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BODYBUILDING IN ISLAM: BALANCING HEALTH, MODESTY, AND ETHICS FROM A MAQĀṢID AL-SHARĪʿAH PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

The growing popularity of bodybuilding in contemporary society raises important questions regarding its compatibility with Islamic principles. This study examines how Muslims may engage in bodybuilding in alignment with the ethical framework of Maqāṣid al-Sharīʿah the higher objectives of Islamic law. Employing a qualitative methodology combining library-based analysis of primary Islamic sources, classical jurisprudential texts, and contemporary fatwas with semi-structured expert interviews across Islamic jurisprudence, medicine, and sports science, the study investigates how bodybuilding intersects with the Islamic objectives of preserving life (ḥifẓ al-nafs) and intellect (ḥifẓ al-ʿaql). Five core themes emerged from the data: preservation of life, sincerity of intention (niyyah), modesty and ʿawrah coverage, avoidance of harmful substances, and moderation (wasaṭiyyah). The findings distinguish between bodybuilding as a physical training regimen which is permissible or recommended when ʿawrah is preserved and intentions are sound and bodybuilding as a competitive sport, which is impermissible when it requires public ʿawrah exposure under clear textual rulings. Within this framework, Maqāṣid al-Sharīʿah functions not to override established textual boundaries, but to explain the underlying wisdom behind them and to address contemporary grey areas such as supplementation practices, digital conduct, and psychological well-being. Practical recommendations are offered for Muslim bodybuilders, policymakers, and religious authorities. The study contributes to expanding the application of Islamic legal theory to contemporary lifestyle choices and demonstrates the adaptability of Maqāṣid al-Sharīʿah as an ethical framework in the domain of sports and physical culture.

Keywords: *Maqāṣid, bodybuilding, ḥifẓ, ethics, modesty.*

INTRODUCTION

The growing popularity of bodybuilding globally has prompted renewed inquiry into its compatibility with Islamic principles. From an Islamic standpoint, the human body is a trust (amānah) from Allah, and its preservation and strengthening constitute an act of worship when undertaken with righteous intention. Bodybuilding, when pursued for health maintenance and physical capability, aligns with Islam's holistic vision of well-being.

However, it also presents significant ethical tensions particularly in competitive contexts concerning the exposure of ʿawrah (parts of the body that must be covered), ostentation (riyāʾ), and the use of prohibited substances. Islam's broadly positive stance toward physical activity is grounded in both the Qurʾān and the Sunnah. Allah says: ﴿*wa lā tulqū bi-aydīkum ilā al-tahlukah*﴾ which means, "*Do not throw yourselves with your own hands into destruction*" (al-Qurʾān, al-Baqarah: 195).

The Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ further affirmed: {al-Mu'min al-qawiyy khayr wa-aḥabb ilā Allāh min al-Mu'min al-ḍaʿīf wa-fī kullun khayr}, which means, "*A strong believer is better and more beloved to Allah than a weak believer, while there is good in both"* (Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, 2664). This ḥadīth establishes that physical strength is valued in Islam as a means of fulfilling religious and social obligations more effectively.

Despite growing scholarly interest in applying Maqāṣid al-Sharīʿah to contemporary issues including medicine, bioethics, and digital technology its systematic application to sports and physical culture remains underexplored. The five primary objectives of the Maqāṣid are the preservation of religion (ḥifẓ al-dīn), life (ḥifẓ al-nafs), intellect (ḥifẓ al-ʿaql), lineage (ḥifẓ al-nasl), and wealth (ḥifẓ al-māl) collectively constituting the evaluative framework through which all human actions may be assessed (Auda, 2008; Kamali, 2008).

Rahman et al. (2024) note in their scientometric analysis that Maqāṣid scholarship is increasingly engaging with lifestyle questions, yet the domain of sports and fitness remains undertheorized. Where clear and specific dalīl (textual evidence) exists such as the Qurʾānic injunctions regarding the coverage of ʿawrah or the established prohibition of self-harm the ruling in question is determined by that primary text.

Maqāṣid al-Sharīʿah is employed in this study not to override or reinterpret clear rulings of this nature, but to serve three distinct functions: (a) to explain the underlying wisdom (*ḥikmat al-tashrīʿ*) behind established textual boundaries; (b) to assess novel contemporary issues where primary texts are silent, such as the use of synthetic supplements or the ethical dimensions of fitness-related content on social media; and (c) to provide a coherent ethical framework for Muslim practitioners navigating the grey areas (masā'il khilāfiyyah) that characterize modern physical culture.

This hierarchical understanding of the relationship between naṣṣ (primary text) and Maqāṣid is foundational to the jurisprudential reasoning employed throughout this study. This study addresses the identified gap by examining bodybuilding through the Maqāṣid lens, focusing on the three objectives most directly relevant to physical practice: ḥifẓ al-nafs (preservation of life), ḥifẓ al-ʿaql (preservation of intellect), and ḥifẓ al-dīn (preservation of religion).

It aims to determine the conditions under which bodybuilding may be deemed permissible, recommended, or impermissible in Islam, and to provide practical ethical guidance for Muslim practitioners, policymakers, and religious authorities.

METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a qualitative methodology combining two complementary approaches: library-based analysis and semi-structured expert interviews. The qualitative design is particularly suited to investigations of religious, ethical, and moral dimensions deeply embedded in cultural and personal experience. As bodybuilding intersects with questions of physical development, Islamic law, and social ethics, a qualitative lens allows for the nuanced and contextually sensitive interpretation that the subject demands.

Library-Based Analysis

The library-based component involved a systematic review of primary Islamic sources (the Qurʾān and Sunnah), classical jurisprudential texts, contemporary fatwas, and academic scholarship in the areas of Maqāṣid al-Sharīʿah, Islamic health ethics, and sports jurisprudence.

Key fatwas examined include: Fatwa No. 40527 by IslamQA (2004) on competitive bodybuilding; the Dār al-Iftāʾ Jordan ruling (2021) on performance-enhancing drugs in sport; Resolution No. 185 of Majmaʾ al-Fiqh al-Islāmī (2006) on hormone use in athletics; and MUIS Guidelines (2022) on health and body supplements. These sources were analyzed to extract governing principles on health, bodily integrity, modesty, and ethical conduct in physical activity.

Expert Interviews

Three semi-structured interviews were conducted with subject-matter experts representing Islamic jurisprudence, medicine, and sports science. The semi-structured format allowed for consistent guiding questions while enabling deeper exploration of individual expert perspectives.

The respondents were: (i) Ustaz Aḥmad Akhyar bin Hājī Muḥammad Rivaʾī, former lecturer in Fiqh at Universiti Sultan Azlan Shah (USAS), providing jurisprudential perspectives on Maqāṣid al-Sharīʿah as applied to physical activity; (ii) Dr. ʾĀʾishah binti Hājī Muḥammad Rivaʾī, paediatric specialist at Hospital Raja Permaisuri Bainun (HRPB), providing clinical perspectives on the health implications of bodybuilding; and (iii) Encik Faiz Ramdan bin Mokhtar, certified fitness trainer, providing professional insights on bodybuilding practices and the feasibility of ethical compliance.

Data from both sources were subjected to thematic analysis, from which five recurring themes emerged: (1) preservation of life (ḥifẓ al-nafs); (2) sincerity of intention (niyyah); (3) modesty and ʿawrah coverage; (4) avoidance of harmful substances; and (5) moderation (wasaṭiyyah). The triangulation of textual, jurisprudential, and interview data strengthens the credibility and internal validity of the findings.

RESULTS

Bodybuilding and the Preservation of Life (Ḥifẓ al-Nafs)

Structured resistance training confers well-documented physiological benefits, including improved cardiovascular function, muscular strength, bone density, and metabolic regulation. When pursued with the intention (niyyah) of maintaining health and strengthening the body for religious and social duties, bodybuilding aligns with the Maqāṣid objective of ḥifẓ al-nafs.

Ustaz Aḥmad Akhyar affirmed that physical training undertaken with the niyyah of serving Allah and the community falls within the spirit of Sharīʿah. Hasan and Ahmad (2021) similarly conclude that bodybuilding, approached with correct intention, constitutes a form of self-care aligned with the life-preservation objective. Conversely, practices that undermine health particularly the use of anabolic-androgenic steroids (AAS) directly contradict ḥifẓ al-nafs.

Research documents that AAS use is associated with liver toxicity, cardiovascular disease (including hypertension and myocardial infarction), hormonal imbalance, and psychological disorders including aggression and depressive episodes (Choćkowski et al., 2024; Özdemir et al., 2024). Dr. ʾĀʾishah confirmed these findings from her clinical experience, noting that long-term steroid use constitutes deliberate self-harm (ḍarar) a category explicitly prohibited under the Islamic legal maxim lā ḍarar wa lā ḍirār.

Sincerity of Intention (Niyyah) and Ethical Motivation

Islamic jurisprudence holds that the moral status of any act is determined by its underlying intention. Bodybuilding is classified as mubāḥ (permissible) or mustaḥabb (recommended) when the practitioner's niyyah is directed toward health preservation or improved capacity to fulfil religious duties. It risks becoming makrūh (reprehensible) or ḥarām (forbidden) when motivated by vanity, pride, or the pursuit of public admiration (riyāʾ). This distinction was consistently affirmed across both the interview data and the textual sources reviewed.

The obligation to cover the ʿawrah is determined by clear textual evidence (dalīl qaṭʾī) that is binding independently of Maqāṣid analysis. Allah commands in the Qurʾān: ﴿*qul lil-muʾminīna yaghuḍḍū min abṣārihim wa-yaḥfaẓū furūjahum*﴾ which means, "*Tell the believing men to lower their gaze and guard their private parts*" (al-Qurʾān, al-Nūr: 30), with an equivalent injunction addressed to believing women in the following verse (al-Nūr: 31).

Authentic aḥādīth establish the minimum ʿawrah for men as the area between the navel and the knee; for women, the obligation is more extensive. These rulings are textually determined and binding. Competitive bodybuilding that requires the unavoidable public exposure of ʿawrah is accordingly *ḥarām* under these primary texts a ruling on which there is no scholarly disagreement in principle, though the precise boundaries of male ʿawrah admit of limited jurisprudential discussion (IslamQA, 2004).

Ustaz Aḥmad Akhyar affirmed this hierarchy clearly: the ʿawrah obligation is established by naṣṣ (text), and no sporting or professional context constitutes a recognized necessity (ḍarūrah) sufficient to override it. Maqāṣid al-Sharīʿah serves here in a supportive capacity: the objective of ḥifẓ al-dīn (preservation of religion and moral integrity) explains the deeper wisdom underlying the modesty obligation and reinforces its application in contemporary settings, but it is not the jurisprudential source (maṣdar) of the ruling itself.

This distinction guards against the misuse of Maqāṣid reasoning to rationalize the suspension of established textual boundaries. Al-Dafrawi (2020) further notes that the modesty obligation extends to the digital sphere, where sharing revealing content on social media constitutes a comparable ethical breach under the same textual rulings.

Avoidance of Harmful Substances

All three expert respondents reached clear consensus that the use of AAS violates Islamic ethics. Beyond the physiological risks documented above, steroid use in competitive contexts constitutes ghish (deception) and violates the Islamic principle of ʿadl (justice). The legal maxim lā ḍarar wa lā ḍirār renders the use of substances causing long-term bodily harm impermissible under Maqāṣid al-Sharīʿah regardless of the intent behind their use.

Encik Faiz noted that certified, responsibly used nutritional supplements may be acceptable when Sharīʿah-compliant, but unregulated performance-enhancing substances fall clearly outside the boundaries of permissible self-care. Tashakkori (2015) and Arazi and Hosseini (2012) document the normalization of steroid use within certain bodybuilding communities, underscoring the need for explicit ethical guidance grounded in Islamic principles.

Moderation (Wasaṭiyyah) in Physical Practice

Islam's foundational commitment to balance (wasaṭiyyah) emerged as a governing principle across all data sources. Bodybuilding is ethically coherent when it forms one component of a balanced lifestyle encompassing spiritual, social, and mental well-being. When it becomes an obsession that displaces religious obligations, fosters body dysmorphia, or leads to physical overexertion, it violates the Maqāṣid principle of holistic self-preservation. Kamal and Hanif (2022) argue that ḥifẓ al-nafs should be interpreted holistically to encompass mental and psychological well-being alongside physical health.

DISCUSION

The findings of this study confirm that bodybuilding is not inherently in tension with Islamic values, but that its permissibility is conditional on niyyah, method, and context a framework consistent with the conditionality embedded in uṣūl al-fiqh reasoning. This conclusion extends prior work by Azmi et al. (2013), Hasan and Ahmad (2021), and Sukor et al. (2023) into a sport-specific ethical analysis.

The convergence of jurisprudential, clinical, and sports-science expert perspectives around the same core themes harm prevention, sincere intention, and moderation despite approaching the question from entirely different professional vantage points, provides strong confirmatory evidence for the internal coherence of the findings and underscores the value of multidisciplinary triangulation as a methodological approach in applied Islamic ethics (Aasim et al., 2013; Auda, 2008).

The Ḥukm Taklīfī Spectrum Applied to Bodybuilding

A key contribution of this study is its application of the ḥukm taklīfī (normative ruling) spectrum to bodybuilding. Rather than arriving at a single undifferentiated verdict, the findings reveal that bodybuilding occupies different positions on the spectrum depending on the practitioner's intention, methods employed, and context of practice. Bodybuilding undertaken for health maintenance, physical resilience in service to Allah and the community, or improved capacity to fulfil religious duties is classified as mustaḥabb.

When pursued with neutral intention, it remains mubāḥ. When driven by vanity (riyā'), it becomes makrūh at minimum. And when it involves the use of AAS, the exposure of ʿawrah in public competitions, or the neglect of obligatory prayers, it crosses into ḥarām. This graduated analysis reflects the sophistication of Islamic jurisprudential reasoning and illustrates that the evaluation of bodybuilding cannot rest on a blanket ruling; it must be continuously assessed against the practitioner's circumstances, intentions, and conduct.

Sadd al-Dharā'ī' and the Prohibition of AAS

The prohibition of AAS under Islamic law is most rigorously supported not merely by the harm-based maxim lā ḍarar wa lā ḍirār but also by the classical jurisprudential principle of sadd al-dharā'ī' the blocking of means that lead to impermissible ends. Even where a bodybuilder's immediate intention in using AAS is enhanced performance rather than self-destruction, the well-documented causal chain from steroid use to organ damage, hormonal dysregulation, psychological harm, and dependency renders the means impermissible on precautionary grounds.

This analysis is further reinforced by the concept of isrāf (excess), with AAS use representing a form of chemical wastefulness directed against one's own body (Kamali, 2008). Encik Faiz's professional observation that the fitness industry normalizes AAS use through competitive pressure and social media imagery underscores the need for sadd al-dharā'ī'-based regulatory intervention at the institutional level, not only individual restraint.

Riyā' in the Age of Social Media

The ethical challenge of riyā' has assumed new dimensions in the social media era that classical jurisprudence could not have anticipated. While the original prohibition targeted the public display of acts of worship to gain human admiration, its logic extends directly to the exhibition of one's physique on platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, where the accumulation of followers and brand partnerships through body display represents a contemporary form of riyā' condemned by the same prophetic warnings.

Tiggemann and Zaccardo (2015) document how social media fitness culture creates unrealistic ideals that drive self-objectification and psychological harm. For Muslim bodybuilders, the practical implication is that digital conduct requires the same niyyah scrutiny as physical conduct: content shared for genuine educational benefit or da'wah may be permissible, while content driven by self-promotion constitutes riyā' in its contemporary form.

The Fatwā Landscape on ʿAwrah and Competitive Bodybuilding

The question of ʿawrah in competitive bodybuilding has attracted a range of scholarly opinions reflecting substantive ijtihādī engagement. The foundational position, affirmed

by IslamQA (2004) in Fatwa No. 40527, is that competitive bodybuilding requiring ʿawrah exposure is impermissible a ruling derived from primary textual evidence, not from Maqāṣid reasoning alone.

More nuanced positions permit training with reduced coverage in gender-segregated environments, provided health is the primary purpose (Fiqh IslamOnline, 2023). Critically, none of the reviewed fatwas suspend the foundational textual prohibition; they address only the degree of its application across varied training contexts. This study's findings particularly the unanimous view of the religious respondent on the primacy of naṣṣ provide an empirical basis for a consolidated, context-specific fatwā addressing the full spectrum of modesty concerns across training, competition, and online conduct.

Ḥifẓ al-ʿAql and the Psychological Dimension of Bodybuilding

While ḥifẓ al-nafs has dominated the bodybuilding ethics discourse, this study foregrounds ḥifẓ al-ʿaql (preservation of intellect and mental well-being) as an equally significant and independently operative evaluative criterion. Contemporary sports psychology documents several pathologies associated with bodybuilding culture, including muscle dysmorphia a form of body dysmorphic disorder characterized by distorted self-perception of insufficient musculature (Martins, 2024).

From a Maqāṣid perspective, such psychological states constitute violations of ḥifẓ al-ʿaql, because Islam requires the preservation of cognitive and emotional equilibrium as the precondition for rational moral agency and the fulfillment of religious obligations. Dr. ʾĀ'ishah's clinical observations corroborated this concern. A bodybuilding practice that produces mental harm even without physical harm is therefore sufficient to render it impermissible under this objective, because psychological stability is independently protected by Sharīʿah.

Natural Bodybuilding as a Sharīʿah-Aligned Model

An important implication of this study's findings is the identification of natural bodybuilding physical development through training, nutrition, and rest without prohibited substances as the model most closely aligned with Maqāṣid al-Sharīʿah. It eliminates the AAS problem by definition, permits ʿawrah-compliant training attire, and its emphasis on long-term health over short-term aesthetic gain provides a structural deterrent to riyāʾ-driven motivations.

Rosman et al. (2019) argue that ethical sports practices are those that embody moral objectives alongside physical ones. Institutional promotion of natural bodybuilding through endorsement by religious authorities and certification by sporting bodies represents a concrete pathway for reconciling Muslim interest in physical development with Sharīʿah imperatives.

The Role of ʿUrf and Changing Social Norms

A further dimension warranting attention is the role of ʿurf (customary practice) in shaping jurisprudential assessment. As bodybuilding becomes increasingly mainstream in Muslim-majority societies, the ʿurf surrounding physical development is shifting with jurisprudential implications. Siddiqi (2015) notes that cultural normalization creates pressure on scholars to update assessments without compromising core principles.

The Maqāṣid framework, through the concept of maṣlaḥah (public interest), is well-positioned to navigate this: it permits recognition of bodybuilding's genuine social benefits public health improvement, youth engagement, channeling of competitive energy into lawful pursuits while maintaining firm boundaries against practices that violate its objectives. This adaptive capacity distinguishes Maqāṣid reasoning from rigid textualism and positions it as the most suitable framework for addressing the ethical complexities of contemporary Muslim lifestyle choices.

A potential limitation of this study is the small number of interview respondents (n=3). While the semi-structured format yielded depth of perspective and triangulation mitigated single-source bias, a larger and more geographically diverse sample would strengthen generalizability.

The study is also limited to the Malaysian context; the specific fatwas and cultural norms shaping bodybuilding ethics in other Muslim-majority regions may differ in important ways. Future research should extend Maqāṣid-based ethical analysis to other sports disciplines and investigate the psychological and spiritual dimensions of bodybuilding through longitudinal qualitative designs.

Table 1: Summary of Research Disscussion

#	Sub-Section	Core Argument	Jurisprudential Concept(s)	Key Implication
1	Opening / Synthesis	Bodybuilding's permissibility is conditional on niyyah, method, and context; convergence across three disciplines confirms internal coherence of findings	Uṣūl al-fiqh conditionality; multidisciplinary triangulation	Extends Maqāṣid scholarship (Azmi et al., 2013; Hasan & Ahmad, 2021; Sukor et al., 2023) into a sport-specific ethical domain
2	Ḥukm Taklīfī Spectrum	Bodybuilding cannot receive a single blanket ruling; it moves along the spectrum from mustaḥabb → mubāḥ → makrūh → ḥarām based on intention, method, and context	Ḥukm taklīfī	Continuous contextual assessment is required; a one-size-fits-all verdict is jurisprudentially untenable
3	Sadd al-Dharā'iʿ & AAS	AAS prohibition is grounded not only in lā ḍarar but also in blocking means that foreseeably lead to impermissible ends; compounded by the concept of isrāf	Sadd al-dharā'iʿ; isrāf; lā ḍarar wa lā ḍirār	Institutional-level regulatory intervention is needed alongside individual restraint (Kamali, 2008)
4	Riyā' & Social Media	The classical prohibition of riyā' extends to digital display of physique on Instagram/TikTok; follower-seeking and brand-promotion constitute a contemporary form of riyā'	Riyā'; niyyah	Online conduct must be subjected to the same niyyah scrutiny as physical conduct; daʿwah-motivated sharing differs from self-promotion
5	Fatwā Landscape on ʿAwrah	No reviewed fatwā suspends the foundational textual prohibition on ʿawrah exposure; scholarly diversity concerns only the degree of application in specific training contexts, not the ruling's existence	Dalīl qaṭʿī; ijtihād; naṣṣ	A consolidated context-specific fatwā is needed, covering training attire, competition formats, and online modesty

6	Ḥifẓ al-ʿAql & Psychology	Muscle dysmorphia and related psychological pathologies independently violate ḥifẓ al-ʿaql even in the absence of physical harm, because Islam protects cognitive and emotional equilibrium as a precondition for moral agency	Ḥifẓ al-ʿaql	Psychological harm alone is sufficient to render a bodybuilding practice impermissible under Maqāṣid (Martins, 2024)
7	Natural Bodybuilding as Sharīʿah Model	Natural bodybuilding resolves all three principal ethical challenges simultaneously: eliminates AAS, permits ʿawrah-compliant attire, and deters riyāʾ through its long-term health emphasis	Maqāṣid-compliance; wasaṭiyyah	Religious authorities and sporting bodies should institutionally promote and certify natural bodybuilding as the Sharīʿah-aligned fitness model (Rosman et al., 2019)
8	ʿUrf & Changing Social Norms	The normalization of bodybuilding in Muslim-majority societies shifts ʿurf with jurisprudential implications; Maqāṣid's maṣlaḥah concept allows recognition of genuine social benefits without compromising core principles	ʿUrf; maṣlaḥah	Maqāṣid's adaptive capacity — over rigid textualism — makes it the most appropriate framework for contemporary Muslim lifestyle ethics (Siddiqi, 2015)
9	Limitations	Small sample (n=3) and exclusively Malaysian context limit generalizability; fatwā norms in other Muslim-majority regions may differ	Methodological	Future research should use larger, geographically diverse samples and longitudinal qualitative designs across multiple sports disciplines

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that bodybuilding is permissible in Islam when pursued with sincere intention directed toward health preservation, conducted within the bounds of modesty, and free from harmful practices such as the use of performance-enhancing substances. The Maqāṣid al-Sharīʿah framework particularly the objectives of ḥifẓ al-nafs, ḥifẓ al-ʿaql, and ḥifẓ al-dīn provides a coherent evaluative lens for assessing bodybuilding in the contemporary context.

Where bodybuilding requires the public exposure of ʿawrah or the use of prohibited performance-enhancing substances, it falls unambiguously into the category of ḥarām by virtue of explicit textual evidence (dalīl qaṭʾī). Maqāṣid analysis reinforces and deepens our understanding of these boundaries revealing their underlying wisdom and situating them within the broader architecture of Islamic ethical objectives but does not alter their application or authority.

Three sets of practical recommendations follow from the findings. For Muslim bodybuilders, the imperatives are: to purify and regularly renew niyyah; to adopt ḥalāl

dietary and supplementation practices; to observe modesty in all training and public conduct; and to abstain from AAS and other harmful substances.

For policymakers in the fields of sport, health, and Islamic affairs, the study recommends establishing Sharīʿah-informed guidelines for sports facilities and competitions, including ḥalāl supplement certification, gender-sensitive training environments, modest attire codes, and enforced anti-doping protocols.

For religious authorities, the study calls for proactive engagement with sports culture through awareness campaigns grounded in Maqāṣid al-Sharīʿah, the issuance of contextually sensitive fatwas addressing sports ethics, and the development of educational programs at the nexus of faith and physical development.

The theoretical contribution of this study lies in demonstrating the adaptability of Maqāṣid al-Sharīʿah as a living jurisprudential framework one that illuminates the wisdom of established rulings and fills the gaps where texts are silent, without displacing those rulings where they exist. This study invites further scholarship to extend Maqāṣid-based analysis to other underexplored domains where faith and modern life intersect.

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