

The Unity Beneath Diversity: A Theoretical Model for Understanding Global Conceptions of the Divine

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how major world religions understand ultimate reality, engaging the enduring philosophical challenge of reconciling unity and diversity. Addressing a gap in comparative theology, which often remains largely descriptive, it proposes a theoretical model that interprets divine unity as a structural pattern rather than a strict metaphysical uniformity. Using comparative theological analysis and the phenomenology of religion, the study examines key dimensions such as transcendence and immanence, personal and impersonal conceptions, ethical attributes, and theistic and non-theistic orientations across Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. The findings show that, despite their differing metaphysical frameworks, these traditions converge

in articulating an ultimate source that grounds moral order, existential meaning, and human engagement with the sacred. The article contributes a philosophically informed model of non-uniform divine unity, offering a coherent approach to understanding religious plurality while fostering interreligious dialogue and highlighting the deeper coherence underlying diverse religious experiences.

ABSTRAK

Artikel ini membahas tentang bagaimana agama-agama besar dunia memahami realitas tertinggi, menghadapi tantangan filosofis yang terus-menerus muncul mengenai upaya mendamaikan kesatuan dan keanekaragaman. Memenuhi kesenjangan yang ditemukan dalam teologi komparatif, yang sering kali tetap bersifat deskriptif, artikel ini mengusulkan sebuah model teoretis guna menafsirkan kesatuan ilahi sebagai suatu pola struktural, dan bukan sebagai keseragaman metafisis yang ketat. Dengan menggunakan analisis teologi komparatif dan fenomenologi agama, artikel ini menelaah dimensi-dimensi utama seperti transendensi dan imanensi, konsep tentang yang personal dan impersonal, predikat-predikat etis, serta orientasi teistik dan non-teistik dalam Kristianitas, Islam, Yudaisme, Hinduisme, Buddhisme, dan Jainisme. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa meskipun kerangka metafisisnya berbeda, tradisi-tradisi tersebut sesuara dalam merumuskan suatu sumber ultim yang menopang tatanan moral, makna eksistensial, dan keterlibatan manusia dengan yang sakral. Kontribusi utama artikel ini ialah penyajian model filosofis mengenai kesatuan ilahi yang tidak seragam, dan dengan itu menawarkan pendekatan koheren untuk memahami pluralitas agama sekaligus mendorong dialog antaragama dan menggarisbawahi koherensi yang lebih mendalam yang mengikatsatukan pelbagai pengalaman religius.

INTRODUCTION

In today's globalized yet increasingly fragmented world, religious traditions continue to shape how communities understand themselves, respond to collective challenges, and seek meaning in life. Even amid rapid technological integration and cultural interconnectedness, societies remain profoundly spiritual, drawing on religious narratives to navigate moral uncertainty, social conflict, and ecological crises. Religious pluralism enriches humanity's cultural and moral landscape, yet it can also generate tension when divergent understandings of ultimate reality are interpreted without a coherent framework. As Huston Smith observes, each tradition offers "its own unique vision of the sacred," shaped by historical context and human experience (Smith, 2009: 18). Similarly, John Hick suggests that the world's religions reflect diverse human responses to a single transcendent reality, highlighting the ongoing dialogue between unity and plurality (Hick, 1989: 243).

While comparative religion has produced extensive descriptive scholarship, contemporary debates reveal a methodological gap. Research often alternates between cataloging doctrinal differences and constructing broad meta-theories that risk oversimplifying distinctive traditions. Monotheistic, polytheistic, and non-theistic frameworks have been widely analyzed, yet relatively few studies propose a structural model explaining how divergent portrayals of the divine can reflect shared patterns of human experience. Francis X. Clooney emphasizes "deep learning across traditions," calling for comparative approaches that move beyond surface-level description toward sustained theological engagement (Clooney, 2010: 9). Phenomenologists such as Ninian Smart, who identifies recurring dimensions of religious life across cultures (Smart, 1996: 15), and William E. Paden, who examines universal structures of meaning-making (Paden, 2017: 7), similarly advocate frameworks capable of recognizing both diversity and coherence.

This article responds to these scholarly developments by exploring how major religious traditions conceptualize ultimate reality across personal, impersonal, monotheistic, polytheistic, and non-theistic paradigms. It investigates how these conceptions shape ritual practice, ethical formation, and lived spiritual experience. The study is guided by three key questions: (1) How do various traditions envision ultimate reality? (2) How do these visions influence worship, ethics, and religious experience? (3) What structural patterns emerge when these traditions are considered in dialogue? Methodologically, the study combines comparative theology, which seeks meaningful convergence without compromising doctrinal integrity, with the phenomenology of religion, which examines how beliefs about ultimate reality are embodied in action, ethics, and daily life.

The central thesis of this article is that the diversity of religious understandings should not be seen as contradictory. Rather, these differences reveal deeper patterns in human engagement with the sacred. Divine unity, in this framework, does not imply metaphysical uniformity but reflects a structural pattern of universal religious experience, expressed through varied religious forms. Building on this insight, the article introduces the framework of the structural unity of the divine, which interprets religious diversity as differentiated expressions of a shared metaphysical order. This framework advances comparative studies beyond descriptive pluralism, offering a coherent lens for understanding how unity and diversity coexist within global

religious thought. By situating this discussion within broader scholarly debates and emphasizing the interplay of plurality, relationality, and practice, the article provides both a conceptual lens and practical foundation for interreligious dialogue, ethical engagement, and deeper reflection on humanity's encounter with the sacred.

CONCEPTIONS OF THE ULTIMATE REALITY IN WORLD RELIGIONS

World religions differ in how they understand ultimate reality. Polytheistic traditions view the divine as multiple powers expressed through natural forces and spirits, while monotheistic traditions like Judaism, Christianity, and Islam affirm one supreme God who governs all creation. These cosmologies are further shaped by two ways of describing the divine: personalism, which sees God as relational and responsive, and impersonalism, which understands the divine as a formless, transcendent principle. Together, these perspectives illustrate the diverse yet interconnected ways humanity interprets the sacred.

Divine Polytheism and Monotheism

Polytheism refers to the belief in multiple divine beings or forces, each responsible for distinct aspects of nature and human existence. This worldview dominates polytheistic traditions, where deities personify natural elements and social functions and ensure the maintenance of cosmic harmony and communal order. Ancient civilizations such as Mesopotamia, the Indus Valley, Greece, Rome, parts of Africa, and Melanesia embodied this approach, viewing divine forces as intertwined with natural phenomena (Barton, 2001: 74). In these contexts, polydemonism also flourished the spirits or lesser supernatural entities were believed to inhabit objects, animals, and geographic sites. These beings were simultaneously revered, feared, and invoked for protection or blessing. According to Paul Tillich, such religious systems express a "symbolic manifestation of ultimate concern," where the multiplicity of gods reflects humanity's existential anxieties and aspirations (Tillich, 1951: 77). Within pluralistic traditions like Hinduism, the multiplicity of gods is not contradictory to unity but rather an expression of it. Each deity represents a distinct facet of the one ultimate reality, Brahman, illustrating a profound unity-in-diversity. This theological framework affirms that divine plurality can coexist harmoniously with metaphysical unity.

Monotheism, in contrast, posits the existence of a singular, supreme, and omnipotent God who is both the Creator and Sustainer of the universe. The earliest structured form of monotheism appears in ancient Israel, where the Hebrew Scriptures commanded, "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:3). The Babylonian Exile intensified this theology, solidifying belief in Yahweh as the only sovereign Lord over all nations and history (Barton, 2001: 112). In Christianity, monotheism is both preserved and deepened through the Trinitarian doctrine, where God is understood as one in essence yet revealed in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Though paradoxical, this mystery reflects divine relationality rather than division. Monotheism's moral and metaphysical logic introduced a unified vision of divine order, distinguishing it from the contextual diversity of polytheistic systems (Maimonides, 1995: 151).

Historically, the evolution from polytheism to monotheism is visible in Israel's theological transformation, the deliberations of the Council of Nicaea (325 CE), and the Quranic revelation in the 7th century CE in Arabia. Islam perfects the monotheistic worldview through *Tawhid*, the absolute unity of God, who is simultaneously transcendent and immanent. The Quran proclaims, "Say, 'He is Allah, [Who is] One'" (Surah Al-Ikhlās 112:1). Any attempt to divide or personify God's essence is considered *shirk*, a grave doctrinal deviation (Nasr, 2003: 62). The historical rise of monotheism often reflected not only theological conviction but also socio-political reform, providing unity and moral order amid the fragmentation of polytheistic societies. Even within monotheistic contexts, however, pluralistic tendencies endure, such as the veneration of saints in Christianity or Sufi devotion in Islam, which express relational approaches to the divine while maintaining an ultimate commitment to God's oneness (Armstrong, 1993: 139).

Personalism and Impersonalism: Diverging Views of God's Nature

Personalism asserts that God is a conscious, personal being who desires a meaningful and intimate relationship with humanity. In Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, God is revealed as one who communicates, guides, forgives, and actively participates in the life of creation. This relational understanding of God transforms worship into a dynamic dialogue, where acts of prayer, repentance, moral decision-making, and ethical living become expressions of personal engagement. The personalist perspective emphasizes that God is not an abstract principle or distant force but an active presence in human experience, inviting a continual encounter with the divine in everyday life (Barton, 2001: 102).

In Christianity, the divine-human relationship is uniquely embodied through Jesus Christ, who serves as both mediator and revelation of God's love and compassion. Through Christ, believers experience the nearness of God in tangible ways, encountering divine mercy, guidance, and solidarity with human suffering. God is therefore understood as immanent within history, present in the struggles and joys of human existence, offering both comfort and moral direction. The personalist view fosters a deep sense of intimacy between the believer and the divine, portraying God as Father, Friend, and Savior whose presence responds personally to human needs, moral striving, and spiritual growth (Maimonides, 1995: 89).

Impersonalism, by contrast, perceives the divine as an abstract and formless ultimate reality, existing beyond personal attributes or anthropomorphic limitations. Within Hinduism's Vedānta tradition, God is identified with Brahman, the all-encompassing, ineffable ground of being that underlies all existence. Brahman transcends individuality, personal identity, and duality; it cannot be confined within the boundaries of human conception or described fully in human language. Similarly, Buddhism and Taoism understand ultimate reality as an impersonal principle. In these traditions, nirvana or the Tao represents the ineffable source of harmony, balance, and enlightenment, guiding adherents toward a deeper understanding of existence that surpasses conventional notions of personality and divine intervention (Nasr, 2003: 64).

In such impersonal frameworks, spiritual practice is oriented not toward dialogue or relational engagement but toward realization and self-transcendence. The emphasis is on awakening to one's essential nature and recognizing one's identity with the ultimate reality through disciplined meditation, contemplation, and renunciation of ego-driven attachments. The ultimate aim is the dissolution of the individual ego and the experience of unity with the absolute, where distinctions between self, world, and divine cease to exist. This is evident in practices such as yogic discipline, Advaita Vedanta reflection, or Zen meditation, where the practitioner seeks direct experiential knowledge of the infinite and moves beyond the limitations of ordinary perception and personal desire.

Influence on Religious Practices and Spiritual Experience

The divergence between personalism and impersonalism profoundly shapes religious practice and experience. In traditions centered on a personal God, religious rituals such as prayer, confession, and communal worship aim to nurture emotional and moral intimacy with the divine. The believer seeks guidance, forgiveness, and companionship, emphasizing divine responsiveness and relational engagement (Barton, 2001: 107). Conversely, in impersonalist traditions, spirituality focuses on transcending individuality and attaining unity with the ultimate reality. Practices such as Hindu meditation, Buddhist mindfulness, and Taoist contemplation illustrate the pursuit of self-transcendence, where liberation, whether understood as moksha or nirvana, is achieved through inner realization rather than personal communion (Nasr, 2003: 71).

While these views differ, they are not mutually exclusive. Many religious traditions integrate both dimensions, as seen in the Hindu Bhakti tradition, which unites personal devotion with metaphysical non-dualism, or Mahayana Buddhism, where devotion to Bodhisattvas coexists with impersonal philosophical insight. Together, these approaches reveal that the divine can be both intimately personal and infinitely transcendent, embodying a unity that surpasses conceptual division and inviting adherents to experience both relational closeness and ultimate realization.

CREATION, DIVINE PROVIDENCE, AND COSMIC ORDER

Religious traditions across the world offer diverse understandings of creation and divine providence, reflecting different conceptions of the divine and its relationship with the universe. The Abrahamic religions — Judaism, Christianity, and Islam — share a belief in God as the Creator and Sustainer of all existence. In Judaism, God is portrayed in the Hebrew Bible as the deliberate and purposeful originator of all things, as affirmed in Genesis 1:1: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." Creation is an act of divine wisdom and order, and God continues to sustain and guide the world through covenants, laws, and moral governance, demonstrating intimate involvement in human and cosmic affairs.

Christianity affirms this understanding in Genesis and emphasizes God's sustaining presence in history through Christ. The New Testament describes Christ as the mediator through whom all things are held together (Colossians 1:16–17). Creation is viewed as the manifestation of God's wisdom, love, and sovereignty. Divine

providence is the active unfolding of God's will in history and nature. As Karl Rahner explains, "God is the absolute future of the world and the goal of all history" (Rahner, 1978: 174), and on the other hand Jürgen Moltmann observes, "The doctrine of creation must include the new creation, otherwise it lacks the element of hope" (Moltmann, 1985: 25). Thus, the Christian understanding of creation integrates both origin and destiny, affirming that the same God who created the world promises its renewal and redemption (Romans 8:19–21). Islam similarly presents Allah as the sole Creator and Sustainer of the universe. The Quran states, "It is Allah who created the heavens and the earth and everything between them in six days" (Quran 32:4). Divine providence encompasses creation, ongoing maintenance of the cosmos, and moral guidance through revelation. Like Judaism and Christianity, Islam emphasizes God's active role in sustaining order and purpose within creation.

In Hinduism, creation is understood as cyclical and pluralistic rather than linear. Ultimate reality, Brahman, is regarded as the eternal source and essence of all existence. Creation, preservation, and dissolution occur in endless cycles, symbolizing the perpetual rhythm of divine activity. Lord Vishnu, as the preserver, maintains cosmic balance, while Shiva embodies transformation, and Shakti, the divine feminine energy, animates all creation. Together, these deities reflect the multifaceted nature of divine providence and the interdependence of creation's forces. The Maitri Upanishad declares that true knowledge lies in realizing that "the Self is Brahman" (6:3), affirming the unity of all beings within the cosmic order. Within Advaita Vedanta, Brahman is not distinct from the world; all existence is a manifestation of the divine. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan explains, "The soul is not other than the Supreme Self, and the world is not other than Brahman" (Radhakrishnan, 1927: 503). Liberation comes through realization of this oneness, when the individual self recognizes its unity with Brahman. Anantanand Rambachan notes, "To know Brahman is to know the essence of reality, and this knowledge is itself liberation" (Rambachan, 2006: 46).

Despite their differing metaphysical frameworks, both the Abrahamic and Hindu traditions express a shared conviction: creation is meaningful, ordered, and grounded in a divine principle that initiates, sustains, and directs the universe. Whether conceived as the personal providence of a Creator or the self-manifestation of ultimate reality, the divine is intimately engaged with creation, guiding it toward harmony and ultimate fulfillment.

DISTANCE AND NEARNESS (TRANSCENDENCE AND IMMANENCE)

The concepts of transcendence and immanence provide essential frameworks for understanding the divine and its relationship with creation across religious traditions. Transcendence highlights God's existence beyond and independent of the material universe, emphasizing divine otherness and majesty. Immanence emphasizes God's active presence within the world and human life. These ideas are not merely abstract theological categories; they shape how religious communities experience, worship, and engage with the divine. The tension and harmony between transcendence and immanence illuminate both the mystery and intimacy of God in Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism.

In Christian theology, these concepts are expressed through the doctrine of divine revelation, which describes how God communicates with humanity. General revelation refers to God's self-disclosure through creation, reason, and conscience, accessible to all people. The Apostle Paul writes in Romans 1:20 that God's eternal power and divine nature are perceived through the things He has made, making creation itself a reflection of God's grandeur and moral order. General revelation, however, does not fully reveal God's will and purpose. Special revelation, communicated through the Scriptures and supremely through Jesus Christ, completes this understanding. John 1:18 states that no one has seen God, but Christ, who is close to the Father's heart, has made Him known. Hebrews 1:1–2 emphasizes that while God spoke to ancestors through prophets, He now speaks fully through His Son. Karl Barth observes that revelation is not a human achievement but a divine initiative, describing it as the self-unveiling of God who is otherwise unknowable to humanity (Barth, 1969: 295). Revelation thus bridges transcendence and immanence, inviting humanity into a relational and transformative communion with God.

In Islam, the balance between transcendence (*tanzīh*) and immanence (*tashbīh*) is expressed through the concept of *wahy*, divine revelation. The Quran, revealed to the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) through the angel Gabriel, is regarded as the literal word of God. God is utterly transcendent and beyond human comprehension, as affirmed in Quran 42:11, yet He is intimately near: "We are closer to him than his jugular vein" (Quran 50:16). Revelation in Islam is both communication and transformative power, shaping personal conduct and communal ethics. The revelation aims to cultivate morally conscious and socially responsible individuals (Rahman, 1980: 6). Toshihiko Izutsu adds that Quranic revelation is metaphysical, serving as a medium through which God's moral and existential reality is disclosed. Through revelation, the transcendent God becomes immanently present in human life and society (Izutsu, 2002: 10).

In Hinduism, transcendence and immanence are expressed through *śruti*, the divinely revealed scriptures including the Vedas and Upanishads. These texts are regarded as eternal truths perceived by sages through direct spiritual experience. The Upanishads convey the paradox of the divine as both beyond all and within all: "That is full, this is full. From fullness comes fullness" (Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upanishad 5:1). The Bhagavad Gita illustrates this duality through *avatāra*, the divine incarnation: "Whenever righteousness declines and unrighteousness rises, I manifest myself to protect the good and to restore *dharma*" (Gita 4:7–8). Advaita Vedanta deepens this understanding, teaching that Brahman pervades all existence and is identical with the self. Rambachan explains that revelation is the inward recognition that the self is one with Brahman, making the transcendent present within human consciousness (Rambachan, 2006: 51).

Across these traditions, the interplay of transcendence and immanence reveals a universal insight: God is both beyond comprehension and intimately present. Whether through the incarnation of Christ, the recitation of the Quran, or the realization of Brahman, humanity seeks to encounter a divine mystery that is simultaneously distant and near, transcendent and immanent.

GOD'S ETHICAL ATTRIBUTES AND THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

The moral character of God is central to how religious traditions understand good, evil, justice, compassion, and human suffering. God is widely regarded as the ultimate standard of moral perfection, yet the existence of evil presents a profound question: If God is all-powerful and all-good, why does suffering persist?

In Christianity, God's ethical nature is revealed through love, righteousness, and mercy. The teachings of Jesus, such as the command to "love your enemies" (Matthew 5:44) and the declaration that "God is love" (1 John 4:8), depict a personal and compassionate God. Christians acknowledge the reality of suffering in a world marked by imperfection, awaiting ultimate redemption (Romans 8:18–22). Christian theologians have approached the problem of evil in complementary ways. C. S. Lewis reflects that suffering can serve as a divine call to spiritual awareness, drawing humans closer to God and that suffering is necessary for moral growth, allowing humans to cultivate virtues such as courage, patience, and love, which could not exist in a world without challenges (Lewis, 1940: 91).

In Islam, God's moral attributes are expressed in the balance of justice (*'adl*) and mercy (*rahma*). The Quran describes God as supremely just and compassionate, emphasizing that hardship is neither arbitrary nor meaningless. Trials and suffering function as tests of faith and character, shaping moral responsibility and spiritual resilience (Quran 2:286; 16:90). Islamic scholars stress that divine justice and mercy operate together, guiding personal ethics and communal life. Revelation provides a framework for understanding suffering, transforming hardship into opportunities for moral and spiritual development (Izutsu, 2002: 10).

In Hinduism (and Buddhism), ethical dimensions of the divine are closely intertwined with the law of karma, where suffering is seen as the consequence of past actions, either in this life or previous lives. The ultimate aim is moksha, liberation from the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth, which ends suffering. The Bhagavad Gita teaches detachment from outcomes, emphasizing that spiritual peace arises when one surrenders the results of actions to the divine (Bhagavad Gita 2:47). Hindu philosophers and spiritual teachers interpret suffering as part of the soul's evolutionary journey. Pain encourages growth, self-realization, and union with Brahman. Some thinkers in Buddhism argue that suffering and evil are ultimately products of illusion, transcended through enlightenment and spiritual realization (Rambachan, 2006: 51).

Across these traditions, God's ethical attributes consistently reflect a concern with justice, compassion, and moral order. Suffering is understood not as a negation of divine goodness but as an integral aspect of spiritual development, moral formation, and the pursuit of ultimate union with the divine. Whether as a test of faith, a means for moral growth, or a path toward liberation, the existence of evil underscores the tension between human limitation and divine perfection, inviting reflection on the profound ethical nature of God.

THEOLOGICAL BELIEF AND EXPERIENCE OF GOD IN THEISTIC RELIGIONS

Religious practices such as prayer, ritual, and festival observance function as mediating structures through which believers articulate and experience the divine.

Beyond mere performance, these practices translate theological concepts into lived reality, shaping ethical conduct, spiritual consciousness, and communal identity. They exemplify what scholars describe as the praxis of faith, where belief and experience intersect, allowing adherents to internalize and participate in the sacred. In theistic traditions such as Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism, these practices serve as both expressions and vehicles of divine encounter, reflecting the relational and participatory nature of human engagement with God (Smart, 1998: 67).

In Christianity, religious practice manifests as communion with a personal and loving God, grounded in a theologically relational framework. Prayer, particularly the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:9-13), functions not only as adoration but as moral formation, orienting believers toward divine will, forgiveness, and sustenance. Sacraments such as Baptism and the Eucharist operationalize theological claims about salvation and grace, making Christ's redemptive presence experientially tangible. Liturgical festivals like Christmas and Easter reinforce incarnational and eschatological dimensions of Christian theology, linking historical narrative with communal memory and ritualized hope. Theologically, these practices underscore the incarnational principle: that the transcendent God becomes accessible and transformative within the temporal and communal sphere (Barth, 1969: 295).

Islamic religious practice embodies submission (*Islam*) to Allah and functions as a constant calibration of ethical, spiritual, and communal life. The Five Pillars — faith, prayer, almsgiving, fasting, and pilgrimage — constitute a framework that integrates ritual observance with moral responsibility. Daily prayers, fasting during Ramadan, and pilgrimage to Mecca serve as ongoing mechanisms for reinforcing awareness of divine unity, mercy, and providence. From a theological perspective, Islamic practice mediates between divine transcendence and immanence, fostering both individual piety and social cohesion while embedding ethical reflection within ritualized engagement (Izutsu, 2002: 10).

Hindu religious practice theorizes the presence of the divine through devotion (*bhakti*), ritual (*pūja*), and festival, emphasizing God's immanence within worldly and cosmic structures. The act of *darshan*, the mutual seeing of deity and devotee, enacts a phenomenological encounter with the divine, while festivals such as Diwali and Holi materialize cosmological and ethical principles in sensory and communal experience. From a theoretical perspective, these practices exemplify the embodiment of metaphysical principles: the immanent and transcendent dimensions of Brahman are rendered experientially real, making theological abstraction accessible to human perception and action (Rambachan, 2006: 52).

Across these theistic traditions, religious practice functions not merely as ritualistic observance but as a systematic engagement with theological and ethical realities. Christianity emphasizes relational communion with a personal God, Islam integrates ritualized submission with ethical praxis, and Hinduism celebrates divine immanence and cosmological order through embodied devotion. Collectively, these practices illuminate the functional theology of religion, demonstrating how human beings cultivate knowledge, morality, and spiritual presence through structured encounters with the divine.

NON-THEISTIC RELIGIONS AND PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACHES TO THE SACRED

Non-theistic traditions such as Buddhism and Jainism present sophisticated spiritual and philosophical frameworks that function without reliance on a creator or personal God. Unlike theistic religions, which locate the foundation of existence in divine agency, these paths conceive the sacred as an ultimate reality to be realized through ethical discipline, knowledge, and personal transformation.

In Buddhism, the primary goal is liberation (*nirvana*) from suffering and the cycle of rebirth (*samsara*), achieved through moral cultivation, meditation, and insight rather than divine intervention. The Buddha, regarded as an awakened teacher, articulated a path of ethical self-development, summarized in the Dhammapada: to avoid all evil, cultivate good, and purify the mind. Doctrines such as *anatta* (no-self) and *pratītyasamutpāda* (dependent origination) reject the notion of a self-subsistent deity, emphasizing impermanence, interdependence, and the moral causality of actions. Even within Mahayana traditions, devotional figures such as Avalokiteśvara or Guanyin function as symbols of compassion and the inherent potential for enlightenment rather than as objects of divine authority. Thus, Buddhism situates the sacred within human consciousness, teaching that ultimate freedom arises through ethical practice, mindfulness, and wisdom (Williams, 2000: 37-38).

Jainism similarly envisions a cosmos independent of divine creation, positing a dual reality of *jīva* (soul) and *ajīva* (non-soul matter), both eternal and self-existent. The universe operates according to intrinsic moral and natural laws rather than divine will. Each soul possesses infinite knowledge and bliss, obscured only by karmic matter binding it to rebirth. Liberation (*moksha*) is attained through ethical conduct, ascetic discipline, and self-effort, not through divine grace. Jain philosophical principles such as *anekāntavāda* (the multiplicity of perspectives) and *syādvāda* (conditional predication) articulate a pluralistic epistemology that recognizes the complexity of truth. Enlightened exemplars such as Mahavira, the last of the twenty-four Tirthankaras, serve as models of moral perfection rather than as gods (Jaini, 1998: 102-103).

In both Buddhism and Jainism, transcendence is realized not through divine command but through ethical awareness, inner transformation, and alignment with the moral and existential structure of reality. These traditions demonstrate that encounters with the sacred can occur through disciplined self-realization and compassionate action, revealing the possibility of spiritual fulfilment without reference to a personal creator.

CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

In today's interconnected world, shaped by globalization, intercultural exchange, and ecological crises, theology is increasingly understood as a shared human endeavor to explore the sacred. Contemporary perspectives, emerging from postmodern, feminist, pluralist, and ecological thought, move beyond rigid dogmas, emphasizing relationality, inclusivity, and ethical responsibility. These approaches encourage dialogue, humility, and moral engagement, showing how diverse religious traditions can respond to common human and ecological concerns.

Postmodern and philosophical currents challenge claims of absolute knowledge, highlighting mystery, plurality, and the limits of human reason. John D. Caputo, for instance, interprets the divine not as a dominating presence but as an event of love, justice, and invitation rather than imposition (Caputo, 2006: 103). Similar insights appear across other traditions. In Hindu philosophy, Brahman is described as *neti neti* (“not this, not that”), conveying that ultimate reality transcends conceptual understanding. Zen Buddhist meditation cultivates awareness of emptiness and interdependence, and Islamic mystics like Ibn ‘Arabi describe God as the hidden, infinite source of all reality (Izutsu, 2002: 10). Together, these perspectives emphasize that the divine surpasses human conceptual systems, yet provides shared points of connection between traditions.

Feminist and liberationist theologies reinterpret traditional religious imagery and doctrines to promote justice, equality, and inclusion. Scholars like Mary Daly and Elizabeth Johnson critique male-centered images of God that limit human understanding of divine and social relationships. Across other traditions, Hindu Shakti worship celebrates feminine creative energy, and Buddhist thought emphasizes relational enlightenment, while Indigenous spiritualities situate the sacred within nature and community. Collectively, these reinterpretations highlight that understanding the divine involves not only belief but ethical, and relational engagement with the world, connecting spiritual reflection with social responsibility.

Pluralist and interfaith approaches recognize that multiple religious paths can lead toward ultimate reality. John Hick argues that religious diversity reflects different cultural responses to the same transcendent reality rather than contradictions (Hick, 1989: 240). Similarly, the Quran affirms this diversity, guiding each community along its own path (Quran 5:48), while Buddhist teachings on *upāya* (skillful means) acknowledge multiple ways to spiritual awakening (Williams, 2002: 66). Such perspectives encourage mutual respect, dialogue, and the cultivation of shared moral and spiritual principles, emphasizing both the uniqueness and the interconnectedness of religious traditions.

The ecological turn in theology integrates these insights with a profound concern for the natural world. Pope Francis’ call for “integral ecology” links care for creation with social justice, highlighting that environmental stewardship is inseparable from concern for the vulnerable and marginalized (Francis, 2015: 86). Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, and Indigenous teachings all stress the sacredness of life and the ethical duty to protect the environment. In this way, modern theology functions as a collective moral and spiritual framework, offering a vision that connects diverse traditions through shared commitments to justice, compassion, and the preservation of life. Ultimately, contemporary theology shows that engaging with the divine is not only an intellectual pursuit but also a moral and relational practice. It provides tools for dialogue across traditions, fostering understanding, ethical responsibility, and cooperative action in addressing both social and ecological challenges.

THEORETICAL AND THE STRUCTURAL UNITY OF THE DIVINE

Building on the diversity of world religions, this article proposes a new framework: the structural unity of the divine. Rather than seeing the differences

between religions as contradictions, this approach interprets them as varied human responses to a shared experience of the sacred. Polytheism and monotheism, personal and impersonal conceptions, mystical practices, and ethical teachings all reveal recurring patterns in how humans encounter and make sense of ultimate reality.

This framework emphasizes that divine unity is not uniformity. It appears through multiple symbols, narratives, and practices, each reflecting the same underlying human longing to connect with what is transcendent. For example, the multiplicity of Hindu deities reflects facets of Brahman, while monotheistic traditions preserve God's oneness while allowing relational, ethical, and mystical experiences. Similarly, personalist and impersonalist perspectives, though different in form, guide adherents toward deeper engagement with the sacred, revealing complementary ways of approaching ultimate reality.

The originality of this model lies in framing religious diversity as a coherent, non-uniform expression of the divine. It highlights the shared human search for meaning, ethical living, and transcendence, offering a philosophical lens for comparative theology, interfaith dialogue, and the study of spirituality. By focusing on patterns of experience rather than doctrinal uniformity, this framework fosters empathy, relational understanding, and recognition of a common human quest for the sacred.

CONCLUSION

This study reaffirms the central thesis that the diversity of religious conceptions of the divine does not indicate contradictions, but rather reflects a deeper structural pattern in human engagement with the sacred. Across Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, the divine is understood in personal, impersonal, monotheistic, and non-theistic terms, yet all these expressions reveal a shared human pursuit of meaning, moral order, and ultimate reality. The proposed framework of the structural unity of the divine clarifies this diversity by showing how distinct theological and ritual forms converge in expressing universal patterns of spiritual experience, ethical responsibility, and relationality with the sacred. This model has direct implications for interreligious dialogue. Recognizing that differences in belief and practice are complementary rather than contradictory encourages dialogue grounded in empathy, respect, and shared moral concern. It fosters cooperation across faiths in addressing global challenges such as social injustice, ecological degradation, and moral uncertainty, emphasizing the ethical and spiritual common ground that underlies human religiosity.

For further research, scholars could explore how theological conceptions of the divine shape ethical action, environmental stewardship, and interfaith collaboration in contemporary contexts. Comparative studies of lived religion, including everyday spiritual practices, could illuminate how ordinary believers embody divine principles in plural societies. Additionally, integrating Indigenous and lesser-known spiritualities may expand understanding of relational and ecological dimensions of the sacred. Interdisciplinary approaches connecting theology, philosophy, and environmental ethics could further develop holistic frameworks, advancing what Pope Francis terms an "integral ecology" that links care for creation with justice and compassion for humanity.

In the end, the journey toward understanding God or the sacred, however named, remains open-ended, dynamic, and relational. It calls for humility rather than certainty, dialogue rather than division, and a shared commitment to healing the human and ecological wounds of our time. The study of God thus becomes not merely an intellectual pursuit but a moral and spiritual vocation and a collective quest to discern the divine presence in the unfolding story of the world.

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