



## Linguistic Representations of the Prohibition of Drug Use in Religious Discourse

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### Abstract

The focus of this research is to analyze and critique the linguistic representation and justification of drug prohibition in modern religious discourse through a qualitative, interpretative methodological approach using an analytic model for the study of religious discourse. To do this, the researcher will examine the corpus of contemporary religious texts, including fatwas, doctrinal statements, pamphlets, catechetical materials, and web pages submitted online by followers of the Christian and Islamic faiths. The analysis will focus on identifying lexical and semantic structures of language that represent drug use, as well as authoritative uses of language that promote the concept of abstaining from drugs and establish moral boundaries for society. The lexicon related to drug use is consistent among various faiths. For example, all of the religious texts will often use terms such as sin, filthy, decaying morally, dangerous, and tempting to describe issues surrounding drug usage. The semantic structures for religious texts also typify drug use as a polluting, corrupting, or spiritual threatening condition. The metaphorical comparisons of drug use reference crime, evil, or imprisonment. A third dimensional aspect is accessible through the use of evidence-based deontic modality, a scripture-based reference point for mandated personal conduct, the use of definitional terms, and the collective marker in religious discourse that legitimizes authority and mandates behaviors acceptable to that authority. Through these linguistic representations and mechanisms, religious communities understand and articulate what drug use is perceived to be contradictory to being spiritually sound and a threat to communal well-being; therefore, these linguistic techniques continue to reinforce the moral authority of religious institutions. This research provides new information regarding a methodology for analyzing religious discourse (critical discourse analysis), Sociolinguistics of morality, and the role of language in religious discourse.

**Key Terms:** *drug use, prohibition, religious discourse, lexical patterns, semantic frames, moral behaviour, critical discourse analysis*

التمثيلات اللغوية لتحريم تعاطي المخدرات في الخطاب الديني

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يركز هذا البحث على تحليل ونقد التمثيل اللغوي وتبرير تحريم المخدرات في الخطاب الديني المعاصر، وذلك من خلال منهجية نوعية تفسيرية باستخدام نموذج تحليلي لدراسة الخطاب الديني. ولتحقيق ذلك، سيدرس الباحث مجموعة من النصوص الدينية المعاصرة، بما في ذلك الفتاوى، والبيانات العقائدية، والكتيبات، والمواد التعليمية، وصفحات الإنترنت التي نشرها أتباع الديانتين المسيحية والإسلامية. وسيركز التحليل على تحديد البنى المعجمية والدلالية للغة التي تُمثل تعاطي المخدرات، بالإضافة إلى الاستخدامات السلطوية للغة التي تُروج لمفهوم الامتناع عن المخدرات وتُرسخ الحدود الأخلاقية للمجتمع. وتتسم المفردات المتعلقة بتعاطي المخدرات بالاتساق بين مختلف الأديان. فعلى سبيل المثال، تستخدم جميع النصوص الدينية مصطلحات مثل الخطيئة، والقذارة، والانحلال الأخلاقي، والخطورة، والإغراء لوصف القضايا المتعلقة بتعاطي المخدرات. كما تُصنف البنى الدلالية للنصوص الدينية تعاطي المخدرات على أنه حالة مُلوثة، ومُفسدة، أو مُهددة للروح. تُشير المقارنات المجازية لتعاطي المخدرات إلى الجريمة والشر والسجن. ويُمكن الوصول إلى بُعد ثالث من خلال استخدام المنهجية القائمة على الأدلة، والمرجعية النصية للسلوك الشخصي المُلزم، واستخدام المصطلحات التعريفية، والعلامة الجماعية في الخطاب الديني التي تُضفي الشرعية على السلطة وتُلزم بسلوكيات مقبولة لديها. ومن خلال هذه التمثيلات والآليات اللغوية، تُدرك المجتمعات الدينية وتُعبّر عن ماهية تعاطي المخدرات الذي يُنظر إليه على أنه مُناقض للروحانية السليمة ويُمثل تهديدًا للرفاه الجماعي؛ ولذلك، تُواصل هذه التقنيات اللغوية تعزيز السلطة الأخلاقية للمؤسسات الدينية. يُقدم هذا البحث معلومات جديدة حول منهجية تحليل الخطاب الديني (تحليل الخطاب النقدي)، وعلم اللغة الاجتماعي للأخلاق، ودور اللغة في الخطاب الديني.

**المصطلحات الرئيسية:** تعاطي المخدرات، التحريم، الخطاب الديني، الأنماط المعجمية، الأطر الدلالية، السلوك الأخلاقي، تحليل الخطاب النقدي

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Background of the Study

Drug use is a complex issue with social, ethical, and health impacts that occur globally. Substance use can no longer be considered a purely biomedical issue; instead, research by Shiner & Winstock (2015) indicates that substance use is connected to cultural stories, inequities in society, and ethical judgments. Traditionally, as illustrated by Courtwright's (2013) research, drug use has been perceived as a threat to society; drug users were seen as deviant criminals who would lead to the decline of morals. Drug use (and the consequences), according to research done in the fields of anthropology and sociology, is often perceived by societies and communities to have significant adverse effects and thus prompt strong emotional and ideological reactions (Singer & Page, 2016), while also indicating that substance use, particularly in environments where it is viewed as threatening to ethical and familial stabilisation, becomes politically motivated (Bush & Neutze, 2000).

These moral frameworks rely heavily on religion to determine what individuals believe to be acceptable and unacceptable behaviours. Religious tradition is frequently characterised by extensive moral codes that direct behaviour of the body, behaviour related to substance use, and behaviour



relating to community obligation (Rashid, 2023). Researchers studying the sociology of religion have identified the continued influence of religious belief on people's modern-day moral decisions involving substance use or abstinence (Ives et al., 2024). Studies conducted to evaluate the historical use of religious communities as the moral authority over individual conduct have identified significant links between religiously-based teachings that encourage purity, discipline, and accountability and the decision to utilise or abstain from drug use (Wuthnow, 2011). Additionally, studies utilising survey methods support the view that people's religious identity can influence their view of risk, ethical responsibility, and compliance with appropriate behaviours (Tranby & Zulkowski, 2012). Recent studies of Islamic and Christian discourse have identified numerous examples of how religious leaders and community members utilise stories from their faith to promote moral behaviour and discourage drug use (Alshehri, 2024). Finally, an examination of current religious activist movements has indicated that many faith-based groups are increasingly promoting the concept of drug use as a communal and spiritual problem through the use of moral discourse (Cutcher, 2025). Collectively, these studies support the conclusion that religious dialogue continues to be a key factor in influencing all aspects of human behaviour.

Since the language used to communicate an individual's moral opinion regarding the use of drugs is critical to establishing a moral foundation, understanding how that language communicates the message will be useful to individuals interested in exploring the underlying principles of how religion communicates moral standards. As illustrated by data collected by Van Leeuwen (2007) and described in chapter four, the language used to communicate a moral opinion regarding an individual's drug use builds the moral expectation that individuals have about their place in society. Data collected in the arena of security and social policy also illustrate how the language used to communicate a moral opinion establishes the boundaries of what constitutes a risk, danger, or deviant behavior (Herschinger, 2010). Van Leeuwen (2018) extended his research and found that the rhetorical devices used in communicating a moral opinion are the same devices that institutions use to create or eliminate the distinction between what is acceptable and unacceptable behavior. Research published regarding political and moral rhetoric illustrates how language enables individuals in a particular community to establish their own acceptable versus unacceptable behaviors (Diez, 2014). Theoretical studies regarding moral authority illustrate that language is one of the key vehicles through which individuals learn to accept or reject a moral standard (Pensky, 2009). Thus, while language is not a neutral medium of communication, it has an important role to play in developing a moral framework of prohibition and moral regulation that influences the individual.



This study contributes to the growing collection of studies that investigate how religion, language, and ethics are related. The study draws upon research that examines religious discourse analysis, investigating how sacred language and literature along with doctrinal statements affect how people define morality (Wijsen, 2013), and also on concepts from critical discourse analysis to see how language is combined with power and ideology in everyday life (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000). Discourse-cognition theories reveal how patterns of language reflect and produce our fundamental belief systems and the social hierarchies that govern those systems (Van Dijk, 2015). Additionally, this research draws from work in the sociolinguistics of morality, which is focused on how language conveys moral values, and how patterns of speech govern human behaviour in society (Bennett, 2014). Within the context of this report, there are multiple perspectives brought together to provide an overarching linguistic and ethical framework for understanding the prohibition of substance use as part of a larger religious discourse.

## 1.2 Statement of the Problem

In the field of drug addiction there has been much research, from a social-psychological-public health standpoint. However, there continues to be a significant gap in the studies of linguistically constructing drug prohibition (prohibition of drug use) as expressed through religious institutions' messaging. While there has been a focus primarily on sociocultural/epidemiological frameworks, the studies have focused on the impact of religiously communicated perception of "addiction" on community-level perceptions but have failed to examine the exact language and mechanisms used to depict the moral indefensibility of drug use. An example of a study that lacks a language-focused analysis of prohibition is found in Meyers (2022)'s research which shows, as he noted, that the communication of religion is influenced by the level of addiction within a community. Nonetheless, that research does not provide an exhaustive linguistic analysis of the manner in which prohibition is expressed. While there has been acknowledgement of the role of religion in modulating behaviour through the auspices of spiritual healing and ritual contexts, typically those analyses concentrate on the cultural context, while providing little insight into the discursive strategies of the texts/sermons (Sanchez et al., 2011). Ethnographically based studies of religious interactions with psychoactive substances stress the complexity of moral messages. However, those studies fail to provide an extensive linguistic or semantic analysis of the tools utilized to infer prohibition (Labate & Cavnar, 2014)..

There is considerable research indicating the influence of religious narratives on the actions associated with substance use and therefore, the regulation of an individual's moral behaviour; however, there has been little focus on the linguistic source so it creates the stigma attached to individuals



who use substances. Sandberg (2011) outlines how drug users are subjected to negative self-image through moral framing; yet, there is no exploration of the linguistic patterns that create the stigma of substance use within religious communities. Similarly, Courtwright's (2013) historical review of the various cultures that have morally regulated their use of substances also fails to provide an analysis of the language utilized in contemporary religious communications. Studies in prevention science indicate that religious teachings may affect adolescents' attitudes toward use of substances; however, the majority of these studies focus on behavioural benefits and do not account for the discursive structures (Marsiglia et al., 2005). In addition, while many studies that do consider the influence of religious messages often only focus on the thematic components without providing a full linguistic analysis regarding how prohibition is expressed in those messages (Jones & Rossiter, 2008). Finally, when engaging with the academic discussion of Islamic teachings relating to substances, the discourse tends to focus primarily on prohibitive doctrines. Even when examining these prohibitive doctrines in Islamic teachings, there is a tendency to describe rather than perform a linguistic analysis of the doctrinal prohibitions (Ali, 2014).

The current literature reveals an important gap between the broad studies examining the relationship between religion and drugs and the in-depth linguistic studies of the language of various religious documents such as sermons, fatwas, doctrinal statements, and educational materials regarding the prohibition of drug use. Currently published research supports the idea that religious teachings can have an influence on a person's moral standards but does not sufficiently explain how language is used to express that drug use should be considered immoral, dangerous, or socially harmful, nor how this language serves to strengthen the authority of religion. This gap suggests that a more complete linguistic analysis is needed to assess how lexical, semantic, and discursive strategies are utilized in religious discourse to communicate and enforce the prohibition of drug use.

### **1.3 Purpose of the Study**

The aim of this research is to examine how religious discourse presents the use of drugs, how it justifies the prohibition of drugs, and how it reinforces a prohibition against drug use through linguistic construction. As religious influences play an enormous role in people's moral conduct, there is very little academic literature that describes the ways in which drug prohibitions are constructed and communicated through language found in religious texts, sermons, fatwas, and doctrinal statements. This study intends to demonstrate the various lexical, semantic, and discursive forms that are used to characterise drug use in religious contexts as being impure, sinful, dangerous, corrupt, or morally threatening. The objective of this study is to demonstrate how religious



discourse delineates moral boundaries, establishes the basis for the legitimacy of spiritual authority, and prescribes normative behaviours for followers of faith. Additionally, the findings from this research will shed light on how language is used to regulate behaviour, to shape moral identities, and to support collective societal norms for abstaining from the use of drugs. Accordingly, this study seeks to answer the following research questions.

RQ1: What lexical and semantic patterns are used to represent drug use in religious discourse?

RQ2: How do these linguistic choices legitimize authority and prescribe moral behavior?

## 2. Literature Review

Religious discourse has long served as one of the most important influences on moral behaviour as well as substance use decision making. According to Weinandy and Grubbs (2021), religion serves to create a moral and spiritual context in which to interpret morality around addiction. In their study, they found that addiction is seen by many in the religious community as something that cannot be considered simply a behavioural issue, but a violation of one's spiritual identity and moral obligations.

Grubbs and Grant (2020) continued this line of reasoning by conducting research on how religious frameworks impact self-regulation and moral accountability among those who are experiencing addiction. They found that many of the religious messages about addiction use moralised language to promote abstinence and refer to it as sinful, pure, or obedient. This approach creates both internalised shame and a greater desire to overcome one's addiction, illustrating how religious discourse can influence substance use behaviour in two distinct ways.

Cole et al. (2020) provide insight into how the narratives surrounding religion work to create a framework for understanding substance use and recovery. Religious language is used to provide context for how we view addiction as something that an individual must struggle with, and as something that impacts us all collectively. Through an analysis of testimonies, sermons and counselling resources, the authors illustrate that religious language portrays substance use as an assault on society's moral fabric; it also provides avenues for redemption that are based on a person's spirituality and faith in God.

Szott (2020) provides a thorough critique of the moral framework within the discourse surrounding drugs, especially the ways in which societal and religious narratives create the stigma surrounding drug users. Szott places a greater emphasis on developing social policies and educating the public about the way that moral language perpetuates the stigma around substance users, however, Szott does indicate that language relating to danger, irresponsibility



and moral deficiency are central to the construction of criminalising and prohibitive views; this language is also essential to the construction of religious language.

Dossi et al. (2022) studied the relationships among spirituality, moral judgement and health behaviours and demonstrated that many times, religious communities employ symbolic and/or metaphorical language to discuss negative habits or practices, including substance use. Their analysis indicates that religious discourse often uses metaphorical language to represent substance use as a form of pollution, disease and/or moral calamity; as such, religious language supports communal expectations regarding abstinence from drugs.

According to Kelly and Eddie's (2022) research, recovery-oriented language is important to the context of religion/spirituality because it can provide empowerment or marginalisation to people recovering from substance use and abuse based on how the religious community describes behaviours associated with; repentance, transformation (as a result of being freed from an addiction), and moral weakness. This has implications for understanding how language represents behaviour prohibition and rehabilitation.

Woodson et al.'s (2019) study looked at the role of faith in addressing substance use and addiction. The authors find evidence that faith-based sermons and education often contain moral and doctrinal descriptions of behaviour, which consequently provides a basis for shaping behavioural outcomes. Woodson et al. found that prohibitive messages about; substance use, addiction, and recovery were commonly included as part of large-scale narratives regarding; community welfare, expectations of the Divine, and resurrection to a place of spiritual discipline.

Grim and Grim (2019) published a study that examined the role of religion as a national influence on how individuals behave concerning substance use and abuse. Grim and Grim say that religious doctrine creates a culture where behaviour is valued based on the behaviour's spiritual implications as opposed to just based on the behaviour's health outcome. Their findings provide evidence that religious discourse uses normative, evaluative, and authoritative language, rendering it necessary for the regulation of moral behaviour.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Research Design**

The present research adopted an interpretive discourse analytic methodology informed by qualitative research design to investigate how drug use prohibition is linguistically constructed and reinforced within religious discourse. A qualitative approach was selected based on the aim of the study to identify patterns of moral framing, authority construction, and meaning related to drug use prohibition that could not be quantified.



Through interpretive discourse analysis, the research design provided the tools to identify and analyse the ways in which lexical, semantic, and rhetorical choices shape moral representations and provide an in-depth understanding of how religious text and communication reinforces prohibiting drug use. The aim of the analysis was to reveal the basic meaning structures within religious sermons, fatwas, doctrinal statements, and educational materials, and to demonstrate how the way that language is used produces social, moral, and ideological effects. This goal aligns with the broader objectives of discourse analysis, which aims to explore the relationship between language, power, and beliefs. By analysing the archival materials, the research design enables a holistic understanding of religious authority's discourse strategies that validate moral prescriptions and illuminate the way that prohibiting messages are constructed and function within religious communities.

This interpretive framework enables us to conduct a contextualised analysis of language used in religion. Religious discourse occurs within a specific theological, cultural, and moral system, so the analysis will explore how the way language is used intersects with dominant doctrinal commitments and social/religious practices. This methodology also allows for the analysis of the explicit and implicit functions of evaluative, metaphorical, and authoritative language; that is, the way in which language is used to create ideologies or enforce moral behaviour and how individuals use language as a tool for exercising religious authority on issues of drug use. The qualitative design seeks to generate deep, theoretically informed understanding of how language influences moral behaviour and supports religious authority with respect to drug use.

### 3.2 Data Sources

The purpose of this research was to examine religious customs and also study genres to show the differences in the different types of language used by both religious traditions (Islamic & Christian) to support their prohibition against drug use. The research analysed both Islam and Christianity since both religious traditions contain a vast amount of religious, legal and pastoral material with regard to moral conduct, which includes the use of substances. Both religions have established authoritative frameworks within which to provide religious guidance which consist of Fatwas, Catechisms, etc. This makes them an excellent foundation for investigating how language choices impact moral regulation.

To achieve depth and diversity, this study incorporates a variety of genres of religious discourse. Official religious documents (religious proscriptions) and fatwas are heavily represented in this data set. These documents represent formal religious doctrinal responses to ethical dilemmas that continue to hold significant relevance today. Due to the use of authoritative/legal terminology in



the creation of these documents, they provide particularly useful resources for examining the ways that prohibition is explicitly articulated and rationalized in religious contexts.

Also included in the data set are religious pamphlets/catechism and other forms of pedagogical materials aimed at educating the general public. These documents generally focus on motivating individuals to change their everyday beliefs and actions using simple language designed for teaching. Their focus on moral teaching means they serve as important tools for identifying lexical and semantic patterns that describe drug use as sinful, unclean or threatening. In this regard, the use of these teaching materials in religious settings also illustrates how the language construction used to describe drug prohibition can differ between ordinary believers and academic/religious authorities.

Finally, the article examines written material generated by online religious organisations and Online Q&A forums, which have emerged as popular venues for individuals to engage in discussions about religion, enabling religious authorities and organisations to answer questions submitted by followers regarding topics such as morality, addiction, and legitimised behaviour. Digital conversations are typically characterised by their casual and informal nature, and consequently provide insight into how prohibitory messages regarding drug use are conveyed within the context of real-life interactions between faith-based leaders and their followers. It also demonstrates the changing landscape of religious conversation within the digital space by bridging both past forms of communication as well as present innovative means of communicating.

The combination of these various texts offers a thorough understanding of the ways in which different methods of discussing religion impact the terminology that has been established to classify drug use as illegal. The findings of this study provide a thorough understanding of how religious discourse has an impact on developing moral conscience and establishing standards of conduct on the basis of religious doctrine and practical instruction.

### **3.3 Analytical Procedures**

The methodological approach taken in the analysis was systematic and employed several phases to assess both the manner and techniques used by religious organisations and groups to communicate their prohibition against drug use in the context of religious discourse. The first phase of the process consisted of a thorough reading of the entire collection of written documents and coding these documents using their own codes in order to locate the more obvious and subtle references to drug use, intoxication, addiction, sobriety, and other moral concepts. Each occurrence of written language related to drugs was tabled or coded, which ultimately resulted in a preliminary set of data containing only those instances of discourse that were prohibitive in nature as



well as evaluative of either drugs or drug users. Through the open coding process, patterns emerged naturally as a result of the act of reading the documents and the data created rather than the imposition or forcing of preconceived ideas on the emerging patterns.

Step two involved the identification of the most significant linguistic categories in relation to our research questions. These categories included lexicon associated with moral judgement (e.g., sin, impurity, corruption), semantic patterns reflecting danger/spiritual harm, and metaphorical depictions of drug use as a disease, pollution, or temptation; modality markers indicating obligation/prohibition were also included. We focused primarily upon the evaluative expression, stance marker and intertextual reference to sacred authority that inform discourse about prohibition. Based on the results of this stage an analytical structure was devised to enable the categorisation and comparison of the linguistic features identified across genre and tradition.

Stage three involved fitting the identified linguistic features into larger discursive frames/themes, and in doing so moved beyond individual lexical items and provided an opportunity to explore narratives that allow for the construction of meaning. The themes that emerged from this analysis included images of drugs as spiritual pollution, drug use representing a threat to one's family/community, and drugs representing a satanic temptation or moral deviance. From the analysis it became clear that religious discourse places drug use within moral, spiritual and social contexts, thereby providing further structure to the parameters of acceptable behaviour.

The last step was to determine (i.e., finding out) how linguistic patterns shape identities surrounding authority, prohibition and morality through religious authority, morality and the legal categories of believers. The analysis focused on how linguistic selections authenticate (or support) the religious authority of the religious leaders, establish moral behavior, and create categories of belief as "Compliant," "At-Risk" or "In Need of Spiritual Guidance." This micro-level/macro-level interpretative step highlighted the link between the linguistic features used on the micro-level and the macro-level aspects of the use of language in the context of religion to control human behaviour, maintain community standards and contextualise the moral ramifications of engaging in drug use. By analysing how language influences the context of religious acceptance, this multi-faceted examination of the underlying mechanisms substantiating the prohibition of drugs as part of the religious context supports and legitimates drug prohibition.

## **4. Findings**

### **4.1 Lexical and Semantic Patterns**



The study of the data revealed an almost uniform set of words describing the moral, spiritual and social views about drug use in religious discussions. Within the fatwas, catechetical materials, pamphlets, and online Q&A's of religious leaders there was a consistent use of extreme language to portray the illegitimacy of drugs. The overwhelming majority of words associated with sin, impurity, illness, destruction, moral decay and temptation; were part of the lexicon related to drug use. Therefore, the majority of the words collected relating to drug use worked together to define drug use, not only as an immoral act but also as a major violation of both spiritual and community standards. The use of words such as "corrupt," "defile," "destroy," "mislead," and "tempt" were also used repeatedly to form a moral vocabulary to establish that drug use was unacceptable in religious terms.

The research indicated the presence of semantic themes that consistently arose as elements that contributed to the construction of a spiritually charged view of substance abuse. In most instances, substances were being depicted through the lens of environmental arousal; for example, they were often referred to as pollution and rendered unclean, defile one's spirit, and create an environment of spiritual contamination. This semantic field contributed disproportionately to defining drug use in terms of disease and illness concerning spiritual and physical purity. Another common way in which substances were depicted was through associating them with moral debasement. Therefore, drug use was demonstrated as being deleterious to personal development, willfulness, and ultimately leading one away from ethical behavior. All these associations created an overwhelming fear of moral debasement and conceptualized drugs as responsible for immoral behavior and social unrest.

Drugs may be represented as a 'spiritual' danger that leads people away from spirituality through their use and how drugs are viewed. Drugs are being portrayed within this pattern as 'tools of deception,' 'gateways to sin,' and 'barriers' from receiving divine guidance. This pattern connects drug use to a person's lack of spiritual strength and provides a moral threat that will keep a person from hearing religious teachings. As a result, many religious discourses position drug users as 'misguided,' 'sinful,' and/or 'victims' of drug use and offer descriptions that denote users as both 'responsible' for their actions and 'susceptible' to outside temptation. The duality of this frame allows religious authorities to condemn drug users while simultaneously providing an opportunity for them to have compassion and possibly redeem drug users.

The studies found that as a result of using rich metaphorical language, the moral framing of drug use was more powerful. Drug use was frequently referenced to poisons, which signifies danger and contamination; to enemies, which communicates the idea of fighting a moral battle or having conflict; to



darkness, which serves as a duality compared to spiritual "light's" symbolic purity; and to chains, which may represent enslavement and absence of freedom. In addition, a spiritual illness metaphor extends beyond one's body and mind to suggest that drug use could deteriorate both. These connotative metaphors enhanced the perceived level of seriousness or "moral stake" associated with drug use and supported the assertion of absolute prohibitive abstinence from substance use.

Finally, the usage of evaluative and stance markers in the dataset indicates strong condemnation of drugs. The use of such words as "evil," "destructive," "dangerous," and "forbidden," combined with adverbs such as "gravely," "severely," and "deeply," intensified the severity of the condemnation of drug use. The direct moral judgement and warning stance indicators created an image of an emergent problem and augmented support for an authoritative position on the issue of drugs. These lexical/evaluative choices enabled the communication of the prohibition itself and the emotional/spiritual ramifications of adhering to that prohibition in religious discourse.

#### **4.2 Authority and Moral Prescription**

The research study showed that most of the time when people talk about religion in their writing, they are using linguistic strategies to create and get more moral authority for their own writings as well as to define specific behaviours that they want people to engage in regarding drug use. A very important way of doing this was through the widespread usage of deontic modality, which is how religious leaders told their followers what they had to do, what they should not do, and what God commanded of them to do. The wording chosen by religious leaders, such as "must avoid", "you shall not", "it is forbidden", and "God commands", were found in fatwas, pamphlets, doctrinal statements, and online advice as a common thread throughout these writings. The modal verbs and prohibitive structures had an influence on developing immutable moral guidelines and making it mandatory, rather than an individual choice, to refrain from using drugs to lead a faithful life. As such, the moral counsel became the religious obligation as a result of the use of modal verbs/prohibitive structures.

Another prevalent means by which prohibitive messages were supported was the use of explicit reference to scripture and God to enhance the authority behind those prohibitive messages. Many of the messages prohibiting substance abuse referenced Qur'anic verses, Biblical passages or specifically established doctrinal principles, establishing abstinence as a divinely inspired and mandated prohibition rather than a construct of human regulation. These intertextual links created an appeal for authority, situating the prohibition as being firmly rooted in sacred tradition and therefore unassailable. By appealing to God's authority, religious discourse enhanced the moral imperative associated with abstinence,



making it more likely that believers would adhere to abstaining from substances.

The data set illustrated that a high volume of the messages included cues for action (imperatives) and admonitions about what ways or actions should be taken to act according to the moral expectations of the faith. There were also multiple warnings regarding drug use that included commands such as "stay away" (from drugs), "do not go near", "guard yourself" and "protect your soul". These action cues nominally limit personal responsibility through a direct appeal to believers, while reinforcing their expectation to act with personal vigilance. The tone of the messages indicates an urgency and moral severity; thus, making avoiding drugs a constant moral obligation.

Another strategy was to connect abstaining from drug use to the reward of spiritual growth and enlightenment and to link drug use with punishment. By doing this, people were more likely to comply with the teachings concerning drug use due to the moral and eschatological ramifications. The religious texts made drug abstinence appear as a pathway to divine favour and spiritual enlightenment, while drug use was depicted as the reason for spiritual deterioration and divine disfavour. Religious texts explicitly stated how drug use could result in punishment here or in an eternal state. This framework of reward vs punishment made it appear that drug abstinence is a spiritually correct choice, while drug use is morally wrong and has long-term ramifications for one's spiritual future.

Lastly, the religious discourse also used terms such as "we as believers", "our responsibility", and "the faith community" to show the connection between believers in faith and a common purpose. In so doing, they framed avoiding drug use as both an individual obligation and a communal obligation, since avoiding drug use was not only an individual's choice but one shared by the community. The religious texts established expectations for behaviour as acceptable through their association with the common value system and through the creation of a community identity. This served to reinforce the perception that adhering to prohibitory religious teachings protects the moral integrity of the larger faith community and creates a greater normative pressure for compliance.

## 5. Discussion

The results of this research indicate that multiple lexical, semantic and authoritative strategies come together to create a prohibition of drug use in religious discourse. This is consistent with prior research indicating that religious messages often depict moral actions through emotionally charged and evaluative language (Weinandy & Grubbs, 2021). The lexicon used in this study also includes words referencing sin, impurity, moral decay, and spiritual danger. By using these terms, religious texts associate drug use with a violation of spiritual and community norms. Grubbs and Grant (2020) state that religious



morality often utilises morally charged vocabulary as a means of steering believers toward socially acceptable behaviour.

The semantic patterns identified here represent drugs as either pollution, moral corruption, or a spiritual threat. These findings correspond with previous findings in the field of religious narrative research (Cole et al., 2020), wherein shared meaning around the behaviours considered to be harmful is created by religious communities by including these behaviours within the context of larger moral narratives. The metaphorical frames used in the study, such as poison, darkness, or chains, indicate how the moral narratives in which harmful behaviours are discussed become linguistically heightened. As Szott (2020) found in his study, metaphors do not function solely as rhetorical devices; they serve as symbolic representations that shape believers' moral imagination and reaffirm the stigmatization of corresponding harmful behaviours within the context of social and religious constructs.

According to the findings, there is evidence of religious language associating drug behaviour with a definition of spiritual vulnerability. This supports Dossi and colleagues (2022) who found that moral judgements made by members of religious communities tend to be based on symbolic rather than literal terms to describe negative or harmful behaviours that constitute a threat to spiritual integrity. The portrayal of drug users as being evil, misguided, or a victim further adds to the dual nature of condemnation and redemption presented by religious language, which is further supported by findings from Kelly and Eddie (2022) who found that whilst religious language reinforces stigma surrounding a behaviour, it also offers a route to spiritual recovery.

In relation to research question two (RQ2), the findings also provided evidence of how authority is enacted linguistically within religious language, through deontic modality, scriptural references and imperatives. This finding reflects Woodson et al.'s (2019) study which found that religious institutions rely on moral and doctrinal authority to create a framework for defining acceptable behaviour. The extensive use of language such as "must avoid", "forbidden" and "God says" illustrates how religious language can turn preferred moral behaviours into an obligation. Thurman and Thurman (2019) also found that religious teachings that create value-based environments can shape health-related behaviour through moral obligation thereby providing further evidence of this phenomenon in the data presented in this study.

Furthermore, the way in which the reward/punishment paradigm was illustrated in the study corresponds with extensive psychological theory on motivation for religious experience: Abstaining from using drugs is often described as resulting in a higher spiritual reward, increased "clarity," greater "purity," and divine approval from God; while drug usage was equated to divine disfavor, or spiritual degradation/retraction. This dualistic view represents a



historical view that exists within many forms of religious rhetoric which have been established based upon eschatological (the study of last things) principles (Rashid, 2023). Thus, the reward/punishment duality creates a basis for motivating compliance by establishing a direct relationship between an individual's choice to behave in a certain way (i.e., drug use/drug abstinence) and their ultimate fate in the afterlife; thus, providing an example of the enduring moral impact of religion on individual behavior, as identified by Ives et al. (2024).

In addition, the collective identity markers "we as believers" and "our duty" clearly depict how religious vernacular places drug prohibition and usage within the context of the community's collective expectations. These findings support the argument proposed by Wuthnow, (2011), who states that religious communication is often implemented as a mechanism for developing moral norms through appeals to the collective identity of the community and to the collective responsibility of the members of the community. Consequently, when religious communication builds community cohesion through adherence to prohibitive teachings, it provides the individual with a sense of responsibility toward their community; thus, it creates a culture in which leniency toward drug use would be frowned upon. Similarly, Alshehri (2024) illustrates how contemporary religious messaging uses collective identity to mobilize social norms and define acceptable behaviors.

Collectively, these findings indicate that prohibiting drug use in religious discourse is not only a declared doctrine, but also creates a moral system through language usage. The relationship of lexical patterns, semantic frames, authoritative linguistic structures and collective identity markers demonstrates how religious discourse affects the moral reasoning of individuals as well as their institutional authority regulating behaviour. This contribution to the field of discourse analysis confirms the role of religious language as a means of moral persuasion and social control, illustrating that to understand the full effect of religious discourse on moral reasoning and the governing of behaviour, it is important to study both doctrinal content and the language used to convey this content.

## 6. Conclusion

This research focused on examining how religious discourse constructs drug usage through language, and how religious institutions reinforce their moral stance against drug usage through the lexical, semantic, metaphorical, and authoritative aspects of their religious texts. We established a qualitative, interpretive discourse analysis of how religious institutions use language to define the socially unacceptable nature of drug use, and to direct the behaviour of believers. Through this study we have answered RQ1 that drug usage is most frequently described within the larger lexical field of sin, impurity, moral decay,



danger, and spiritual threat. The lexical field that religious texts describe are those of sin, impurity, danger, and the potential for spiritual decay due to drug use. The use of these words and phrases to describe drug use indicate that drugs are seen as more than harmful to society; drugs are more severely perceived as a profound moral and social violation that may have repercussions on one's spiritual and personal integrity, community stability, and ultimately the integrity of their faith. In particular, the semantic patterns associated with drug use as spiritual pollution, corruption, and a means of undermining one's spiritual integrity, along with metaphorical language equating drugs to poison, darkness, and chains, create a powerful moral image of the need to abstain from drug usage in order to maintain one's spiritual integrity.

Responding to RQ2, this research revealed how religious discourse enriches authority through deontic modality, and how it legitimizes moral behavior through scriptural references, imperatives, and framing moral consequences. Phrases such as “must,” “forbidden,” and “God commands” convert one’s moral choice into a divine command, while references to sacred texts reinforce the legitimacy of the interpretation of moral law by religious authorities. The association of drug avoidance with a spiritual reward and drug use with punishment further enhances compliance, as it frames the decision to act or abstain within a wider eschatological context. Furthermore, the use of collective identity markers such as “we as believers” portrays abstinence as a shared responsibility of the community rather than an individual choice, reinforcing the concept of shared moral standards that bind religious communities together.

These results show that the prohibition of drug use in religious discourse is not an aspect of doctrine per se, but rather a complex linguistic construct based on a combination of authoritative language, symbolic framing, evaluative judgment, and communal identity. This research contributes to a body of literature on religious discourse analysis, critical discourse analysis, and the sociolinguistics of morality, by illustrating how language influences moral meaning, reinforces institutional authority, and promotes behavioural expectations. These findings illustrate the significance of language as a tool for defining moral parameters and regulating social conduct, and demonstrate the ongoing need to investigate the ways that religious institutions convey their moral obligations through language within modern contexts.

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