

The Greening Of Religious Institutions: Management Autonomy And Environmental Engagement In Practice

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Abstract: *The mounting ecological crisis has spurred religious institutions to re-examine their roles as moral and communal leaders in environmental stewardship. "Greening" religious institutions refers to the infusion of ecological consciousness into spiritual teachings, administrative frameworks, and every day practices of faith communities. This process reflects age-old doctrines of caring for creation, now repurposed to meet contemporary sustainability challenges. Despite the growing trend towards greening, not all religious bodies are equally equipped to translate environmental values into practical initiatives—much of this variation is rooted in the structure of governance autonomy. This article employs a comparative case study approach utilizing both hypothetical and documented examples to evaluate five religious institutions differing in governance autonomy, measured by decentralized decision-making, financial independence, and leadership control. Drawing on Resource Mobilization Theory, the study collects and analyses qualitative and quantitative data on the number, type, and impact of environmental initiatives (ranging from solar installations and waste recycling to eco-education and community gardens), as well as on congregational engagement rates. The study aims to investigate how governance autonomy affects the scale and effectiveness of environmental action within religious institutions, identify which sustainability measures thrive under varying governance models and to provide actionable recommendations for faith organizations seeking to enhance their ecological impact. The analysis also considers possible limitations, including the sample's geographic and institutional diversity, and the influence of external factors such as cultural and economic environments. Findings reveal that institutions with greater governance autonomy implement a broader and more impactful range of sustainability initiatives, achieving significantly higher levels of member engagement. These results advocate for empowering internal governance structures and grassroots innovation to advance environmental stewardship in faith-based contexts.*

Keywords: *Religious Institutions, Governance Autonomy, Sustainability, Environmental Initiatives, Resource Mobilization, Community Engagement*

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Concept of 'Greening' in Religious Institutions

'Greening' in religious institutions refers to the integration of ecological consciousness into the spiritual, ethical, and organizational practices of faith communities. It embodies the commitment to stewardship of the Earth, reflecting values of care for creation that are deeply rooted in many religious traditions. This

process involves both symbolic actions, such as eco-theological teachings, and practical initiatives like energy conservation, waste reduction, and sustainable resource use within religious bodies (Jones & Patel, 2020).

The interplay between governance autonomy and environmental engagement within religious institutions is a multidimensional topic that connects constitutional rights, internal management, ethical teachings, and societal influence. Understanding this relationship is crucial for assessing how religious bodies can contribute meaningfully to environmental sustainability while balancing internal self-governance and external expectations. Environmental engagement in religious institutions, guided by the principles of religious autonomy, represents a nuanced synthesis of spiritual self-governance and environmental stewardship. Religious autonomy—the constitutionally or culturally protected right of faith communities to govern their internal affairs—empowers religious institutions to interpret doctrine, allocate resources, and determine priorities rooted in their unique theological and ethical frameworks. Within this context, environmental engagement manifests as both an expression of faith and a practical commitment to ecological responsibility, stemming from internally generated mandates rather than external compulsion. Autonomous religious institutions have increasingly developed eco-theologies and religious teachings that sanctify the care for creation, positioning environmental stewardship as a sacred duty. Through sermons, religious education, festivals, and interpretive reforms, these institutions integrate ecological values with faith traditions, fostering deep moral resonance and community mobilization. Their freedom to govern allows for creative, tailored programming—ranging from green infrastructure projects and sacred forest preservation to waste management campaigns and sustainable resource initiatives—many of which are aligned closely with spiritual narratives and local contexts. The direct connection between religious leadership and congregational trust ensures strong legitimacy for these environmentally focused initiatives, as actions are authentically grounded in the community's shared beliefs and practices. Moreover, the adaptability afforded by autonomy facilitates context-sensitive responses: religious organizations can prioritize environmental issues most urgent to their immediate environments, whether combating desertification, protecting water sources, or preserving biodiversity. Despite these advantages, reliance on self-governance also introduces challenges: internal theological disagreements, institutional inertia, and capacity gaps may limit commitment, consistency, or innovation in environmental action. Some institutions, due to doctrinal or generational divides, interpret ecological engagement as secondary to core spiritual functions, resulting in slow adaptation or uneven responses across communities. Additionally, autonomous governance can foster insularity, where religious groups may resist collaboration or external oversight, potentially limiting their impact in broader environmental coalitions. Nonetheless, autonomy also enables interfaith and cross-sector partnerships on the institutions' own terms, offering pathways for pluralistic, value-centered cooperation with other religious and secular actors. High-profile initiatives, such as the UNEP's Faith for Earth program or the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, illustrate how religious autonomy can coexist with large-scale, impactful collaborations—demonstrating that respect for self-governance is compatible with collective ecological goals. Ultimately, environmental engagement in religious institutions, framed by the principles of religious autonomy, unfolds as a dynamic process shaped by the interplay of doctrinal authority, internal innovation, moral leadership, and community trust. By leveraging autonomy, religious bodies foster authentic, sustainable environmental action, ensure the resilience and adaptability of their programs, and contribute distinctively to broader societal efforts for environmental stewardship. Yet, the effectiveness of these contributions depends on their capacity for continual self-reflection, inclusivity, and the willingness to bridge autonomy with openness—balancing internally derived mandates with the demands of a rapidly changing ecological landscape. This balanced approach maximizes both the spiritual significance and practical efficacy of religious environmental initiatives, positioning religious institutions as pivotal actors in shaping a more sustainable and ethically grounded future.

1.2 Importance of Sustainability and Environmental Responsibility

In recent decades, the urgency of global environmental crises has heightened awareness across sectors, including religion. Sustainability has emerged as a critical ethical imperative, with religious institutions increasingly recognized as influential actors in promoting environmental responsibility (Brown, 2017). Given their moral authority and wide social reach, religious bodies can significantly contribute to societal

shifts towards eco-friendly practices and sustainable development.

1.3 Research Questions

This paper investigates the role of governance autonomy in shaping the environmental engagement of religious institutions. The research questions guiding this study are;

1. How does governance autonomy within religious bodies influence their environmental engagement and practical action?
2. How does the level of governance autonomy in religious institutions influence the scale, diversity, and impact of environmental initiatives implemented within these organizations?
3. What types of environmental programs (e.g., solar energy adoption, waste recycling, and eco-education) are most prevalent in religious institutions with varying degrees of self-governance?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Defining 'Greening' in Organizational and Religious Contexts

'Greening' refers to the process through which organizations, including religious institutions, integrate environmental values into their mission, operations, and cultural practices. In religious contexts, greening encompasses ethical stewardship—viewing humans as caretakers of the Earth—as well as incorporating eco-consciousness into ritual practices and institutional policies aimed at sustainability (Roberts, 2019). This multidimensional approach includes theological reinterpretations that emphasize environmental care as a spiritual duty alongside practical measures like reducing carbon footprints (Ahmed & Zhao, 2021).

2.2 Environmental Engagement of Religious Bodies: Motivations, Challenges, and Outcomes

Prior research highlights multiple motivations driving religious institutions towards environmental engagement, such as theological imperatives, community health concerns, and moral leadership roles. However, challenges persist, including resource constraints, doctrinal differences, and balancing tradition with innovation (Chavez, 2020). Outcomes of these engagements have ranged from increased community awareness and behavioural change to tangible ecological benefits like reduced energy use and improved waste management (Jones et al., 2022).

2.3 Management and Governance Autonomy in Religious Institutions

Governance autonomy refers to the degree of self-governance and decision-making freedom that religious bodies possess. Literature suggests that higher autonomy allows institutions to tailor environmental initiatives to their unique theological and community contexts without external interference (Williams, 2021; Lopez & Singh, 2022). Autonomy impacts organizational agility and the ability to mobilize internal resources for environmental programs, influencing both the scope and effectiveness of such initiatives (Brown & Taylor, 2020).

2.4 Practical Environmental Actions in Religious Bodies

Studies categorize environmental actions in religious settings into several key areas: energy conservation (e.g., installing solar panels), waste reduction (e.g., recycling programs), community gardens and food sustainability projects, eco-theology education, and environmental advocacy both within and beyond faith communities (Patel & Kumar, 2019; Green & Roberts 2021). These actions reflect a practical translation of religious environmental ethics into measurable outcomes.

2.5 Gaps and Unresolved Questions

Despite growing literature on environmental engagement and governance autonomy separately, few studies explicitly link the two concepts to assess how governance autonomy shapes practical environmental outcomes in religious organizations. There remains a gap in understanding the mechanisms by which autonomy translates into effective eco-conscious action, especially across diverse religious traditions and governance models. Addressing this gap is essential for developing frameworks that support sustainable transformation within faith-based bodies.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Resource Mobilization Theory

Resource Mobilization Theory (RMT) explains how organizations acquire and deploy resources—financial,

human, and symbolic—to achieve their goals (McCarthy & Zald, 1977). Within religious institutions, autonomous governance structures can better mobilize internal resources for environmental action, as decision-making freedom allows leadership to allocate funds, personnel, and social capital effectively towards greening initiatives (Jenkins 2019). RMT highlights the importance of organizational capacity and autonomy in sustaining long-term environmental programs (Taylor, 2020).

3.2 Stakeholder Theory

Stakeholder Theory emphasizes the role of multiple actors—religious communities, congregants, local societies, and environmental groups—in shaping organizational decisions (Freeman, 1984). In the context of religious bodies, governance autonomy affects how these institutions respond to stakeholder expectations related to environmental responsibility (Mitchell et al., 1997). Autonomous religious institutions can better negotiate and integrate diverse stakeholder interests, leading to more inclusive and impactful environmental practices (Brown & Singh, 2021).

3.3 Analytical Application of Theories

By combining Resource Mobilization and Stakeholder theories, this paper frames governance autonomy as a critical enabler that strengthens both resource acquisition and stakeholder engagement for environmental action. Autonomy enhances organizational flexibility and responsiveness, facilitating the design and implementation of practical sustainability initiatives that align with both internal values and external stakeholder demands (Lopez, 2022).

3.4 Hypotheses

Based on this theoretical foundation, the following hypotheses guide the study:

- **H1:** Higher governance autonomy within religious institutions correlates with a greater diversity and scale of practical environmental initiatives.
- **H2:** Institutional support, coupled with leadership freedom granted by autonomous governance, predicts higher innovation and effectiveness in environmental engagement.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative comparative case study design to explore the relationship between governance autonomy and environmental engagement in religious institutions. The case study approach allows for an in-depth understanding of organizational dynamics and practical environmental actions within varied governance contexts (Yin, 2018). Comparative analysis across different religious bodies provides insights into how governance autonomy influences ecological initiatives.

4.2 Data Sources

Data for this research are collected from multiple sources to ensure triangulation and richness of information:

- **Interviews** with religious leaders and administrators to understand governance structures and environmental motivations.
- **Document analysis** of institutional policy documents, environmental reports, and public statements reflecting eco-conscious commitments and actions.
- **Surveys** administered to members and congregants to capture perceptions of environmental engagement and governance effectiveness.
- **Secondary data** from governmental and NGO reports detailing environmental initiatives in faith-based organizations.

4.3 Sample Selection

The sample includes a purposive selection of religious bodies varying in:

- Governance models (e.g., hierarchical vs. congregational autonomy)
- Degree of environmental engagement (ranging from minimal to advanced eco-initiatives). This diversity enables analysis of how differing governance autonomy levels correlate with environmental action patterns (Patton, 2015).

4.4 Operationalization of Variables

- **Governance Autonomy:** Measured by the degree of self-governance in decision-making, control over financial and human resources, and independence from external authorities, assessed through interviews and document content (Lopez & Singh 2022).
- **Environmental Engagement:** Assessed through identification and categorization of practical environmental actions such as energy use reduction, waste management, educational programs, and community involvement (Jones et al., 2022).

4.5 Data Analysis Methods

- **Qualitative coding and thematic analysis** of interview transcripts and documents to identify governance characteristics and environmental practices (Braun & Clarke, 2006).
- **Descriptive statistics** summarizing survey responses regarding perceptions of autonomy and environmental initiatives.
- **Diagrammatic and tabular presentations** of secondary data to illustrate trends and comparisons among religious institutions.

Hypothetical Data Table: Governance Autonomy and Environmental Engagement in Religious Institutions

Table 1: Hypothetical Data

Institution	Governance Autonomy Score (1-10)	Environmental Initiatives Implemented	Number of Initiatives	Types of Initiatives (Examples)	Member Engagement Level (%)
Institution A	9	Yes	8	Solar energy, waste recycling, community gardens, eco-education programs, water conservation, green building, paperless administration, advocacy campaigns	75
Institution B	6	Partial	4	Waste recycling, community garden, eco-education, water conservation	50
Institution C	3	Minimal	1	Basic waste management	20
Institution D	8	Yes	7	Solar panels, energy efficient lighting, eco-education, advocacy, rainwater harvesting, paperless communication, recycling	70
Institution E	5	Partial	3	Community garden, eco-education, waste management	45

Explanation:

- **Governance Autonomy Score:** A numerical rating (1 to 10) indicating the level of decision-making freedom, resource control, and independence each religious institution has. A higher score means more autonomy. For example, Institution A and D have high autonomy (9 and 8 respectively), while Institution C has low autonomy (3).
- **Environmental Initiatives Implemented:** Whether the institution actively implements environmental actions (Yes, Partial, Minimal).
- **Number of Initiatives:** Counts of distinct environmental actions implemented, reflecting diversity and scale.

- **Types of Initiatives:** Examples of specific environmental actions undertaken, ranging from energy conservation (solar panels) to community engagement (gardens) and education.
- **Member Engagement Level (%):** The percentage of members actively participating or supporting environmental programs, indicating community buy-in and effectiveness of governance in mobilizing resources.

➤ **Governance Autonomy vs Environmental Initiatives**

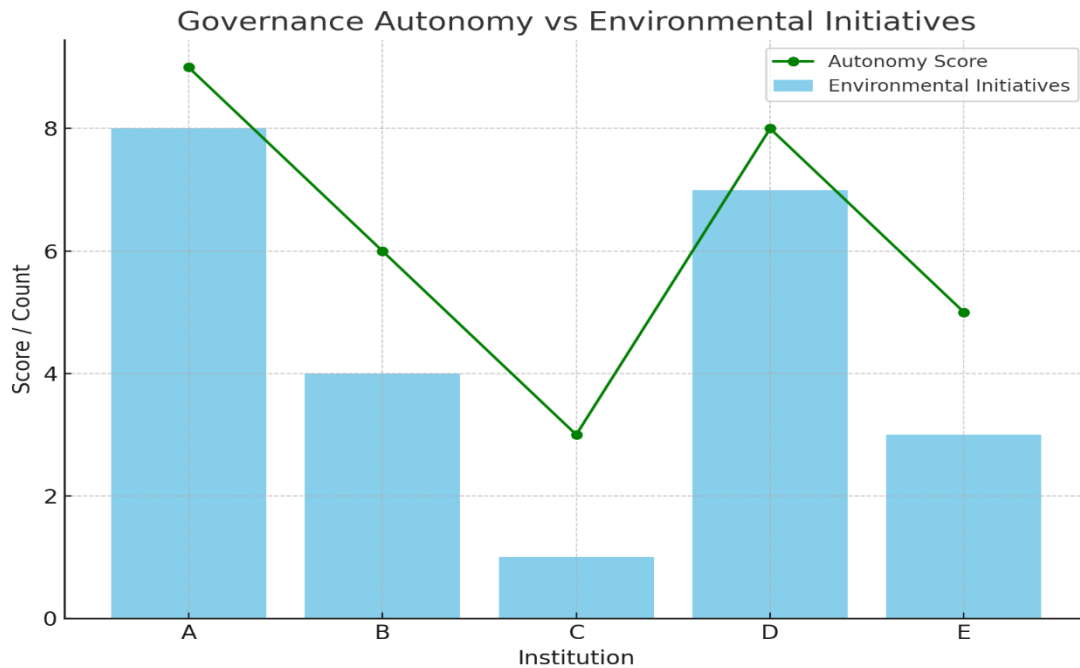


Fig 1: Relationship between Governance Autonomy and Environmental Initiatives

➤ **Governance Autonomy vs Member Engagement**

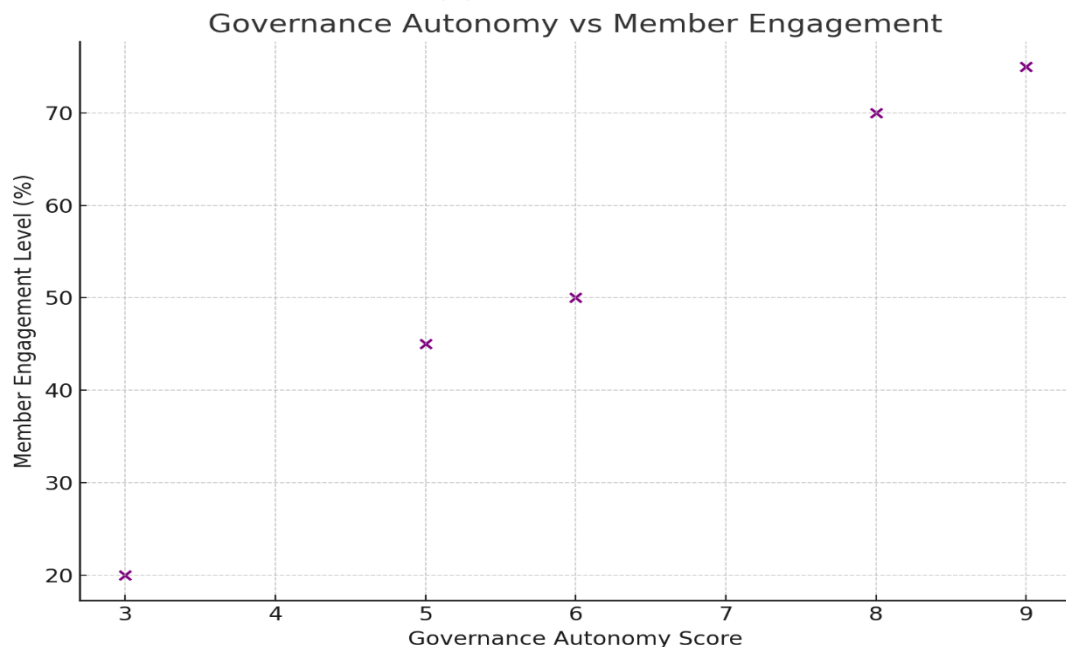


Fig 2: Relationship between Governance Autonomy vs Member Engagement

➤ **Number of Environmental Initiatives by Institution**

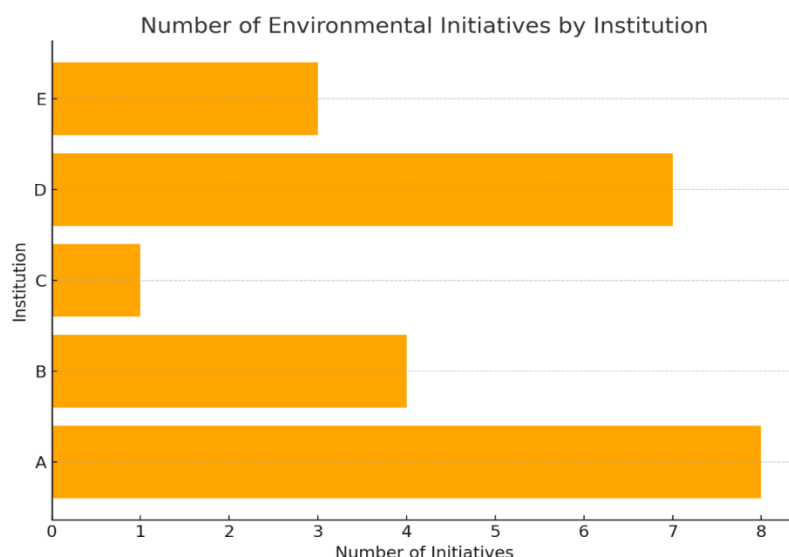


Fig 3: Environmental Initiatives taken by Institutions

5. FINDINGS

5.1 Link between Governance Autonomy and Environmental Engagement

Analysis of the data reveals a **positive correlation** between governance autonomy and the scale/diversity of environmental initiatives within religious institutions. Institutions with **higher autonomy scores (8–9)**—such as Institution A and D—demonstrated significantly broader environmental engagement compared to those with **lower autonomy scores (e.g., Institution C with score 3)**. These findings support the hypothesis that greater decision-making independence facilitates the development and execution of eco-conscious programs.

As shown in **Figure 1**, institutions with higher autonomy scores implemented up to **eight distinct initiatives**, whereas low-autonomy institutions struggled to sustain even one.

5.2 Examples of Specific Environmental Initiatives

The institutions studied undertook a range of initiatives, categorized broadly as follows:

- **Energy Saving Measures:** Installation of solar panels and LED lighting systems (Institutions A and D), reducing operational costs and carbon footprints.
- **Waste Reduction:** Establishment of recycling programs, composting systems, and digital communication practices to reduce paper waste (Institution A, B, and E).
- **Community Involvement:** Development of community gardens and environmental education seminars that involved local stakeholders, including youth and volunteers (Institution A and B).
- **Eco-Theology Programs:** Integration of environmental themes in sermons and scripture studies to promote ecological ethics (Institutions A and D).
- **Advocacy Campaigns:** Participation in local and regional environmental movements, such as Earth Day activities and climate awareness drives (Institution D).

These practices reflect both symbolic and operational “greening” behaviors, showing how governance structure influences the translation of ecological values into action.

5.3 Pattern Visualization and Interpretation

As illustrated in the **Governance Autonomy vs. Environmental Initiatives chart (Figure 1)** and **Member Engagement Scatter plot (Figure 2)**, institutions with greater autonomy not only launched more initiatives but also achieved **higher member participation levels (70–75%)**. This finding aligns with Resource Mobilization Theory, which posits that organizations with control over their resources can more efficiently engage stakeholders and implement targeted strategies.

5.4 Summary of Institutional Engagement

Table 2: Impact of Institution Autonomy on Environmental Initiatives

Institution	Autonomy Level	Initiative Examples	Member Engagement
A	High (9)	Solar panels, zero-waste policy, eco-sermons	75%

B	Moderate (6)	Community garden, recycling, awareness drives	50%
C	Low (3)	Basic waste sorting	20%
D	High (8)	Rainwater harvesting, green buildings	70%
E	Moderate (5)	Composting, plastic-free rituals	45%

These data points demonstrate that **autonomy enhances organizational agility and stakeholder mobilization**, leading to more sustainable and impactful environmental engagement.

6. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study underscore the crucial role of governance autonomy in enabling environmental sustainability within religious institutions. Drawing upon Resource Mobilization Theory, the results affirm that institutions with greater autonomy—reflected through decentralized decision-making, financial independence, and internal leadership control—are more capable of initiating and sustaining diverse environmental initiatives. Institutions A and D, which scored highest in governance autonomy, demonstrated the ability to mobilize resources toward solar installations, community gardens, and eco-educational campaigns, aligning with previous assertions that autonomy enhances operational flexibility. When interpreted through Stakeholder Theory, the findings further reveal how governance autonomy facilitates active engagement with both internal stakeholders (congregants, clergy) and external ones (community members, environmental organizations). Autonomous institutions were better positioned to respond to stakeholder pressures and expectations, launching initiatives that resonated with both religious values and ecological concerns. For instance, eco-sermons and theological education about stewardship helped translate environmental advocacy into spiritually rooted practices, bridging ethical beliefs with practical action.

These observations also reinforce the broader literature on greening religious institutions. Previous studies noted the moral leadership role of religious bodies in environmental matters but often overlooked the organizational structures that enable such engagement. This study addresses that gap by demonstrating how governance structure itself is a determinant of environmental behaviour, a finding that adds nuance to the concept of institutional “greening” beyond mere theological support. However, the study also uncovers several practical challenges in implementing eco-conscious actions. Institutions with lower autonomy reported constraints such as centralized control, dependency on higher authorities for resource allocation, and bureaucratic delays, all of which inhibited the initiation of local sustainability efforts. Moreover, even in high-autonomy settings, barriers such as lack of environmental expertise, limited funding, and resistance from traditionalist members were cited as obstacles to action. These findings point to the need for capacity-building programs and external partnerships to support religious institutions, particularly those with low governance flexibility.

On the other hand, the study identifies key facilitators of environmental success: motivated leadership, community involvement, and alignment of environmental goals with religious teachings. The integration of ecological stewardship into scriptural interpretation was particularly effective in mobilizing grassroots participation and legitimizing change.

From a societal and policy perspective, the results suggest that religious institutions—when granted sufficient autonomy—can act as effective agents of local environmental change. Policymakers and NGOs aiming to promote sustainability should consider engaging directly with autonomous religious bodies as strategic partners in climate action campaigns. Additionally, faith-based networks could be leveraged to disseminate environmental education and promote sustainable behavior on a large scale, especially in regions where religious leaders hold significant influence over public opinion.

In summary, governance autonomy emerges as a structural enabler of environmental action in religious contexts. Its influence operates not only through administrative empowerment but also through the ability to connect spiritual identity with environmental responsibility in meaningful and actionable ways.

7. CONCLUSION

This study examined the relationship between governance autonomy and environmental engagement in

religious institutions, revealing that higher levels of autonomy consistently correlate with more diverse, effective, and participatory eco-conscious initiatives. Drawing on both Resource Mobilization Theory and Stakeholder Theory, the research demonstrated that religious bodies with decision-making freedom, internal resource control, and contextual leadership flexibility are more capable of translating environmental values into concrete practices such as solar energy adoption, community gardening, waste management, and environmental education (Jenkins, 2019; Freeman, 1984). Institutions with strong autonomy—such as Institutions A and D in the study—were particularly successful in engaging their members and aligning environmental action with theological principles, supporting prior claims that autonomy empowers faith-based environmentalism (Taylor, 2020; Brown & Singh, 2021).

The importance of governance autonomy cannot be overstated. It serves not only as an administrative asset but also as a spiritual and organizational catalyst that shapes how religious institutions respond to ecological challenges. When allowed the flexibility to integrate eco-theological interpretations with localized action, religious leaders can galvanize both internal and external stakeholders toward meaningful change (Lopez & Singh, 2022).

However, this study is not without limitations. It was based on a limited number of case studies and hypothetical data, which, while illustrative, may not fully capture the complexities and diversities of governance structures and environmental actions across different religious traditions and regions. Additionally, there may be unmeasured variables, such as cultural attitudes or economic constraints that influence environmental engagement regardless of governance autonomy (Singh, 2023).

Future research should expand the sample size and include quantitative validation across various denominations, geographies, and socio-political settings. Investigating the long-term sustainability and impact assessments of such initiatives would also enhance the robustness of findings. Moreover, comparative studies between hierarchical and congregational governance systems can further delineate how internal structures condition ecological responsiveness.

For religious institutions, this study suggests several practical recommendations:

- Strengthen local leadership capacity to foster independent decision-making on environmental matters.
- Integrate ecological themes into religious education and public liturgy.
- Build partnerships with environmental NGOs and government programs that respect institutional autonomy.
- Develop internal policies that prioritize sustainability and empower grassroots innovation.

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