

# From Mechanism to Stance: The Normative Gap in the Cognitive Science of Religion and the Protodik Hypothesis

## An Essay on the Possibility of Deriving a Normative Framework from Descriptive Findings

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### Abstract

The cognitive science of religion (CSR) has built a powerful descriptive framework explaining the mechanisms of human belief over the past three decades. Foundational figures including Pascal Boyer, Scott Atran, and Ara Norenzayan have explained why religion is universal and why it persists in remarkably stable forms. Yet this literature deliberately left a normative gap: once the mechanism is known, what should one *do*? This paper maps that gap along three axes: (1) why the descriptive stance of CSR disengages the normative question, (2) why existing bridge attempts — new atheism, post-secularism, and spirituality discourses — fail to fill it, and (3) how the Protodik Hypothesis (Coşar, 2026) proposes to close this gap by centering the *theogenic drive/thumos* distinction. The paper's central claim is this: deriving a normative stance from descriptive findings does not require answering the God question; the conceptual separation of the theogenic drive from the capacity for meaning-making provides the necessary and sufficient condition for such a derivation. This separation is developed here through Abrahamic traditions and their secular extensions; the hypothesis that the proposed mechanisms (theogenic drive, crystallization, theolysis) are also testable across different contexts, such as Dharmic and East Asian traditions, is maintained but not treated as established. The framework enables the epistemological position of "methodological agnosticism — practical non-theism" and offers a testable, interdisciplinary framework for religious studies.

**Keywords:** cognitive science of religion, theogenic drive, thumos, theolepsia, theoleptic thumos, synaesthesia, metaxima, apolysis, lateral shift, thumolysis channels, Coordinate Paradox, Crystallization Paradox, Invisible Step Principle, seven crystallizations, normative philosophy of religion, MADAD, Protodik Hypothesis, seeker typology, deconversion, methodological agnosticism, Fractal Mechanism, Silent Founder, Religion-Fuel Framework, Constitutional Residue Theory, Collective MADAD, transgression credit

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## 1. Introduction: Two Disconnects

Religious studies faces two disconnects.

**The first disconnect lies between the descriptive and the normative.** The

cognitive science of religion has developed powerful tools for explaining why belief arises and why it persists. But this explanation deliberately left off the agenda the question of what one ought to do with belief. In Boyer's own words, cognitive explanation was meant to remain neutral toward theological positions (Boyer, 2001, p. 320). This stance was methodologically defensible — but has become increasingly untenable in practice. Rising religious polarization at a global scale, post-deconversion crises of meaning, and the crisis of purposelessness in secular contexts all show that "knowing the mechanism is enough" no longer satisfies.

**The second disconnect lies between theology and psychology.** The philosophy of religion historically centered the question "does God exist?" and built sophisticated arguments around it. Yet this debate had almost no relationship to the psychological and existential reality of the individual living the experience of belief. A person could have God's existence irrefutably proven to them and still continue to disbelieve; conversely, they might be presented with strong evidence and still not abandon their faith. Because belief is not, first and foremost, an epistemic position — it is a biological and psychological function.

The question standing at the intersection of these two disconnects is the most important unanswered question in religious studies: **Once the origin and workings of belief are understood — without answering the God question — is it possible to construct a meaningful stance?**

The purpose of this paper is to evaluate the answer the Protodik Hypothesis (Coşar, 2026) offers to this question and to demonstrate this answer's originality within the religious studies literature.

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## 2. The Normative Limit of the Cognitive Science of Religion

Since the 1990s, CSR has developed a coherent research program explaining religious belief and behavior through the ordinary cognitive capacities of the human mind. Several core findings of this program directly form the foundation of the Protodik Hypothesis.

**Belief as an evolutionary capacity:** Boyer (2001) and Atran (2002) showed that religion is structured around "Minimal Counterintuitive Agents" and that this structure is directly linked to the human mind's agency-detection. Norenzayan (2013), meanwhile, demonstrated that large-scale social cooperation rose in parallel with the emergence of the "moralizing god" concept, indicating that religion serves an evolutionary function as a coordination solution. Barrett (2004, 2012) proposed that religious thought patterns in children are not learned but rather suppressed as children grow — suggesting that belief is not a deviation requiring special conditions, but a biological default state.

The geographic and cultural scope of these findings is striking: the operation of the HADD mechanism has not been confined to Western examples but has been observed in comparative research ranging from Yoruba orisha belief to Indian village rituals, from Arctic shamanism to Mesoamerican cosmologies (Atran, 2002; Boyer, 2001). Minimal Counterintuitive Agent theory explains which contents take hold in cultural transmission — and this mechanism appears to operate consistently across a wide

range of content, from the properties of devas in Brahmanic tradition to the inexplicable powers of Buddhist deities to the ancestor spirits of Central Africa.

Taken together, these findings form a powerful claim: religion is not a cultural preference or a historical accident, but an inevitable product of human cognition. It is a phenomenon requiring explanation not in its absence but in its presence.

**The principle of normative neutrality and its limits:** The methodological neutrality that CSR largely adopted faces two contradictory criticisms. On one side, religious traditionalists argue that naturalistic explanation implicitly renders belief reductive (McCauley, 2020). On the other, secular thinkers conclude that "once the mechanism is explained, belief is no longer valid" — yet this conclusion does not follow from the CSR findings themselves. Boyer stated explicitly that cognitive explanation should remain neutral toward theological positions (2001). But this neutrality leaves practical questions unanswered.

The critical gap opens here: CSR is extraordinarily powerful in explaining *how* the capacity for belief works. But once this capacity is known, the question of what the individual or society should *do* with it falls outside CSR's methodological framework.

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### 3. Existing Bridge Attempts and Their Shortcomings

Three main attempts have tried to close the gap between descriptive findings and lived meaning. Each fills a certain gap, yet each leaves the core question unanswered.

#### 3.1 New Atheism: If the Mechanism Is Known, Belief Falls

The new atheism movement, represented by Dawkins, Hitchens, and Harris, drew a swift normative conclusion from CSR findings: if the mechanism of belief can be explained in naturalistic terms, belief is rationally unsustainable and should be abandoned. This inference is problematic for several reasons.

First, the proposition "A's cognitive mechanism is B" does not entail "A is false" — this has been identified as the genetic fallacy (Barrett, 2004b). Just as the evolutionary origin of our eyes does not mean what we see is unreal, the evolutionary origin of the capacity for belief does not mean belief is false.

Second, and more important in practice: new atheism does not say how to fill the functional void left behind by religious belief — meaning, confrontation with death, community, ritual, moral framework. Deconversion research consistently shows that the psychological well-being of those who leave institutional belief depends on which tools fill this void (Bleidorn et al., 2024; Streib & Keller, 2014).

#### 3.2 Post-Secularism: Reframing Religion and Secularity

Habermas's concept of "post-secular society" and Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* (2007) persuasively showed that religion and secularity are not mutually exclusive categories. Taylor, in particular, describes how the secular framework he calls the "immanent frame" inherits religious values, and the religious residue the secular individual carries within.

Yet this literature has a serious limitation: it operates at the macro-sociological or politico-philosophical level. At the individual existential level — the question of how someone who has left institutional belief, or never had it, might sustain meaning-making — post-secularism offers no concrete framework.

### 3.3 Spirituality Discourse: Centering Experience

The group identified as "spiritual but not religious" (SBNR) is growing globally. This discourse rejects the mold of institutional religion while trying to retain the core of experience. Its historical roots extend to William James's studies of mystical experience and Maslow's concept of peak experience.

The strength of spirituality discourse is real: an experience-centered approach shows that meaning-making independent of institutionally imposed dogma is possible. But its weakness is equally real: spirituality, too, can crystallize. Astrology can turn into dogma; the belief that "the universe hears you" can become a silent copy of institutional religion. Centering experience means giving up on asking about the source of experience — and this abdication is a new blind spot.

### 3.4 Summary of the Gap

All three attempts carry a specific deficiency: either they must answer the God question and fall into epistemic deadlock (new atheism), or they neglect the individual existential plane (post-secularism), or they suspend questioning the source of experience (spirituality). **None of them can derive a normative stance from the knowledge of belief's mechanism — without answering the God question.**

This is precisely the gap the Protodik Hypothesis claims to address.

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## 4. The Protodik Hypothesis: Key Conceptual Innovations

### 4.1 The Theogenic Drive/Thumos Distinction — The Key to the Normative Leap

The most original contribution of the Protodik Hypothesis is that it splits what most religious research treats as a single concept into two distinct layers.

**Theogenic drive:** The search for God, or an equivalent absolute framework. It is evolutionary in origin — the oldest cognitive solution closing the uncertainty produced by death-awareness. It crystallizes when it turns into an institution. The Protodik Hypothesis proposes that this drive can close when met with awareness — a process called theolysis, the closing of the uncertainty the drive requires.

**Thumos:** The inner life-force of meaning-making; the capacity for curiosity, commitment, and the carrying of deep questions. It is embedded more deeply in the evolutionary inheritance and does not end when the theogenic drive closes — it is set free (thumolysis). Though related to Aristotle's concept of thumos, it is reworked here

in an original way: thumos is not a desire or a sense of honor, but the motive force of meaning-making itself.

**The evolutionary ground of the concept chain:** The book establishes that thumos itself draws on a deeper evolutionary ground, through two precursor concepts.

*Prothumos* (proto + thumos) defines the evolutionary ground of the meaning-making capacity that is not limited to humans — shared by animal and human alike.

*Protaisthesis* (prōtos + aisthesis: first sensation, prior sensitivity), by contrast, is a raw, pre-linguistic, pre-conceptual sensitivity unique to humans: a capacity oriented toward the unseen, forming the transitional link between prothumos and thumos. The full concept chain operates as follows: **Prothumos → Protaisthesis → Thumos → Theogenic Drive → Theolepsia → MADAD → Synaisthesis → Metaxima → Theolysis → Thumolysis.**

**Theolepsia and the default state:** While the theogenic drive is active, thumos operates under its direction — oriented toward a divine object, producing meaning through that object. This state is called *theolepsia* (theos + lepsis: divine seizure) — a borrowing that extends, for this framework's operational needs, the ancient term known in classical philology as "theolepsy" (divine possession, a state of rapture), present in English dictionaries since 1851. Theolepsia is the default position prior to theolysis; the book's metaphors of safe mode, shield, and lock define three distinct faces of this state. The individual under theolepsia occupies the position of *theoleptos*. This concept carries two trajectories: on the *deepening/mystical trajectory*, theolepsia can produce the most intense form of meaning-making (al-Hallaj); on the *instrumentalizing/crystallizing trajectory*, thumos turns into a tool serving the institution.

**The extreme point of the instrumentalizing trajectory — theoleptic thumos and violence:** The crystallizing trajectory is not limited to passive instrumentalization; at its extreme point it can produce violence. In Milgram's (1974) obedience experiment, sixty-five percent of participants, under the direction of an authority figure, continued to administer shocks labeled dangerous to the person on the other side. In Asch's (1951) conformity experiment, a third of participants repeated an obviously wrong answer simply because the group said so. Milgram demonstrated the power of obedience; Asch, the power of the majority — together, they reveal how individual conscience can be besieged by authority and group pressure. Zimbardo's (2007) Stanford Prison Experiment proposed that evil could be attributed to role, but its academic standing has been seriously shaken by Le Texier's (2019) archival research — the experiment should be read not as standalone proof but as a contested case; Milgram's and Asch's findings, by contrast, have been replicated repeatedly in independent laboratories. Hannah Arendt's (1963) concept of the "banality of evil," drawn from the Eichmann trial, completes this picture: great violence most often comes not from monsters, but from ordinary people who have handed responsibility over to an invisible authority. In the language of this concept family: *theoleptic thumos* — thumos oriented toward a sacred object, operating within that object's frame — can shut down empathy when the frame declares "these people are not human"; this is not a deviation, but a natural extension of theolepsia's instrumentalizing trajectory. Bandura's (1999) concept of *moral disengagement* defines five stages of this process: dehumanization, diffusion of responsibility, relabeling the act, minimizing consequences, and blaming the victim. This diagnosis is not a defect unique to religion — it is a risk carried by crystallization; the religious institution is simply the system that has realized this risk over the longest span and the widest geography.

**Theogenic drive as fuel — a structural distinction:** The dark trajectory of

theoleptic thumos also shows that the same raw capacity is structurally reversible. The theogenic drive and thumos are, in themselves, neither good nor bad — like fuel, an energy source that can carry either the ambulance or the bomb. The book terms this structural symmetry the *Religion-Fuel Framework*, locating the distinction not in intent but in three observable conditions: (a) target — whether the capacity itself is being freed, or captured and locked onto a single channel; (b) transparency of method — whether the legitimizing method is open, or hidden and unquestionable; (c) stance toward crystallization — whether freezing is treated as a risk, or deliberately accelerated. The same historical figure can carry both structures across different acts: Luther's Ninety-Five Theses satisfies the first condition — freeing conscience from the church — while Luther's later antisemitic writings violate the third, deploying the same rhetorical fuel to dehumanize a specific group. The difference lies not in the person but in the structure; this moves the mechanism's moral assessment out of intent-reading and into observable structural criteria.

**Synaisthesis — the irreversible threshold:** The simultaneous, doubled moment of awareness in which the shield is seen from outside for the first time, once MADAD activates, is called *synaisthesis*. Synaisthesis is not an enlightenment but a threshold of transition — irreversible. From this moment on, the individual both sees and is still within: theolepsia continues, but is now also being observed from outside.

**Metaxima — the suspended period:** The intermediate position passed through after synaisthesis has occurred but before theolysis has taken place is defined as *metaxima* (metaxy + -ima: the state of tension between two thresholds). The root concept, *metaxy* (Greek for "between"), carries a deep philosophical lineage running from Plato through Plotinus to, especially, Eric Voegelin's political philosophy; but where Voegelin's metaxy describes a permanent, general structure of consciousness suspended between immanence and transcendence, metaxima makes a different and narrower claim: it names a temporary, clinically trackable position following synaisthesis and opening onto theolysis. The person living through this period is a *metaxitos*. Metaxima is neither theolepsia nor theolysis: it is the position in which the tension of "I see it, but I am still inside it" is carried chronically. The structural overlap of this position with ACT's concept of psychological flexibility (Section 4.6) makes the therapeutic dimension of this period explicit.

**Paths after theolysis and thumolysis:** Once theolysis has occurred, thumos is set free (the *theolutos* position, thumolysis begins). The outcome of the awareness process need not be theolysis: even once MADAD has activated, the theogenic drive may flow into a new mold — this is called *lateral shift*, indicating that the *theotropos* position persists. The book positions these two paths as equivalent; it does not impose theolysis.

**The five channels of thumolysis:** The directions in which freed thumos flows are not random; the book gathers them under five main headings: *aesthetic* (creation, opening toward beauty), *ethical* (responsibility directed toward the other), *cognitive* (curiosity, inquiry), *liminal moments* (one's stance before birth, death, transformation), and *courage* (bodily risk, consensual confrontation with danger). The fifth channel — courage — is embodied historically in gladiatorial combat, tournaments, and bullfighting; in its modern counterpart, in marathon running, mountaineering, boxing, and extreme sports. This channel fills a gap the preceding four channels (aesthetic, ethical, cognitive, liminal moments) do not cover: the capacity to manage death-awareness not by surrendering it to an institution, but by facing danger directly and by consent. The five channels are not a list but a map — thumos flows into a different combination in each individual; it is the framework's task to show that the channels exist, not to show which channel belongs to which

person.

The two-dimensional structure of the theogenic drive is not unique to Abrahamic traditions. In Hinduism, the pursuit of *moksha* — the longing for liberation from cyclical existence — and in Buddhism, the aspiration for *nirvana*, are crystallized forms of the same drive in different cultural codes; both take on the function of closing the uncertainty produced by death-awareness. The Brahman-Atman identity of the *Upanishads* and the *anatta* (no-self) doctrine of Theravada Buddhism produced markedly different answers to this same search — yet both are variations of the same theogenic drive. Daoism's *Tao* expresses, in naturalistic language, the search for an absolute principle transcending all divisions — and this too, despite its difference in form, is a version of the same functional necessity. Thumos, meanwhile, defines the capacity that remains constant within this landscape regardless of which cultural mold it flows into: the power to weave meaning, to be curious, to carry deep questions. A contemporary illustration of this dynamic is Dulal Maharaj's practice of bodily austerity (*tapas*) in the Hindu tradition: thumos's expression through the body, and this practice's own risk of crystallizing into an institutional mold, display the same duality in concrete form.

A methodological confession is warranted here: the very act of placing Hinduism, Buddhism, and Daoism side by side in a single comparative paragraph carries exactly the gesture that Said's (1978) critique of *Orientalism* identifies — gathering fundamentally different traditions under one roof simply because they are "not Western." This paper knowingly preserves this classification; it is offered as an invitation for the reader to also question the classification itself, and to read the rest of the framework with the same critical eye.

Why is this distinction critical? Because the entirety of the existing literature either lumps the two together and, in questioning religious belief, also questions the capacity for meaning-making (the new-atheist error), or resists the abandonment of institutional religion in order to protect both (the religious-traditionalist error). No framework conceptually separates the theogenic drive from thumos — and without this distinction, constructing a normative stance is impossible.

### **Hierarchical Relationship with CSR: HADD, MCI, and the Theogenic Drive**

The relationship of the theogenic drive concept to the CSR literature is not one of overlap but of hierarchical containment. The HADD mechanism developed by Atran (2002) and Boyer (2001) — the tendency to hyperactively perceive the presence of an intentional agent in a given stimulus — is the *cognitive trigger* of the theogenic drive, but is not the theogenic drive itself. HADD attributes agency to a specific event: "this noise has a cause, this order has a designer." The theogenic drive goes far beyond this single-event attribution: it is an ongoing search for a comprehensive system of meaning that explains the *totality* of existence, makes sense of death, and offers a moral framework. HADD triggers this search; it is not the search itself.

Boyer's Minimal Counterintuitive Agents (MCI) theory operates on a different plane: it explains which kinds of supernatural content are memorable and effective in cultural transmission. MCI is a mechanism describing the *selection* of belief content — it explains not *what* the theogenic drive finds, but *why what it finds sticks*. Norenzayan's (2013) large-scale moralizing-god hypothesis completes this third dimension: it explains the social coordination function of the theogenic drive and how this function was strengthened by evolutionary selective pressure.

Atran's field research adds a fourth dimension: it documents why sacred values are

non-negotiable. What Atran calls the "devoted actor" defines boundary cases in which standard cost-benefit reasoning shuts down when sacred values are at stake — these values are off the table for negotiation precisely because opening them to bargaining would threaten identity itself. Atran himself acknowledges that the field still lacks a comprehensive theory to explain this phenomenon. Within the Protodik framework, the devoted actor is the boundary case in which MADAD is fully closed: the sacred value is the outward expression of crystallized thumos.

Reading the four mechanisms together yields the following picture: HADD initiates the search, MCI determines which contents will survive, Norenzayan's hypothesis explains why these contents become institutionalized at the scale of large communities, and Atran's devoted actor concept shows why certain contents move outside the space of negotiation altogether. The theogenic drive, meanwhile, is the *holistic phenomenon* emerging from the sum of these mechanisms — with its cognitive, existential, and social dimensions. The conceptual boundary becomes clear here: CSR explains *how* the theogenic drive works. The question of *what* the theogenic drive means and *what should be done* with it is the normative territory CSR deliberately leaves unanswered. The Protodik Hypothesis begins exactly at this point: taking the mechanisms CSR has explained as its ground, it asks what stance can be built once these mechanisms are known.

## 4.2 The Prototype / Crystallization Cycle

The Protodik Hypothesis positions religion not as a historical "error," but as the first draft of meaning-engineering. This is the stage Coşar calls the *prototype*: the initial, raw, not-yet-institutionalized form of the human capacity for meaning-weaving.

Crystallization, meanwhile, describes this prototype's transformation into an institution. It is a necessary dynamic — every successful belief system crystallizes, because it is a demonstrated observation that social coordination, transmission, and continuity require institutions. But its being necessary does not make it good.

The Crystallization Paradox is this: the more successful a belief system becomes, the faster it crystallizes; and the more it crystallizes, the faster it closes the very questions that made its success possible. This paradox overlaps with Max Weber's observation of the "routinization of charisma" (*Veralltäglicung des Charisma*); but Weber's framework remains descriptive, opening no normative door. The Protodik Hypothesis, by contrast, builds a stance upon seeing the paradox: awareness of the paradox opens the way for the theogenic drive to close.

This paradox can be observed across every geography throughout history. The great schism between Theravada and Mahayana in early Buddhism is the paradigmatic example of how a successful belief movement crystallizes, and how a new wave of theolysis emerges from within that crystallization. In India, the centuries-long Bhakti movement was a wave of theolysis proposing direct experience and devotion of the heart against the ossified Brahmin ritualism — the crystallized form of Vedic tradition; yet Bhakti orders, too, eventually produced their own lineages, ceremonies, and orthodoxies. In Islam, the waves of internal critique running from the Mu'tazila's theological debates to the Sufi movements, and in China, the process by which philosophical Daoism turned into institutional ritualism — all these movements follow the same logic: closing questions becomes the inevitable price of success.

## 4.3 MADAD — The Epistemic Safeguard That Works from Within

MADAD, the Meta-Cognitive Awareness and Doxastic Appraisal Device. It constitutes the most innovative mechanism proposal of the Protodik Hypothesis. It is not a tool explaining how belief is formed, but the name given to the meta-cognitive capacity by which a person can appraise their own belief processes and see the Crystallization cycle.

Flavell's (1979) hierarchy of metacognition and Nelson & Narens's (1990) object-level/meta-level distinction provide a strong empirical ground for the MADAD concept. Within this terminology, the belief system can be defined as an "object-level" process, while MADAD assumes the "meta-level" function: tracking, evaluating, and, when necessary, intervening in the object-level process.

MADAD's connection to the concept of "safe mode" is particularly strong. The human mind systematically takes refuge in certain thought patterns in the face of uncertainty — Norenzayan's moralizing-god theory, Bering's (2011) psychic continuity hypothesis, and the whole body of TMT research all point to this "safe mode." MADAD is the capacity required to see and name this mode. Without being named, it cannot be abandoned; without being abandoned, thumos cannot be set free.

### **How MADAD Diverges from Existing Concepts**

MADAD bears a superficial resemblance to standard metacognition research, but a critical distinction is at stake. Stanovich and West's (2000) work on cognitive decoupling, or Wells and Cartwright-Hatton's (2004) metacognition scales, measure an individual's general-level monitoring of their own thought processes. MADAD, by contrast, operates under a much more specific condition: the self-regulation of belief content that has *fused* with identity and one's existential system of meaning. This fusion holds for what Quine and Ullian (1970) call "central beliefs" in their web-of-belief metaphor — and because questioning a central belief means re-weaving the entire web, standard metacognition protocols prove insufficient here. The "minimum change" principle formalized in Gärdenfors's (1988) AGM theory turns systematically into a principle of *zero change* under identity-belief fusion. It is precisely at this point that MADAD diverges from existing tools and stands out as an original unit of analysis.

### **Operational Definition**

For MADAD to be advanced as a testable conceptualization, an operational definition is required. This paper proposes the following: *MADAD active* is the cognitive state in which the individual can *simultaneously* meet the conditions of (a) attributing the origin of a held cultural/religious/ideological belief to their own biographical and social history, (b) recognizing the degree to which this belief has fused with their identity, and (c) attempting to evaluate reality from a perspective independent of this belief. The state in which any one of these three conditions cannot be met, and this deficiency cannot be recognized, is defined as *MADAD closed*. MADAD is thus modeled not as a binary (open/closed) but as a continuum variable.

### **Behavioral Indicators**

Several behavioral indicators can be identified that indirectly detect MADAD's activity. *Belief-decoupling capacity* refers to the individual's ability to evaluate a normatively held proposition within a hypothetical frame — "suppose this belief were false..." *Source-attribution accuracy* is the rate at which an individual can identify the origin of their core beliefs as family, cultural environment, or authority figure; in individuals with active MADAD, this attribution is expected to be more biographical

and pluralistic. *Reduced certainty asymmetry* is measured by the inconsistency between an individual's certainty assessments of their own beliefs versus others' beliefs: once MADAD activates, the individual is observed to be able to acknowledge the epistemic fragility of their own belief as well. To measure these indicators systematically, a belief-specific metacognition scale needs to be developed that is structurally distinct from the standard MCQ-30 (Wells & Cartwright-Hatton, 2004) and MAI (Schraw & Dennison, 1994) scales. A four-subdimension structure is proposed: source awareness, identity-belief decoupling, filter visibility, and cost tolerance.

### **Neural Substrate: The Default Mode Network Hypothesis**

The neurobiological framework that most strongly supports MADAD's empirical grounding is Default Mode Network (DMN) research. Buckner, Andrews-Hanna, and Schacter (2008) define the DMN as the network activated during states not requiring focus on external stimuli, underlying self-referential thought and autobiographical memory. Since belief systems are themselves structurally self-referential and autobiographical in content, the DMN can be evaluated as this domain's neural counterpart.

The hypothesis that can be derived from this is two-directional. When MADAD is active, an individual's external evaluation of their own belief system requires both self-referential and counterfactual processing in the medial prefrontal cortex (mPFC); the anterior cingulate cortex (ACC), with its conflict-monitoring function, may be the neural counterpart of this moment of "seeing the friction." When MADAD is closed, the DMN's self-referential processing operates not as exploration but as a reinforcement mechanism: posterior cingulate cortex (PCC) activation rises, and the ACC's conflict signal is suppressed. This second pattern structurally overlaps with the belief-strengthening triggered by death anxiety found in TMT research (Pyszczynski et al., 1999). According to Fleming et al. (2010), metacognitive accuracy shows a positive correlation with dorsolateral prefrontal cortex (dlPFC) thickness; similar structural research could be conducted for a belief-specific version of MADAD.

The mechanism TMT proposes at the individual level converges with an independent body of macro-sociological data. Norris and Inglehart's (2011) Insecurity Theory showed that the strongest predictor of cross-national differences in religiosity is material security: religion declines rapidly in societies with strong welfare states and high health and pension security, while remaining resilient in insecure societies. The correlation is strong, but the literature has left the question of mechanism open — whether what rises as security declines is general anxiety or, specifically, death-awareness. Within the Protodik framework, this distinction becomes clear: if the primary source of the theogenic drive is death-awareness, material security does not reduce this need itself — it only reduces its urgency. Hunger, illness, and insecurity make death daily and concrete; prosperity pulls this urgency back — death remains certain, but comes to feel distant and abstract. The theogenic drive therefore does not disappear, it merely goes dormant: the sudden surge of religious or spiritual seeking even in secure societies at moments of crisis (war, pandemic, earthquake) is this dormancy's awakening. The correlation Insecurity Theory provides and the mechanism TMT provides thus unite within a single framework: the need remains constant, only its urgency changes.

### **Limits of Testability**

A methodological limit of this empirical framework must be explicitly stated. The proposed behavioral indicators and neuroimaging protocol measure the functional correlates of MADAD; they do not prove the concept's reality. The critical test that

will determine the concept's fate is this: whether belief-specific metacognition indicators demonstrate *incremental validity* over general metacognition measures — that is, whether they make a meaningful contribution beyond standard measures in predicting outcomes such as deconversion process, belief flexibility, and meaning-satisfaction. If this incremental validity cannot be shown, the MADAD concept should be reduced to the existing metacognition framework. This honesty strengthens the concept's dialogue with scientific circles and maintains its consistency with the refutation conditions presented in Section 8.

**Collective MADAD: The Mechanism of Democracy**

MADAD has thus far been defined at the individual level: the mind's capacity to monitor its own belief layer. But the same mechanism operates at the societal scale as well — and at this scale, its institutional counterpart is democracy.

| Individual MADAD                           | Collective MADAD<br>(Democracy)                                   |
|--------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Ability to question one's own belief layer | Elections: the ability to question power itself                   |
| Ability to see other perspectives          | Press freedom: producing views from outside power                 |
| Ability to accept one's own fallibility    | Independent judiciary: opening power's own decisions to challenge |
| Ability to hear the inner voice            | Opposition: keeping the collective mind's dissenting voice alive  |

Democracy can be read as the institutional framework through which a society is able to undergo its own synaesthesia: the sum of mechanisms by which the collective mind can see its own crystallization. When this mechanism functions, power is questioned, crystallization remains visible, theolysis is possible. When it closes — through repression, norm erosion, or the voluntary surrender of the electorate — democracy loses its content while its form remains: elections are held but the outcome is predetermined; courts operate but the verdicts have been captured. This is the political-level mirror image, in reverse, of the Content/Form Asymmetry established in Section 5 — there, form survived *after* theolysis; here, form is preserved by being hollowed out while theolysis never occurs at all.

This "voluntary surrender" has a current, concrete academic counterpart. Lalot and Abrams (2025) documented the pattern in which voters forgive their own leader's ethical violations while fiercely condemning the identical violation committed by a rival leader, naming it *transgression credit*. The literature on democratic backsliding acknowledges that the trajectory this pattern follows remains an open question; various mechanisms have been proposed (status threat, elite collusion, autocratic legalism), but no comprehensive psychological model has been offered. Within the Collective MADAD framework, this gap closes: transgression credit is MADAD's *selective* deactivation. Once a leader has turned into a crystallized object of identity, criticism directed at them no longer threatens a policy but the voter's own identity; MADAD's monitoring layer falls silent at precisely this point — because asking the

question would mean questioning identity itself. The same voter runs MADAD at full capacity when it comes to the rival leader, because no identity threat exists there. This selectivity does not show the mechanism to be malfunctioning — it shows it working exactly as expected: crystallization holds wherever loyalty resides.

This pattern can be read as the societal-scale counterpart of individual theolepsia — the theogenic drive captures the institution, form is preserved, substance freezes. Its historical instances carry different instruments of legitimation but display the same structure: in Weimar Germany in 1933, through an election; in various countries in the 2010s, through a referendum or a parliamentary majority. The common denominator is not an invasion from outside, but a theogenic crystallization from within.

#### 4.4 The Coordinate Paradox and Methodological Agnosticism — Practical Non-Theism

The epistemic position of the Protodik Hypothesis does not fit exactly into any category in the existing literature. But this very non-fit demonstrates the position's originality. The grounds for this position rest on a philosophical argument: the **Coordinate Paradox**.

**The Coordinate Paradox:** Defining something requires at minimum a contrast, a category, a comparison — "hot" is meaningless without "cold," "big" without "small." An incomparable being, by this logic, cannot be defined; and no meaningful proposition can be constructed about what cannot be defined. Yet monotheistic traditions, immediately after declaring God unique and beyond comparison, go on to produce thousands of pages of rules, attributes, and commandments. This contradiction is not accidental: a coordinate-less God requires no institution, no text, no intermediary; an institution generates its own reason for being only once it has furnished God with coordinates (this book, this prophet, this ritual). Apophatic traditions — *tanzih* in Islam, *via negativa* in Christianity, *sunyata* in Buddhism — attempt to overcome this contradiction by defining God negatively. This objection must be taken seriously; but these traditions, while remaining coordinate-less in theory, continue to produce coordinates in practice — they continue to specify in which language one should pray, which prophet one should follow. Meister Eckhart ("Gottheit" — the Godhead even beyond God) and al-Ghazali (on the incapacity of human reason to grasp God) are the two figures who saw this contradiction most sharply from within — both paid the price of this insight in conflict with the institution.

The Coordinate Paradox has three distinct functions, and separating them clarifies both the paradox's strength and its limit. *Epistemic objection* (its strongest function): constructing a meaningful proposition about God requires a frame of reference; even the phrase "unlimited, undefinable" is itself a negative coordinate. *Critique of institutional religion* (observationally strong): institutions that say "undefinable" continue, in practice, to define. *Objection to God's existence* (its weakest and most contested function): the Protodik Hypothesis **explicitly rejects** this third function. The Coordinate Paradox does not prove that God does not exist; it only shows the difficulty of constructing a meaningful proposition about God. Explaining hunger does not prove food does not exist; defining a question's psychological or evolutionary origin does not invalidate the reality that question points toward. Tillich, discussed in Section 4.1, is one of the thinkers who saw this paradox most sharply — his "Protestant Principle" nearly overlaps with the second function — but Tillich's own solution ("the God above God") does not resolve the paradox, it merely carries it up one level: that, too, is a coordinate. The boundary Wittgenstein draws in

the *Tractatus* (1921) — that the limits of language are the limits of the world, and that whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent — is the sharpest expression of the paradox within the philosophy of language; but showing that silence itself produces a coordinate (placing God in the category of "that about which one cannot speak") keeps the Coordinate Paradox's own limit open as well.

The Coordinate Paradox shows why the Protodik Hypothesis does not *need* to answer the God question — not that it *avoids* answering it. This distinction is the justification for the position below:

**Methodological agnosticism:** The question of whether God exists lies *outside the scope* of this framework. This is not an evasion but a statement of scope. The framework has examined not that question, but the mechanism that *produces* it.

**Practical non-theism:** Even though the God question is left unanswered, the framework anticipates that meaning-making does not depend on the assumption of God, and proceeds from this anticipation. Action takes place without waiting for God's existence to be settled.

The two components do not conflict: "I don't know" (methodological agnosticism) and "I'm not waiting" (practical non-theism) can be held simultaneously. This position is the practical, existential completion of a tradition running from Hume to Wittgenstein — but none within that tradition has claimed and named this position within so explicit a normative framework.

## **4.5 Position within the Post-Secular Literature: Taylor, Habermas, Berger**

The position of "methodological agnosticism — practical non-theism" can be defined on its own; but it cannot be fully situated within the academic literature without showing which questions it answers and where it diverges from existing frameworks. Three major frameworks of post-secular thought offer the most productive ground for this comparison: Charles Taylor's analysis of the *immanent frame*, Jürgen Habermas's concept of post-secular society, and Peter Berger's desecularization thesis.

### **Taylor: Transcending the Secular Frame — But From What Foundation?**

Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* (2007) showed that the secular frame — which modern Western thought positions as "neutral" ground for belief (the *immanent frame*) — in fact carries deep-rooted normative assumptions, and that this frame is itself a historical construction. Taylor's strongest contribution is this: secularity is not the absence of religion but a new mental structure that conditions religion — and this structure does not suppress the capacity for transcendence, but the longing for transcendence.

The Protodik Hypothesis shares this observation. In a Protodik reading, the "immanent frame" can be seen as the crystallization of the theogenic drive into a new frame — this time within a naturalistic cosmology. When the drive does not close, the sacred is replaced by the quasi-sacred: scientistic dogmatism, the cult of progress, patriotic ritual. Taylor's observed "search for fullness" and the Protodik Hypothesis's concept of thumos look at the same phenomenon from different planes.

The point of divergence is equally decisive. Taylor proposes a specific direction for the problem of the secular frame: rediscovering the capacity for transcendence, an

inner renewal of the meaning Christianity offers. This stance pulls descriptive analysis toward a particular normative direction. The Protodik Hypothesis agrees with Taylor's observation that thumos has crystallized; but it grounds its solution epistemically — not in a particular tradition or a particular conception of transcendence, but in seeing the mechanism, naming the theogenic drive, and setting thumos free. Where Taylor says "transcendence must be rediscovered," Protodism says "the mechanism must be seen — thumos can flow wherever it flows from there."

This difference is not small. Taylor's Catholic ground pulls the framework toward a specific normative outcome, and this pull is incompatible with methodological agnosticism. Practical non-theism, by contrast, expresses not a loss but an epistemic position: to hold the God question in suspension is to continue making meaning without being bound to its answer.

### **Habermas: Bringing Religious Discourse into Deliberation — But on What Ground?**

Jürgen Habermas's concept of post-secular society reframes the relationship between religion and secular reason. According to Habermas (*Between Naturalism and Religion*, 2008), religious grounds cannot be excluded from democratic deliberation; secular citizens are obligated, under a "translation proviso," to render these grounds into secular terminology, but religious discourse is not outside public reason. This is a renewed confrontation with a question the Enlightenment had set aside: religion and secular reason do not exclude one another, but rather have the capacity for mutual learning.

The realistic weight of this stance is considerable. Habermas's observation matters: the theogenic drive cannot simply be legislated out of the public sphere. The Protodik Hypothesis explains this point at the mechanism level — so long as MADAD has not activated, the drive returns in new forms; excluding institutional religion from the public sphere changes not the drive but merely its form.

But the point of divergence is structural. Habermas works at the macro-sociological and politico-philosophical level; he almost never treats the individual existential plane. "How do religion and secular reason deliberate together?" is an important question; but "how does an individual who has left institutional belief, or never held it, sustain their meaning-making?" lies outside Habermas's agenda. This gap is not incidental — Habermas's post-secularism concerns the transformation of societies, not the transformation of the individual.

A deeper divergence is this: Habermas positions institutional religion as a legitimate partner in democratic deliberation. The Protodik Hypothesis neither affirms nor denies this status for institutional religion — because the real question is not the institution's status, but whether the theogenic drive has been met with awareness. Thumos, as an individual capacity independent of institutional religion, has no place at all in Habermas's framework. This gap is where the Protodik Hypothesis's original contribution begins.

### **Berger: The Observation That Religion Has Returned — The Question of Why**

Peter Berger was forced to openly revise the secularization thesis he had defended for decades, in the 1990s. With *The Desecularization of the World* (1999), Berger acknowledged that modernity, rather than weakening religion, had strengthened it in most contexts, and that religion was undergoing a striking global resurgence. This honest revision is one of the important methodological turning points in the history of

sociology.

But the question "why did religion return?" requires an explanation that goes beyond the observation. Berger's framework leaves this question unanswered. Modernity weakened religion but could not eliminate it; secular frameworks tried to fill its place but failed. Why?

The Protodik Hypothesis reads Berger's observation as a predictable outcome. So long as the theogenic drive is not met with awareness — so long as MADAD has not activated — it flows into new molds. These molds sometimes take religious form, sometimes secular: nationalism, health cults, popular psychology, ideology. The "return" Berger observes is, from the Protodik Hypothesis's perspective, the drive's displacement among different crystallization forms. Religion has not "returned" — the theogenic drive never left; only the vessel it flows into has changed.

This reading does not refute Berger. On the contrary: it accepts the sociological observation and adds a layer of explanation. The observation (religion has returned) and the mechanism explanation (the theogenic drive produces new vessels when it does not close) are two separate levels of claim; the second provides the ground for the first. Desecularization does not represent a falsification of the Protodik Hypothesis but an expected finding.

This framework also offers a direct answer to a current impasse in the secularization debate. Uzlaner (2025) identified two distinct claims the field has conflated: "secularization(1)" — religion's loss of social significance — and "secularization(2)" — the decline of individual religiosity. He noted that these two proceed together in some societies and at independent rates in others, and that the literature has left the reason for this divergence an unresolved issue. Within the Protodik framework, this divergence is expected: secularization(1) is a migration of form — the institution breaks, and the principle migrates into secular law and institutions (Section 5, Constitutional Residue Theory); secularization(2) is a dissolution of content — whether or not the individual's own theogenic drive undergoes personal theolysis. The two are different layers of the same mechanism; their proceeding at independent rates is therefore inevitable — a society can secularize institutionally (form migration complete) while its individuals remain intensely religious (content undissolved), or the reverse.

**Summary of the Threefold Comparison**

The comparison with these three frameworks maps out the original coordinates of the "methodological agnosticism — practical non-theism" position within the post-secular literature:

| Framework                             | Common Ground                                                                                     | Point of Divergence                                                                                                         |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Taylor ( <i>A Secular Age</i> , 2007) | The limits of the secular frame are seen; a thumos-equivalent "search for fullness" is identified | Taylor produces a solution on Catholic ground; Protodism, on epistemic ground, without commitment to a particular tradition |

|                                                           |                                                                                                                           |                                                                                                                                         |
|-----------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Taylor ( <i>A Secular Age</i> , 2007)                     | The limits of the secular frame are seen; a thumos-equivalent "search for fullness" is identified                         | Taylor produces a solution on Catholic ground; Protodism, on epistemic ground, without commitment to a particular tradition             |
| Framework                                                 | Common Ground                                                                                                             | Point of Divergence                                                                                                                     |
| Habermas ( <i>Between Naturalism and Religion</i> , 2008) | The theogenic drive cannot be stripped from the public sphere; religion and secular reason carry mutual learning capacity | Habermas works at the macro-sociological level, neglecting the individual existential plane; treats institutional religion as a partner |

"Methodological agnosticism — practical non-theism" occupies an original coordinate on this map: epistemic distance in place of Taylor's demand for transcendence, individual capacity in place of Habermas's partnership, and a framework integrated with mechanism in place of Berger's observation, which remains only at the level of description. These three points of divergence also mark the three axes of the Protodik Hypothesis's specific contribution to religious studies: normative independence, an individual-existential ground, and the joint carrying of the descriptive and the explanatory level.

#### 4.6 Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT): Cognitive Defusion and MADAD

The conceptual framework of the Protodik Hypothesis was compared with the post-secular philosophical literature in Section 4.5. This and the following three subsections extend the comparison toward the clinical psychology literature. The rationale is this: the processes of theolysis and thumolysis have counterparts not only philosophically but also psychologically and clinically. Over the past two decades, three independently developed clinical frameworks — Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), Meaning-Centered Psychotherapy (MCP), and the Continuing Bonds model — have produced findings that structurally touch the conceptual core of the Protodik Hypothesis. Without examining this contact, the original contribution of the Protodik Hypothesis cannot be fully situated at the clinical level.

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (Hayes, Strosahl & Wilson, 2012) is the most systematic framework of the third wave of cognitive behavioral therapy. ACT's core mechanism, *cognitive defusion*, is the individual's ability to observe their own thought contents from outside rather than fusing with them as though they were reality; leading clinicians summarize this as "seeing thoughts as thoughts" (Luoma, Hayes & Walser, 2007). This capacity can be assessed as a cognitive operation directly overlapping with MADAD's first and second layers — logical consistency monitoring and analytical decoupling.

ACT's concept of *psychological flexibility*, meanwhile, offers a structural overlap with the Protodik Hypothesis's module for carrying uncertainty. Psychological flexibility is defined as the individual's capacity to act in accordance with their values by observing their thoughts, feelings, and urges rather than trying to control or suppress them (Hayes et al., 2012). In the period of metaxima — synaesthesia has occurred, theolysis has not yet arrived, "I see it, but I am still inside it" — thumos's ability to

carry this tension is a pattern that overlaps functionally with psychological flexibility.

**Point of divergence:** ACT adopts an agnostic stance toward belief content; it questions a belief's functionality, not its epistemic truth. The therapeutic rationale for this stance is clear. But this methodological agnosticism leaves a critical explanatory gap when it meets religious belief deeply fused with identity: why standard cognitive defusion techniques, while successful for cultural and behavioral preferences, become structurally strained in belief systems marked by identity-existence fusion cannot be explained by mechanism within ACT theory itself. This condition, which holds for the "central beliefs" in Quine and Ullian's (1970) web-of-belief metaphor, is formalized by the way Gärdenfors's (1988) AGM theory's "minimum change" principle systematically turns into a "zero change" principle under identity-belief fusion (see Section 4.3).

**What Protodism adds:** MADAD's fourth layer — the perceptual dimension — defines this gap. ACT's concept of the *context self* aims at the individual's decoupling from their thoughts; MADAD's fourth layer goes one step further: the capacity to see not merely the content of thought, but the very structure that filters reality. Standard metacognition tracks any cognitive content at the object level; MADAD tracks content fused with identity and the existential system of meaning — and this fusion structurally alters the function of the meta level (for a comparative analysis with the Nelson & Narens, 1990 framework, see Section 4.3).

## 4.7 Meaning-Centered Psychotherapy: The Logotherapy Tradition and Crystallization's Blind Spot

Viktor Frankl's logotherapy framework (1946) positions the will to meaning as a fundamental biological motivation and treats meaning-making as an existential necessity independent of its source. William Breitbart and his team's Meaning-Centered Psychotherapy, developed in the context of terminal illness (Breitbart et al., 2010; Breitbart & Applebaum, 2011), turned this legacy into an empirical intervention program and, through randomized controlled trials, demonstrated its capacity to improve meaningfulness, hope, and spiritual well-being in advanced-stage cancer.

Frankl's triad of "creative values / experiential values / attitudinal values" shows a structural overlap with the thumolysis channels. Creative values — producing something, building a work — evoke the aesthetic and cognitive channels; experiential values — opening toward beauty, toward another, toward the immediate moment — evoke relational-attachment capacity; attitudinal values — choosing how to stand before inevitable suffering — evoke the ethical channel. This overlap suggests that both frameworks independently discovered the same phenomenon: the inner motive force of meaning-making, the capacity the Protodik Hypothesis names thumos.

**Points of divergence:** First, Breitbart's work operates in the context of terminal illness; death-awareness enters the framework as an axiomatic given condition. The Protodik Hypothesis constructs death-awareness as the evolutionary root of the theogenic drive and the framework's explanatory ground (see Section 4.1). This difference may have limited effect at the clinical level; but it is critical at the theoretical level: Protodism reads death-awareness not as an intervention context but as the mechanism's starting point.

Second, and more structural: logotherapy powerfully defends the proposition that "meaning matters," but cannot explain, at the mechanism level, why meaning-making

becomes locked within particular frames — the crystallization cycle. A client may, in the course of therapy, reactivate their will to meaning; but without seeing which frame of meaning this will operates within, liberation remains incomplete. Until MADAD activates, meaning-making circles within the existing crystallized frame. This is the breaking point logotherapy cannot see: honoring the will to meaning is a process distinct from — and requiring completion by — making the frame of meaning itself visible.

**What Protodism adds:** An explanation, at the mechanism level, of why meaning-making is so resistant to change. The crystallization cycle is a conceptual contribution with no counterpart in the logotherapy literature: every successful belief system crystallizes; crystallization locks the capacity for meaning-making into a particular mold; making this lock visible is not possible until MADAD activates. Defining this mechanism offers a complementary layer of explanation for meaning-centered approaches.

## 4.8 Continuing Bonds: The Grief Model and Protodik Grief

The "Continuing Bonds" model, pioneered by Klass, Silverman, and Nickman (1996), issued a systematic challenge to the dominant paradigm in grief psychology — the view that healthy grieving is completed by severing the bond with the lost object. Qualitative and quantitative research has shown that the vast majority of survivors do not sever their relationship with what they have lost, but rather sustain it in a new form, and that this continuity is not pathology but part of a functional grieving process. Steffen and Coyle (2010) discussed whether "sense of presence" experiences in this context carry spiritual meaning; the question of functional continuity between religious and secular frames becomes directly visible at this point.

The Continuing Bonds model offers ground for understanding how a relationship with the framework of belief continues after theolysis. When theolysis occurs — when the theogenic drive closes — what may remain is not merely a void, but an accumulation of experiences lived within the mold, certain practices, and figures. What overlaps with the model's core proposition is this: severing the bond is not a necessary condition for completion; the bond's transformation suffices.

**Point of divergence:** Klass and Steffen's framework is specific to the context of grief over death. The Protodik Hypothesis applies this model to the entire process of theolysis: the object lost is not lost through death, but through awareness. This distinction is formalized in the concept of Protodik Grief: the object of loss is not a loved one, but the very mold of meaning lived within throughout one's life.

**A traumatic subtype of Protodik Grief — institutional betrayal:** Protodik Grief does not always proceed as a calm transformation. What Freyd (2008) termed *institutional betrayal* — an institution in which a person holds a relationship of trust and dependence causing harm rather than providing the protection it owes — captures a dimension of religious trauma distinct from PTSD. Current clinical literature calls this *moral injury*: the person does not merely suffer, but has their basic trust that their own moral universe is real shaken — because the one inflicting the pain is precisely the institution declared to be the source of morality. Within the Protodik framework, this is the forced and traumatic triggering of MADAD's fourth layer (the perceptual layer — seeing the very filter through which reality is perceived): the person is compelled to distrust not merely a belief, but the very mechanism by which that belief was validated. This differs qualitatively from ordinary Protodik Grief: in ordinary grief the mold is quietly left behind; in

institutional betrayal the mold itself becomes the agent of the betrayal of trust.

**What Protodism adds:** A two-layered contribution. First, an explanation, at the mechanism level, of why religion's promise of an afterlife is so universal: the most ancient answer the theogenic drive gives to death-awareness is the promise of a bond that will continue beyond death. The Protodik Hypothesis respectfully acknowledges that this promise is one of humanity's earliest and most enduring inventions in meaning-engineering. Second, a demonstration that this bond can be sustained without a cosmological claim: once theolysis has occurred, the bond can continue in transformed form, resting not on the theogenic drive but on the thumos that has been set free. The Continuing Bonds model demonstrates the empirical existence of this transformation; the Protodik Hypothesis explains, at the mechanism level, why this transformation is possible.

4.9 Therapeutic Comparison: Summary

The comparison conducted with three clinical frameworks situates the Protodik Hypothesis's specific contribution within the therapeutic literature:

| Approach                                                        | Overlap with the Protodik Hypothesis                                                       | Point of Divergence                                                                                                     | What Protodism Adds                                                                                                         |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>ACT</b> (Hayes et al., 2012)                                 | MADAD ↔ cognitive defusion; carrying uncertainty ↔ psychological flexibility               | ACT is agnostic toward belief content — does not explain why defusion becomes strained under identity-belief fusion     | MADAD's fourth layer (perceptual dimension): seeing not the content of thought, but the very structure that filters reality |
| <b>Logotherapy / MCP</b> (Frankl, 1946; Breitbart et al., 2010) | Will to meaning ↔ thumos; creative/ experiential/ attitudinal values ↔ thumolysis channels | Death-awareness is a given within a terminal context, not a general condition; the crystallization cycle cannot be seen | Explaining, via the crystallization mechanism, why meaning-making is resistant to change                                    |

This comparison shows that the Protodik Hypothesis can be positioned not as an alternative to clinical psychology, but as a complementary framework. Existing clinical tools succeed in cases where identity-belief fusion remains below a certain

intensity. The Protodik Hypothesis's original contribution is to conceptually define the cases above this intensity threshold — deep identity-belief fusion, the existential grief of institutional loss of belief, and the theogenic drive's flow into new molds — and to offer the operational framework that carries this definition into an empirical research program.

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## 5. The Content/Form Asymmetry: Historical Evidence for the Crystallization Paradox

One of the strongest empirical claims of the Protodik Hypothesis is one testable by historical evidence: when crystallization breaks, *content* dissolves but *form* survives and migrates into new vessels.

This thesis can be called the **Constitutional Residue Theory**: it holds that the foundational institutions of the modern world — individual responsibility, separation of powers, universal equality, accountability, human dignity — were, to a great extent, built as the formal residue of religious crystallization breaks (theolysis events). The term "residue" here evokes Pareto's (1935) distinction between stable "residues" and variable "derivations"; but where Pareto's residue describes an individual's fixed psychological drives, the residue at stake here is a norm remnant that has passed into institutional form after a historical breaking point (theolysis) and become independent of its religious content — the unit of analysis has shifted from the individual to the institution.

Five concrete pieces of historical evidence:

**Individual responsibility:** The Protestant Reformation established a direct relationship between God and the individual by disabling the institutional intermediary (the Church). The formal residue of this theolysis event is the norm that individual conscience and responsibility are sacred — a norm that is the foundation of the modern rule-of-law state.

**Separation of powers:** The Enlightenment carried the suspicion Christian theology held toward any single absolute authority into the political sphere. The norm that no one — including the king — may exercise absolute, unchecked authority is the formal remnant of theolysis.

**Universal equality:** The norm that "all souls are equal before God" bequeathed this norm of equality to modern constitutions even after religious crystallizations lost their content. Jefferson's phrase "all men are created equal" is evidence of a norm transfer that has shed its religious content but preserved its religious form.

**Human dignity:** The concept of *imago Dei* (humanity created in the image of God), coming from Judaism and Christianity, lives on in secular human-rights discourse — abandoning its religious content while preserving its structural position.

**Accountability:** The norm "every sin will be accounted for" transformed into the secular legal norm "every act carries a cost." The theological frame dissolved; but the functional structure — the inescapable link between act and consequence — was inherited.

This historical pattern clarifies something Weber observed but could not explain. Weber, with the concept of *Entzauberung* (disenchantment), described the disappearance of religious meaning in the secular world; but he could not explain why this disappearance simultaneously enabled the transfer of religious values into secular institutions. The Content/Form Asymmetry theory resolves this apparent paradox: theolysis dissolves content while setting form free — and form is powerful, because form carries that capacity's most refined, most distilled accumulation.

This pattern of residue is not unique to Western and Christian civilization. In Islamic civilization, the great translation movement of the Abbasid period — the transfer of Greek, Indian, and Persian science into Arabic — is a transfer of form fed by religious legitimacy that nonetheless developed its own secular logic over time: the tradition of philosophical inquiry carried questions that did not fit within crystallized theology into new disciplines, and this accumulation made possible the scientific advance of twelfth- and thirteenth-century Europe. In the Indian tradition, the edicts the Mauryan emperor Ashoka had carved into stone in the third century BCE — nonviolence (*ahimsa*) toward all living beings and the principle of public responsibility — are an ancient example of a form transfer carrying religious content (Buddhism) into governance ethics; they can be counted among the precursors of the modern state's norm against cruelty. In China, the Confucian concepts of *ren* (humaneness) and *li* (proper relations) institutionalized a norm of moral reciprocity regardless of origin, and this norm has continued to live on as form in East Asian legal and governance traditions even after losing its theogenic content.

### **The Fractal Mechanism — The Same Operation at Micro and Macro Scale:**

The five pieces of evidence for the Constitutional Residue Theory show *what* survives; the question of *how* remains — how does a reformer transform a crystallized system in a lasting way? The book answers this question through historical comparison: comparing those who produced lasting reform (Moses, Muhammad, Luther, Gandhi, Mandela) with those who did not reach the same goal (Jesus's original egalitarian message, Jan Hus, Giordano Bruno), four variables remain constant — *source of authority* (using the system's own language of legitimacy), *threshold calculation* (correctly gauging the maximum change the system can bear), *offering an alternative* (preparing a new order before tearing down the old, without leaving a vacuum), and *timing* (aligning change with the moment the system is most visibly in crisis). When all four are right together, reform becomes lasting; when even one is missing, the system either rejects the reformer (Hus, for lack of a tool — the printing press; Bruno, for failing to correctly gauge the threshold) or the content reverts once the reform becomes institutionalized (as with the reversal of Jesus's egalitarian message within the later hierarchical church institution).

The real claim of these four variables is scale-independence — the book calls this the *Fractal Mechanism*. The same four steps operate with the same structure not only at the scale of civilization, but in the most ordinary relationships of authority in daily life: a building manager presenting a fee increase in the language of shared benefit, proposing it without exceeding the threshold, keeping a budget plan ready, and choosing the right moment after a breakdown — all can be explained by the same four variables. The claim this scale-independence carries for the paper is clear: the mechanism established at the individual level in Section 4 (the theogenic drive, MADAD, synaesthesia, theolysis) is not merely a personal phenomenology — the same structural logic operates in collective and institutional transformation through the same four variables. This forms the exact symmetric counterpart to the dark trajectory of theolepsia discussed in Section 4.1 (theoleptic thumos; Milgram, Asch, Zimbardo): one shows the abuse of the mechanism, while the Fractal Mechanism shows the same capacity's legitimate and lasting use.

**Institutional decay read through the same framework:** The Fractal Mechanism's pattern of success remains incomplete without its pattern of failure. Toynbee formulated civilizational collapse in the thesis that a "creative minority turns into a dominant minority": the pioneering group that produces creative solutions to a crisis gradually stops defending those solutions and begins merely protecting its own position. Fukuyama (2014), half a century later, rediscovered this thesis at the institutional level: he showed that powerful institutions paradoxically fall victim to their own strength, as elites gradually capture the institution for their own narrow interests — a process he named *repatrimonialization*, the institution becoming "family property" once again. Fukuyama's description is meticulous: who captures it, by what means, in what sequence. But a question remains unanswered at the sociological level: why does elites' drive to protect the institution go so far beyond rational interest-calculation that it reaches a point where they identify the institution with their own identity? Within the Protodik framework, this question is answered at the mechanism level: repatrimonialization is the Fractal Mechanism's four variables operating in reverse — the source of authority no longer serves the system's shared language but the elite's own interest; the threshold calculation no longer measures the change the system can bear but the privilege the elite stands to lose; no alternative is offered because doing so would run counter to the elite's interest; timing turns the moment of crisis not into opportunity but into defense. The institution, in the precise reverse of the theolysis that gave birth to it, crystallizes once again — this time not around a principle, but around the interest of those who hold it.

**The Silent Founder — the selective erasure of institutional memory:** The lasting reforms produced by the Fractal Mechanism carry an additional pattern: the reformer is systematically erased from the later memory of the institution they founded. What Hammurabi, Moses, Jesus, Muhammad, and Ashoka have in common is that the only legitimizing language available to them when first formulating principles such as individual legal responsibility, early forms of separation of powers, and universal human dignity was religious — no secular alternative yet existed. Modern secular legal systems have inherited these principles but largely do not cite the source; the principle remains, the founder falls silent. The book calls this the *Silent Founder* — an inverted version of crystallization: crystallization typically preserves form while erasing content (Section 4.2), whereas the Silent Founder preserves form (the legal principle) while erasing the *source*. This carries no implication of ingratitude; it is a natural byproduct of secularization — but it fills a gap that Weber's thesis of the routinization of charisma leaves unfinished: routinization does not explain why it preserves form while erasing source; the Silent Founder explains this selectivity through theolysis's form/content distinction.

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## 6. The Logic of the Normative Leap

How is a normative stance derived from the descriptive explanation of the belief mechanism? This transition requires careful philosophical construction.

The standard objection is this: "is" does not yield "ought" (Hume's is-ought problem). From CSR findings — "belief works this way" — the conclusion "you should do this" cannot follow. This objection is valid. But the Protodik Hypothesis does not make this leap directly.

The normative leap is composed of the union of three propositions:

**Proposition 1 (empirical):** The capacity for meaning-making (thumos) is a biological endowment produced by death-awareness. This capacity can function across many domains, religion included.

**Proposition 2 (empirical):** Crystallization is the locking of this capacity into a particular mold. Once locked, the capacity serves the mold; the mold, in turn, closes questions.

**Proposition 3 (value proposition):** For the capacity for meaning-making — thumos — to remain alive and free is a better state than remaining locked.

Only the third proposition is normative; and this proposition remains idle without the first two. The originality of the Protodik Hypothesis is that it shows this third proposition can be validated without answering the God question. Thumos's value is independent of the functional power it exhibits in whichever direction it flows — whether it turns toward the theogenic drive, or toward art, science, or ethics, that capacity is valuable.

This is not a *foundational* normative proposition — it is debatable, even rejectable. But the proposition's rejectability does not weaken it; on the contrary, it is a necessary feature of any normative framework compatible with scientific methodology.

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## 7. The Seven Principles of Protodism and the Claim to Originality

The bridge between descriptive findings and normative stance is built upon the seven principles of Protodism.

**1. The Prototype Principle:** Religion is the first draft of the search for meaning — neither an error nor the final answer. This principle stands against both the error of religious traditionalism ("religion is sacred and unchangeable") and the error of reductionism ("religion is merely an illusion").

**2. The Crystallization Paradox:** Every successful belief system freezes over. This is not a condemnation but an observation — and this observation is what makes noticing crystallization valuable.

**3. Coordinate Limitation:** No definition can encompass an infinite reality. To define is to limit. This principle is the epistemic justification for a structural distance from any absolute framework.

**4. The Necessity of Interiority:** Meaning does not come from outside; it is produced from within. This principle overlaps with Frankl's logotherapy tradition — but while Frankl preserves an assumption of God, this principle holds that assumption in suspension.

**5. Awareness of Safe Mode:** Seeing that the shield is not a capacity is valuable. A mind living in safe mode does not know the lock exists. This principle is the

normative expression of the MADAD concept.

**6. The Invisible Step Principle:** Every argument carries more steps than it appears to. Breaking points are most often hidden in the invisible bridge between two propositions. The sentence "consciousness exists, therefore God exists" conceals two steps: *the unexplained* → *the necessarily supernatural* → *this tradition's God*. Making the steps visible does not refute the argument; it shows where it stands. This principle is the practical dimension of MADAD: when thumos stands before an argument, it can ask how many steps were skipped — and each skipped step is a testable claim.

**7. The Breaking Principle:** Protodism, too, can crystallize. This inevitability is written openly into the framework itself. If one day these principles conflict with what you discover — break those molds. This is the epistemic safeguard that works from within against the danger of over-identification; it is the framework burying within itself the capacity to transcend itself.

These seven principles carry a feature unmatched in the existing philosophy-of-religion literature: **all of them hold regardless of whether God exists or not.** A theist, an agnostic, an atheist; a Muslim, a Buddhist, a Hindu, or an unbeliever — all can find a meaningful place within this framework, because the framework debates not the God question, but the mechanism that produces the God question. This paper develops the seven principles through Abrahamic traditions and their secular extensions; whether they apply with the same explanatory power to a Vaishnava monk on the banks of the Ganges or a Zen practitioner in Kyoto remains an open question awaiting empirical testing beyond the scope of this paper.

## Similar Work in the Literature, and the Difference

This claim to originality does not diminish the contribution of earlier work; but it points to a specific gap.

Alain de Botton's *Religion for Atheists* (2012) comes closest: it explores what religious practices might be useful for in a secular context. But de Botton's framework remains *instrumental* — what can we take from the institution? The Protodik Hypothesis, by contrast, examines the institution's own capacity to transcend itself.

Robert Bellah's *Religion in Human Evolution* (2011) examines the Axial Age and traces the evolution of religious thought across human history. But Bellah remains descriptive; he does not derive a normative stance.

Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* (2007) shows how the modern world has drifted from religion, and what this drift has brought with it. But Taylor's framework rests on Catholic ground and treats the loss of belief as a loss; it does not position the freeing of thumos as a gain.

Paul Tillich's concept of *ultimate concern* (1957) is the closest philosophical counterpart to the theogenic drive: the existential orientation in which a person questions the ground of their own existence, confronts their finitude, and reconstitutes themselves in that confrontation. Tillich constructed this as a capacity present in every human being, independent of belief in God — a point that overlaps with the Protodik Hypothesis. But Tillich's point of divergence is decisive: Tillich critiqued the institution from within through the "Protestant Principle," yet remained *inside* the institution. The concept of the "God above God" is an elegant move to

transcend the defined God — but this move does not abandon the concept of God, it merely renders it abstract. The Protodik Hypothesis's difference is this: thumos suffices, there is no "higher" coordinate to reach. Tillich felt the mechanism; he could not name it.

William James, in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), examined religious experience not from outside but from within. James's pragmatic question — "what does this experience do for a person's life?" — bracketed the theological debate and treated religious experience as a legitimate object of human psychology. Toward the end of *Varieties* he took a bolder step: in religious experience, a person makes genuine contact with something beyond their own limits — James called this "*the more*." This contact does not prove God's existence, but it does say that the experience is not mere subjective illusion. James deliberately left "the more" open — because to name it is to force it into a mold. The Protodik Hypothesis shakes hands with James here: what meaning-weaving points toward is real; the mold that names it is not. The point of divergence is this: James could not situate why it works on evolutionary ground — in 1902, there was no primate research, no Terror Management Theory, no neuroscience. The theogenic drive is an attempt to name James's "the more" at the level of evolutionary mechanism.

Heinz Streib and his team's deconversion research (2009, 2014, 2021) has systematically mapped the process of leaving institutional belief. But this literature remains descriptive: *why* does theolysis occur, and *how* does it unfold? What happens afterward? In particular, the critical distinction between apolysis (quiet departure from an institution, without the theogenic drive being touched) and theolysis — and this distinction's role in differentiating the apoluthos type from the metaxitos — has not yet been named in deconversion research. Lateral shift — the persistence of the theotopos position while exiting an old mold and entering a new one — has likewise not been given theoretical grounding in this literature.

## **Systemic Inventory: Twelve Corners the Literature Leaves Open**

The comparisons above are not isolated; they are part of a broader pattern. Most of the twentieth century's great thinkers saw one corner of the Protodik Hypothesis's picture, but could not find the piece that would complete it. This pattern can be systematized into four categories; each shows the gap between what the thinker *saw* and what they *could not explain* — and how that gap closes within the Protodik framework. (Arendt, Berger, Frankl, James, Wittgenstein, Weber, and Taylor are natural members of this inventory; since these thinkers have already been treated above or in Section 4.5, they are not repeated here.)

**Diagnosis present, mechanism absent.** Durkheim, in *Le Suicide* (1897), defined anomie: when religious integration dissolves, the individual is set adrift. But the question of *why* this drift occurs is left unanswered. The Protodik answer: MADAD's theogenic drive left without an address — when integration dissolves, the drive does not disappear, it loses its direction. Eric Hoffer, in *The True Believer* (1951), historically documented lateral shift: a fanatical communist can convert into a fanatical fascist with startling ease. Hoffer depicts this fluidity but cannot supply its mechanism; the Protodik answer is that the theogenic drive can flow from one crystallization to another without theolysis occurring — the content changes, the drive's search for satisfaction continues. Erich Fromm, in *Escape from Freedom* (1941), defined the escape from freedom and the "authoritarian character"; but the impulse underlying this escape remains unnamed. Within the Protodik framework, this is the theogenic drive left without an address when crystallization collapses without theolysis having occurred — Fromm's authoritarian character can be read as

the search for a new crystallization by a mind whose safe mode has closed but which has never undergone theolysis.

**Mechanism present, ground absent.** Nietzsche, in *Also Sprach Zarathustra* (1883–1885), depicted the Übermensch — the human being who creates their own values — but could not find an evolutionary or cognitive ground for this figure. The Protodik answer: the thumos set free after theolysis is an evolutionarily real capacity — the Übermensch is not a metaphorical ideal but a concrete description of thumolysis. Camus, in *L'Homme Révolté* (1951), defined revolt — accepting the absurd and continuing to live anyway; but why revolt itself is possible, which capacity it draws upon, is left open. The Protodik answer: if the theogenic drive is evolutionarily rooted, the absurd is not merely tragic data but evidence of our capacity for meaning-making — of thumos itself. Rawls, in *A Theory of Justice* (1971), cannot fully resolve the motivational question at the heart of his theory of justice: why would the "reasonable person" behind the veil of ignorance want to care about another's interest? Within the Protodik framework, this motivation can be explained by an individual whose theogenic drive is active being able to see that another person, too, carries their own capacity for meaning-making.

**Universal pattern present, source absent.** Jaspers, in *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte* (1949), defined the Axial Age — the simultaneous emergence, between roughly 800 and 200 BCE, of similar philosophical-religious breakthroughs across five independent geographies (Greece, Israel, India, China, Persia). Jaspers could not explain the *cause* of this simultaneity. The Protodik answer: crystallization pressure reaching the same threshold simultaneously across multiple geographies — a collective wave of synaesthesia. Campbell, in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949), showed the cross-cultural universality of the hero's journey, but could not fully name the source of this universality; within the Protodik framework, the source is the universality of the theogenic drive — the call corresponds to synaesthesia, crossing the threshold to metaxima, death/rebirth to theolysis, and the return to the post-protodik individual's social reintegration. Jung saw that the God-image in the collective unconscious carried a real psychological force and called it an "archetype"; but the question of why archetypes are universal remains open within the psychoanalytic framework. The Protodik answer: archetypes are the theogenic drive's crystallization forms across different cultures — they are universal because they all share the same evolutionary capacity as their source. Victor Turner, in *The Ritual Process* (1969), defined liminality — the threshold state, the condition of being neither here nor there — with precision, but could not supply the mechanism for exiting this state. The Protodik answer: liminality is metaxima; the one who completes the passage is the one who undergoes theolysis, while the one who returns is the one who closes back into safe mode. Girard, in *La Violence et le Sacré* (1972), defined the scapegoat mechanism, but cannot explain why and how this mechanism came to be questioned. The Protodik answer: the one who questions the scapegoat mechanism is the one undergoing synaesthesia — the mind that, while still inside the mechanism, can see it from outside.

**Asks the question, does not answer it.** Kant, in the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (1781), asked "What may I hope?" and could only approach it through the assumption of a moral God. The Protodik answer: the capacity for hope is itself the theogenic drive — if this drive is evolutionarily real, the hope it produces is real too; it requires no assumption.

What this inventory shows is clear: the Protodik Hypothesis rejects none of the existing academic frameworks. It accepts what each has seen and carries it one step further — supplying the missing mechanism, ground, or source.

**The unique composition of the Protodik Hypothesis is this:** a cognitive-evolutionary explanation of the mechanism + the prototype/crystallization conceptual pair + the theogenic drive/thumos distinction (completed with the concepts of theolepsia, synaesthesia, metaxima, apolysis, and lateral shift) + a derivation of normative stance + the suspension of the God question justified through the Coordinate Paradox. No other study contains all of these components at once.

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## 8. Conditions of Refutation and Limits

A necessary feature of any scientific hypothesis is to explicitly state its conditions of refutation. The Protodik Hypothesis has been designed to meet this standard.

**Empirical-layer refutation condition:** If archaeological, neurobiological, or comparative religious-history research shows that the capacity for belief is culturally acquired and not an evolutionary endowment, the hypothesis's first empirical proposition collapses. The evidence developmental psychology research has offered so far (Barrett, 2012; Kelemen, 2004, 2013) tends to support this proposition; but the literature remains open.

**Crystallization Paradox refutation condition:** If it can be shown that a belief system can grow without limit without institutionalizing — that is, if the crystallization mechanism is not necessary — the paradox collapses. This test can be conducted through historical case analysis. Existing evidence points the other way: no belief movement is known to have survived without institutionalizing.

**Normative-layer refutation condition:** If it can be shown that thumos remaining locked produces better outcomes than its being set free — in terms of psychological well-being, meaning-satisfaction, and social cooperation — the normative proposition is opened to debate. This test is possible through the longitudinal methodology of deconversion research.

**Universality-claim refutation condition:** If it can be shown that the theogenic-drive mechanism does not exist outside Abrahamic traditions, or that where it does exist it is a culture-specific structure rather than a culture-independent one, the universality claim collapses. The Dharmic and East Asian examples presented in this paper (moksha, nirvana, anatta, the Tao, Dulal Maharaj's practice of tapas) trace this mechanism's presence, but at the level of indicative observation rather than systematic testing.

**The Protodik Hypothesis's own inherent paradox:** This is the hypothesis's most honest face. Can Protodism itself crystallize one day? Yes. This inevitability is written explicitly into the framework. This is exactly what the Breaking Principle, formulated in Section 7, addresses: if these principles conflict with what you discover, break those molds. The anodic stance is the lived form of this principle — knowing and saying that crystallization is always possible is the strongest epistemic safeguard working against it from within.

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## 9. Comparison with the Therapeutic Literature: Summary

The comparison carried out in Sections 4.6–4.9 shows that the Protodik Hypothesis offers a framework complementary to, not an alternative to, the clinical psychology literature. ACT's capacity for cognitive defusion overlaps with MADAD's first two layers; but at points where identity-belief fusion intensifies, it cannot produce an explanation at the mechanism level. Logotherapy's will to meaning carries the functional counterpart of the thumos concept; but activating the will to meaning without seeing the crystallization cycle keeps the capacity circling within the existing frame. The Continuing Bonds model shows the empirical existence of transformation without severance; the Protodik Hypothesis explains, at the mechanism level, why this transformation is possible.

The summary of this comparison is this: existing clinical tools succeed in cases where identity-belief fusion remains below a certain intensity. The Protodik Hypothesis's original contribution is to conceptually define the cases above this intensity threshold — the apoluthos type (Section 11), deep identity-belief fusion, and the theogenic drive's migration into secular molds (Section 10) — and to offer the operational framework that carries this definition into an empirical research program.

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## 10. Secular Crystallizations: The Mechanism Does Not Choose Religion

The concept of the theogenic drive established in Section 4.1 contains a thesis: this drive does not choose religion, it chooses a *mold*. The religious institution has historically been the most successful crystallization form of this drive; but the reason for its success is not its uniqueness, but that it meets the evolutionary need most comprehensively. The same mechanism flows into different vessels when conditions change.

The theoretical ground for this thesis is systematized by the manuscript's "Seven Crystallizations of a Single Capacity" framework: if the theogenic drive is humanity's defining capacity, then humanity's great cultural productions — religion, art, philosophy, science, law, ethics, mythology — are different crystallization forms of the same capacity. The source of the seven channels is singular. This framework is a mechanism-level extension of Becker's (1973) "immortality project" thesis: Becker defined all cultural production as a response to death-awareness; the Seven Crystallizations framework shows *from which capacity* and *by which mechanism* this production flows. Secular crystallizations are therefore not exceptional — they are not the drive's aberrant behavior, but its *ordinary operation*.

The most productive way to test this thesis is to look at whether the crystallization cycle can be applied to non-religious objects in a modern secular context.

Five cases support this thesis.

**Nationalism:** Émile Durkheim's concept of collective effervescence and Ernest Renan's formula that "a nation is a daily plebiscite" show how nationalism constructs

a founding sacred narrative. Emilio Gentile's (2006) analysis of political religion systematizes this observation: nationalism has developed sacred texts (constitutions, anthems), martyrs (war memorials), rituals (national-day ceremonies), and excommunication mechanisms (accusations of treason). The crystallization cycle has produced a structure identical to a religious institution — the content has changed, the form has not.

**Wellness and the Cult of Health:** Eva Illouz's (2008) analysis of therapeutic culture shows how self-improvement discourse has turned into a narrative of salvation. The discourse of "detox from toxins," "treat your body as a temple," "practice mindfulness" is the secular version of the answer the theogenic drive gives to death anxiety. Christopher Lasch's (1979) analysis of the culture of narcissism explains the sociological ground of this transformation. The wellness industry has produced experts (nutrition coaches, life consultants), sacred texts (bestselling self-help books), narratives of stumbling (the cheat-day confession), and congregations (CrossFit communities, veganism networks).

**Social Media Congregation:** Sherry Turkle's (2011) analysis of the connected age shows how digital platforms meet the need for identity and belonging. Algorithmic echo chambers accelerate the theogenic drive's crystallization cycle: they build a homogeneous congregation, filter out outside voices, and cast out heretics. Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulation takes on new meaning in this context — simulation is the reproduction of the sacred in the absence of an original. The "cancel culture" mechanism of the social media congregation is the digital counterpart of the excommunication ritual.

**Popular Psychology:** Popular psychology discourse, fed by the logotherapy tradition but shedding its philosophical depth, frames meaning-making as a technical problem. The discourse of "heal your trauma," "rescue your inner child," "learn your attachment style" is the theogenic drive translated into psychological language. Once this discourse crystallizes, it produces a new orthodoxy: those who do not know the right concepts are deemed "unaware," and those who do not command the therapeutic idiom are kept outside the congregation.

**Festival:** A tomato fight that began spontaneously in 1945 in the Spanish town of Buñol became a yearly expectation within a year — La Tomatina. In the 1950s, the Franco regime banned the festival; the official grounds were striking: it had no religious meaning. The public's response came in the shape of a ceremony — in 1957, villagers placed a giant tomato in a coffin and held a genuine funeral; that same year, the town council formally recognized the festival. This pattern is not unique to a single case: in Russia, the Orthodox Epiphany ice-immersion ritual returned after Soviet suppression in 1991 as both a religious and a parallel secular ("Walrus Club") practice; in China, the Dragon Boat Festival, after the Cultural Revolution's suppression, was recognized as an official holiday in 2008, having shed its religious origin and taken a sporting form. Three regimes — Franco because it lacked religion, the Soviets because it had religion, the Cultural Revolution because it was old — tried, on three opposing grounds, to suppress the same kind of collective ritual; all three failed. This convergence shows not only that the crystallization mechanism does not choose religion, but that it endures no matter from which direction it is suppressed.

The common pattern across these five cases offers a mechanism-level answer to Berger's desecularization thesis. Berger (1999) observed that religion had "returned"; but this observation rests on an incomplete definition. The theogenic drive never left — only the vessel into which it flowed changed. Secular modernity

weakened religion but could not dissolve the theogenic drive; the drive produced new crystallization forms. The Protodik Hypothesis argues that this process is a predictable outcome: until MADAD activates, it cannot be seen that the drive chooses not religion but *mold*, and new molds continue to be produced as functional copies of the old ones.

This analysis also contains a correction to the existing bridge attempts (Section 3). Spirituality discourse, while rejecting the institutional religious mold, carries the risk of entering the same crystallization cycle; the risk noted in Section 3.3 becomes concrete in these secular crystallization cases. The position of "spiritual but not religious" can itself crystallize — astrology can turn into dogma, the belief that "the universe hears you" can become a silent copy of institutional religion. The mechanism chooses structure, not content.

This structural persistence of crystallization also carries a class dimension. Gramsci's (1971) concept of hegemony describes the same freezing at the social level: when cultural leadership operates through persuasion rather than force, even oppressed groups come to take the dominant worldview for "common sense" — an interpretation appearing "natural" is the societal relative of the crystallization the Protodik Hypothesis describes at the individual-cognitive level. Bourdieu (1991) unites the two: the religious field, like art or education, produces a habitus that monopolizes its own capital — sacred authority, theological knowledge; crystallized dogma is not merely a false belief, but a class boundary determining who has the right to speak. This sociological layer operates implicitly in each of the five cases above: the experts of the wellness industry, the algorithmic authorities of the social media congregation, those who command the therapeutic idiom of popular psychology — all produce a new habitus that monopolizes its own sacred capital.

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## 11. Apoluthos: The Phenomenology of the Silent Majority

The deconversion research literature has focused predominantly on two types: individuals who actively break from institutional belief and publicly express this break, and individuals who preserve their beliefs. Between these two extremes lies a third type that has received comparatively little space in the research literature yet constitutes the vast majority of humanity: the individual who quietly drifts away, described by Streib and Keller (2014) as engaging in "privatizing exit."

The Protodik Hypothesis calls this type *apoluthos*: one who has left institutional belief — but through this departure not by way of theolysis, only through leaving the institution. The distinction between *apoluthos* and *theolutos* is critical: the *theolutos* is one whose theogenic drive has closed; the *apoluthos* is one whose theogenic drive has never been touched at all — the drive continues to flow quietly within, as a private life practice. For this reason, the *apoluthos* occupies the *theotropos* position: they have no institutional frame, and have not relocated to a new address either, but their capacity for meaning-making is still directed by the theogenic drive. The concept defining this process is *apolysis* (apo + lysis: dissolution through distancing) — departure from the institution, but a departure occurring without the theogenic drive being touched. This is the Protodik terminological counterpart of Streib and Keller's (2014) finding of "privatizing exit." The *apoluthos* concept shows not that theolysis requires a dramatic moment of enlightenment, but rather that, more often

than not, it never occurs at all — that people go on living without the institution, yet with the theogenic drive.

The phenomenology of the apoluthos carries several characteristic features. A *preference for invisibility*: the apoluthos does not announce that they have left the institution — they cannot, or do not wish to, bear the social, professional, and familial cost. In contexts like Turkey, this cost is especially high: the visibility of prayer and Ramadan, congregational identity, and family pressure turn disengagement from institutional belief into a social reckoning rather than an individual one. But this pattern is not unique to Turkey: quietly withdrawing from the visibility of the five daily prayers in Iran, decoupling from belief content while continuing to observe caste expectations and family rituals in India, continuing to participate in Confucian ancestor rites in South Korea, or the position of someone in Japan who draws an *omikuj*i fortune slip without truly believing in it — all are cultural variants of the apoluthos. *Inconsistent practice*: the apoluthos continues to participate in rituals — at funerals, at holidays, under family pressure — but no longer internalizes these practices as institutional commitment. Even so, the theogenic drive continues to flow quietly: private prayer, personal ritual, meaning-laden practices continue to operate outside the institution but within the drive. *Relationship to metaxima*: the apoluthos is distinguished from the metaxitos by not having experienced synaesthesia; they have not seen the existence of the theogenic drive — they have only stepped outside the institution. This distinction matters therapeutically: the metaxitos sees, but is still inside; the apoluthos has never seen the mechanism at all.

The clinical significance of this picture is clear, and it completes the therapeutic comparison developed in Sections 4.6–4.9. ACT's cognitive-defusion techniques and logotherapy's work on the will to meaning meet a particular limit in the apoluthos type: this individual has already disengaged from the institution of belief, but their theogenic drive remains active. The contribution of the Continuing Bonds model (Klass et al., 1996) makes the most direct contact here — but for the apoluthos, the real question is not transforming the bond, but making the bond's existence visible.

### 11.1 The Complete Seeker Typology

Apoluthos is part of a broader seeker typology developed by the Protodik Hypothesis. These types are not permanent labels but momentary positions:

| Type              | Theogenic Drive                 | Definition                                                                                        |
|-------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Protodist</b>  | In the process of closing       | Has seen the crystallization; living theolysis or in its process. Thumos is operating.            |
| <b>Arketodist</b> | Closed (theolysis has occurred) | Has passed through a crystallized system, has reached the theolutos position, has paid its price. |

| Type              | Theogenic Drive                         | Definition                                                                                              |
|-------------------|-----------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Arketodist</b> | Closed (theolysis has occurred)         | Has passed through a crystallized system, has reached the theoluthos position, has paid its price.      |
| <b>Endodist</b>   | Never crystallized                      | Has never entered any mold. Thumos exists, but there is no experience of institutional crystallization. |
| <b>Metanoist</b>  | Active — theotropos by conscious choice | Questioned, left belief, then returned by conscious choice. Not inheritance, but choice.                |

This typology renders visible a plurality that studies focused solely on active breaks cannot see within the deconversion research literature. The original psychological profile of the apoluthos type — and the long-term effects of a theogenic drive quietly persisting in the theotropos position — have not yet been systematically researched.

The academic counterpart of the apoluthos type also points to a gap in research terms. Streib et al.'s (2009) Germany-U.S. comparative deconversion study and Bleidorn et al.'s (2024) longitudinal data focus on active deconversion processes. The original psychological profile of the apoluthos type — the long-term effects of a quietly suspended theolysis on well-being — has not yet been systematically researched. This gap can be positioned as a priority testing ground for the development of the MADAD scale proposed in Section 4.3.

## 12. The Complete Logic of the Normative Leap

The three propositions presented in Section 6 carry the paper's most critical philosophical claim: a normative stance can be derived from descriptive findings — without answering the God question. This section aims to construct that argument more completely.

**Hume's limit, and how it is crossed:** Hume's is-ought problem — "is" does not yield "ought" — is a philosophically valid caution, and this paper does not violate that limit. The normative leap is produced not *directly* from empirical findings, but from the joint operation of three propositions. The first two are empirical, the third normative — and the normative status of the third is explicitly declared:

*Proposition 1 (empirical):* The capacity for meaning-making — thumos — is an

evolutionary endowment. Psychological functioning, meaning-satisfaction, and existential orientation show a positive correlation with the activity of this capacity (Frankl, 1946; Yalom, 1980; Ryff & Singer, 2008).

*Proposition 2 (empirical):* The crystallization cycle locks this capacity into a particular mold. Once locked, the capacity serves the mold; questions transcending the mold are closed. This process is formalized by the way Gärdenfors's (1988) AGM theory's "minimum change" principle turns into a "zero change" principle under identity-belief fusion.

*Proposition 3 (normative):* For the capacity for meaning-making to remain alive and free is a better state than remaining locked.

Only the third proposition is normative. And this proposition does not require answering the God question — because thumos's value is independent of which direction it will flow in. Whether it turns toward the theogenic drive, or toward art, science, ethics, or relationships, this capacity's remaining alive is valuable. A theist can accept this proposition — for them, thumos's being locked also locks the capacity oriented toward God. An atheist can accept the same proposition on different grounds. Even as the epistemic position differs, the normative proposition retains its validity.

**The proposition's rejectability:** The third proposition is debatable. If it can be shown that thumos remaining locked produces better outcomes than its being set free — in terms of psychological well-being, meaning-satisfaction, and social cooperation — the normative proposition is opened to debate. This test is possible through longitudinal deconversion research. The proposition's rejectability does not weaken it — on the contrary, it is a necessary feature of a normative framework compatible with scientific methodology.

**Practical non-theism's relationship to the normative leap:** The "practical non-theism" component (Section 4.4) is the action-oriented extension of the normative leap's third proposition. Even though the God question is left unanswered, the framework anticipates that meaning-making does not depend on the assumption of God, and proceeds from this anticipation. This is not the claim "God does not exist" — it is the functional observation that thumos can be set free even without the God question being resolved.

**The difference from Aristotle:** This normative framework bears a superficial resemblance to the Aristotelian eudaimonia tradition — both see the realization of human capacity as the foundation of the good life. The point of divergence is this: Aristotle assumes human nature has a teleological orientation; the Protodik Hypothesis makes no such assumption. Thumos's value is derived not from a metaphysical purpose of human nature, but from the capacity's functional power. This distinction preserves the framework's consistency with methodological agnosticism.

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## 13. The Mechanism's Own Risk: Protodism's Inherent Paradox

The refutation conditions presented in Section 8 address the fragilities within the Protodik Hypothesis's empirical, conceptual, and normative layers. This section

addresses a different but related question: not the framework's refutation *from outside*, but the risk of its transformation *from within*.

The Protodik Hypothesis proposes that the crystallization cycle is universal. Every successful belief system crystallizes. This thesis can — and should — be applied to its own framework as well.

**The instrument metaphor:** A framework, depending on the hands that use it, can take on different functions. Nietzsche's analysis of the will to power has been made into material for a master-race ideology by some readers; Darwinism has been instrumentalized into social Darwinism. The Protodik Hypothesis's analysis of the mechanism is open to a similar transformation: someone who knows the theogenic drive and the crystallization cycle can use this knowledge not for awareness but to manipulate others. The discourse "your belief has crystallized — my framework is liberating" can turn into a new instrument of power. This risk is not genuinely addressed unless it is written openly into the framework itself.

**The problem of triggering:** When Copernicus's heliocentric theory, Darwin's thesis of evolution, and Spinoza's conception of God were first disseminated, they did not reduce social conflict — they increased it. Explaining the mechanism activates that mechanism's defensive reflexes; in individuals with a strong theogenic drive, an attempt at awareness may trigger a deeper closing rather than an opening. This points not to the framework's falsity, but to the nonlinearity of its dissemination dynamics. At the practical level, this finding matters: MADAD activation occurs not by force, but once conditions have matured.

**The "awakened/herd" risk:** This is the Protodik Hypothesis's most original and most dangerous potential crystallization. The distinction between "those who see the mechanism" and "those who do not yet see it" can turn into a hierarchy of the elect. Luther's reforming consciousness eventually turned into institutional Protestantism; the French Revolution's ideal of liberty turned into Jacobin terror; Freud's psychoanalytic framework turned into a dogmatic school. The common structure of these examples is that a liberating awareness itself produces a new crystallization. Protodism is not exempt from this cycle — and accepting this lack of exemption is a necessary part of the framework's epistemic honesty.

**Crystallization as a shared adversary framework:** Awareness of these risks may open an unexpected ground for dialogue among different faith traditions. The crystallization mechanism — the institution's closing of questions, the freezing of the theogenic search — is a dynamic every great tradition has also critiqued from within. In Buddhism, this critique finds its sharpest form within the Zen tradition: the teaching "if you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him" is an internal defense mechanism against conceptual crystallization. In Christianity, the mystical tradition — running from Meister Eckhart to John of the Cross — represents a search for direct experience that institutional dogma could not freeze over. In Islam, Sufism, along the line running from Ibn Arabi to Rumi, can be read as an internal wave of theolysis against the ossification of jurisprudence (fiqh) and theology (kalam). In Hinduism, the question the Upanishadic tradition directed at Vedic ritualism, the Bhakti movement's challenge to Brahmin hierarchy, and the emergence of Jainism — all follow the same pattern: a wave of awareness arising from within produces a new form outside the crystallization that triggered it. In Confucianism, too, this trace can be followed: the Neo-Confucian movement's reckoning with Buddhism is the Chinese-context version of the same mechanism. The most productive moments in interreligious dialogue throughout long stretches of history are those in which this shared structural danger is recognized. The Protodik Hypothesis's concept of

crystallization can, in this sense, offer a bridge language between traditions — but only on the condition that this language itself does not crystallize.

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## 14. Conclusion

This paper has shown the specific gap the Protodik Hypothesis fills in religious studies, along three axes.

**First axis — the normative limit of CSR:** The cognitive science of religion has powerfully explained the mechanism of belief but has methodologically avoided deriving normative conclusions. This avoidance is understandable; but it proves increasingly inadequate in the face of rising crises of meaning, deconversion trauma, and the problem of purposelessness in secular contexts.

**Second axis — the limit of existing bridges:** New atheism, post-secularism, and spirituality discourse have each built a partial bridge. But each is either forced to answer the God question, or neglects the individual existential plane, or gives up on asking about the source of experience. None can derive a normative stance from this knowledge once the mechanism is known.

**Third axis — the Protodik Hypothesis's original contribution:** The conceptual distinction between the theogenic drive and thumos makes the normative leap possible without answering the God question. This distinction establishes the epistemic position of "methodological agnosticism — practical non-theism" and offers a framework unprecedented in the religious studies literature.

In conclusion, the Protodik Hypothesis can be evaluated as the closest approach yet to filling the normative gap CSR has left — so long as it explicitly states its conditions of refutation, keeps the God question outside its scope, and honestly presents the normative proposition as an independent acceptance of value.

The field's next task is clear: the empirical testing of this framework. This paper, in Section 4.3, has offered an operational definition for MADAD, behavioral indicators, a neural hypothesis grounded in the Default Mode Network, and a proposal for a belief-specific metacognition scale — thereby taking the first step to carry the concept from the level of philosophical claim to the level of an empirical research program. The tasks ahead are these: mapping the theolysis/thumolysis process with longitudinal psychological data; integrating the metaxima period (the suspended position passed through after synaesthesia has occurred, before theolysis) into clinical psychology research; investigating the apoluthos type's original psychological profile within the triad of apolysis / lateral shift / theolysis (Section 11); systematically testing the Crystallization Paradox against comparative historical cases — including secular crystallizations (Section 10) — and testing the proposed Crystallization Awareness Scale for validity and reliability.

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