (he) Reiteration (rest)
26	Rather, He says that we should entrust our worries to Him.	Reference (he, him)
27	God cares for us- He feels our pain and worries.	Reference (he)
28	If our family and life are important to us, they are even more important to Him.	Reference (him)
29	God’s call is not to stop working, but while we work, to strengthen our faith in Him.	Reference (him)
30	Whatever we cannot do, He can do.	Reference (we, he)
31	Let us ask for this blessing in our holy celebrations, so that while we work, our spirit may be strengthened and inspired anew.	Reference (we, our)

Semantic Influence of Cohesive Devices in Priests’ Sermons

Table 2 presents the semantic influence of cohesive devices observed in the priests’ homilies and sermons. Beyond their structural function, these cohesive devices appear to contribute to how meaning is constructed and developed within the discourse. Rather than functioning only as grammatical links, they also help shape how ideas are interpreted within the sermon context.

First, reference contributes to semantic continuity by helping maintain consistent identification of key concepts such as God, humanity, faith, and rest. Through the use of pronouns and demonstratives, the sermons maintain

continuity without repeatedly naming these concepts. In the present analysis, reference appears to support coherence by anchoring ideas to shared religious entities and themes. This observation is consistent with studies indicating that reference supports continuity and clarity in discourse by tracking participants and key concepts across texts (Halimah *et al.*, 2024; Tabari & Johnson, 2023). Second, conjunctions help organize the logical flow of ideas in the sermons. They indicate relationships such as cause, contrast, and sequence, allowing the message to develop in a structured manner. In the analyzed sermons, conjunctions appear to guide listeners through the progression of ideas, particularly in linking human

actions with spiritual interpretations of rest and faith. This aligns with findings that conjunctions contribute to discourse organization by clarifying logical relationships between ideas (Zhou, 2024).

Third, ellipsis and substitution contribute to brevity and efficiency in expression. In the sermons, these devices allow certain information to be omitted or replaced without losing meaning, as the context makes interpretation possible. This requires listeners to infer meaning based on surrounding discourse. Previous research suggests that such cohesive strategies can support comprehension by reducing redundancy and encouraging contextual interpretation (Rizki *et al.*, 2022; Ali, 2023). In this study, these devices appear to reflect the spoken and interactive nature of sermons, where meaning is often co-constructed with the audience.

Fourth, reiteration and collocation help reinforce key themes and maintain semantic relatedness across the discourse. The repetition of concepts such as “faith,” “trust in God,” and “rest,” along with the use of related lexical items, contributes to thematic consistency. These patterns appear to support message emphasis and

retention. This is consistent with literature suggesting that lexical cohesion, including repetition and semantic grouping, contributes to discourse coherence and thematic unity (Martin, 2024; Hibatulloh *et al.*, 2024).

The findings suggest that cohesive devices play an important role in supporting semantic coherence in priests’ sermons. While they primarily function as structural tools, they also appear to contribute to how meaning is organized and interpreted within the discourse. This is consistent with discourse studies that emphasize cohesion as a key factor in supporting comprehension in extended spoken and written texts (Zaheer *et al.*, 2024). More specifically, the analysis indicates that different cohesive devices contribute in complementary ways to meaning-making. Reference helps maintain continuity of central religious concepts, while conjunctions organize the logical progression of ideas. Ellipsis and substitution encourage contextual interpretation by requiring listeners to infer omitted information. Meanwhile, reiteration and collocation help maintain thematic focus across the sermon by reinforcing key ideas.

Table 2: Semantic Influence

Cohesive Devices	Sentence	Sample Sentences	F	%
Reference	1, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6,7, 7, 9, ..., 14, 16, 17, 18, 19, 21,...31, 31	1.his, 1. his, 2. his, 3. his, 4. his, 5. said, 6. his, 7. this 7. his, 9. his, 10. he, 11.his, 12. this, 13. he, 16. his, 17. his, 17. his, 18. us, 19. ours, 21. his, 22. he, 23. he, 24. said, 25. his, 26. his, 26. his, 27. his, 28. his, 29. his, 30. ours, 30. his, 31. us, 31. ours	34	62.96%
Substitution	7, 8	7. this, 8. a lot of things	2	3.70%
Ellipsis	9, 19	9. apart from..., 19. we	2	3.70%
Conjunction	1, 2, 2, 3, 4, 8, 9, 15, 18, 20	but, 2. rather 2. while, 3. and, 8. because, 9. however, 15. since, 18. but, 20. if	9	16.67%
Reiteration	1, 1, 3, 25	want, 1. wants, 3. do and strive, 25. take a rest	4	7.41%
Collocation	7, 8, 11	7. freedom ..., 8. endeavor...,11. nutrition, ...	3	5.56%
Overall	54		54	100%

CONCLUSION

The study demonstrates that cohesive devices play a crucial role in enhancing the clarity, organization, and overall meaningfulness of sermons. The deliberate use of linguistic elements not only strengthens the delivery of the message but also deepens listeners’ understanding and emotional engagement. As a result, sermons become more effective in communicating spiritual teachings and in guiding believers toward meaningful application in their daily lives. This highlights the importance of linguistic cohesion as a fundamental component of effective religious discourse and communication. Despite its contributions, the study is limited by its focus on a specific set of sermon texts, which may not fully represent the diversity of preaching styles across different contexts, denominations, or cultural settings. The qualitative nature of the analysis also means that interpretations may be influenced by contextual factors and researcher perspective. Nevertheless, the findings remain relevant

in emphasizing how language structure can shape the effectiveness of spiritual communication.

The results of this study have practical applications for religious leaders, educators, and communicators. By integrating awareness of cohesive devices into sermon preparation and delivery, preachers can enhance the quality of their messages and foster deeper engagement among listeners. Similarly, educators in language and communication can use these findings to illustrate the role of cohesion in effective discourse, while members of the community may benefit from a greater appreciation of how sermons are structured to convey meaning.

In light of these findings, it is recommended that religious institutions incorporate training and evaluation focused on linguistic cohesion to improve preaching practices. Future research may explore a wider range of sermon contexts or examine the role of cohesion in other forms of religious and public discourse. Additionally, the strategies identified in this study may be adapted by

writers and public speakers to produce messages that are clear, coherent, and impactful across both religious and secular settings.

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