

# **The Concept of Religious Pluralism in a Globalized World: An Analytical and Comparative Study of John Hick and Hossein Nasr's Theories**

Examining the Notion of Religious Pluralism in the Writings of John Hick and Hossein Nasr: A Comparative Analysis of their Perspectives.

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ABSTRACT

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Religious pluralism is an increasingly significant phenomenon in our global society. As religious diversity continues to grow, it's essential to understand and appreciate different religious traditions and their beliefs. This thesis aims to contribute to the scholarly discourse on religious pluralism by analyzing and comparing the works of John Hick and Hossein Nasr, two influential scholars in the field. Using a qualitative research approach, the study provides a brief understanding of each scholar's key ideas and arguments and their contributions to the field of religious pluralism. Specifically, the study examines critical concepts such as the doctrine of Incarnation, the concept of primordial tradition, and the esoteric-exoteric dichotomy. The research also investigates Hick's perspective on the relationship between phenomena and noumena and Nasr's ideas on archetypes on the formation of religious belief systems. According to the topics discussed the study analyzes the differences between Hick and Nasr's approaches to religious pluralism particularly in relation to the formation of religion, the knowability of God, and the ethical and metaphysical dimensions of religious pluralism. Hick emphasizes the importance of interfaith dialogue and cooperation in promoting mutual understanding and respect while rejecting exclusivity associated with orthodox interpretations of the doctrine of the Incarnation and proposing a new interpretation. In contrast, Nasr emphasizes the need to preserve each religious tradition's unique identity and integrity. These differing perspectives reveal the complexity of religious pluralism and underscore the importance of continued exploration and dialogue in this area. Overall, this study seeks to enhance our understanding of religious pluralism and its implications for our global society. By providing a brief analysis of Hick and Nasr's works, this thesis can serve as a basis for further research in this area.

*Keywords:* John Hick, Hossein Nasr, Religious pluralism, Perennialism, Traditionalism, Comparative studies, Interfaith dialogue.

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## 1.0 Introduction

*"They Worship me as One and as many, because they see that all is in me" –  
Bhagavad Gita*

Looking back into the past, we find that religion has been a virtually universal dimension of human life, so much so that man has been defined as a religious animal. To quote the anthropologist, Raymond Firth, 'religion is universal in human societies' (Hick, 1973, p. 133). Throughout history, the study of religion has been a crucial aspect of human inquiry, as it is a ubiquitous phenomenon observed in societies ranging from primitive communities to great civilizations. Religion has been a potent force capable of both positive and negative outcomes. It can bring about positive phenomena such as promoting unity and creating beauty, goodness, and wisdom among individuals. Conversely, it can also lead to negative phenomena such as war, violence, division, and separation. The effects of religion depend on the interpreter's perspective and whether employ it positively or negatively. Religion, like a knife, can be employed to save a person's life in surgery or take a life in a murder. Therefore, in my opinion, the issue of religion should be taken seriously in society.

The question of the diversity of religions has long been a primary concern for religious scholars, giving rise to numerous theories. Throughout history, people tended to view their own religion as the only true one, with their knowledge and experience of the Absolute reflected directly in their religion's teachings. The issue of the diversity of religions poses a significant challenge to contemporary scholars and philosophers of religion who adopt a positivistic approach in their attempts to resolve it. The question arises as to how the existence of multiple religions is possible if God is understood to be Absolute in a metaphysical sense and if religion is also considered to be absolute. This appears to suggest the existence of several absolutes. Examples such as Christ's statement, "I am the way, the truth, and the life," or the Muhammad's proclamation that "No one sees God until he has seen me." (Nasr, 2007a, p. 8). In addition, the Christian view of celibacy as a virtue, the importance of marriage in Islam, and the caste system in Hinduism, further, complicate the matter. This enumeration of apparently contradictory teachings among religions could be extended to include numerous additional examples.

Many religious scholars have raised doubts about the existence of an "absolute" reality owing to its apparent contradictions, and some have even completely rejected the concept.

Consequently, proponents of atheism and critics of religion posit that all aspects of reality are subjective and relative, and they point to the existence of diverse religious beliefs as evidence that religious claims lack validity. This brings forth the fundamental query of determining which perspective holds true, and how these inconsistencies statements align with the concept of God's absoluteness. Inquiries such as these have led many religious scholars during the 19th and 20th centuries to regard religion as a contextual construct. Eminent personalities such as Feuerbach, Marx, Freud, Russell, and August Comte dismissed the notion of the sacred and the Absolute due to the apparent inconsistencies found within religion and the diversity of religious beliefs<sup>1</sup> (Ibid., 28).

There exist four potential theories to the issue of religious diversity. Dialectical materialism posits that all religions are arbitrary and stem solely from human preferences and desires shaped by historical, societal, and economic factors. *Exclusivism* holds that only one religion possesses transcendental truth while all others are invalid. *Inclusivism* maintains that while all religions may contain elements of truth, one's own religion is the most comprehensive and, therefore, superior. Finally, religious pluralism asserts that all faiths are true as the same divine entity inspires them.

I believe the significance of religious pluralism has heightened in the era of globalization. Presently, we reside in an epoch where distinct components of various religions are readily available and accessible in our daily lives. In contrast, during the pre-modern age, a peasant residing in a location such as Trier might have had no exposure to other religious traditions throughout their entire life. Hence, the subject of religious pluralism did not create any challenges, and this issue might not have even crossed their mind. However, in my view, with the advent of globalization, the scenario has transformed significantly, and the issue of religious pluralism can impact our associations with other individuals. Due to the effects of globalization and the progress of communication technology, people in contemporary times have more convenient access to various religious texts, practices, and teachings. Consequently, individuals now possess more knowledge about the world's religions than at any other point in history. Notably, internet searches allow religious scholars to locate

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<sup>1</sup> Ironically, the abundance and diversity of religions, which could prove the existence and legitimacy of a Divine Reality, are instead being used to discredit it. Even though numerous major and minor religions acknowledge the existence of a Transcendent Reality, some scholars argue that the existence of multiple religions proves their falsity. However, the presence of various religions can indicate the validity of religious truth and the existence of a Divine Reality. In other words, the diversity of religion doesn't necessarily mean that all religions are meaningless but instead shows that they are all seeking an ultimate and transcendent Truth (Nasr, 1989, p. 281).

theological and philosophical works from a variety of faiths, a level of convenience that was previously unavailable.

In our global society, varied religions become more evident in our daily life. We live in a world where we can observe the cultural components of various religions. It's not easy to claim that our faith is the only true one while denying the validity of all other religions. Hossein Nasr (1933), a distinguished University Professor of Islamic Studies at George Washington University, contends that due to the increased access to information and the shrinking of the world, three dimensions of religion - sacred art, doctrines, and spiritual figures - are now more readily visible and exert a greater impact on individuals' daily lives than in the past. This phenomenon is occurring within the context of the contemporary era characterized by globalization. The first aspect is the manifestation of "sacred art" in religions. Refusing to acknowledge other religions is akin to rejecting all the artistic and cultural wonders that these religions have created based on their unique perspective on God. For instance, a modern educated Western individual who appreciates the design of the Chartres Cathedral would find it challenging to remain indifferent to the splendor of other religious architectures, such as the Cordoba Mosque, the Taj Mahal, the Brihadeeswara Temple, or the temples of Kyoto. Moreover, individuals with musical education and a severe interest in Western sacred music, from Gregorian chant to Palestrina (1525–1594) and Bach (1685–1750), cannot ignore the spiritual significant carried by Sufi music, Hindu music, or Buddhist chanting (Ibid., 5).

As a global society, we can no longer afford to treat only the paintings of Giotto (1267–1337), Raphael (1483–1520), or Michelangelo (1475–1564) as high art, while dismissing the merits of Chinese ink wash paintings, Japanese *ukiyo-e*, Islamic miniatures, Native American sand painting, and the wall paintings of Ajanta. Likewise, a person with a solid literary background who finds spiritual inspiration in Dante (1265–1321), John of the Cross (1542–1591), or William Blake (1757–1827) must also acknowledge the religious significance of Kabir (15 century) and Jalal al-Din Rumi's (1207–1273) poetry. During travels, it is not uncommon for individuals to bring home, for instance, a Taoist landscape painting or a Shinto icon, or a Hindu mandala without fully comprehending its profound metaphysical and religious significance (Ibid.).

Based on Nasr's perspective, the second aspect concerns "doctrines". In the field of comparative religion studies during the Middle Ages, scholars such as Albertus Magnus

(1200-1280) and Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) delved into works of Islamic Philosophy<sup>2</sup> by Avicenna (980-1037) and Al-Ghazzali (1058-1111). Despite Islam not being regarded as a true religion during that time, Christian scholars recognized the religious significance of these texts and argued that they should be studied from the standpoint of religious philosophy (Ibid., 6). Other examples of medieval comparative religion studies include the works of Maimonides, a 12<sup>th</sup>-century Jewish philosopher who compared Judaism with Islam and Christianity, and the 8<sup>th</sup>-century Hindu philosopher Adi Shankara, who compared Hinduism with Buddhism and Jainism.

In our time, as a global society, there is a heightened sense of global awareness concerning the non-Christian religious doctrine, requiring a departure from the polemical stance of medieval theologians who resided in a predominantly Christian milieu and therefore overlooked the reality of revelation and the diverse manifestations of religion in various divine forms. It is simply implausible to engage with the *Bhagavad-Gita* or the *Upanishads* in a scholarly manner without being deeply moved by the profound religious significance and wisdom they impart (Ibid., 6). Thus, it is crucial to acknowledge and consider the religious beliefs of other faiths. This requires approaching their sacred texts, theological works, or inspired literature with an open mind and without any preconceived biases.

The final aspect of religion pertains to the "saints" and the spiritual experiences of individuals who follow various religious beliefs. The third reality discussed in this context, namely the spiritual existence of human beings who adhere to diverse religious beliefs, holds greater significance than the preceding two realities of art and doctrine. While some individuals may dismiss the importance of sacred art or metaphysical and doctrinal treatises from other traditions, it is difficult to deny the presence of religious and spiritual identity in individuals of different faith communities and disregard their spiritual existence. In historical accounts, it is evident that when the renowned Sufi saints embarked on a journey to India, the Hindu sages were quick to acknowledge their exceptional spiritual character, leading to significant exchanges between the two groups in Kashmir, Sind, and Punjab (Ibid.). Or when Francis of Assisi (1181 –1226), a Christian saint, visited Egypt and met with Muslims, his spiritual essence was immediately recognizable to Muslims, and his character was admired by many. His spiritual teachings influenced them, and he was not considered an outsider or infidel.

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<sup>2</sup> The works of al-Ghazali and Avicenna were translated into Latin by several scholars during the Middle Ages. Some of the most famous translators include Gerard of Cremona (1114 – 1187) and Michael Scot (1175 – 1232).

The presence of morally upright individuals who follow different religious traditions in our interconnected world raises inquiries about the legitimacy and genuineness of diverse faiths. To put it another way, encountering individuals who embody moral excellence, such as saints and sages, and who possess a quest for spirituality and truth, as well as those who demonstrate knowledge and wisdom within their respective religious traditions, prompts us to reconsider the dismissal of other faiths as invalid. This is because these religions have proven to generate fruitful and positive outcomes. This issue has been confronted by a significant number of British missionaries who journeyed to India during the 19th century and encountered individuals such as Ramakrishna. Ramakrishna's pure and virtuous way of life left a profound impression on Christian missionaries, who saw in him the embodiment of Christ's teachings (Ibid., 7).

The phenomenon of globalization has facilitated our unmediated interaction with the corporeal and cultural aspects of various religions, enabling us to observe the cultural influence of diverse religious phenomena in our daily routine. Consequently, the impact of different religions can be observed in various aspects of society and culture more prominently than ever before. Therefore, examining religious pluralism is an essential subject in religious epistemology.

The subject of religious pluralism aims to elucidate the reasons behind the abundance of religions worldwide. The fact that numerous religions exist is an undeniable truth; however, the issue of religious pluralism does not revolve around this observation. Instead, it tries to figure out the *raison d'être* of these diversities or why there are different beliefs and practices in religion and where they come from. Throughout history, the authenticity of different religions has been debated. Those who hold an *exclusivist* view consider their religion to be the only true faith while viewing the followers of other religions as misguided. This perception has led to confrontations and conflicts in human societies, resulting in significant persecution of minorities, suppression, and other forms of conflict.

The diversity of religions and traditions that exist in our world has created a situation where no single religion can claim to be the center of attention while ignoring the others. The phenomenon of globalism has forced followers of religions to pay attention to one another. Therefore, it is crucial for researchers in the field of philosophy of religion to explain this diversity. Pluralistic approaches to religious diversity assert that, within certain boundaries, one religion is as good as any other. In other words, religious pluralism seeks to provide a way to establish the legitimacy of different religions and the possibility of salvation for their followers (Zinnbauer & Pargament, 2000, pp. 162,171).



Many theories and reasons have been proposed to address this diversity of religions. This thesis will discuss and compare the hypothesis of religious pluralism put forth by two different intellectual mainstreams: John Hick (1922-2012), a Christian philosopher, and Hossein Nasr, a Muslim philosopher. A comparison of these two views will be presented, followed by a conclusion on the subject of religious pluralism. John Hick and Hossein Nasr have proposed different approaches to the diversities of world religions. Hick's theory of "*religious pluralism*" and Nasr's idea of the "*transcendent unity of religions*"<sup>3</sup> both aim to address the legitimacy of different religions and their followers' salvation. The concept that "truth and salvation are not exclusive to one religion, and all religions benefit from Absolute Truth" was first systematically proposed by John Hick, who is known as a proponent of religious pluralism in the current century. As elucidated in the discourse of religious pluralism, John Hick is a pivotal and renowned figure in this subject matter, and any discussion on religious pluralism would be incomplete without his mention. While the idea of religious pluralism originates in the ancient mystical thought of religions, John Hick is one of the earliest theorists to systematically explicate this doctrine in the contemporary era.

Hossein Nasr offers another interpretation and comprehension of religious pluralism in the school of *perennialism*, which holds significant importance. Nasr explores the *perennial philosophy* and its notion of *traditionalism*, with his concept of tradition gradually revealing itself as a form of "religious pluralism" (Aslan, 1998, p. x). Through the assistance of traditional philosophies, Islamic history of thought, and mysticism, Nasr explicates religious pluralism. Given that Hossein Nasr's perspective is comparatively less well-known among religious scholars in academic circles, I have chosen to concentrate on his interpretation of religious pluralism together with Hick's. By examining both Hick and Nasr's views, one can gain a more comprehensive understanding of the topic.

This master's thesis addresses fundamental questions surrounding the validity of all religions versus the authenticity of one religion. In particular, the study will explore the possibility of finding common ground amongst diverse religious teachings and the implications of any such commonality. To a certain degree, the analysis of Hick and Nasr's religious pluralism reveals a shared foundation and similarities among religions. The purpose of this thesis is to provide the reader with a comprehension of religious pluralism by

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<sup>3</sup> The concept of "*transcendent unity of religions*" was first introduced by Frithjof Schuon, a Swiss-German philosopher, and metaphysician, in his book "*The Transcendent Unity of Religions*" published in 1948. Schuon's work explored the underlying metaphysical principles shared by various religious traditions, emphasizing the idea that all genuine religions ultimately point to the same transcendent reality. Hossein Nasr was influenced by Schuon's ideas and developed them further in his own work, contributing significantly to the popularization and dissemination of the concept.

examining the works of Hick and Nasr and acquainting them with these scholars' justifications for religious pluralism. The study will examine the potential contradictions between religious doctrines and how John Hick and Hossein Nasr's theories of religious pluralism address these contradictions. Furthermore, the study will explore the scholars' perspectives on whether all religions, despite their differences, represent manifestations of the same transcendent Reality, and whether there is a common element behind the apparent differences. Lastly, this research has identified differences between Nasr and Hick through careful examination and analysis of their respective perspectives. These differences are discerned in several areas, namely religious reform, intra or extra-religious pluralism, epistemological issues, and the origin of religion. Specifically, they diverge in their approach to modifying particular religious doctrines in tradition, attaining religious pluralism through intra-religious or extra-religious discussions, the nature of knowledge about God, and their respective beliefs regarding the origin of religion, whether divine or human. These disparities inevitably shape their interpretations of religious pluralism in different manners. Ultimately, the thesis aims to understand why religious pluralism is crucial in our time and why it is defensible and intelligible from the viewpoints of John Hick and Hossein Nasr.

## 1.1 Explanation of Terms

In this section, to enhance the reader's understanding of the master thesis, definitions and explanations of important terms will be provided that are central to Hick and Nasr's theory of religious pluralism. These terms are relevant to the diversity of religions discussed in this thesis, and descriptions for each term will be presented. The following terms will be covered.

### 1.1.1 Religious Exclusivism

*Religious exclusivist* believes that truths and salvation are only possible through a specific religion. *Religious exclusivism* is the belief that one's own religion or faith is the only true and valid path to salvation or enlightenment and that all other religions or faiths are incorrect or false (Hick, 1985, p. 38). This belief often leads to the exclusion or condemnation of other religions and may involve the belief that followers of other religions are misguided or even damned.

*Exclusivism* can take many forms, ranging from mild forms of religious superiority to more extreme forms that view other religions as evil or demonic. It is often associated with

fundamentalist or conservative religious groups. *Religious exclusivism* can lead to intolerance, prejudice, and even conflict between different religious groups. There are many Jewish, Christians, and Muslims who have such a perception that only their religion is the only true religion, and all other religions are false (Wainwright, 2005, p. 345).

In the eyes of *religious exclusivists*, their faith alone is central, and only "my" religion can reveal the fullness of truth. It can be an extreme case of religious egotism, in which one believes that one's own values are accurate and that everyone else's religion is bogus and results from delusions and fabrications.

### 1.1.2 Religious Inclusivism

*Religious inclusivism* is the belief that while one's own religion or faith may hold the ultimate truth, other religions or faiths also contain some aspects of truth and can be a valid means to achieve salvation or enlightenment. In other words, *religious inclusivism* believes that although a particular religion has the whole truth, members of other faiths can also experience salvation (Hick, 1985, pp. 32-33; Heim, 1995, p. 4).

*Inclusivism* is based on the idea that different religions can complement and enrich one another rather than being mutually exclusive. Unlike *exclusivism*, which regards one's religion as the only true path to salvation, *inclusivism* is characterized by a willingness to learn from and respect other religions and see them as valid expressions of humanity's spiritual search for meaning and purpose.

It can promote greater tolerance, understanding, and harmony among different religious groups and can help foster a more peaceful and just society. For example, a Christian *inclusivist* believes that although Christianity is absolute truth and other religions have a small part of truths, a Muslim or Hindu, if they live a moral life and a good life, can also experience salvation and truth (Marbaniang, 2007). After the changes instituted at the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s, this viewpoint is now widely held within the Catholic Church. The Catholic Church has shifted its position from *exclusivism* to *inclusivism* and now believes that people of all faiths have a chance at salvation. We will discuss this view of the church in the following sections.

### 1.1.3 Religious Pluralism

Religious pluralism is a concept that refers to all religions in the same way, have truths, and are ways to salvation. Religious pluralism is the belief that there are many different religions and faiths in the world and that all of them are equally valid and valuable expressions of human spirituality. It holds that no religion has a monopoly on truth, and each religion can provide a unique perspective on the nature of reality, the purpose of life, and the ultimate meaning of existence. Pluralists believe various religious beliefs are authentic and equally valid in communicating God, the world, and salvation. The pluralistic contention is that although religions have different outward forms, all have the same source in the same God (Marbaniang, 2007). It involves recognizing the truth and Supreme Reality embodied in all religions as our own.

Religious pluralism acknowledges the diversity of human beliefs and practices and sees this diversity as a positive aspect of humanity's spiritual quest. It encourages mutual respect and dialogue between different religions and promotes an atmosphere of tolerance and understanding. Pluralism encourages individuals to embrace diversity and look for common ground with people of other faiths, but it does not demand that they discard their own religious convictions. This view posits that all religions share a common core, and this shared core can be expressed in many ways. Without fear of persecution or discrimination, members of a religious minority can freely practice their faith and express their spirituality in whichever way they see fit within a pluralistic community. Pluralism is seen by many as an essential foundation for building a peaceful and just society, one that values diversity and promotes harmony among people of different cultures and faiths. Religious pluralism is a concept that can be defined also as the act of "respecting the otherness of others." (Grimshaw, 2023, pp. 71-81).

So, in short, religious pluralism means seeing all religions as the centre and respecting the religious identity of others as the manifestation of truth and might be summed up as the attitude that all religions have equal value, and the corresponding behaviour of respecting the religious identity of others as a representation of truth. Thus, it is also possible to confirm the reality of our own traditional universe's centre while acknowledging that we exist in a multi-centred world.

#### 1.1.4 Perennial Philosophy

An additional term that requires elaboration is '*perennialism*', which possesses multiple connotations. As per one interpretation, it is a philosophical approach put forth by certain scholars of religion, which provides an understanding of religious pluralism. According to the perennials, the various religious traditions are attributed to the same divine source and grounded on equivalent metaphysical principles. These principles is seen as eternal and unchanging, and is said to be accessible to individuals through a process of inner transformation and direct experience. These principles are occasionally denoted as *philosophia perennis*.

Since the Renaissance period, the term "*philosophia perennis*" has been employed to refer to the complete collection of essential and universal truths that are not affiliated with any particular religion. The term "*perennial*" is derived from the Latin word "*perennis*," which means "everlasting." Consequently, the original meaning of "*perennial philosophy*" denotes timeless and comprehensive truths or wisdom that are considered the fundamental essence of all religions and spiritual practices (Lings & Minnaar, 2007, p. xii). These principles provide insights into the essence of reality, the purpose of human existence, and the individual's relationship with the divine. Those who have articulated the *perennial philosophy* have also addressed every aspect of religion, including God and man, revelation and sacred art, symbols and images, rites and religious rules, mysticism, social ethics, metaphysics, cosmology, and theology. According to Nasr, this school is concerned with religion in its transhistorical reality, rejecting the historicism of the 19th-century European academic approach to *religionwissenschaft* (Nasr, 1993, p. 55).

The concept of *perennial philosophy* is a subject of debate in the academic study of mystical experience. From a perspective, *perennialism* endorses the notion that all major religions share a fundamental core of wisdom, substantiated by shared *religious experiences*<sup>4</sup>,

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<sup>4</sup> A *religious experience*, which can also be called a spiritual experience, sacred experience, or mystical experience, is a personal experience that is understood through the lens of religion. The idea started in the 19th century as a reaction to the growing rationalism in the West. William James made the idea well-known. In many religious and mystical traditions, *religious experiences*, especially the knowledge they bring, are seen as divine revelations rather than natural events. They are thought to be real encounters with God or gods or with higher-order realities. It is a unique experience such as wonder at the infinity of the cosmos, the sense of awe and mystery in the presence of the sacred or holy, the feeling of dependence on a divine power or an unseen order, or the peace that follows faith in divine forgiveness (Smith E., 2023). In the first sense, *religious experience* refers to a similar interaction with the divine and supernatural presence or to the perception of purity or rightness as with other people and things in the world. Briefly, *religious experience* refers to both a unique encounter with the divine or ultimate as well as the interpretation of any experience as leading to the divine or ultimate (Ibid.).

typically mystical. In a narrower sense, it is the view that certain types of mystical or other *religious experiences* are 'essentially the same,' phenomenologically speaking, in all or almost all human cultures and religious traditions (Draper, 2020, p. 1). From an alternative viewpoint, Huston Smith (1919–2016), a prominent religious studies scholar in the United States, has observed that the *perennial philosophy* is not founded on *religious experiences* but on metaphysical intuition (Smith H. , 1987, p. 554). As the conversation surrounding mystical experience has evolved, there has been a shift in emphasis within the *perennial philosophy* from metaphysical intuition to *religious experiences* (Smith, 1987, p. 554).

However, advocates of the *perennial philosophy* contend that despite the considerable variation in the external forms and rituals of diverse religions, there exist certain fundamental principles and experiences that are universally shared. *Perennialism* has been used as a framework for interfaith dialogue and for enhancing the promotion of religious pluralism in discussions and debates. It emphasizes the commonalities and shared values among various religious and philosophical traditions while respecting their distinct cultural and historical contexts.

#### 1.1.5 Traditionalism

The other concept that necessitates explanation is "*Traditionalism*." Traditionalism comprises a cohort of intellectuals<sup>5</sup> from the 20th and 21st centuries who believe that ageless wisdom and universal truths underlie all the significant religions worldwide and concur with one another.

This movement is known for valuing traditional wisdom and spirituality. According to the traditionalists, this wisdom and spirituality have been lost in the modern world through the rise of novel secular philosophies stemming from the Enlightenment. For traditionalists, modernism itself is considered an abnormality (Kalin, 2015, p. 127). They reject the secular, materialistic, and relativistic outlook of modernity. Their opposition to the various aspects of modernism stems from concerns about the desecration and disenchantment of nature, man, and the universe. They are very interested in bringing spiritual conduct and traditional science, cosmology, and values back into society.

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<sup>5</sup> Some of the first people to support this way of thinking were Ananda Coomaraswamy (1877–1947), René Guénon (1886–1951), Frithjof Schuon (1907–1998), Titus Burckhardt (1908–1984), Martin Lings (1909–2005), William Stoddart (1925), Jean-Louis Michon (1924–2013), Marco Pallis (1895–1989), William Chittick (1943), Harry Oldmeadow (1947), James Cutsinger (1953–2020), Huston Smith (1919–2016) and Hossein Nasr are also well-known members (Rose, 2021, pp. 50-52).

Moreover, this movement highlights the importance of preserving the metaphysical and philosophical traditions of the major faiths worldwide. Traditionalists believe that the world's major religious and spiritual traditions encapsulate timeless wisdom transmitted through generations and can guide individuals toward spiritual enlightenment and fulfillment. The foundational principles of these traditions can be traced back to a shared set of overarching metaphysical principles. Therefore, the concept of tradition in their perspective is very closely related to religious pluralism. The perspective of its authors is often referred to as *philosophia perennis* (Lings and Minnaar 2007, xi-xii). *Traditionalism* can thus be viewed as a sort of religious pluralism that accepts the inherent worth of diversity and affirms the legitimacy of different spiritual pathways. Their worldview is rooted in the traditional concepts and metaphysics of ancient religions and is thus entirely based on an intra-traditional perspective.

Thus, the idea of religious pluralism, together with the school of *traditionalism*, and *perennialism* are different ways to comprehend religion and spirituality, which contain large similarities. John Hick and Hossein Nasr refer to the same phenomenon, but they employ different terms to describe it: Hick uses the concept of religious pluralism, while Nasr utilizes the idea of *traditionalism* and *perennial wisdom*. It should be noted that numerous philosophers and intellectuals advocate for religious pluralism, yet they do not identify themselves as traditionalists or followers of *perennialism* and may even oppose this school. However, in contrast, all authors and thinkers who endorse *traditionalism* and *perennialism* subscribe to the concept of religious pluralism and do not consider any religious tradition as lacking in validity. The reason for this issue is that *traditionalism* and *perennialism* are a school of thought that includes various discourses. But the idea of religious pluralism is only a hypothesis in the field of theology that many scholars and people with different tendencies can accept. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the concepts "*traditionalism*" and "*perennialism*" are largely synonymous and may be employed interchangeably. Throughout the 20th century, traditionalists authors universally subscribed to the fundamental principles of *perennial philosophy*. Therefore, we must consider traditionalists and perennialists to adhere to the same principles.

#### 1.1.6 Logos

The concept of Logos has played a significant role in various religious and philosophical traditions, including Christianity, ancient Greek philosophy, and other religious

traditions. The word "Logos" has distinct connotations in many philosophical and religious traditions. However, the concept of Logos originates in ancient Greek philosophy, specifically in the writings of philosophers such as Heraclitus, who used the term "Logos" to refer to the underlying principle of the universe (Britannica, Logos, 2023). Heraclitus, for instance, utilized Logos to express the dynamic essence of the universe. He considered Logos as the principle that rules the universe and is responsible for the order and harmony we witness in the world. In later philosophical traditions, like Stoicism, Logos referred to the divine reason that rules the universe. They also viewed Logos as how we may comprehend the natural world and identify ourselves with it (Ibid.).

In Christian theology, Logos describes Jesus Christ, also known as the Word of God or the second person of the Trinity. Logos is a Greek phrase also used in the Gospel of John to characterize Jesus Christ, who is described as the eternal Word or the intellect of God (John 1:1) that becoming human (John 1:14). In this context, Logos refers to the divine intellect or wisdom that Jesus Christ embodies.

In the realm of Islamic philosophy, there exists a concept similar to the Greek notion of Logos known as "*al-ʿAql*" or intellect/reason. Within Islamic thought, *al-ʿAql* is viewed as the highest faculty of the human soul and serves as a means for accessing knowledge of God and the universe. Through the application of intellect, human beings can perceive the signs of God within the natural world and comprehend His attributes and qualities. *Al-ʿAql* is deemed the foundation of all knowledge and the medium by which humans can comprehend the nature of reality and the divine. Furthermore, the notion of the 'universal man', is intimately linked to the notion of *aql* as Logos in Islamic philosophy and theology. The concept of the universal man, also known as *insan kamil* in Arabic, is a pivotal notion in Sufism and Islamic metaphysics and denotes the flawless or exemplary human being who epitomizes the entirety of divine traits and characteristics (Nasr, 1964, p. 110; Nasr, 2006, p. 43). Another concept related to Logos in Islamic theology is the notion of "*kalimatullah*" (the word of God). *Kalimatullah* refers to God's divine word or speech, believed to be the source of all existence and attributed to Jesus Christ in the Quran (4:171).

Thus, the concept of Logos is nearly ubiquitous, and upon closer inspection, we can discover its counterparts in Eastern religions, no need to analyze them all. In summary, Logos holds a central position in Hick and Nasr's doctrine of religious pluralism. Because the connection between man and the supreme truth is possible through Logos, which is the hidden intellect present in all humans and has been revealed in divine figures such as Jesus Christ, Muhammad, Buddha, and others. Logos can be understood as the divine "reason" that



manifests itself, and every human has the potential to bring forth this divine reason from within themselves.

## 1.2 Background for Choice of Topic

*"The religion of love is beyond all faiths and all beliefs."* – Rumi

I chose religious pluralism in global society as my topic because of its increasing significance in our contemporary world. As someone who is deeply committed to fostering tolerance and understanding between diverse religious traditions, I believe that researching the dynamics of religious pluralism is essential to fostering a more peaceful and harmonious global society.

In recent years, there have been numerous instances of persecution and discrimination against minority religious groups, especially in countries like Iran where religious minorities are frequently marginalized and oppressed. This has only strengthened my belief in religious pluralism as a means of fostering mutual respect and understanding among diverse religious traditions. Coming from Iran, a country with a theocratic system and a government with religious sovereignty, I had experienced first-hand the detrimental effects of religious *exclusivism* and fundamentalism. These phenomena often perpetuated through propaganda, can result in prejudice and hatred towards religious minorities and can lead to their marginalization. For instance, the Iranian government's oppression of the Baha'i minority, who are deprived of their basic rights to education and have their cemeteries destroyed, as well as the persecution of Christian minorities and their priests are some examples of such repressions (Amnesty, 2022).

Those who adhere to the belief that their own perspective is the only path to the truth often invalidate other religions and schools of thought, resulting in closed societies and intolerance. This intolerance can be observed in various monopolistic ideologies, schools, and sects. Any doctrine that limits the truth has the potential to incite hatred and engender isolation from others, and I believe that this is one of the root causes of suffering in the world.

In my view, prejudice propagated by fanatics is one of the causes of violence and hatred in contemporary society. Discrimination and bigotry stemming from race, religion, ethnicity, or national origin contribute to human isolation and the repression of marginalized and minority communities. *Inclusive* and pluralistic perspectives reveal that those who believe they alone possess the truth (*exclusivist*) are guilty of a form of religious racism, as they

perceive their group to be superior to others. In this particular context, the term "racism" does not signify any inherent genetic superiority over others, but rather reflects a general sense of superiority that is grounded in the belief that the truth is exclusively possessed by "us," the adherents of our faith, while all other religions are deemed untrue. This *exclusivist* perspective can give rise to hostility towards those who hold differing beliefs, ultimately leading to antagonism. In my opinion, the fundamental practice of distinguishing between "us" and "them" is the basic building block of religious extremism and fanaticism. This outlook can be particularly egregious when individuals from other faiths are viewed as adherents of false beliefs and illusions.

The notion of religious pluralism did not arise spontaneously within my mind. Instead, it stemmed from a personal journey involving the confrontation of societal ills such as racial discrimination, religious arrogance, and the oppression of minority groups within a theocratic framework. These experiences led me to study various religious traditions and recognize their inherent beauty, virtue, and veracity. Consequently, the theory of pluralism gained validity in my perspective, and I was equipped with a set of criteria to evaluate religious tenets.

A key rationale behind my selection of this topic is religious fundamentalism's prevalent and thriving nature in contemporary society. I observe that the primary impediment to resolving religious prejudice within communities stems from their limited understanding of religion. I assert that an alternative perspective on religion could potentially resolve numerous religious prejudices. The phenomenon of fundamentalism, I believe, arises from a flawed comprehension of the purpose and nature of religion. Specifically, the *exclusivist* approach to religion resembles that of a political party or a sports team fan. Similar to how team supporters oppose rival teams, *exclusivists* view other religions as adversaries to their own. However, I contend that this group-centric mentality regarding religion is misguided and inappropriate. Rather, we should view religions as akin to diverse languages, clothing styles, foods, flowers, fruits, and colors, rather than as political factions or groups. Given that religion espouses objectives such as morality, love, spirituality, truth, righteousness, solidarity, and beauty, it is incompatible with the belief that one's own religion is the sole source of truth and faith and that adherents of other religions are inferior.

Therefore, my interest in the topic of religious pluralism led me to study the works of John Hick and Hossein Nasr. The scholarly contributions of Hick and Nasr have significantly impacted my perspective on religious pluralism. Hick's pluralistic perspective on religion, which prioritizes religious tolerance and dialogue, has personally struck a chord with me as a means of fostering enhanced comprehension and reverence across diverse religious traditions.

Simultaneously, Nasr's traditionalist perspective has prompted me to contemplate the unique and discrete characteristics of every religious convention and the significance of preserving their particular identities. By examining the perspectives of Hick and Nasr in my master's thesis, I hope to gain a deeper appreciation for the complexities of religious pluralism and its role in molding the world as it exists today. Any research on religious pluralism has the potential to contribute to a greater appreciation of the significance of religious tolerance and understanding in fostering a more tranquil and harmonious global society. So, I want to show that there is both a rational basis and a religious basis for this hypothesis, and at the end I will compare the views of these two thinkers.

### 1.3 Field, Objectives, and Methodology

It is difficult to confine the "religious pluralism" discussion to a particular domain, as it encompasses multiple fields of study. This conversation is fundamentally interdisciplinary, drawing on comparative religion, philosophy of religion, theology, and mysticism studies. As previously noted, religious pluralism emerged as a significant concept in the philosophy of religion during the 20th century through the work of the British philosopher John Hick. Hick's theory of religious pluralism remains the most extensive and widely debated concept within the Anglo-American philosophy of religion. Hick's arguments, in their development, were shaped by and significantly influenced other philosophical disciplines, particularly metaphysics, epistemology, and the philosophy of language (Harrison, 2020). Therefore, when John Hick utilizes Kant's skeptical argument to rationalize religious pluralism, he operates within the realm of philosophy.

On the other hand, Hossein Nasr engaged in inter-religious dialogue and utilized the principles of the Quran and other scriptural and mystical texts to develop a theory of religious pluralism. Nasr's work can be classified within theology, metaphysics, and mysticism, as he employs historical religious traditions to defend religious pluralism. There exist theological rationales for the emergence of pluralism within major religions, such as the doctrine of divine love. Suppose love is regarded as one of the highest virtues in diverse religions. In that case, it becomes difficult to reconcile the concept of an all-loving God with the notion of *religious exclusivism*, which assumes that God abandons all others to an eternal destiny of damnation (Steven, 2011, p. 14).

This research is situated within the broader religious studies and theology field, specifically focusing on comparative religion, philosophy of religion, and mysticism. Drawing

on intra-religious and extra-religious perspectives, an interdisciplinary approach will contribute to a more robust and nuanced understanding of religious pluralism. By examining religious traditions from various angles and disciplines, we can better appreciate the richness and complexity of these traditions and develop a more inclusive and respectful approach to religious diversity.

The objective of the research, as mentioned in the introduction, is to understand the concept of religious pluralism as defined by Hick and Nasr. Through a brief analysis of their works, the study will identify the key features of their respective concepts of religious pluralism and highlight any similarities or differences between them. The study will also highlight notable resemblances among religions in their works and therefore, explain why *exclusivism* cannot be rationalized or deemed acceptable. Also, to contribute to the ongoing discourse on religious pluralism by providing a brief analysis and comparison of Hick and Nasr's views. Ultimately, the research aims to highlight the significance of religious pluralism in contemporary religious discourse and assess its relevance in the present day.

The research methodology will be qualitative and based on a comparative analysis approach to investigate the concept of religious pluralism in the works of Hick and Nasr. The primary sources for the research will be the published works of both scholars, including their books, articles, and essays on the subject. In addition to primary sources, the research will include secondary sources such as critical reviews and analyses of the works of Hick and Nasr. Notably, Turkish Islamic scholar Adnan Aslan's book "*Religious Pluralism in Christian and Islamic Philosophy: The Thought of John Hick and Seyyed Hossein Nasr*" (1998) will be a key secondary source as it is the only book that directly compares these two scholars' perspectives on religious pluralism.

#### 1.4 Scientific Theory

The topic of religious pluralism in the works of Hick and Nasr can be approached from various scientific theories and perspectives. One can view it through a realist lens, or consider social constructivism, functionalism, postmodernism, relativism, and other frameworks.

According to Hick, religious pluralism theories, as an area of study in religious studies, offer a realistic and rational perspective on the diversity of religions. Despite initial perceptions of religious pluralism as relativistic and anti-realistic, it is not founded upon the notion that truth is relative. For Hick, religious pluralism entails the discovery of truth through varying modes and expressions, which consequently gives way to a realistic outlook. The

pluralist approach posits that multiple sets of beliefs or practices can be considered accurate or correct, whether partially or fully, without negating one another.

Realism acknowledges that various *religious experiences* exist objectively in the world and that acknowledging this diversity is an essential aspect of religious pluralism. An integral part of religious pluralism is the realistic acknowledgment of the variety of *religious experiences* (Hick, 1989, p. 172-173). The realist theoretical framework accounts for the fact that *religious experiences* are not made up or are not a hallucination. When discussing the concept of religious realism, Hick refers to the existence of objects of faith that transcend human experience. He posits that human existence has a fundamental significance and value, which originates from a higher, transcendent source beyond us. This notion is supported by the fact that all religious traditions, according to Hick, point to a common source of Divine or Absolute existence. Therefore, based on this plausible worldview, it can be inferred that the Divine or Absolute, referred to as God, exists and is the origin of all faiths (Hick, 2004, p. 172).

As outlined in the introduction, many researchers, particularly those with materialist views, perceive the presence of numerous religious traditions as evidence of the subjective nature of truth. From the standpoint of these scholars, the scientific theories of religious pluralism encompass a social constructionist perspective, which asserts that religion is essentially a product of human creation and is heavily influenced by social and cultural contexts. This stance maintains that the coexistence of diverse religious traditions among various populations is the source of religious pluralism, with the distinct social and political processes of each society, as well as its historical heritage, playing a crucial role in shaping this diversity.

Hick and Nasr's writings on religious pluralism provide fruitful material for a social constructionist approach to comparative religion studies. This theoretical framework can shed light on the development of their religious traditions and their mutual influence. It can also shed light on how different people's backgrounds and cultures have shaped their perspectives on religious diversity. In addition, social constructionism encourages readers to recognize and value the range of perspectives presented by the authors' various religious backgrounds and practices.

The functionalist hypothesis is another scientific perspective on religious diversity, proposing that faiths have useful purposes for both people and groups. This idea proposes that religious plurality develops as a result of the fact that many faiths can address the varied spiritual and social requirements of their adherents. Some people may find solace and purpose

in one religious' tradition, while others may do so in another. Hick and Nasr's writings also offer insights into the study of religious plurality via the lens of functionalism. With the help of functionalism, we can see how religious plurality serves society by bringing people together and giving them a sense of purpose in life. The possible downsides of religious pluralism are also highlighted, such as interfaith tensions. Understanding how religious pluralism fosters mutual respect and acceptance amongst faiths can be improved by tracing its uses in Hick's and Nasr's writings.

Another alternative scientific theory to consider is postmodernism, which posits that reality can be interpreted and understood in multiple ways and that our understanding of it is influenced by our cultural and historical context (Duignan, 2023). In the comparative study of religious pluralism in the works of Hick and Nasr, postmodernism can provide valuable insights. It can help shed light on how cultural and historical context shapes our understanding of religious pluralism, particularly given the different backgrounds of Hick and Nasr. Additionally, postmodernism underscores the importance of recognizing and valuing diversity in the study of religious pluralism. This theoretical framework rejects the idea that there exists a sole "accurate" method for interpreting religious traditions or practices. As per Lyotard's (1924-1998) terminology, such a notion can be deemed a *metanarrative* (Lyotard, 1979, pp. xxiv-xxv). Instead, religious pluralism fosters the recognition and admiration of varied perspectives, promoting a more inclusive and tolerant attitude towards divergent beliefs.

If one believes in the divine origin of religions and is not an atheist, the scientific theory of religious pluralism can be explained through the realist perspective, where God is seen as the objective reality that is the source of all revelations. However, for those who view religions as a social construct and do not believe in their transcendent truth, alternative theories like anti-realism, relativism, post-modernism, and social constructivism can be used to support this viewpoint.

However, Hick posits that, given the broad range and heterogeneity of religious traditions and experiences, the realistic pluralist hypothesis provides a more cogent account of religious diversity than either relativist, anti-realism, or *exclusivism*. Religious pluralism has only recently emerged as a distinct philosophical and theological perspective, building on and critiquing earlier views. As a result, the merits of pluralism continue to be a source of controversy, with external challenges from *exclusivists*, *inclusivists*, religious anti-realists, and relativists (Norton, n.d.).

## 1.5 Research Ethics

In research, ethical considerations are paramount, as they dictate what constitutes acceptable and unacceptable practices. The ethical issues that arise in research include material collection, writing, and source references (Furseth & Everett, 2020, p. 27). Additionally, researchers must be respectful of the religious beliefs and practices of the people they study. They must also act responsibly towards society, ensuring that their work has potential benefits for the community at large (Ibid., 28). To this end, the current research will rely on a variety of scholarly sources, such as articles, encyclopedias, and books, which will be properly cited to give credit to the original authors.

As religious pluralism promotes the values of tolerance and respect towards all religious traditions, research in this area has the potential to promote greater societal harmony and reduce religious prejudices. It is important to note that, by defending religious pluralism, I do not seek to justify all religious teaching. In my view, the principles of religious pluralism do not imply that all religious behaviours are morally acceptable. Indeed, many religious traditions include the *harm principle* as a fundamental ethical teaching reflected in their sacred texts. Nevertheless, it is not uncommon for individuals to justify harmful behaviours based on extremist interpretations of religious teachings.

Some interpretations of religious teachings, particularly those of a fundamentalist nature, may promote discriminatory attitudes toward women, prioritize male perspectives, or even condone violence toward others. Additionally, some societal norms and restrictions expressed in religious texts may be incompatible with modern values. To address these issues, a hermeneutic approach is required to distinguish between *essential* and *accidental* teachings (see 4.1.1) and consider the historical context in which the text was written. It is important to note that religious pluralism does not seek to legitimize immoral behavior or actions, and the purpose of this thesis is not to justify violent or unethical practices carried out by any religious group. Instead, the focus is on exploring religious diversity's philosophical and epistemological foundations. Overall, such research can promote greater tolerance and understanding in society and help to reduce religious prejudice.

## 2.0 John Hick's Religious Pluralism

"God's love is too great to be confined to any one side of a conflict or to any one religion." –

Desmond Tutu

### 2.1 Introduction

In this section, we will provide a concise overview of John Hick's professional background and the origins of his interest in religious pluralism. We also refer to a few of Hick's arguments based on the similarities among faiths. Despite formalizing the theory of religious pluralism in the 20th century, Hick maintained that this perspective is grounded in a longstanding tradition and that he systematized it as a formal theory in contemporary times. We will briefly address these matters. Additionally, we will provide a brief survey of the Catholic Church's view on *inclusivism*, as Hick asserts that *exclusivism* is fundamentally incompatible with our era, leading the Catholic Church to renounce its *exclusivist* tendencies.

John Hick, a British philosopher and theologian is a prominent figure in the field of religious pluralism. After serving in the Royal Air Force during World War II, Hick pursued his philosophical and theological interests at the University of Edinburgh. He served as a pastor in the Church of Scotland while studying philosophy and psychology and eventually became a lecturer in philosophy at the university. During this time, Hick began exploring questions related to *religious experience* and the philosophy of religion. In the 1950s, Hick started focusing on philosophical challenges to religion, particularly the problem of evil and religious diversity. His notable works on these topics include "*Faith and Knowledge*" (1957) and "*The Existence of God*" (1958).

In the 1960s, Hick assumed the position of a lecturer in religion and philosophy at the University of Birmingham, which served as a pivotal moment in his career because, at that time, Hick increased his relationship with the believers of other religions and the ideas of religious pluralism gradually formed in his mind, allowing him to dedicate more time to his scholarly endeavors and advance his ideas on religious pluralism (Cramer D. C., u.d.). Hick's contributions to the field of religious pluralism have had a lasting impact on the philosophy of religion. Additionally, he exhibited a keen interest in interfaith dialogue and cooperation beyond his academic pursuits, having played a foundational role in establishing the Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies. Moreover, Hick worked closely with religious leaders of diverse traditions to promote mutual respect and understanding. After that, Hick became deeply involved in the civil rights organization *All Faiths for One Race*, which has its



headquarters in Birmingham. To enhance his knowledge, he traveled multiple times to India to study Hinduism, the Punjab to study Sikhism, and Sri Lanka to study Buddhism. After years of research, he finally wrote *Death and Eternal Life* (1976). In this book, he analyzed and contrasted various afterlife beliefs that people hold in different world regions. He also suggested a model for the afterlife that drew from both Eastern and Western notions (Ibid.).

Hick's distinguished academic career encompassed a range of esteemed institutions, including the University of Birmingham, Cambridge University, and the Claremont Graduate School in California, among others. He was a Fellow of the British Academy and received numerous awards and accolades for his contributions to philosophy and theology. He produced a significant body of work on religious philosophy, investigating issues such as the nature of God, the nature of *religious experience*, the incarnation, and the problem of evil. It is generally agreed upon that Hick was one of the 20th century's most influential philosophers of religion, and his works have significantly influenced the academic discipline of religious studies.

Hick's contributions have greatly influenced the study of religious diversity and pluralism. He also wrote several publications regarding religious pluralism, the most notable of which is *God and the Universe of Faiths* (1973), *God has many names* (1980), and *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (1989) has let the idea of religious pluralism gain many fans. Many discourses and books have been expressed and written to support and criticize it. John Hick persuasively argues for an authentic religious pluralism, respectful of the non-Christian traditions that have persisted over time--Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, and Islam. Hick remained noted throughout his career for his pioneering work on religious pluralism, which is the belief that all religions are valid paths to God and that no one religion has a monopoly on the truth. He maintained that all the world's faiths are different interpretations of the same overarching truth, which he called "the Real."<sup>6</sup> (Hick, 2004, p. xix).

As will be elaborated on in greater depth later, he utilized the perspective of Emmanuel Kant to provide clarity and justification for religious pluralism. He was inspired by the ideas of philosophers such as Kant and Ludwig Wittgenstein, who argued that knowledge of Ultimate Reality was beyond the limits of human understanding and that different perspectives could be equally valid (Hick, 1957, p. 142). Hick grounded his theory of

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<sup>6</sup> It is noteworthy to mention that within Hick's works, various terms are employed to describe God, including the Real, Ultimate Reality, Godhead, the One, the Absolute, Truth *Per se*, *Noumenon*, Infinite, the Divine, the Transcendence, etc.

religious pluralism on Kant's skepticism, arguing that adherents of various religions do not possess direct access to *Truth per se* and merely perceive a representation of the Absolute. Hick viewed Kant's realm of epistemology as extending beyond sensory experience, encompassing *religious experience* as well. Since humans do not have access to reality as it exists beyond our perception (*Noumena*), we are limited to acquiring interpretations and understandings of that Truth through our experiences (*Phenomena*). Therefore, different religions result from distinct experiences and interpretations of the Absolute, making them all truth in this sense (Cramer D. , u.d.). We will discuss this area more in the following sections (section 2.2).

But before we get more deeply into Hick's hypothesis of religious pluralism and some of his notions on the topic, it is necessary to mention how Hick became interested in religious pluralism. John Hick became interested in religious pluralism as a missionary in India in the 1950s and later during the 1970s<sup>7</sup> (Aslan, 1998, pp. 9-10). During this time, he became aware of the diversity of religious beliefs and practices in India and began questioning the *exclusivist* Christian theology he had been taught. He realized that the traditional Christian belief that salvation could only be found through explicit belief in Jesus Christ was incompatible with the religious diversity he encountered in India (Hick, 2005a, pp. 160, 199). This realization led Hick to begin exploring the possibility of a more *inclusive* theology that recognized the validity of other religious traditions and the possibility of salvation outside of Christianity. He began to develop a pluralistic theology that saw different religions as different responses to the same Ultimate Reality and argued that all religions had the potential to lead individuals to a transcendent experience of the divine. Specifically, Hick was intrigued by how different religious traditions approached the concept of Ultimate Reality and the diverse methods employed to attain it. Hick's interest in religious pluralism was also influenced by his study of philosophy, particularly the philosophy of religion in Birmingham.

Birmingham was home to a substantial population of Muslims, Jews, Sikhs, and Hindus at the time. As Hick engaged in discussions with followers of these religions and attended their religious services, his perspective began to evolve (Aslan, 1998, p. 8). Hick pondered the significance of that moment in his life and wrote:

And occasionally attending worship in mosque and synagogue, temple and gurdwara, it was evident that essentially the same kind of thing is taking place in them as in a

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<sup>7</sup> Hick's intellectual pursuits took him again to India, where he taught philosophy at the University of Calcutta from 1974 to 1976. This experience afforded him the opportunity to engage with oriental religions, which greatly influenced his perspectives on various aspects of spirituality and religion (Aslan, 1998, pp. 9-10).

Christian church—namely, human beings opening their minds to a higher divine Reality, known as personal and good and as demanding righteousness and love between man and man (Hick, 1980, p. vii).

During that period in Birmingham, Hick was deeply involved in two significant areas of interest: 1. The criticism of conventional Christology, the re-interpretation of the incarnation, and 2. The challenge posed by religious pluralism. According to Aslan, Hick accomplished this in a manner that allowed the critique of traditional Christology to support the advancement of religious pluralism. These two broad concepts have since become the principal focus of his intellectual pursuits throughout his lifetime (Aslan, 1998, p. 9).

Hick's book, *God and the Universe of Faiths* (1973) espoused a call for a paradigm shift in the perception of religion. He recognized that it was no longer tenable for Christian theologians to treat Christianity as the sole world religion. He posited that in the vast majority of cases, roughly 98%, an individual's religious beliefs (and any accompanying dissent) are determined by the circumstances of their birthplace. For instance, individuals born into Muslim families in Muslim countries are highly likely to adopt Islam as their faith. Similarly, those born into Christian families have an equally high probability of identifying as Christian (Hick, 1973, p. 132; Hick, 2005a, p. 1). Additionally, Hick posited that the aforementioned phenomenon applies to adherents of other major religions, including Jews, Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, and Taoists. He argued that it is highly improbable for a person born into a Tibetan Buddhist family to adopt Christianity or Islam. Likewise, it is unlikely for an individual born into a Muslim family in Iran or Pakistan to embrace Christianity or Buddhism. Hick maintained that this pattern is replicated worldwide across various religious communities (Hick, 1973, p. 132; Aslan, 1998, p. 101). Hick posits that "the accidents of birth" constitute a pervasive phenomenon, which could furnish a hypothesis of religious pluralism. He contends that if, in most instances, an individual's adherence to a particular faith is contingent upon the circumstances of their birth, such "exclusive" truth claims cannot be deemed cogent (Aslan, 1998, p. 101).

Individuals have inherited their religious, linguistic, and cultural identities throughout history. These inherited characteristics are deeply ingrained in our psyche and profoundly impact our worldview. The religion we are taught from a young age often appears to be the most fitting and accurate, as it aligns with our inherent beliefs and values. This mutual compatibility creates a sense of belonging and fulfillment that is often unmatched by alternative belief systems (Hick, 2005a, p. 2). Hick argued that just as it is impossible to say

which civilization is correct and which is wrong, it is also impossible to say which is right and which is wrong in the case of religion.

*An Interpretation of Religion* (1989) has the most comprehensive explanation of Hick's ideas. Hick here offers a thorough theory that aims to account for all religious phenomena. He calls it "*a pluralistic hypothesis*," which is how Hick refers to his notion. According to this hypothesis, all faiths are culturally conditioned reactions to the same Ultimate Reality. So, every religion in the world, according to Hick, should be seen as "various human reactions to one divine Reality..." (Hick, 1980, p. viii). Religious movements exemplify a variety of diversities that delineate the heterogeneous nature of the human species, encapsulating a multiplicity of dispositions and cognitive perspectives. The differences in attitudes evident within the Eastern and Western hemispheres and the corresponding religions they comprise can be traced to many factors, including linguistic, social, political, and artistic variances that have molded distinct cultural and religious traditions in each region.

Hick posits that throughout its historical development, Christianity has been characterized by *exclusivist* tendencies, asserting that Christ represents the only authentic manifestation of the divine Logos, and subscribing to a church-centric perspective that views any interpretation beyond *the* Church as heretical. According to Hick, the doctrine of the incarnation is largely to blame for this extreme *exclusivity* within Christian orthodoxy. Hick offers a novel interpretation of the incarnation to address this issue, which is discussed in the subsequent section (2.2). Hick argues that throughout the history of Christianity, there has been a discernible trend towards the tribalization of God, whereby the deity is viewed as the exclusive possession of a particular group that adheres to certain doctrines. Moreover, the Church has often shown limited regard for religious minorities, even those within its own ranks, and has frequently condemned and rejected various sects and denominations as erroneous and heretical<sup>8</sup>. The Church maintained that even infants without baptism were liable to be condemned to *limbo*<sup>9</sup>, let alone individuals who dissented from the Church's teachings and practices.

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<sup>8</sup> Throughout the history of Christianity, various groups and individuals have been labeled as heretical due to their teachings and practices that were considered to be outside the boundaries of orthodox Christian belief. Here are a few examples of heretical sects in Christianity: Gnosticism, Arianism, Nestorianism, Marcionism, and Cathars are just a few examples of the many heretical sects that have arisen within Christianity over the centuries. Each of these groups has been condemned by the Orthodox Christian church for promoting beliefs that are seen as incompatible with the teachings of the Bible.

<sup>9</sup> Study by International Theological Commission, 22 April 2007, 32–40

According to Hick's analysis, for at least fifteen centuries, the Christian stance had been that all individuals, regardless of their cultural or ethnic background, were required to embrace Christianity to achieve salvation. *Exclusivism* has been the prevalent perspective Christians hold toward other world faiths throughout Christianity's history. This can be seen in the apologetic attitude that Augustine of Hippo used toward the ancient religions of Greece and Rome and in the efforts that Thomas Aquinas made in his *Summa Contra Gentiles* to assist missionaries in converting Muslims to Christianity. Several events during the Middle Ages, such as the papal decree of Boniface VIII in 1302 and the Council of Florence in 1438-45, prove that *exclusivism* predominated within the Christian theology of religions during this time (Aslan, 1998, pp. 172-173). An example to consider is the famous papal decree issued by Boniface VIII in 1302, which stated:

"We are required by faith to believe and hold that there is one holy, catholic and apostolic Church, we firmly believe it and unreservedly profess it, outside it there is neither salvation nor remission of sins... to submit to the Roman Pontiff is, for every human creature, an utter necessity of salvation." (Hick, 1973, p. 120).

The *exclusivist* position was also prevalent within the Protestant community, including the Lutheran and Anglican Reformed Churches, as evidenced by literary works such as Luther's *Large Catechism* and the Frankfurt Declaration of 1527, both of which presented an *exclusivist* outlook, which maintains that salvation is not attainable outside of Christianity. This belief is particularly pronounced among evangelical groups, who regard it as a fundamental tenet of their faith. For instance, the Frankfurt Declaration of 1527 conveyed this message to the non-Christian world, stating:

"We, therefore, challenge all non-Christians, who are God's creation, to believe in Jesus Christ and to be baptized in his name, as eternal salvation is promised to them only through him." (Ibid., 121).

The Church's historical *exclusivist* tendencies were so at odds with the globalized and modern world, ultimately leading the Catholic Church to reconsider this outlook in the mid-20th century. This shift represents a positive step towards fostering greater religious tolerance and mutual acceptance, as *exclusivist* views can have significant moral implications for interpersonal relationships, potentially leading to religious hubris and the outright rejection of interfaith dialogue. When the presumption of the invalidity of other religions is present, it completely forecloses the path to mutual understanding and meaningful discourse. According to Hick, although religious *exclusivism* has been a dominant perspective within the Christian world, there has been a noticeable shift towards *inclusivism* or even pluralism in recent times due to the impact of liberal ideals in Western societies. In the contemporary era, particularly

following *the Second Vatican Council* (1962-1965), the Church endeavored to rectify its dogmatic doctrine and espoused a more *inclusive* perspective that acknowledged the potential for salvation beyond the confines of the Catholic Church. Consequently, an avenue for more comprehensive interpretations was opened in this period (Hick, 2005b, p. 4).

As Hick astutely observes, *the Second Vatican Council's* revision of Church doctrine resulted in a transition from *exclusivity* to *inclusivity* within the Catholic Church. The phrase "In our time," derived from the Latin term "*Nostra Aetate*," is the opening sentence of *the Second Vatican Council's* Declaration on the Relationship of the Church with Non-Christian Religions. *Nostra Aetate* represents a momentous proclamation that delineates the Church's amicable ties with Eastern religions, such as Buddhism and Hinduism, and Muslims and Jews. These religions were included in the declaration, which affirms "the presence of God's work within the principal faith traditions" (Nienhaus, 2013). This outlook is predicated on the notion that while Christianity may be the sole comprehensive religion, other religions may also contain elements of truth and salvation. This fresh interpretation paved the way for interfaith discussions and a more tolerant stance between the Catholic Church and other religions. The principle of *inclusivism*, which emerged during the modern era due to the Church's interaction with other faiths, is conceivably the most prevalent of interreligious postures (Robbins, 1989, p. 267).

Another concept that was brought up during the second council in relation to this idea of inclusivity was the notion of "*Anonymous Christians*" introduced by Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner (1904-1984)<sup>10</sup>. This idea is justifying the doctrine of *inclusivism*, which is a theological notion regarding the destiny of the unlearned, positing that individuals who have never encountered the Christian Gospel may still be redeemed through Christ (Hick, 1979, p. 194). Rahner defines an *anonymous Christian* as someone who lives a life of true devotion to God and virtue but does not identify as a Christian or believe in the Christian faith. Rahner thought that the grace and love of God are available to anybody who honestly dedicates their life to God and doing good, regardless of religious denomination. This ideology held that God's mercy works mysteriously and can save non-Christians (D'costa, 1985, p. 132). John Hick has adopted the theological concept of *anonymous Christianity* to acknowledge the

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<sup>10</sup> Karl Rahner (1904–1984) was a German Jesuit priest who is largely regarded as one of the most influential Roman Catholic theologians of the 20th century. He was a key architect of *the Second Vatican Council* and played an instrumental role in shaping the Catholic Church's *inclusivist* outlook (Marmion, 2017, 1 March, pp. 25-48). He is most well-known for his contributions to Christology and the unification of an existential philosophy of personalism with Thomistic realism, in which human self-awareness and transcendence are situated within a realm in which God is the ultimate determinant (Britannica, Karl Rahner, 2023).

multiplicity of religious beliefs and practices globally, asserting that divine love and grace are accessible to all individuals, irrespective of their religious identification (Hick, 1985, p. 33).

However, Hick maintains that Vatican II falls short of his expectations, as it is unable to address the type of pluralism he seeks. To clarify his position, he provides the following explanation:

But still, Vatican II has not made the *Copernican revolution*<sup>11</sup> that is needed in the Christian attitude to other faiths. It still assumes without question that salvation is only in Christ and through incorporation into his mystical body, the church (Aslan, 1998, p. 175).

Hick argues that although *exclusivism* may appear to be reasonable when considering only one's own religious tradition, it is highly unlikely in the present-day world. He also suggests that if *exclusivism* were valid, empirical evidence would support it. For example, those who adhere to the true religion would be expected to demonstrate greater moral rectitude, their societies would be more desirable places to reside, or they would be more successful in producing saints. However, according to Hick, this is not the case. Practitioners of every religion seem to undergo moral transformations in their lives (Hick, 1989, p. 307). Hick argues that no religion is superior to another regarding ethics and virtues (Hick, 1981, p. 467). He argues that the results of all faiths are similar, with many saints and righteous people found across different religious traditions. He highlights the significant impact that sages and philosophers from various religions have had on society. Within these vast historical constructs, the Real, the Ultimate, and the Divine are comprehended and responded to, resulting in the gradual transformation of human existence from egocentrism to Reality-centrism. He uses this shift from egocentrism to Reality-centrism to measure the validity of religious pluralism (Hick, 1981, p. 467). Hick emphasizes that the ability of religions to create saints is a crucial characteristic, and this capacity to produce saints serves as a valid criterion to identify the authenticity of a religious tradition as a salvific human response to the Real (Aslan, 1998, p. 109).

A defensible assertion is that all religions share the fundamental tenet that individuals ought to aspire towards perfection, transcend their egoistic tendencies, overcome *maya*, and

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<sup>11</sup> Hick's *Copernican revolution* means realizing that all religions are important and revolve around God. This is different from thinking that only one religion, like Christianity, is the most important. It's like how people used to think the Earth was at the center of the universe, but then realized the Sun was actually at the center. It's important to consider all religions when studying theology in a global context, instead of just looking at one religion separately (Almond, 1983). This means recognizing the religious value of other religions and including them in theological discussions, rather than assessing them based on a theology constructed independently of them. The revolutionary aspect of this paradigm shift is that it acknowledges the importance of other religions and considers them as part of a global theological context.

heedlessness, and discover the divine self within, ultimately transforming themselves towards a divine nature. Indeed, virtually all of the world's major religions have underscored the significance of cultivating mystical knowledge and engaging in related practices at some point in their histories. Therefore, according to Hick, universal ethical principles are shared among all major religions that are very similar. Across all religions, we observe consistently emphasizing the cultivation of virtuous qualities such as love, compassion, honesty, forgiveness, generosity, humility, affection, self-sacrifice, and a desire for beauty, wisdom, and goodness, among others. Conversely, these ethical principles are characterized by a condemnation of specific behaviors, such as arrogance, greed, envy, pride, sloth, selfishness, cruelty, injustice, unjustifiable anger, gluttony, and corruption, which are deemed to be vices. As Hick noted, one crucial aspect contributing to the credibility of the religious pluralism argument is the existence of shared ethical codes among different traditions. This represents a fundamental principle of the major religions, serving as a shared goal uniting all faiths (Aslan, 1998, p. 110). These principles also include liberation from suffering and attaining the kingdom of God, union with God, achieving selflessness, freedom in *nirvana*, and other similar ideas (Ibid., 109). Evidently, all religions recognize the importance of prayer or meditation, worship, and ritual practices to connect with the divine. Each religion has unique ways of expressing devotion and reverence, such as chanting, meditation, prostration, pilgrimage, and other ritual forms.

Furthermore, Hick also looks at the content of prayers between religions. Hick's examination of prayers across religions highlights significant theological parallels among these prayers reflected in religious texts. However, he places greater importance on the functional similarities of these prayers in the daily practices of believers and the impact they have on religious and spiritual life rather than on their intricate theological details. For example, he cites a Muslim prayer recited during the celebration of Ramadan as an instance of such similarity:

Praise be to God, Lord of creation, Source of all livelihoods, who orders the morning, Lord of majesty and honor, of grace and beneficence. He who is so far that he may not be seen and so near that he witnesses the secret things. Blessed be he and forever exalted (Hick, 1973, p. 141).

And here is a Sikh creed used at the morning prayer, which shares many similarities with the same Islamic worship, and Hick provides other examples of different religions in this subject, so it is unnecessary to include all of them here:

There is but one God. He is all that is.



He is the Creator of all things, and He is all-pervasive...

He is timeless, unborn, and self-existent.

He is the Enlightener

And can be realized by the grace of Himself alone.

He was in the beginning; He was in all ages

The True One is, Was, O Nanak, and shall forever be (Ibid., 141-142).

This similarity suggests that the prayers express the encounters of diverse individuals with the same divine Reality. These references all honor God as all beings' origin, foundation, and sustainer. These prayers also describe God as timeless, limitless, infinite, omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent, and omnibenevolent. According to Hick, such prayers and hymns must undoubtedly express the encounter of diverse individuals with the same divine Reality. The experiences of God have taken place within diverse human societies, involving individuals with varying philosophies, modes of thought and emotion, and histories. These experiences have created different theological systems within various religious structures and organizations (Ibid., 143). According to Hick, it is incorrect to assert that religions are invalid since religions, much like civilizations, exemplify different human natures, temperaments, and thoughts. Through *religious experience* and interaction with the "*noumenon*," humans have discovered certain truths that can be observed through the shared principles among religions.

Another point that made Hick think and made him tend to religious pluralism was the question of how it is possible for a God who is absolute love not to accept the salvation of the majority of people, both pre-Christian and non-Christian (Ibid., 122). For Hick, this is a fundamental question. Because if we assume that only the group who were baptized and believed in a series of theological dogmas are subject to salvation, then this God cannot be called absolute love, and it becomes more like a tribal God. And this moral contradiction between God's unconditional love and the eternal damnation of the majority of humans has caused the church and many Christian theologians to adopt another approach, *inclusivism*, and religious pluralism. Therefore, after all these observations and meditating on different religions, Hick turned to a pluralistic hypothesis, religious pluralism. In its broadest terms, this is the belief that no religion monopolizes the truth that leads to salvation. Alternatively, in

the more poetic words of the great Sufi, Rumi<sup>12</sup>, speaking of the world's religions, "The lamps are different, but the Light is the same; it comes from beyond " (Hick, 2005a, p. 161).

Hick's recent works introduce a noteworthy perspective. Despite the prevalence of pluralistic interpretations of religion in modern times, Hick argues that such a view is not a novel idea but has existed within religious traditions throughout history. While it may not be the predominant belief in some religions like Judaism and Christianity, it is much more usual in Eastern religions. In particular, Sufism, a mystical branch of Islam, is well-known for its pluralistic perspective. Hick writes:

It is sometimes said that religious pluralism is a product of post-Enlightenment western liberalism. However, this is a manifest error, since the basic pluralist idea predates the 18th-century European Enlightenment by many centuries. It was taught by such thinkers as Rumi and al-Arabi in the 13th century, and Kabir, Nanak, and many others in 15th century India. Each tradition has strands of thought that can be developed to authorize the pluralist point of view. But any reader of the Qur'an is familiar with such verses as: '*If God had pleased He would surely have made you one people (professing one faith). But He wished to try and test you by that which He gave you. So try to excel in good deeds. To Him you will all return in the end, when He will tell you of what you were at variance*' (5: 48, Ahmed Ali translation), and the many verses which endorse without distinction the long succession of prophets through the ages (Hick, 2005b, p. 12)... Indeed, it occurs in the edicts of the Buddhist emperor Asoka in the 2nd century BCE. So far from its having originated in the modern west, the fact is that the modern west is only now catching up with the ancient east! Indeed, even within Christianity itself, there were expressions of religious pluralism long before the 18th-century Enlightenment. Thus, Nicholas of Cusa in the 15th century wrote that 'there is only one religion in the variety of rites' (*De Pace Fidei*, 6). So, it is an error, born of ignorance, to think that religious pluralism is a modern western invention (*Ibid.*, 15).

Hick posits that religious texts can be interpreted through the lens of pluralism. He contends that certain philosophers and mystics within each religion have espoused a comprehensive and pluralistic perspective of other religions. However, I must add that the Christian tradition did not possess the terminology of "religious pluralism" during the pre-modern era. Yet, some Christian mystics and philosophers held a more *inclusive* perspective

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<sup>12</sup> Rumi was a Persian poet, Islamic philosopher, theologian, and Sufi mystic who lived during the 13th century and was originally from Greater Khorasan in Greater Iran. His spiritual legacy has been immensely valued by Muslims of the Indian subcontinent, Persians, Kurds, Tajiks, Turks, Greeks, Pashtuns, and other Central Asian Muslims for the past seven centuries. Rumi's influence extends across national borders and ethnic divisions. His poetry has been widely translated into a great number of languages from all over the world and reworked into a variety of formats. Rumi is known as the "most popular poet" and the "highest selling poet" in the United States. *Masnavi*, which he wrote, is widely regarded as one of the most important poems written in Persian. His writings continue to be read in their original language by a significant number of people in Greater Iran and throughout the Persian-speaking world (Wikipedia, Rumi, 2023).

and sometimes encountered opposition from those who adhered to *exclusivist* beliefs<sup>13</sup>. The writings of these Christian figures are more evident in the Christian mystical tradition.

In summary, Hick's examination of the religious practices and beliefs of Muslims, Jews, Sikhs, Hindus, and Buddhists in Birmingham, along with his personal experiences and travels in India, convinced him to adopt the idea of religious pluralism. Additionally, he studied the origins of *exclusivity* in Christianity and attempted to address this problem. According to Hick, the Catholic Church has historically regarded itself as the ultimate authority on religious interpretation, resulting in an exclusivist perspective that considers other religions and even other denominations as invalid. However, changes in this perspective emerged in the 20th century, leading to *inclusivistic* interpretations by the Catholic Church and many Christian theologians. In his argument for religious pluralism, he suggests that an individual's adherence to a particular faith is often contingent upon the circumstances of their birth, making all faiths culturally conditioned reactions to the same Ultimate Reality. He subsequently established a theoretical framework for religious pluralism utilizing Kantian philosophical and epistemological principles, providing a philosophical defense of this

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<sup>13</sup> While pluralism may not be the dominant view in Christianity, there are precedents for it within the Christian mystical tradition. In the context of the Bible, it is imperative to acknowledge Jesus' teachings as recorded in the Gospel according to John. Specifically, Jesus affirmed the existence of numerous mansions in his Father's abode (John 14:2), while also recognizing the existence of "other sheep" who do not belong to his immediate flock (John 10:16). Ambrose of Milan (340-397), a prominent figure in the early Church, affirmed the Holy Spirit as the source of all truth, regardless of the speaker's religious affiliation. Augustine of Hippo, another influential Church father, noted that elements of what is now referred to as Christianity can be traced back to ancient times, and that its principles have been present since the dawn of humanity (Samuel, 2020). Repeatedly one finds Christian mystics expressing an awareness that God is in all creation. Christian mystics often report a unity of existence in which God exists in all creatures, including plants and trees. For example, Catherine of Genoa (1447-1510) claimed that God exists in all creatures, and William Blake (1757-1827) described the whole world as full of God, from the sand to the sky. Or as Angela Foligno (1248 -1309) claimed, the world as a whole is pregnant with God and full of God. It is common for mystics to go beyond the theological standards of their age, as Origen taught that all creatures could be redeemed and saved. Marcarius (300 - 391) no longer condemned non-Christians, Nilus of Sora (1433 - 1508) opposed burning the Judaizers, and Meister Eckhart (1260 -1328) said that in union with God, we become God despite the very pagan sound of that statement. Julian of Norwich (1343 - 1416) saw no Jews in eternal torment and taught all humankind's salvation (Fanning, 2001, p. 219). Catherine of Genoa saw heaven and hell as states of the soul rather than places. Jacob Boehme (1575 - 1624) had no patience with creedal disputes and taught friendship with Jews, Muslims, and heathens (Ibid.). Jonathan Edwards (1703 -1758) believed that all the world's religions had received Gods revelation and that salvation was possible for non-Christians, and Thomas Merton (1915 -1968) came to understand that he would be a better Catholic not by refuting other faiths but by affirming their beliefs when he could (Ibid.). The goal of mystics is to attain union with God by merging themselves with the divine. A closer examination of the mystical elements of Christianity reveals that mystics have been an integral part of the faith throughout its two thousand-year history. Despite the widely held notion that Christianity is a religion founded on the acceptance of established theology or creed and the performance of specific external actions, it is, in fact, a living religion that emphasizes a personal experience of God. Christianity, akin to Buddhism, Hinduism, the Sufis of Islam, Kabbalistic Judaism, and shamanic spirituality, is a spirituality that involves the direct perception of the Absolute. The methodology of the mystics provides a genuine alternative that is rooted in the core of the Christian faith (Ibid.)

viewpoint. This interpretation suggests that all religions result from the encounter with God, which will be the focus of the following sections. He also argues that *exclusivism* cannot be deemed cogent and that the results of all religions are similar, with many saints, ethical codes, and righteous people found across different religious traditions. He also believed that regular believers are more focused on their relationship with God rather than complex theological ideas about God. Religious practices such as prayer, worship, and showing reverence to God hold greater significance in daily religious life compared to the theological concepts expounded by theologians. Hick also questions how a God who is 'absolute love' could not accept the salvation of the majority of people, both pre-Christian and non-Christian. He posited that an all-loving God would not condemn most people on earth due to their religious affiliations. Ultimately, Hick doesn't view the theory of religious pluralism as a novel concept but rather one that was already inherent in the tradition. He saw his role as merely systematizing and articulating this perspective.

## 2.2 The Doctrine of Incarnation: The Basis of Christian Exclusivity

*"Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts sometimes accusing them and at other times even defending them."* – Paul the Apostle (Romans 2:14-16)

As Hick explains, the doctrine of the incarnation, which posits that God became flesh in the person of Jesus Christ, was central to the Christian faith. However, this doctrine also raised difficult questions about the relationship between God and non-Christian religions. In particular, the idea that God became incarnate in Christ seemed to suggest that God's presence and salvific activity were exclusive to Christianity. This led many Christians to adopt an *exclusivist* view, which held that Christianity was the only true religion and that other religions were either false or inferior. However, as Hick argues, this *exclusivist* stance has been a source of tension and conflict between religions throughout history and has contributed to religious intolerance and violence in many parts of the world. Hick argues that the doctrine of the incarnation needs to be reinterpreted and revised to avoid contradicting the truth of other religions. According to Aslan, Hick's idea of religious pluralism is intertwined with his new Christology, and he seeks to support his theory by redefining the doctrines that give Christianity a unique position (Aslan, 1998, p. 176).

Hick's perspective on the incarnation can be perceived as a component of his wider endeavor to establish a theology of religious pluralism, which underscores the multiplicity of religious experiences and acknowledges the legitimacy of various religious approaches toward God. In other words, John Hick's theological re-interpretation of the incarnation departs from traditional Christian theology and demonstrates his broader commitment to religious pluralism. According to Hick, the reinterpretation of the incarnation is essential because it has been used to validate the assertion that Christianity is the only faith established by God in human form and, therefore, is superior to all other religions (Ibid., 177). According to Hick, the belief that salvation is exclusive to Christianity and that the orthodox doctrine of the incarnation is the only means of comprehending God can transform the Christian God into a tribal deity (Hick, 1977, p. 180). Through his re-interpretation of the incarnation, Hick endeavored to confirm the distinctive assertions of Christianity while also acknowledging the worth of other religious traditions. Consequently, this raises a pivotal concern highlighted by Hick, namely the issue of incarnation within Christianity.

Hick posited that for humans to comprehend God, divine Reality is manifested in various ways depending on cultural and religious contexts. Therefore, God reveals himself through multiple manifestations, and Jesus, in Hick's view, is not the only manifestation. He argued that just as Jesus embodied the divine in a particular historical and cultural context, God also manifests himself in other religious traditions in suitable ways. In other words, other religious traditions, besides Christianity, can provide access to the divine Reality, and their adherents can also experience God's presence according to their unique ways. Hick's objective can be characterized as a form of 'demythologization' of the concept of incarnation, with a particular focus on the ideas put forth by Rudolf Bultmann (1884 –1976) a German Lutheran theologian. He believed that demythologizing the incarnation would make sense of the variety of world religions and give them equal validity as ways to encounter God (Hebblethwaite, 1987, p. 7). Hick's interpretation of the incarnation has elicited controversy among Christians, with some perceiving it as diminishing the uniqueness of Jesus as the Son of God. Nevertheless, others have embraced Hick's ideas as affirming the diversity of religious experiences and acknowledging the universality of God's love and presence.

John Hick extensively expounded upon his ideas in numerous works, including *God and the universe of faiths* (1973), and *Incarnation and Myth* (1977). He identified a challenge in the literal interpretation of the incarnation, which led to Christianity's *exclusivity*. He

maintained that a major issue was the orthodox conception of the doctrine, wherein Jesus is regarded as God in a literal sense and as the sole manifestation of the God or Logos in human history. Therefore, the only path to truth and salvation is through Jesus of Nazareth (Hick, 1979, p. 192). As a result, Hick considered the church's interpretation of the incarnation as an obstacle to his religious pluralism and believed that the literal understanding of the concepts of the Son of God, God the Son, and God-incarnate suggests that Jesus is the only way to know and connect with God truly. This implies that any religious practices outside of the Judaic-Christian faith are not considered part of the path to salvation. In other words, construing the incarnation as exclusive to one religious tradition inevitably leads to *exclusivism*. This implication did not cause much harm in the past because Christendom was an independent society with minimal interaction with other cultures. However, for Hick, it was necessary to reexamine this traditional interpretation in the present era of globalization and increased interfaith connections.

To avoid this *exclusivity* associated with the Church's traditional interpretation of the incarnation, Hick rejected the doctrine's literal understanding and redefined it as a metaphor and a mythological and symbolic idea (Hick, 1973, p. 165). According to his view, the doctrine of the incarnation is deemed to be truly unfathomable, despite the two millennia worth of theological endeavors that have transpired. There has been no resolution to the issue of how Jesus Christ could possess both a divine and human nature concurrently (Ibid., 170). Thus, the assertion that God assumed human form is considered a mythical statement by Hick. One conceivable interpretation of this myth is that the incarnation is not a one-time historical event in which God became human in the person of Jesus Christ. Instead, incarnation is an ongoing process in which God continually enters the human experience in various ways. Hick regarded the incarnation as a potent emblem of the divine's existence in the world. From his standpoint, it should be perceived as a demonstration of the divine's manifestation in all human beings<sup>14</sup>, rather than an isolated occurrence that solely took place in Jesus Christ.

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<sup>14</sup> Is it conceivable to pose the question of whether Christology represents a unique form of mystical existentialism, simply a means of comprehending human existence? It is possible to suggest that the Gospel texts interweave historical and mystical Christology. The mystical Christology in the bible can be seen as an expression of man's essential existence, asserting that human beings possess a divine nature and that their genuine nature is divine, with their soul being eternally united with the Ultimate Reality. In other words, the incarnation of Christ could be considered a symbol of the divine nature of man. This mystical perspective, which recognizes that the incarnation is an image of the human soul, can be found in the works of Meister Eckhart and Rudolf Steiner. For instance, Meister Eckhart believes God is not outside

Hick posits that historically; Christian devotees have utilized religious language concerning Jesus without critically examining the logical coherence of such rhetoric. The precision of the terms employed to assert that "Jesus was the incarnation of God the Son," "God created the heavens and the earth in seven days," or "fall of Adam" etc., has not been thoroughly scrutinized. Hick raises pertinent questions regarding whether such language is intended to convey factual information, make a promise, pass judgment on valuable entities, or employ literal, metaphorical, symbolic, mythological, or poetic meanings. Hick subscribes to the belief that the concept of a deity manifesting in human form constitutes a myth and metaphor. By reinterpreting the incarnation metaphorically, Hick aims to highlight the idea that the divine can be encountered in other religious traditions as well, not just in Christianity (Hick, 1977, pp. 177-178 & Aslan, 1998, p. 181).

It is essential to clarify the definition of the "myth" used by Hick. In Hick's perspective, the term "myth" should not be equated with falsehood or deceit, but rather serves as a means of expressing a practical truth that believers can relate to (Hick, 1973, p. 167).

Hick states:

I define a myth as a story or statement which is not literally true, but which tends to evoke an appropriate dispositional attitude to its subject-matter. Thus, the truth of a myth is a practical truthfulness: a true myth is one which rightly guides us to a reality about which we cannot speak in non-mythological terms (Hick, 1989, p. 248)

Religious language is often characterized by its symbolic and mythological nature. According to Hick, myth is the only language that can effectively convey transcendent realities as long as it is understood within the context of practical truth (Hick, 1979, p. 49). For instance, it is commonplace for individuals to attribute a certain occurrence to the devil's work. Even if such attribution is not a literal truth, it exhibits a mythic quality, and its veracity stems from the appropriateness of the attitude it stimulates towards the actual character of the event. A narrative myth operates by recounting a story, which is not factually accurate, typically about the genesis of a particular situation. Alternatively, it can embed a set of moral and religious teachings within a narrative framework, which elicits a faith-based response to

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man, but he is perfectly interiorized. Hence such statements: "The being and the nature of God are mine; Jesus enters the castle of the soul; the spark in the soul is beyond time and space; the soul's light is uncreated and cannot be created. It takes possession of God with no mediation; the core of the soul and the core of God are one." For Meister Eckhart, the soul of man is one with the Father: it engenders God as a divine person. "If I were not, God would not be God." (Schürmann, 2020). Similarly, Rudolf Steiner also interpreted the doctrine of the incarnation in a way that emphasizes the presence of divine nature in all humans. For more information on Rudolf Steiner's *interpretation of the Gospel of St. John*, see Steiner (1992).

the teachings (Hick, 1973, p. 167). Symbols and metaphors carry profound meanings, and it falls upon theologians and philosophers to discern and acknowledge the intended connotations of these expressions. Hick's approach to the doctrine of incarnation can be characterized as a semantic analysis endeavoring to uncover the intended significance of the symbolic language utilized in the incarnation.

Hick contends that myths offer a means for individuals to comprehend their understanding of God, and the myth of the incarnation aims to convey the idea that by following the example of Jesus, individuals can partake in his eternal life. Attributing divinity to Jesus is a testament to his significance and religious value (Ibid., 172). In other words, the title "Son of God" was a metaphor employed by Jesus' followers to express their profound admiration for the values he embodied (Mbogu, 2008, p. 117; Hick, 1977, p. 168). Hick posits that the doctrine of the incarnation holds practical utility as it underscores the significance of Jesus in the Christian tradition. The assertion that God took on human form, is a mythical expression of the belief that encountering God is possible through Jesus. According to Hick, the incarnation held significant value for the apostles and early Christians, reflecting their belief in Jesus Christ's role in their life. The disciples believed that God was present in Christ and encountering him was akin to experiencing God in his most perfect form. The actions and teachings of Christ were seen as a reflection of God's will and purpose. He argues that the notion that God descended from heaven to live among people as a mortal carries immense psychological and emotional power. It instills a sense of divine presence within the earthly realm and provides a perfect role model to emulate. As a result, followers can trust and obey Christ's teachings without hesitation (Hick, 1979, p. 47).

He contends that once people encountered Jesus and were transformed by him, he became the focal point of their religious lives, inspiring their devotion and loyalty. He posits that the pure and righteous life lived by Jesus led people to experience divine purity in him. While Hick does not argue that Jesus is God, he posits that the profound consciousness of God embodied by Jesus would have made it possible for individuals in the first century to experience a sense of being in the presence of God through spiritual contagion. This experience, in turn, led people to believe that Jesus was God and exalt him as a divine entity. Therefore, it was logical for them to use the loftiest terms in their culture to refer to him. In addition, the idea of divinity being present in human life was a common theme in the ancient world's Hellenistic and Judaic cultures. Thus, it is not surprising that Jesus was deified during



that historical period (Hick, 1977, p. 174). Hick puts forth a naturalistic and, to some extent, realistic re-interpretation of the concept of incarnation, proposing that Jesus was a human being and a remarkable spiritual and moral teacher<sup>15</sup>. He posits that the traditional interpretation of Christology, which asserts the literal divinity of Jesus, is not factually accurate instead arguing that Jesus was a unique human who had experienced a transformative encounter with the divine.

Therefore, Hick used *Feuerbach's* account of God as a projection of human ideals, which was an answer to the spiritual needs of first-century Christians (Ibid., 168). Moreover, John Hick posits that the historical Jesus did not consider himself God or the incarnate God (Hick, 1973, p. 172). He would have regarded such a notion as heretical if it had been presented to him during his lifetime. Hick acknowledges that there is no definitive evidence regarding how Jesus viewed himself. He argues that the "historians of the period have concluded, with an extraordinary degree of agreement, that Jesus did not profess to be God incarnate," based on the available evidence. Additionally, Hick notes that the title "divine" and "son of God" were commonly used for heroes, emperors, and monarchs in Jesus' time, both among the Jewish people and the Greco-Romans. Therefore, Jesus might have been expected to be revered and even considered a god (Aslan, 1998, p. 178).

Hick would have possibly agreed with Maurice Wiles, a deceased Anglican priest and theologian from the University of Oxford, who asserted in the preface of the book *Incarnation and Mythology* (1977) that the designations "Christianity" and "incarnation" should not be treated as synonyms (Wiles, 1977, p. 2). In addition, Hick argues that the concept of incarnation is a widely encompassing idea subject to various interpretations and there have been presented various interpretations of the concept of incarnation throughout the history of Christianity. As a result, it is challenging to determine a single definitive doctrine of the Christian incarnation (Hick, 1979, p. 47-48). According to Hick, the concept of the incarnation, as presented in orthodoxy, is simply an interpretation of the significance of Jesus. Throughout the history of Christianity, there have been numerous understandings of the role

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<sup>15</sup> This view is in contrast with the view of the Orthodoxy of Christianity. This famous quote from C.S. Lewis's book *Mere Christianity* (1952), where he famously argues that Jesus could not simply be considered a great moral teacher, indicates the issue and opposite to the view of John Hick:

"I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: 'I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God.' That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse...but let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to." (Lewis, 1960, p. 41)

of Jesus Christ as the leader of the faith during both early Christianity, Middle Ages, and the modern era. However, political power and the rise of the Catholic Church, which replaced the Roman Empire, suppressed, and destroyed many of these interpretations. As a result, Hick argues that the orthodox doctrine of the incarnation is not the only interpretation within the Christian tradition and history and that Christianity encompasses a broader range of beliefs.

However, Hick argues that the mythical depiction of the God-man, the incarnation, or the exaltation of a human figure into a divine being is not unique and exclusive to Christianity and is also present and acknowledged in other religious traditions in China and India, and other places as well (Ibid., 192-193). Specifically, he points to the example of Gautama Buddha, the historical figure who founded Buddhism, and how he was transformed into a divine entity in *Mahayana Buddhism*. According to the doctrine of the Three Bodies (*Trikaya*), Gautama's earthly body (*Nirmanakaya*) is that of a human who attained enlightenment and taught others the path, while his transcendent or celestial body (*Sambhogakaya*) is a divine entity to whom prayers are directed. The earthly Buddhas are projections of the heavenly Buddhas' lives into this world's flow. But eventually, these transcending Buddhas are one in the Dharma Body (*Dharmakaya*), representing Absolute Truth (Hick, 1977, pp. 168-169). This, according to Hick, illustrates the symbolic and mythological nature of religious language and the tendency of different religious traditions to use similar concepts and themes to express their beliefs about the divine (Ibid.).

In parallel to the Christian belief that Jesus Christ embodies the pre-existing divine Son or Logos, Buddhists also understand the human Buddha as a manifestation of a transcendent and pre-existent Buddha. Similarly, in *Mahayana Buddhism*, Buddha is believed to be united with the Absolute, just as in Christianity, the eternal Son is considered to be one with God the Father (Ibid.). Comparably, the development of Buddhology and Christology can be observed, and there are similar beliefs regarding the pre-existence of Muhammad in the Sufi tradition of Islam. "*Haghighat Muhammadiyah*" or "*the Truth of Muhammad*" is a significant concept in Islamic Sufism that has garnered attention from Ibn Arabi<sup>16</sup>(1165–1240) and his commentators. The notion of Logos is already well-known in various contexts

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<sup>16</sup> Islamic thinking was profoundly impacted by Ibn al-Arab (1165–1240), a great Arab Andalusian Muslim scholar, philosopher, poet, and mystic. The cosmological vision he promoted through his teachings eventually came to be accepted as the norm in many parts of the Muslim world. Before his death, he was known as *Muyaddin* (The Reviver of Religion), and afterward, followers of Sufism gave him the title of *Shaykh al-Akbar* (The Greatest) in recognition of his teachings. He was revered as *Doctor Maximus* (The Greatest Teacher) throughout medieval Europe, from whence the "Akbarian" school took its name. For some in the Muslim community, including academics, Ibn 'Arab was practically a saint (Wikipedia, Ibn-Arabi, 2023)

in Islamic philosophy and mysticism. Ultimately, the discussion surrounding "*Haghighat Muhammadiyah*" is deeply connected to the question of "the perfect man" and Logos, who serves as a conduit for the mercy of the Almighty to reach the creatures<sup>17</sup> (Lakzayi, 2021, Sep 17, p. 1). According to Hick, the various exaltations of holy figures in different religious traditions can satisfy certain spiritual yearnings of individuals. He contends that people perceive the divine in these figures, including Jesus of Nazareth, by recognizing their holiness (Hick, 1977, p. 172). He argues that a crucial aspect of reinterpreting the doctrine of the incarnation recognizes that if we accept the mythological interpretation of the incarnation, we can use a similar explanation to account for similar ideas in other religions (Hick, 1973, p. 172-177). In other words, whenever religious leaders of other religions say that a person is the only divine being, the same myth can be used to explain them.

Hick asserts that it is essential to contemplate how God operates within the religious lives of all individuals and how Christianity aligns with this pluralistic world. Since diverse religions use different names to refer to God, it is more appropriate to acknowledge this reality. Suppose one were to adopt a literal interpretation of the incarnation, where only through Jesus Christ's death can individuals be saved, and their response to him is the sole means of their salvation. In that case, it follows that the only path to salvation is through the Christian faith. This would imply that most individuals on Earth have not been, and will not be, saved. However, it raises the question of whether God, who loves all individuals and is the father of all, has chosen that only those born in specific times and places will be saved. Hick says this idea is too narrow because it makes God seem like the tribal god of the predominantly Christian West. As we've seen, because of this illogical *exclusivity* belief, many Christian theologians have tried to solve this problem by saying that other men of other faiths may be *anonymous Christians* or part of the invisible church, etc. (Hick, 1977, p. 180).

Moreover, according to Hick, if we assert that God is "ultimately good" or "all-good," it seems reasonable to assume that a good God would desire "ultimate goodness" or the

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<sup>17</sup> In Ibn Arabi's view, Muhammad is the most significant representation of God's manifestation in human form. He posits that Muhammad was the very first thing created, as the master of all creatures and the foremost example for humans to follow (*al-ḥaqīqa al-Muhammadiyah*). According to Ibn Arabi, God's attributes and names are evident in this world, and Muhammad represents the most complete and perfect manifestation of these traits and names. According to Ibn Arabi, Muhammad is a reflection of God, and he argued that the knowledge of Muhammad was equivalent to knowledge of God, providing the most convincing proof of God's existence. Ibn Arabi analyzed the idea of "the perfect man" in great detail by scrutinizing the Logos from over twenty-two different perspectives. He considered the Logos, also known as the "Universal Man," as a bridge connecting humans and God (Dobie, 2010, p. 225). A common archetype can be observed between the Islamic Sufism concept of Muhammad and the Christian view of Jesus Christ, despite minor differences in their contents (Nasr, 2007b, p. 38)

salvation of all individuals. If a good God wants everyone to be saved, but structures things in such a way that only a select few are saved, then such a God cannot be just. Consequently, for God to demonstrate his justice, he must provide a means for all individuals to achieve salvation (Aslan, 1998, p. 106). Hick proposes that the most effective approach to address this quandary is acknowledging that God reveals his word in various regions of the world, leading to the diversity of religions. If we use the term "Logos" to denote how God achieves salvation, we must recognize that all salvations, across all religions, are the product of the "Logos." Based on their respective concepts and symbols in distinct cultures and religions, individuals encounter the "Logos" and attain salvation. However, it would be inaccurate to claim that everyone who attains salvation does so solely through Jesus of Nazareth (Hick, 1977, p. 181).

In summary, Hick's perspective on the incarnation challenges the *exclusivist* claim that Christianity is the only way to know and encounter God. He argues that such a claim is dogmatic and incompatible with God's unlimited love and grace for all human beings. Instead, Hick's reinterpretation of the incarnation as symbolic and mythological allows for the possibility of encountering the sacred in other religions. By recognizing the diversity of *religious experiences* and the different ways God may manifest Himself, Hick's approach promotes religious pluralism and removes an obstacle to accepting it. Hick's central concern is the possibility of encountering the divine in other religions. The fact that Christians experience God does not necessarily imply that people outside of Christianity do not experience God. In other words, while Christianity serves as the means through which God reveals himself in Western culture, other groups from different cultural traditions may experience God differently. Other religions similarly espouse views on how God manifests himself. Therefore, it is appropriate to assume that God has manifested himself diversely. In this way, Hick's interpretation of the incarnation is an essential contribution to expanding our understanding of religious diversity and promoting interfaith dialogue. The crux of the matter lies in the fact that the reinterpretation of the incarnation does not attenuate the pivotal significance of Christ in the Christian way of life, and it does not preclude the recognition of the role and importance of Christ as the focal point of veneration in the life of a Christian. Simultaneously, adherents who endorse this conception need not disregard the potential for the unveiling of veracity in other religious traditions.

### 2.3 John Hick's Perspective on Phenomena and Noumena

*"The ultimate truth is beyond all religions. And yet it is the same truth which all religions proclaim."* – Sathya Sai Baba

Acknowledging that various religious traditions embody God in distinct forms brings up a fresh problem about religious disputes and distinctions. This gives rise to two key queries: Firstly, what is the *raison d'être* of these religions and why do so many religions exist? Secondly, what causes differences or possible inconsistencies and conflicts among religions? In addressing this problem, Hick proposes applying Kant's epistemological theory. As mentioned in the previous sections, John Hick offers several ways of discussing contradictions between religions, including the separation of *noumenon* (reality as it is) from *phenomena* (perception of reality). One of the foundations of the claim of religious pluralism in Hick is one aspect of Kant's philosophy. Hick's central thesis is that all religions offer different perspectives on the Ultimate Reality or the Transcendent, and no single religion can claim a monopoly on truth. To defend his position, Hick draws on Kant's epistemology, which suggests that the human mind is limited in knowing reality directly (Hick, 2004, p. 240-241).

To understand Hick's view, it is necessary to explain Kant's epistemology. Although philosophical systems before Kant were mainly ontological, Kant founded an epistemological approach. What he did in the epistemology of sensory perception was to change the role of mind and object in the act of perception. According to Kant, knowledge is composed of matter and form; the substance of knowledge is provided through experience and its form through the mind. Therefore, due to the interference of the mind in the process of cognition, we cannot know the world outside the mind as it is; If we had intellectual intuition or the faculty of perceiving things as they really are, we could understand the *noumenon*; But we never experience non-sensory perception. Therefore, the mind can gain knowledge about the appearance of objects or *phenomena*, and objects in themselves can never be known (Copleston, 1994, pp. 279-283; Hick, 2004, p. 241). So according to Kant, the mind structures our experiences through categories of understanding, and we can only know what our senses and mental faculties allow us to know. Therefore, our knowledge of reality is always limited and mediated through our cognitive abilities.

Hick applies Kant's epistemology to the study of religion by arguing that our understanding of the Transcendent is always mediated through our religious traditions and

cultures. In other words, we can only know the Transcendent through the lenses of our own religious beliefs and practices. It means no religion can claim privileged or exclusive access to the Transcendent. Hick further argues that different religions offer different perspectives on the Transcendent, and these perspectives are equally valid. He suggests that different scientific theories offer different models of the physical world, and so do different religions offer different models of the Transcendent. None of these models can claim to be objectively true, but they can all be subjectively true to their respective adherents. The 10-century Muslim Sufi al-Junaid drew this conclusion in a metaphor that he applied in the plurality of forms of awareness of God: 'The color of the water is the same as that of its container' (Hick, 2004, p. 241). Thus, Hick's use of Kant's epistemology allows him to defend religious pluralism by showing that our understanding of the Transcendent is always mediated and limited by our cognitive abilities and cultural contexts. No single religion can claim to have exclusive access to the truth, and different religions offer equally valid perspectives on the Transcendent.

Hick used Kant's cognitive distinction between the "world in itself" (*noumenon*) and the "world as it appears" (*phenomena*) to us and applied it to the relationship between Absolute Reality and human awareness of this Reality. Hick claims that Kant's model of epistemology is not only limited to sensory experiences but also includes all *religious experiences* (Ibid., 243). Therefore, every image of the Ultimate Reality that religious people have in their *religious experience* and when facing the Absolute is actually a *phenomenon* of that reality that no human being cannot experience as it is. Therefore, when religious people talk about the Absolute or the Ultimate Reality, in fact, they are talking about that Reality as it appeared to them. We can compare Hick's pluralistic theology to the ancient parable of "*blind men and an elephant*"<sup>18</sup> attempting to describe an elephant by touching the leg, the trunk, and the side. Each man has a unique way of describing the elephant, and while they are all accurate, they are also each certain that they are right and the other two are wrong (Goldstein, 2010, p. 492).

Hick uses this model to explain the variety of *religious experiences*. He thinks that the way people pray and meditate, sacred texts, rituals, and other parts of tradition serve the same purpose as Kant's cognitive categories and perceptual forms. In other words, he thinks that *religious experiences* are shaped by the cultural context of the tradition being talked about

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<sup>18</sup> The parable of the blind men and an elephant is about a group of blind men who touch an elephant for the first time and envision what it is like. Each blind man feels the elephant's side or tusk. The parable's moral is that people prefer to declare Absolute Truth based on their limited, subjective experience while ignoring others' equally genuine experiences. The parable spread from ancient India. The narrative also surfaces in the accounts of Sufi and Bahá'í Faith traditions from the 2nd millennium.

(Hick, 2004, p. 242). These thoughts, feelings, and intellectual foundations come from different cultures, which affect how the type of experience is expressed and how it is interpreted in different ways. Hick says that the same divine Reality has always been active in the world and showing itself to people and that the different ways people have responded have to do with their own circumstances. These ethnic, geographical, climatic, economic, social, and historical conditions have resulted in the current diversity of human civilization. Within each major cultural zone, responses to the divine have assumed distinctive shapes. Thus, Islam represents the principal response of the Arabic peoples to the divine Reality, Hinduism represents the principal response of the Indian peoples, Buddhism represents the principal response of the peoples of South-East Asia and parts of northern Asia, Christianity represents the principal response of the European peoples, etc. (Hick, 1973, p. 139). Hick also suggests that all the great traditions affirm this distinction between the unknowable (*noumenon*) and the manifestation of it (*phenomena*).

Hick discusses this dichotomy within the domain of major religions. He speaks about the ineffable nature of Ultimate Reality stems from its inherent incapability of human description and comprehension. In other words, since God, the Ultimate Reality is beyond human comprehension, He cannot be described by man. Theologian Thomas Aquinas, for instance, acknowledged that God transcends all forms of human intellect (*Summa contra Gentiles*, I, 14: 3). For Aquinas, God's eternal, self-existent nature exists beyond the realm of human conceptual systems, or transcategorical, rendering God ineffable. Thus, a distinction between God's infinite self-existent being and God as humanly knowable becomes necessary (Hick, 2005b, p. 13). This dichotomy is also evident in the works of prominent Christian mystics, such as Meister Eckhart<sup>19</sup> and Clement of Alexandria (150-215), who distinguished between the Godhead, the Ultimate ineffable Reality, and the known God of scriptures and church doctrine and worship, which is conceived and understood in limited human terms (Ibid.). According to Hick, Rudolf Otto (1869 –1937) eminent German Lutheran theologian, philosopher, and comparative religionist describes the theology of the 13th-century Christian

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<sup>19</sup> Meister Eckhart was a Dominican theologian from Germany who flourished between the 13th and 14th century. He is most commonly linked with the mystical school of Christian theology due to his writings and teachings. He was of the opinion that God could be found in everything and that the purpose of the spiritual life was to overcome all distinctions in order to arrive at a state of oneness with God as the ultimate destination. The views that have been presented here could be interpreted as offering support for religious diversity in its pre-modern guise. Schopenhauer drew parallels between Eckhart's philosophy and the teachings of many mystics and ascetics from the Hindu, Christian, and Islamic traditions: "If we turn from the forms, produced by external circumstances, and go to the root of things, we shall find that Sakyamuni and Meister Eckhart teach the same thing; only that the former dared to express his ideas plainly and positively, whereas Eckhart is obliged to clothe them in the garment of the Christian myth, and to adapt his expressions thereto." (King, 2002, pp. 125-128)

mystic Meister Eckhart as an impersonal God (Hick, 1973, p. 145). Similarly, Carl Jung (1875–1961), shares this viewpoint and regards the God introduced in Eckhart's teachings as an impersonal deity:

Meister Eckhart's theology knows a "Godhead" of which no qualities, except unity and being, can be predicated; it "is becoming," it is not yet Lord of itself, and it represents an absolute coincidence of opposites: "But its simple nature is of forms formless; of becoming becomingless; of beings beingless; of things thingless." (Jung, 1970, p. 193)

Therefore, we can also see an example of the interpretation of an impersonal God in the Christian tradition. In the same way, Maimonides (1138–1204) the Jewish philosopher expressed this dichotomy as the distinction between the essence and manifestation of God (Hick, 2005b, p. 13) and the Kabbalist mystics made a distinction between *Ein-Sof*<sup>20</sup>, the Absolute Divine reality beyond human description, and the God of the Bible (Hick, 2004, p. 237). Comparably, it is common knowledge in *Mahayana Buddhism* that there is a difference between the ultimate Dharmakaya (*an sich*), and its numerous incarnations, such as the Buddhas of heaven who make up the Sambhagakaya and the Nirmanakaya. This idea is also linked to the distinction between the impersonal Dharmakaya (*dharmata dharmakaya*) and the personified Amida or Buddha of limitless compassion (*upaya dharmakaya*). According to Hick, this distinction was initially presented by T'an-luan (476–542) the Chinese Buddhist monk, and was later embraced by Shinran (1173–1263) the Japanese Buddhist monk in the Pure Land tradition (Ibid., 241).

Hick additionally highlights Islamic teaching that asserts Allah transcends human experience yet is made manifest to human awareness as expressed in the Quranic phrase, "The eyes attain Him not, but He attains the eyes" (6:103). Among the Sufis, the Real, known as *Al Haq*, is considered to be the abyss of the Godhead underlying the self-revealed Allah (Ibid., 237). Many writers affirm the ultimate ineffability of God, such as Kwaja Abdullah Ansari (1006–1088), who, in prayer to God, declared, "You are far from what we imagine you to be," and "The mystery of your reality is not revealed to anyone" (Hick, 2005b, p. 13). The concept of Allah being both transcendent and immanent, or *batin* and *zahir*, is mentioned in the verse of the Quran (57:3), and it is a fundamental aspect of Islamic theology and mysticism.

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<sup>20</sup> The term "*Ein Sof*," which is derived from the Kabbalah, refers to the infinite or boundless aspect of God prior to any self-manifestation in the creation of spiritual realms. Its etymology consists of two Hebrew words: "Ein" meaning "nothing," and "Sof" meaning "limitation." According to Kabbalistic teachings, the negation of any attribute is emphasized when referring to *Ein Sof*, in line with the Neoplatonic belief that God cannot be associated with desire, thought, word, or action. The name "*Ein Sof*" reflects the concept that it is beyond human comprehension or understanding. The Ohr Ein Sof, or the "Infinite Light," symbolizes the paradoxical divine self-awareness that is annulled within the Ein Sof before creation (Kohler & Broyde, u.d.)



We find the same dichotomy within the other great traditions. In Hinduism, there is a distinction between *Brahman nirguna* and *Brahman saguna*. "Supreme Brahman" (*nirguna*) is beyond all descriptions and conceptualizations. It is described as the formless (in the sense that it is devoid of *Maya*) that eternally pervades everything, everywhere in the universe and whatever is beyond. *Saguna* is the Absolute with qualities close to the concept of immanence, the manifested divine presence (Hick, 2004, p. 236).

In my opinion, this dichotomy reveals two issues for us. Firstly, Hick employs to justify his philosophical standpoint on religious pluralism. This dichotomy becomes a tool for the philosophical justification of religious pluralism. This means that all religions are the result of the experience of the one unknowable God, and after the *religious experience*, the differences between religions are derived from that one unknowable God. Hick posits that the unknowable God remains ineffable in all religions in the form of *noumenon*, and it is the individual who, upon interpreting their *religious experience*, expresses their perception of that unknown Reality. This is where apparent differences in the descriptions of God arise between religions because different cultures create diverse interpretations of God. Secondly, it is not a simple task to categorize Eastern and Western religions into those that believe in an impersonal or personal God. Upon closer examination, it becomes apparent that both conceptions of God, whether personal or impersonal, can be observed in each of these traditions. Consequently, there is no inherent contradiction between Eastern and Western religions.

Hick observes that the dichotomy discussed previously can resolve the problem of distinguishing between personal and impersonal conceptions of God. In all the religions discussed, there exists an infinite and incomprehensible essence of the Godhead and a manifestation or appearance of that ineffable Reality. The personal attributes of God, such as love and mercy, are associated with the level of *Brahman Saguna* or personal God. Hence, the divine Reality can be viewed as both personal and non-personal (Ibid., 6). When we turn to men's religious awareness of God, we speak of *Saguna*, God in relation to man or *phenomena* (Hick, 1973, p. 144). One can observe the duality between an impersonal and a personal God in nearly all major religions, both indicative of some aspect of truth. This suggests that experiencing God in *religious experiences* is both impersonal and personal (Hick, 2004, p. 245), transcendent and immanent, apophatic and cataphatic, unseen and manifested, unknowable and knowable. Such duality is inherent to the mystery of the Ultimate Being and can be comprehended through a panentheistic approach to God.

The examples presented by Hick demonstrate that the divine Reality, being infinite, must extend beyond human understanding and be shrouded in mystery. This infinite transcendence is referred to as *nirguna*, the ultimate Godhead, the Real as it is (*an sich*), or the *Noumenon*. This distinction is required in the belief that God, *Brahman*, or the Dharmakaya is limitless and cannot be completely equated with any human experience or definition. The concept of "infinity" of God is also a fundamental assumption of all major religious traditions. For instance, in Christian theology, Augustine stated that 'God transcends even the mind,' while John of the Cross declared that God 'is incomprehensible and transcends all things.' (Ibid., 238). In Islam, the term *subhanahu* signifies that God is above all human description, as stated in the Quran (23:91, 37:180) that 'He is beyond what they describe' (Ibid.). The Hindu Upanishads also describe *Brahman* as being beyond the eye, speech, and mind's reach and having an 'unthinkable form' (Ibid.). Also, the phrase "*Neti Neti*" is a Sanskrit expression that conveys the meaning of "not this, not that" or "neither this, nor that." This term is present in the Upanishads, and it serves as an analytical meditation technique to help individuals understand the nature of *Brahman* by negating everything that is not *Brahman*.

The outcome of this dichotomy and the inherent separation between Godhead and humankind elucidates an important point for us which is in Hick's philosophy concrete descriptions applicable within the realm of human experience cannot be literally applied to the *noumenal* ground of that realm, which is unexperientable. As such, the Real cannot be described in terms of oneness, plurality, personality, materiality, goodness, evilness, animacy, or inanimacy, or attributed with qualities such as love, justice, and power (Ibid., 246). This perspective implies that God, as the "Ultimate Reality," is inscrutable, unknowable, and ineffable. Consequently, any quality ascribed to God, such as omniscience, omnipotence, pure goodness, and so on, may not necessarily align with the Ultimate Reality. Moreover, any attribute of God described in sacred texts is nothing more than an interpretation. This leads us to inquire whether such an interpretation invariably corresponds to reality. Might the interpretation of a prophet, sacred text or mystic be mistaken? Additionally, why are these attributes applied to the Ultimate Reality? Does Ultimate Reality lack these attributes, and do these descriptions of God in religions fail to exist in Reality *per se*? This is a salient observation, as the fourth section (see 4.3 and 4.4) of this study will elucidate the consequences of this perspective, highlighting the stark difference between Hick's and Nasr's viewpoints.

Hick posits that all depictions of God are interpretations of the Ultimate Reality through the lens of human experience, rather than being inherent attributes of the Ultimate Reality itself. In essence, the human *religious experience* generates diverse interpretations, which ascribe certain attributes to the Ultimate Reality. This is because the *phenomenal* world is structured by human conceptual frameworks, which do not apply to the *noumenal* ground. Therefore, any human understanding or interpretation of the Real, as exemplified in descriptions of entities such as Allah or *Brahman*, is just a reflection of the individual's *religious experiences*. According to Hick, it is even inaccurate to describe the Real as a thing or entity (Ibid.). Thus, the Real remains an elusive and unknown entity, and all descriptions of it are limited to human understanding of their own *religious experiences*, as it cannot be perceived as it truly is in itself. Nevertheless, the relationship between the ultimate *noumenon* and its various *phenomenal* manifestations, or between the boundless transcendent Reality and our numerous limited human images of it, allows for mythological expressions about the Real, as mentioned in the previous section (Ibid., 247-248).

However, for Hick, to say that God is infinite is acknowledging that He can be perceived and expressed in numerous ways. Hick relates this infinity of God to the ineffability of the *Noumenon* or the Real and asserts that *religious experience* allows for the apprehension of this transcendent Reality in various forms, giving rise to the diversity of religions. Thus, when an individual encounters their particular form of *religious experience* as a manifestation of truth, it is like looking through a glass into the darkness; it is vague and shadowy; therefore, they must also recognize that other vast streams of *religious experience* take different forms, looking through a different glass. *Religious experiences* are influenced by various concepts and imaginative constructs and are embodied in diverse institutions, artistic expressions, and modes of living. Hick asserts that the human apprehension of the Real is achieved via *religious experiences*, albeit in a manner that parallels Kant's account of our apprehension of the world. Specifically, such experiences are construed as meaningful *phenomenal* events that arise from interpreting informational input from external reality by the human mind's categorical framework. It follows that the source of such information, i.e., the *noumenal* realm, can only be posited as the reality that collaborates with the human mind to produce the *phenomenal* world of our experience (Ibid., 243). Accordingly, Hick posits that the human mind plays a central role in shaping the nature of *religious experiences*, resulting in various religions. It is a fundamental contention of Hick's philosophy that when we speak of a personal God with moral attributes and intentions or of non-personal entities such as the

Absolute, *Brahman*, or the Dharmakaya, we are essentially referring to the Real as it is experienced by human beings - that is, as a *phenomenon* (Ibid., 246).

In conclusion, Hick drew on Kant's distinction between the *noumenal* realm and the *phenomenal* realm. He argued that because the *noumenal* realm is unknowable to us, we cannot claim to have objective knowledge of Ultimate Reality or the nature of God. Instead, all *religious experiences* and beliefs are necessarily filtered through our human perspectives and cultural contexts, shaping our understanding of the divine. This means that no religion can claim exclusive access to the truth about God or Ultimate Reality. Rather, all religions are imperfect attempts to comprehend the divine, and they each provide unique perspectives on the Ultimate Reality. In essence, apart from one's own religion, which is sustained by a unique manifestation of *religious experience*, there exist other religions, each with its own distinct current of *religious experience* flowing at its core. As a result, when Hick says that our perception of Reality is an interpretation of Absolute Reality and not itself, it means that different concepts of God, such as Jahveh, Krishna, Allah, etc., are different manifestations of a single divine Reality. Each of them contributes to the knowledge of the nature of "Ultimate Reality" to some extent, but none of them includes it ultimately. Thus, God can be worshiped in many ways. Every religion originated as an immediate reaction to the Real. By acknowledging the veracity of the spiritual practices of others, we can bring everyone together under the *aegis* of the Real. According to Aslan, Hick believes that we will be able to eradicate religion wars and bigotry as a result of this and instead foster peace and religious tolerance around the globe (Aslan, 1998, p. 132).

### 3.0 The Significance of Tradition in Hossein Nasr's Philosophy

*"Verily, to every people there has been sent a prophet"* – Quran (16:36)

#### 3.1 Introduction

This section furnishes a concise synopsis of Hossein Nasr's life, as well as his perspectives on the concept of 'tradition' in relation to religious pluralism. Nasr, like John Hick, is among the intellectuals who reject the notion of *exclusivity* and advocate for religious pluralism. He does this through Islamic tradition and Islamic background. In my view, the selection of Nasr as a traditionalist Muslim philosopher subscribing to pluralism exemplifies Hick's approach in the Christian tradition towards religious pluralism. However, it is important to note that, unlike

Hick, Nasr does not espouse a systematic philosophical theory on religious pluralism, and it is not the primary focus of his work. In contrast to Hick, who is recognized as a pioneer of the religious pluralism hypothesis in contemporary discourse, Nasr's philosophical contributions lie in the fields of *traditionalism* and *perennialism*, where he explores the concept of *transcendental unity of religions*. In this segment, following a concise introduction to Nasr's life, we shall explicate the notion of 'tradition', along with its interconnection with the phenomenon of religious pluralism.

Hossein Nasr (1933) is an Iranian philosopher who has significantly contributed to the study of Islamic philosophy, spirituality, and culture. Nasr is widely regarded as one of the most influential Muslim scholars worldwide due to his extensive research on Islamic tradition and philosophy. His scholarly expertise spans various fields such as traditional culture, including wisdom, religion, philosophy, science, and art, as well as Western thought from ancient times to the present day and the history of science. Nasr advocates for revelation, tradition, and what he refers to as "*scientia sacra*," as opposed to rationalism, relativism, and modern Western materialism. He does not seek to formulate a novel philosophical system, but instead, strives to revive traditional doctrines that he believes have been disregarded in the contemporary world. Nasr is content to recall what he regards as the many manifestations of timeless wisdom. While his works prominently feature Islam and Sufism, his universalist outlook, derived from the concept *perennial philosophy*, considers the common essence of all orthodox religions beyond their formal particularities or present-day state. Nasr's scholarship in Islamic philosophy, situated at the intersection of Western and Islamic intellectual traditions, has earned him a position as one of the key figures in this domain (Robinson-Bertoni, 2017, p. 303). His writings are characterized by their rigorous scholarly methodology, comprehensive erudition on all things Islamic, the robustness of critical thought, and sustained clarity of expression. Nasr also is widely acknowledged as the foremost traditionalist thinker, drawing upon the concept of eternal wisdom (*sophia perennis*) to offer solutions to contemporary environmental challenges (Oldmeadow 2004, p. 213).

Nasr has worked in a variety of colleges and organizations throughout the world, including Tehran University, Harvard University, and George Washington University, where he is presently a Professor Emeritus of Islamic Studies. He was also President of the Iranian Academy of Philosophy and a member of the UNESCO International Committee on the Scientific and Cultural Foundations of Human Unity.

Nasr is also the author of more than fifty books and more than five hundred articles and essays, many of which are about the link between religion, philosophy, and culture in the

Islamic world (Nasr, 2007a, xiv). He is well-known for emphasizing reality's spiritual elements and advocating for a more holistic and integrated approach to knowledge and understanding. Some of his most influential works include *Science and Civilization in Islam* (1968), *Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man* (1968), *Knowledge and the Sacred* (1981), *The Need for a Sacred Science* (1993), *Religion and the Order of Nature* (1996), and *The Heart of Islam: Enduring Values for Humanity* (2002) and *Islamic Philosophy from Its Origin to the Present* (2006). According to Aslan, these works have significantly impacted various fields, including Islamic studies, philosophy, and spirituality, and continue to be widely read and studied by scholars and readers alike (Aslan, 1998, p. 19-23).

Nasr has received various prizes and distinctions for his services to scholarship and interfaith communication. He is widely considered one of the most prominent and important Islamic thinkers of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Nasr was not just the first Muslim to give a Gifford lecture<sup>21</sup>, but also the only person from the East to do so (Ibid., 21). Nasr's linguistic proficiencies are noteworthy, as he demonstrates fluency in Farsi, Arabic, and English and competently in French and German. Moreover, he exhibits a level of proficiency in Italian, Latin, and Greek (Ibid., 24)

Furthermore, in conjunction with his proficiency in the humanities domain, Nasr has formal training in physics and the history of science. He graduated from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) with a bachelor's degree in physics and mathematics and from Harvard University with a master's degree and a doctorate in the History of Science and Philosophy in the 1950s (Ibid., 14).

In 1958, he got his Ph.D. from Harvard university. That same year, he returned to Iran and was hired as an associate professor of philosophy and the history of science at Tehran University. He was the youngest person to become a full professor at Tehran University. He did this when he was only 30 years old. A series of noteworthy accomplishments marked Nasr's career in academia in Iran. In addition to his roles as vice-chancellor at Tehran University and President of Aryamehr University, he founded the Imperial Iranian Academy of Philosophy at the request of Empress Farah Pahlavi (Ibid., 17-18). The Academy quickly emerged as a preeminent center for philosophical discourse in the Islamic world. Before the

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<sup>21</sup> The Gifford Lectures are a series of talks given every year. The lectures are delivered at four universities in Scotland: The University of St Andrews, the University of Glasgow, the University of Aberdeen, and the University of Edinburgh. They were started in 1887 by Adam Gifford, Lord Gifford, as part of his will. They aim to promote and spread the study of natural theology in its broadest sense, which includes knowledge of the divine. The Gifford lectureship is a very prestigious academic award in Scotland.

Iranian revolution, during his time in Iran, he also founded the Islamic and Iranian Studies department at Harvard, Princeton, the University of Utah, and the University of Southern California (Moore, 2010, p. xxv). Following the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran and the widespread arrests of Iranian intellectuals during the revolution, Nasr was compelled to flee Iran and seek refuge in the United States with his family. He has since dedicated himself to teaching Islamic sciences and philosophy (Aslan, 1998, p. 21). Nasr's formidable reputation has established him as a leading representative of the Islamic philosophical tradition, as well as the *perennialist school* of thought and the school of *traditionalism*, on a global scale (Oldmeadow, 2004, p. 213)

To examine and understand Hossein Nasr's pluralistic approach, we must be familiar with traditionalists' view of religion and their view of the world because the idea of religious pluralism in Nasr's discourse is influenced by his traditionalist view, especially his mystical and Sufi approach. He has extracted his view on 'tradition,' '*perennial philosophy* and primordial religion' (see 3.2), '*archetypal religion*' (see 3.3), and '*esotericism* and *exoticism*' (see 3.4) from the core of various religions and reinterpreted it in a novel language, emphasizing the interconnectedness of different religious traditions.

Nasr believes that the term "tradition," as used in this study, became prevalent in Western society when knowledge and the world around us were losing their sacredness during modern times (Nasr, 1989, p. 65). According to Nasr, before the Renaissance, people were so closely connected to tradition that they didn't have to think about defining it. It was like a fish living in water that never thinks about the water it's swimming in. The people of that era were fully immersed in a world shaped by tradition and deeply understood divine knowledge, the sacred, and the cycles of civilization and culture. However, they didn't experience a completely secular and anti-traditional world like we do today, leading to a need to define and formulate what tradition means (Ibid., 66).

Nasr believes that the meaning of tradition is often misunderstood and confused with habits, customs, and inherited ways of thinking. However, according to Nasr, tradition is connected to the way of life derived from the Divine, but it has been lost due to the disillusionment of the modern world. Tradition is closely linked to fundamental concepts like the Hindu and Buddhist *dharma*, the Islamic *al-din*, the Taoist *tao*, and the Jewish *Halakhah* (Ibid., 69). These concepts are essential to understanding the meaning of tradition.

For Nasr, the worlds and civilizations created by these religions are traditional, and each religion is the origin of its own tradition, which extends the principles of the religion to different domains. Nasr defines tradition in the context of *the traditionalism school* as such:

...tradition refers to principles or truths that have a divine origin and are revealed or unveiled to humanity and the cosmos through various figures, such as messengers, prophets, avatars, the Logos, or other means of transmission. These principles have various applications in different domains, including law, social structure, art, symbolism, science, and the attainment of Supreme Knowledge. Tradition encompasses not only the principles themselves but also their ramifications and the means for achieving them (Ibid., 68).

Therefore, in this regard, Nasr sees a connection between the origin of the word 'tradition' and the word 'religion.' He explains that the term 'tradition' is rooted in the idea of transmission, encompassing the transfer of various types of sacred knowledge, practices, laws, techniques, and forms through both written and oral means. These transmitted elements could take the form of written texts or be deeply ingrained in people's souls (Ibid., 67).

According to Nasr, the root meaning of the word religion is "binding" (Latin: *Religare*). It refers to the bond that connects humanity to God and also to each other as members of a community. Through revelation, religion reveals certain principles and truths, becoming the basis for tradition and its various applications (Ibid., 72-73). Thus, divine revelation can be seen as the cause of all traditions. The etymology of religion and tradition shows that religion connects people to God, while tradition passes on the essence of religion or divine revelation from one generation to another. This idea is related to religious pluralism because Nasr does not consider tradition to be limited to a specific religion and when he talks about tradition, he means all ancient traditions. Islam, for example, is not just a static religion, but a living tradition that includes both fixed and changing aspects. When this distinction is applied to Islam, it indicates that the religion incorporates not just the theoretical principles that are explained in the Quran but also the rites and obligations that have been established by both the Quran and the *Sunnah* (tradition). Islam is a tradition since it encompasses not only the essential set of beliefs and practices but also the full of their historical application and evolution. It is possible to make the case that while Islam as a religion exemplifies those components of Islam that do not change, Islam as a tradition encompasses both the fixed and the fluid aspects of Islam. In other words, Islam as a religion is unchanging and unmoving, while Islam as a tradition is alive and dynamic (Aslan, 1998, p. 51).

Nasr's perspective is predicated on the unchanging nature of divine truths, as well as the existence of a divine Logos and Supreme Essence that underpins all religions and traditions, impervious to the vicissitudes of time and place. Rather, what undergoes change as tradition, is the form or theological expression of this timeless wisdom. Despite the historical evolution religions have experienced, they continue to possess continuity and vitality across



various domains. Nasr maintains that while changes in religion are inevitable, they function as processes through which fixed and unchanging principles are reaffirmed. Accordingly, Nasr does not dispute that religions have evolved and transformed over time, but rather views such evolution as an extension of the fundamental fact that religions embody the "*ideal*" that pre-exists in the divine realm, in a Platonic sense. In other words, these natural changes made by philosophers and sages in the tradition are only the re-creation of the primary truths of religions and the further flourishing of the same tradition, and not a deliberate act to radically change the doctrines of a religion.

It is noteworthy that Nasr's understanding of tradition's dynamism differs from Hick's approach toward the Christian tradition, where he sought to alter traditional doctrine substantially, engendering a radical change that contradicts the essence of Christian tradition. In Nasr's belief change and evolution within the tradition are natural processes that do not entail substantive alterations in religious doctrines. In the Islamic tradition, for instance, numerous philosophers and mystics have enriched Islam without bringing about significant changes in its fundamental beliefs. Rather, they have expanded upon the truths enshrined in the Qur'an, articulating them in the parlance of their times. Nasr posits that tradition is a divine mandate that originates from the essence of the Divine. Therefore, he harbours a strong critique of the reform and alteration of established teachings, deeming it as an act that fundamentally transforms the very essence of religions. This contrasts with Hick's approach to the doctrine of the incarnation, which involves significant alterations (see 4.1).

It is also important to note that tradition is not limited to the Abrahamic religions but includes Indian, Japanese, Greek, Chinese, Egyptian, indigenous, shamanism, and primitive traditions. These traditions have shaped knowledge, customs, and rituals (Nasr, 1993, pp. 57-58). Despite differences in culture and location, Nasr argues that these diverse traditions reflect a remarkable unanimity of views regarding the meaning of human life and the fundamental dimensions of human thought. Nasr contends that acknowledging the multiplicity of religions and how they perceive and express the divine is vital for a healthy and balanced society. The concept of tradition in Nasr's view helps bring different religions together by recognizing their shared roots and essential beliefs. Rather than perceiving religions as independent entities, Nasr sees them as part of a broader spiritual heritage founded on the same transcendent Truth. The traditional viewpoint stresses the universality of religious principles while appreciating the uniqueness of various religious manifestations. It also recognizes that while various faiths may highlight different elements of the divine, they all strive to link humans with the divine. Nasr derived a significant portion of his notions

concerning tradition from the teachings of the Quran. This point is significant because it highlights a fundamental difference between Nasr and Hick, as Nasr's rationale for pluralism is an intra-religious justification grounded in Sufi metaphysics and Quranic teachings, whereas Hick's justification is a philosophical and secular one, based on Kantian philosophy.

According to Nasr, the oneness of God in the Quran does not result in the uniqueness of prophecy, but rather its multiplicity. God, being infinite, created a universe with diversity, including humanity, which diversified into different races and tribes. While all humans share a common ancestor and a unique yet similar nature, it would be unimaginable for a religion emphasizing Divine Oneness to have been crafted for only a select few (Nasr, 2002, p. 16). The Quran acknowledges this by stating that God has sent messengers to every people and appointed a Divine Law and a way or tradition for each (10:48). The Quran also recognizes the importance of language by stating that messengers are sent with the language of their people (14:4), which indicates the diversity of traditions originated from same God. The Quran emphasizes that the diversity of traditions is vital and intentional, as God intends to test humanity with the resources provided (5:48). The Quran is widely recognized as the "*Umm-al-Kitab*" or archetypal book, which encompasses all divine revelations. All holy scriptures are interconnected as they communicate the same fundamental concept of the *primordial tradition* (see 3.2) of oneness in various historical settings and linguistic forms.

In Nasr's perspective, *the school of traditionalism* conceives of religion as vast enough to encompass all different types and modes of divine manifestation, including the primal and the historical, the Semitic and the Indian, and the mythic and the abstract. Thus, tradition, as understood by this school, includes all these various forms of religious and spiritual expression (Nasr, 1993, pp. 57-58). Thus, 'tradition' is intrinsically linked to the 'sacred,' as the traditional human life was imbued with a sense of spirituality and sanctity and a direct awareness of the divine presence in the cosmos. Consequently, Nasr's conception of the universality of "divine traditions" bears similarity to John Hick's "hypothesis of religious pluralism," rendering these two perspectives comparable.

Thus, according to Nasr, tradition consists of universal truths that are based on the nature of reality, and it is not a myth but a sacred science that is very real (Nasr, 1989, p. 68). This sacred science refers to the idea of *perennial philosophy*, which encompasses the overall collection of universal truths that can be discovered throughout all religions based on divine revelation. And it is concerned with the Sacred and its tenets can be found in virtually every religious tradition (Aslan, 1998, p. 51). Thus, tradition is inextricably related to revelation and religion, to the Sacred, to the notion of transmission of the truth, to the *exoteric* and the

*esoteric* as well as to the spiritual life, science, and the arts (Nasr, 1989, p. 68). In the succeeding sections, an analysis will be presented regarding the importance and concept of *perennial philosophy* as well as the differentiation between *esoteric* and *exoteric*.

To conclude, Hossein Nasr's pluralistic approach is influenced by his traditionalist views, which see tradition as a connection to divine truth that has been lost due to modern disillusionment. According to Aslan, tradition, in Nasr's understanding, is inextricably tied to religious pluralism (Aslan, 1998, p. x). Nasr recognizes that different religions reflect a remarkable unanimity of purpose despite their diversity and that each religion has its own traditional practices that have shaped its distinct culture and civilization. Consequently, Nasr sees tradition as a means of bridging religious divides and fostering greater understanding and respect among individuals of various faiths. Tradition is a vital and dynamic aspect of religion. But this vitality and changeable aspect of religion does not mean the change of the essence of the religious doctrines but rather the flourishing of the truths that lie in the heart of the religion.

### 3.2 Primordial Tradition & Sophia Perennis: Promoting Religious Pluralism

*"And the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech"* – Genesis 11:1

This section continues Nasr's theory of religious pluralism, which is based on Sufi metaphysics and an intra-religious perspective on Islamic teaching. The current section expands on Nasr's perspective, showing how he derives his justification for religious pluralism from certain teachings and concepts, primarily in the Quran and also the Western and Eastern traditions. In contrast to Hick, who justifies religious pluralism through mainly extra-religious philosophical reasons that have roots mainly in the works of Kant. This section will address two main themes. Firstly, it will examine whether the various traditions discussed are distinct expressions of a unified *Primordial Tradition*. Secondly, it will explore the concept of *perennis philosophia* and its association with religious pluralism.

The utilization of the notion of *primordial tradition* is justified based on its religious significance, having been referenced in the Quran and other traditions. Nasr posits that various traditions should not be regarded as isolated and conflicting entities, each operating within a distinct paradigm that cannot be comprehended by another tradition. Instead, the multiplicity of traditions is a consequence of a fundamental tradition that has been transmitted from a divine source. Essentially, the concept of *primordial tradition* embodies the

coexistence of diverse traditions within a unified framework that reveals itself through the multitude of human traditions. As mentioned, the theories posited by Nasr are predicated upon Islamic and intra-religious teachings. Nasr draws a connection between the concept of *Primordial Tradition* and the Platonic realm of *Ideas* and Quranic concepts such as the 'primordial nature of man' (*al-fitrah*), 'pure religion' (*Hanif*), and the 'first tradition' (*sunnah al-awwalin*). In the Quran, Islam regards itself as the authentic supporter of the first tradition that has been constant and will continue to be so. The Quran refers to this as *Din Hanif* (3:67 & 10:105 & 30:30) For instance, we read in the Quran (30:30):

"Set thy face to religion as a Hanif in the primordial nature (*Fitrah*) from God upon which originated mankind there is no altering the creation of God; that is upright but most mankind know not."

In Nasr's perspective, the term "*fitrah*" is equivalent to the concept of "primordial nature" in humans. From an Islamic perspective, *fitrah* represents an unadulterated, pure, and unsullied form of the primordial religiosity nature of man. The Prophet of Islam is purported to have said in the hadith, "Every child is born with *al-fitrah* (the primordial religiosity). Then it is his parents who make him Jewish, Christian, and Magian." (Aslan, 1998, p. 102) This notion shares similarities with the pre-Islamic religion of Abraham, known as *Hanif*, which implies a faithful individual who is genuinely devoted to the spirit and tends towards worshiping God rather than idolatry<sup>22</sup>. Nasr also mentions the last part of this verse (*there is no altering the creation of God*); one cannot modify this fundamental quality of human nature since. Thus, religion's fundamental essence or universal truths remain constant, while the modes of their manifestation vary across different faiths. Primordial human nature is a spiritual concept and cannot be confined to the exact practices of any specific religion (Nasr, 2015, p. 1821). This perspective shares some similarities with the notion of the *anonymous Christian*<sup>23</sup>.

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<sup>22</sup> Idolatry is considered a deviation from one's innate disposition or primordial nature (*fitrah*) as a human being. In other words, anything that takes a person away from his true Self is idolatry, which does not necessarily mean devotion to religious symbols. To elucidate, idolatry may be perceived as a form of alienation and absence of faith, which ought to be interpreted in an existential context. Otherwise, various religious practices entail the use of idols, symbols, statues, and other sacred objects. Idolatry is an existential and internal matter in this context.

<sup>23</sup> The concept of '*anonymous Christian*' and '*fitrah*' share some similarities in that both suggest the possibility of a spiritual inclination or inherent knowledge within human beings that may lead them towards a recognition of the divine or God. In Christianity, the concept of '*anonymous Christian*' refers to individuals who, without explicit knowledge of Christian teachings, may still possess an implicit faith and relationship with God. Similarly, in Islam, '*fitrah*' refers to the innate human disposition towards recognizing the existence of God and the distinction between right and wrong. Both concepts propose the idea that individuals may have a predisposition towards a spiritual understanding that is not necessarily tied to a specific religious tradition or explicit knowledge of religious teachings.

According to Aslan, the nexus between primordial nature and religious pluralism lies in the fact that our primordial nature is a common corpus of knowledge and a unifying force across all religions (Aslan, 1998, p. 50). As stated by Aslan, Nasr believes that religion is found in every time and place because people have an innate sense of spirituality. Although there are many different religions, they all have this common root. Nasr argues that this primordial nature has been implanted in every human being by God. This means that we can celebrate our differences while still recognizing that we are all connected through our spiritual nature (Ibid., 102).

According to Nasr, all religions have been essentially based on the same doctrine of 'Unity of Being'. Islam holds that each prophet was responsible for disseminating the message of the oneness of God. Islam reaffirms this fundamental truth, which has always existed, and aims to return to the primordial religion - the eternal *sophia*, or the *religio perennis*. This is achieved through a steadfast emphasis on Divine Unity and by guiding humanity to their original nature (*fitrah*) that has been obscured due to their state of neglect. According to Islamic beliefs, God did not reveal different truths through His prophets, but rather through different forms and expressions of the same fundamental truth of Unity. Islam thus reiterates this truth within the framework of the Abrahamic tradition and the Semitic spiritual climate (Nasr, 1972, p. 33). According to Nasr "All traditions are earthly manifestations of celestial archetypes of the *Primordial Tradition* in the same way that all revelations are related to the Logos or the Word which was at the beginning" (Nasr, 1989, p. 74 & Aslan, 1998, p. 50).

In Islam, there are three personalities - Adam, Abraham, and Muhammad - who are similar in nature (Nasr, 1972, p. 33). According to Islamic teaching, the *primordial tradition*, based on Unity, originated with Adam himself<sup>24</sup>. It is noteworthy that certain Muslim Sufis, who adhere to a pluralistic perspective, establish a connection between Hinduism and the concept of the religion of Adam. The notion of the *Primordial Tradition* in the Quran resembles the Hindu concept known as "*Sanatana Dharma*" (Eternal Law). These two bear a

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<sup>24</sup> Here, we should pay attention to the symbolic and mythic language of religion. The symbolic and mythic language of religion warrants attention, particularly within the context of religious mythology, where the significance of these myths is crucial to understanding the formation of relationships between religions. This is not a matter of "analytical history" but rather an exploration of how such myths have played an active role and held profound meanings. For instance, when Nasr refers to Adam or the tradition of Adam, it is not necessarily meant to suggest that Adam was a historical figure. Rather, this figure may be understood as an archetype of humanity, with Adam's religion as an allegory of the *primordial tradition* and the earliest form of religion in human history. Other interpretations of such figures may also exist. It is important to note that even if these prophets and religious figures lack a historical basis, their significance remains paramount in shaping the history of thought.

striking resemblance to each other and similarities are so profound that in Sufism some have referred to Hinduism as the "Religion of Adam." (Nasr, 1977, p. 132). By doing so, they broaden the scope of the *Primordial Tradition* to encompass Eastern religions as well.

Abraham is considered to represent the reassertion of a pivotal role for the Semitic people, as he symbolizes the unity of the tradition from which Judaism, Christianity, and Islam emerged. Within the Islamic faith, he is recognized as the "father of the faith" representing the *primordial religion* that the religion of Islam aimed to reaffirm. Moses later particularized this universal message for a 'chosen people', and the religion of Judaism emerged as the first separate religion from the Abrahamic tradition. The revelation given to Moses served as the aspect of this tradition or, more specifically, the *primordial tradition* as law. Judaism emphasizes the importance of following Divine Law, known as the Talmudic Law, as the basis of religion to shape daily life (Nasr, 1972, p. 34).

According to Nasr, Christ, and the Christian revelation, on the other hand, represent the inward and spiritual aspect of the Abrahamic tradition, which is the internal dimension of the *primordial tradition*. This dimension emphasizes a spiritual way rather than a legalistic approach. Christ did not bring a new revealed law or *shariah*; rather, he presented a path or *tariqah*<sup>25</sup> based on the love of God. Finally, Islam is considered the third great expression of the *primordial tradition*. According to Nasr, Christians understand that the trinity reflects unity, so in the same way, this third expression of the Abrahamic tradition is a return to the original Unity or the "religion of Abraham." Judaism represents the law or the external aspect of this *primordial tradition*, and Christianity represents the spiritual way or the internal aspect of it. On the other hand, Islam combines tradition in its original unity by including both a law (*shariah*) and a spiritual path (*tariqah*) (Ibid., 35). Hence the concept of the *primordial tradition* is based on the universal perspective of the Qur'an, which recognizes all diversities as having their origins in the Divine Logos.

However, the notion of *primordial tradition* is not exclusive to Islamic theology but has been deliberated differently in Western thought. The fascination of Renaissance scholars for pursuing the origins and the concept of "*Primordial Tradition*" led Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499) to prioritize the translation of the *Corpus Hermeticum*<sup>26</sup> over Plato's works, as it was

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<sup>25</sup> In Sufism, a *tariqa* (or *tariqah*) refers to a school or order that focuses on mystical teachings and spiritual practices aimed at seeking *haqiqah*, which translates to "Ultimate Truth." This term is used to describe the specific concept of these teachings and practices within a Sufi order or school.

<sup>26</sup> The *Corpus Hermeticum* is a set of 17 ancient Greek texts that were believed to have been written by Hermes Trismegistus, a combination of the Greek god Hermes and the Egyptian god Thoth. These writings had a significant influence on Western esotericism. During the Renaissance and the Reformation, Hermeticism was often seen as a middle ground between Christianity and paganism. Despite its

believed to be more ancient and primordial (Nasr, 1989, p. 69). *Corpus Hermeticum* reflects the concept of a *primordial tradition* that existed before the emergence of organized religions. The Hermetic books imply that universal wisdom has been passed down through the years and can be reached through spiritual activities and contemplation. This primordial wisdom is identified with the divine and viewed as a source of spiritual illumination and transformation in the Hermetic worldview. The scriptures present a vision of a universe in which everything is interconnected. Through the pursuit of spiritual knowledge, humans can gain a greater awareness of themselves and the world around them.

This inclination toward the concept of *Primordial Tradition* also became prevalent during the 19th century and contributed to the prevailing worldview and *Zeitgeist*<sup>27</sup> which refers to the general spirit or mood of a specific historical moment (Ibid., 69). The idea of *Primordial Tradition* is also apparent in the writings of the 18th-century philosopher Johann Herder, who believed that each civilization has a distinct "spirit" or "genius" that is reflected through its language, art, and rituals. The notion has been applied to examine the shared beliefs and values behind cultural and historical movements such as the Renaissance and the Enlightenment<sup>28</sup>. However, this has resulted in significant confusion regarding the meaning of the *Primordial Tradition* and its relationship to various religions (Ibid.).

Therefore, it can be summed up in one sentence *Primordial Tradition* encapsulates "all truths of all religions" (Aslan, 1998, p. 50). Nasr proposes that the existence of diverse religious expressions indicates the existence of multiple traditions while recognizing the *Primordial Tradition* as a single phenomenon. From a broader perspective, the *Primordial Tradition* is the eternal truth and origin of all traditions and truths (Nasr, 1989, p. 75). Nasr believes that every religious tradition is authentic and has a divine message at its core, and the reference to a single *Primordial Tradition* does not negate the celestial origin of any religion or tradition (Nasr, 1993, p. 57). To him, this Tradition contains *sophia perennis* - an eternal truth that encompasses the entirety of all religious truth. The plurality of religions, from an *esoteric* perspective, confirms the existence of an underlying truth within each of them. According to Aslan, the concept of the *Primordial Tradition* not only links all religions back

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significance, popular Hermetic literature received little academic attention from the Renaissance era until the conclusion of the 19th century (Britannica, Hermetic writings, 2013).

<sup>27</sup> In German philosophy during the 18th and 19th centuries, the term *Zeitgeist* referred to an intangible entity or force that influenced the qualities and characteristics of a particular period in world history. While Georg W. F. Hegel is commonly associated with this term, he differentiated between the *Zeitgeist* and other related concepts such as *Volksgeist* (national spirit) and *Weltgeist* (world-spirit). The term was coined and popularized prior to Hegel's use, with figures such as Herder and Goethe contributing to its widespread adoption.

<sup>28</sup> See Eliade, M. (1964). "The Quest for the Origins of Religion". *History of Religions*, 4(1), 154-169.

to their divine source (the Real), but also binds them to one another (Aslan, 1998, p. 50). Consequently, the *Primordial Tradition* is a universal truth transmitted through history by the great sages and prophets of different religions, embodying the fundamental principles and teachings common to all religions, and surpassing time, culture, and language constraints (Gangadean, 2009, p. 138; Nasr, 1993, p. 57).

Let us now turn to our second inquiry and delve into the concept of "*perennis philosophia*." Nasr employs this idea to uphold religious pluralism, or what he terms as the "*transcendent unity of religions*." The notion of *sophia perennis* points to a truth that exists in numerous religions, albeit in varying forms (Nasr, 1989, p. 74). At the heart of every religion lies the *perennis philosophia*, which ultimately leads back to the origin of human existence (Ibid., 68). *Sophia perennis* is closely related to the *Primordial Tradition* and the meaning of tradition itself. According to Nasr, each tradition is intimately connected to *perennial* wisdom. His explanations reveal that all religions benefit from an inner wisdom from God, which has always been present, manifesting in different traditions. Nasr defines this term as such:

By *Philosophia Perennis* is meant a knowledge which has always been and will always be and which is of universal character both in the sense of existing among peoples of different climes and epochs and of dealing with universal principles. This knowledge which is available to the intellect is, moreover, contained at the heart of all religions or traditions, and its realization and attainment is possible only through those traditions and by means of methods, rites, symbols, images and other means sanctified by the message from Heaven or the Divine which gives birth to each tradition (Nasr, 1993, p. 53-54).

The central idea is that all religions convey a universal message in different ways, which can only be perceived by delving into the *esoteric* aspects of religion. Nasr likens this to the Gnostic perception of early Christianity. This knowledge lies at the heart of religion, illuminating the meaning of its rites, doctrines, and symbols, and unlocking the ability to comprehend the necessity of religious plurality and the means of entering other religious universes without diminishing their religious significance (Ibid., 54).

*Perennial* wisdom is considered the foundation of all traditions, including Vedanta, Buddhism, Kabbalah, traditional Christian, and Islamic metaphysics. Although these traditions use different texts and symbols, they ultimately converge toward recognizing the same Ultimate Reality. For example, the Kabbalists may start with the Hebrew Bible rather than the Sanskrit Upanishads, but the concept of the *En-Sof* that they invoke is, in fact, aligned with the same Reality that the *Advaitist school* of Vedanta seeks to understand (Nasr, 1989, p. 289). According to Nasr's perspective, every tradition profoundly connects with



*perennial wisdom* or *Sophia*. However, it is essential to acknowledge each tradition's spiritual uniqueness and specificity and not use the *perennial* wisdom as a pretext for disregarding their uniqueness (Ibid., 69).

Nasr's works have identified several instances of *perennial* wisdom shared among the world's religions. These universal concepts that transcend time, culture, and geography serve as common threads that tie the diverse tapestry of faith together. One such concept is the belief in the existence of a single, Ultimate Reality and the unity of God, which is a fundamental tenet of all major world religions (Ibid., 71). Another shared theme is the emphasis on spiritual practices such as prayer, meditation, and contemplation, which facilitate direct spiritual experience or *gnosis*, an encounter with the divine (Ibid., 12, 107).

The significance of moral conduct and virtue ethics is also a recurring theme in world religions. Virtues such as compassion, kindness, and generosity are praised and advocated in many religious traditions. Love is another key theme, and it is recognized as a crucial element in all religions, whether it is love for God, for others, or the world (Ibid., 107, 266). Here, we realize the similarities between Hick's view (section 2.1) regarding virtue ethics between religions and Nasr's view. Another example of *perennial* wisdom that is shared among several religions is the recognition of the divine in the cosmos, which emphasizes the importance of protecting and preserving the natural world. The interconnectedness of all things and the idea of seeing the divine in all aspects of creation, or the cosmos as a *theophany*, is also a shared concept (Ibid., 135, 191). Also, many religions believe in immortality and the continuation of the soul after death, either in a state of bliss or suffering, based on one's actions in life (Ibid., 175, 187). These examples of *perennial* wisdom serve as underpinnings for the world's major faith traditions, as espoused by Nasr. Despite the diversity of religious texts, symbols, and practices, these universal themes provide a common ground for interfaith dialogue and understanding. Thus, the recognition of these shared concepts is crucial to promoting harmony, tolerance, and respect for diverse religious traditions. In my view, there are shared concepts between Nasr and Hick in this part. Hick posits that the Logos has manifested in other religions, resulting in shared characteristics such as the presence of saints, shared virtue ethics, and the transformation of believers from an ego-centered to a Reality-centered mindset, etc. This perspective appears similar to Nasr's *perennial philosophy* in some sense.

The term "*Philosophia Perennis*" was popularized by Aldous Huxley (1894-1963) in his eponymous work (1945), which has garnered fame among laypersons and religious experts interested in religion and philosophy. Some Renaissance theologians who were influenced by neo-Platonism and the theory of Forms developed the idea of *perennial*

*philosophy*. Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499) claimed that the world's soul or love had an equivalent in the realm of ideas (Schmitt, 1966, p. 508 & Nasr, 1989, p. 70). Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463–1494), a disciple of Ficino, contended that truth could be discovered in multiple traditions (Schmitt, 1966, p. 513). However, the term *Sophia perennis* is attributed to Agostino Steuco (1497-1548), an Augustinian philosopher and theologian of the Renaissance era. Steuco maintained that there is a universal principle underlying all things, which has been known by all peoples throughout history (Schmitt, 1966, pp. 505,517, 532; Nasr, 1989, p. 70). It is also regarded as the most significant concept of *the Traditional School*, which forms the core of every religion. However, Nasr posits that the concept of *perennial* wisdom often considered a contemporary derivative of neo-Vedantic schools of Hinduism or Renaissance philosophers, is in fact rooted in an ancient and venerated wisdom known in the West as "*Prisca Theologia*" (ancient theology), Hinduism as "*Sanatana Dharma*" (eternal dharma), and in Islam as "*Al-Hikma Al-Khalide*" (eternal wisdom). These traditions are linked to the *Primordial Tradition* and, consequently, to the very origins of human existence (Nasr, 1989, p. 68). Nasr argues that it is crucial to differentiate between *philosophia perennis* and modern syncretic movements, such as the Neo-Vedanta School within the New Age movement. For Nasr, the acquisition of *Sophia perennis*, or timeless wisdom, is the ultimate aim of human existence in both Western and Eastern traditions and is a fundamental aspect of the notion of tradition.

A crucial inquiry is whether Nasr believes that the laws, customs, rituals, and structures of various religions convey identical truths. Essentially, does every religion propagate the same message? Nasr's *philosophia perennis* posits that despite the diversity of religious practices and forms, a unifying principle exists beneath it all. This unity emanates from the fundamental truth that lies at the core of all religions. However, this unity cannot be discerned at the surface level of external forms. *The traditionalism school* espouses that while religions share common principles and mystical teaching, they do not simply articulate the same message in external forms (See 3.4). This school resists the inclination towards sentimental ecumenism, which views religions as being indistinguishable by reducing them to a common denominator or disregarding some of their fundamental teachings.

In contrast, traditionalists uphold the significance of each sacred tradition's minutiae, believing them to be of heavenly origin and deserving of veneration, as befits every manifestation of the sacred. They recognize the unique spiritual genius of each religion and emphasize its uniqueness, contending that these characteristics constitute exact evidence of the transcendent provenance of each religion and the actuality of its archetype in the Divine

Intellect (Nasr, 1993, pp. 59-60). Thus, For Nasr, it is only on the internal dimension that this *transcendence unity of religions* must be sought.

To conclude, *Primordial Tradition* is the universal and everlasting source of divine revelation at the heart of all traditional faiths. It represents the essential wisdom passed down from the beginning of human history through diverse spiritual traditions and is anchored in the Divine Intellect. We saw that the concept of *fitrah* and *hanif* in Islamic terminology represents the innate inclination towards the unity of worship of God in all humans. It spans the entire spectrum of religious life, from the earliest shamanic activities to the highest mystical revelations of the great religious founders and is distinguished by a unifying principle that transcends the diversity of human civilizations and historical epochs. *The Primordial Tradition* is the foundation of all spiritual knowledge and practice and the ultimate source of meaning and purpose in human life. At the same time, Nasr believes that at the heart of every religion lies *the philosophia perennis*, a doctrine concerning the nature of reality and a method for attaining what is Real. Doctrine and method vary from one religion to another, but their essence and goal are universal. This timeless wisdom is the universal truth that lies at the heart of all the world's spiritual and philosophical traditions and provides the basis for a holistic and sustainable human society.

### 3.3 God, Archetypes, and the Formation of Religious Belief Systems

*"O, mankind! Verily We have created you male and female and have made you nations and tribes that ye may know each other."* – Quran (49:13)

In this section, we will investigate Nasr's standpoint on "God and His connection with the human soul" and "the *raison d'etre* of religion," which refers to the reason for the emergence of religious convictions. Additionally, we will explore how the notion of an archetypal religion has facilitated the identification of specific schools and aspects of religion that demonstrate striking similarities across diverse faiths. For instance, within Islam, *Shiism* shares numerous similarities with Catholic Christianity, whereas Protestantism aligns with Sunni Islam in various other aspects. This section is important as it highlights a difference between Nasr's and Hick's perspectives. As we remember, Hick posits that *Noumenon*, or Ultimate Reality, is unknowable, thereby rendering Truth *per se* as inherently unknowable. Thus, it becomes necessary to briefly outline Nasr's view of God and the significance of the concept of *archetypal religion*. The latter is particularly relevant as it underscores Nasr's

belief that religion is entirely divine in origin and not a human interpretation of *religious experiences*. Essentially, Nasr's view of archetypes implies that it is God who shapes religion rather than humans.

According to Aslan, Nasr posits that the notion of the 'archetype' can provide a meaningful lens through which to approach the conundrum of religious pluralism (Aslan, 1998, p. 165). Specifically, Nasr asserts that each religion harbours a celestial archetype that embodies a particular facet of the Divine Essence. Nasr developed the concept of *archetypal religion*, which pertains to the root. Nasr sees the root of religions not in social, economic, political, and historical affairs but in the Divine Intellect and that the primary model of every religion is derived from the archetype of that religion in the world of *ideas*. He says:

“Religion is not *only* the faith of the men and women who possess religious faith. It is a reality of Divine Origin. It has its archetype in the Divine Intellect and possesses levels of meaning and reality like the cosmos itself”...” Religion in its earthly manifestation comes from the wedding between a Divine Norm and a human collectivity destined providentially to receive the imprint of that Norm. From this wedding is born religion as seen in this world among different peoples and cultures. The differences in the recipient are certainly important and constitute one of the causes for the multiplicity of religious forms and phenomena, but religion itself cannot be reduced to its terrestrial embodiment.” (Nasr, 1993, p. 56-57).

This view of Nasr is also intra-religious and is extracted from Quranic concepts. Nasr amalgamates the notion of the diversity of religions and traditions with the singularity of the Supreme Truth. To understand this theory completely, one could question the *raison d'être* of religion, namely the fundamental purpose or driving force behind its existence, as well as the origin of religious beliefs. Regarding why religions exhibit variation, Nasr explains that God's cosmic manifestation takes on a diverse range of forms. Nasr posits that the world and humanity themselves are manifestations of God and that various religions also reflect this truth. In other words, all that exists must have had a pre-existing reality in the archetype since creation is not only by God but also in God (*En Theos*). According to Nasr, the archetype of all creation exists in God himself, in what is referred to as the "Hidden Treasure."<sup>29</sup> Therefore, the Quran asserts that the spiritual source of all things is in the Hand of God (*yad-ullah*).

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<sup>29</sup> According to one hadith, God is referred to as a "hidden treasure," serving as a symbolic representation of the idea that all things in the cosmos originate from and represent the Divine Reality. As conveyed by the Prophet of Islam, God states that "*I was a hidden treasure and desired recognition, which is why I created everything to make myself known.*" Consequently, humanity is considered the primary instrument of God on Earth, and the purpose of creation is for humanity to acquire knowledge and love for God. God's treasury encompasses all things in the universe, both visible and invisible, and all things in the universe serve as a theophany, or a manifestation, of the Divine Names and Attributes. As God's wisdom permeates all things, Muslims regard the cosmos as God's initial revelation to humanity. It is through God's names that all beings gain their existence, and the universe was formed when the Divine Intellect of the Breath of Compassionate (*nafas al-Rahman*) gave life to the archetype truths of all things (Nasr, 2002, p. 11).

Although the world appears to be a distinct reality, its true reality is rooted in God. The world is not only an external manifestation of the Divine Principle and its flow of manifestation from Divine Nature but also an internal manifestation and Self-Disclosure of the Divine Principle (Nasr, 2007b, p. 43).

God's desire to be known led to His initial manifestation in the form of the world, out of which arose manifold and multifarious cosmic entities. Once this foundation had been established, God revealed Himself in human form, engendering a plethora of diverse and abundant multitudes in human worlds. God also revealed Himself through various religions suited to these diverse human societies. God took shape in the form of religions and laws to guide humanity toward true knowledge. Thus, God reveals Himself through three manifestations: the world, humankind, and religion (Nasr, 1989, p. 282). So, in this view, the cosmos, and all existence within, including religions and humans, is the *theophany* or emanation from the Absolute. Thus, gods in different religions are not separate realities but different names for the same Reality. In this context, all traditional religions refer to the same Reality, albeit employing different terminologies. Nasr expresses this concept as follows:

The Ultimate Reality which is both Supra-Being and Being is at once transcendent and immanent. It is beyond everything and at the very heart and centre of man's soul. *Scientia sacra* can be expounded in the language of one as well as the other perspective. It can speak of God or the Godhead, Allah, the *Tao*, or even *nirvana* as being beyond the world. But it can also speak of the Supreme Self, of *Atman*, compared to which all objectivization is *maya*. The Ultimate Reality can be seen as both the Supreme Object and the Innermost Subject, for God is both transcendent and immanent, but He can be experienced as immanent only after He has been experienced as transcendent (Ibid., 137).

Nasr intends to emphasize that the plurality of traditions is not a sign of incompatibility or mutual exclusivity, but rather indicative of the diversity of colorful manifestations that come from a single Reality that has manifested itself in different ways. Therefore, the earthly expansion of religions is the act of finding the possibilities that exist in the presence of God. Therefore, according to Nasr's theology, God is perceived as the very embodiment of Reality. Furthermore, God, as the Reality, is characterized as being metaphysically infinite, serving as the source of all cosmic potentials and embodying all possibilities (Nasr, 1993, p. 9).

In addition to being transcendent, God is also immanent, acting as the Supreme Self that reveals itself through the individual self. The Ultimate Self may be attained through the expansion of the awareness of the centre of consciousness. In this framework, the human self is a weak reflection of the cosmic level of the Self (Ibid., 16). Nasr continues that this wisdom

accounts for the Ultimate Reality, which is at the heart and center of man's soul (Nasr, 1989, p. 24). This point is significant as it highlights a fundamental difference between Hick and Nasr. Nasr maintains that the attributes of God in religious traditions are actual realities, not subjective interpretations. The human self is not an isolated entity, but rather a part of the Supreme Self. Each soul is a microcosm that is connected to and emanates from the Supreme Self. By utilizing intelligence that is sanctified by revelation, we can gain access to the heart of revelation and discover the fundamental truth that underlies all intelligence. This is the sacred knowledge, the *scientia sacra*, which originates from the inner revelation at the center of the human state, known as the heart (Ibid., 150). Traditionally, the heart, not the head, is considered the seat of intelligence. The Quran refers to this intelligence as *aql*, which is identified with the heart, or *al-qalb*. Similarly, the Latin words for belief (*credo*) and heart (*cordis*) are derived from the same root, revealing a metaphysical Truth about the connection between intelligence and the heart (Ibid., 150). When Nasr says that the Intellect was once a seeing faculty, he is referring to Plato's "eye of the soul", the "eye of the heart" (*Ayn al-qalb*) in Islamic Sufism, the "third eye" (*Ājñā*) in Hindu and Buddhist doctrines, or "the inner eye" (*Chante Ognata*) in Native American beliefs. This is one reason why traditional sages are always called "seers". This eye transcends duality and rational thinking, perceiving the unity that underlies all existence (Ibid., 152). This intelligence that can attain knowledge of the Sacred is already rooted in the center of the human state, never separated from the Supreme Self. This is why the Sufis chant:

Open the eye of thy heart so that thou wilt see the Spirit

So that thou wilt see that which cannot be seen (Ibid.).

So, in fact, the capacity of individuals to connect with their inner Self, which is synonymous with God, is the ability to experience unity with the Supreme Self. This enables individuals to perceive reality in its true form, and those who achieve this knowledge are referred to as "seers" for this reason. This perspective diverges from Hick's viewpoint in certain aspects, which we will elaborate upon in section (4.3). However, let us revisit the subject of the *archetypal religion* and scrutinize Nasr's perspective on this matter further.

Nasr's perspective on God indicated that he did not limit the nature of religion to its mere historical manifestation. Instead, he contends that each religion comprises inherent potentials that are ingrained within its celestial archetype. These potentials are either actualized or realized in history and within the context of humanity, which is divinely

ordained to be the temporal and human vessels for that particular religion. Each religion represents a manifestation of an archetype that embodies a particular aspect of Divine Nature. The reality of each tradition on Earth reflects the essence of the corresponding archetype, which is at the heart of Divinity itself. Nasr compares each archetype to a regular geometric figure with distinct qualities yet reflects the Divine, which is both the Center and the all-encompassing circle. Therefore, while each religion may differ in its terrestrial manifestation, they all share the same origin in the Divine archetype (Ibid., 295). Nasr's perspective also includes the interpretation of the reflection of one archetype within the reflection of another on earth. In other words, it is conceivable that a religious archetype can manifest itself in a different religious tradition. If two distinct archetypes exist, such as in Christianity and Islam, then *Shiism* can be viewed as a purely Islamic reality that reflects the archetypal religious reality associated with Christianity. Likewise, Lutheranism represents a Christian reality that reflects the Islamic archetype within the Christian world. The same is true for the *bhakti* movement in medieval Hinduism in relation to Islam (Ibid.).

Nasr sees *Shiism* and Catholicism as sharing an archetypal theme of religious rituals, praying, procession, shrines, intercession, spiritual authority and the importance of a spiritual hierarchy, devotion, and veneration of saints and imams. Nasr sees this shared emphasis on spiritual authority as a potential point of connection between the two traditions in the archetypal realm. Similarly, Nasr sees Sunni Islam and Lutheranism as sharing an archetypal theme of individual responsibility and a direct relationship with God. Both traditions emphasize the importance of individual interpretation of religious teachings and personal responsibility for one's spiritual journey. In Sunni Islam, this is expressed through the concept of *ijtihad*, or personal interpretation, while in Lutheranism, it is reflected in the emphasis on individual conscience and a direct relationship with God. Nasr sees this shared emphasis on individual responsibility as a potential point of connection between the two traditions.

Regarding *Amidism*<sup>30</sup> and *Bhakti yoga*, Nasr sees a shared archetypal theme of devotion and love for the divine, intercession, rituals, and pilgrims. Both traditions emphasize the importance of personal devotion and surrender to the divine, expressed through devotional practices such as chanting, prayer, and meditation. In *Bhakti yoga*, devotees offer prayers to

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<sup>30</sup> Pure Land Buddhism (*Amidism*) is a Mahayana Buddhist tradition with a focus on attaining rebirth in a Pure Land, and it is among the most widely practiced forms of Buddhism in East Asia. In Tibetan Buddhism, there is also a popular religious orientation, particularly among laypeople, that involves prayers and practices aimed at rebirth in a Buddha-field.

their chosen deity with love and devotion. In *Amidism*, followers recite the name of *Amitabha Buddha* with the hope of being reborn in the Pure Land. In both, there is a belief in the intercession of religious figures. Nasr sees this shared emphasis on devotion as a potential point of connection between the two Eastern traditions, and also with *Shiism* and Catholicism, which also place great importance on devotion to the divine (Ibid.).

According to Nasr, modern studies of religion lack access to the sacred knowledge that is necessary to understand the reality of the archetypal world and the vertical chain of cause and effect. This lack of understanding results in the reduction of every new religious phenomenon to either certain borrowing, historical influence, or socioeconomic causes<sup>31</sup>. Nasr argues that this reductionism overlooks the fact that each religion is based on an archetypal reality that transcends historical borrowing and social factors and that the interpenetration of these archetypal reflections within different religious traditions is independent of historical influence. Therefore, understanding the reality of the archetypal world is crucial to fully comprehend the nature and significance of religious phenomena (Ibid.).

This perspective considers religions to have archetypal realities that exist on various levels. Even though different religions may emphasize distinct aspects, such as love, knowledge, mercy, or self-sacrifice, all major elements of religion must somehow be present in a comprehensive tradition (Ibid.). Nasr provides significant illustrations to support his argument. He suggests that, in Christianity, which is characterized as a path of love, the pursuit of knowledge can be found in the teachings of Eckhart and Nicholas of Cusas. In Islam, where direct access to God is emphasized, the intercession of *Shiite* Imams is crucial. In Buddhism, which places great emphasis on an individual's endeavor to attain *nirvana* through following the eightfold path, compassion is also necessary and is evident in both Tibetan Buddhism and *Amidism* (Ibid., 296). Therefore, according to Nasr, living a religion fully allows one to have an understanding of all religions, making it unnecessary to practice multiple religious or spiritual paths. In practice, an individual can only follow one religion and spiritual path, which becomes *the* path and religion as a whole (Ibid.). Therefore, In

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<sup>31</sup> Nasr maintains that while certain borrowings may result in similarities between various religious traditions, such borrowings are secondary to the fundamental and divine origins of an authentic religion stemming from God's divine logos. In contrast, Western orientalist from the mid-19th century onwards, such as those who studied Islamic Sufism, believed that Sufism had borrowed its teachings from Eastern religions, Neoplatonic philosophy, Gnosticism, or Zoroastrianism (Nasr, 1996, p. 13).



Nasr's view, the authenticity of religions is not determined by their superiority over one another since they all originate from the same source (Nasr, 1993, p. 62). Therefore, since all religions originate from the same source, the metaphysical Truth, it should be possible for traditional religions to coexist peacefully and harmoniously.

In summary, God, as the Ultimate Reality, permeates everything, and the human soul can attain unity with God. As a result, knowledge of God at its most profound level is regarded as sacred knowledge. Therefore, the path to comprehending God is accessible, and the depictions of God in religious texts are divine revelations rather than mere interpretations of a personal experience. For Nasr, religion is revealed to the human mind not from his own mind filled with desires, will to power, Freudian unconsciousness, dreams, fears, and anxieties but rather from the Divine realm, which is the source of all knowledge. In Nasr's view, religion is a reality that originates from God and the celestial sphere. The idea of religion lay in the world of the *Ideas* or Logos of God, and like the world itself, it has degrees of meaning and inner realities.

### 3.4 The Esoteric-Exoteric Dichotomy in Hossein Nasr's Thought

*“The difference among creatures comes from the outward forms.  
When one penetrates into the inner meaning there is peace  
Oh, marrow of existence! It is as a result of the difference in perspective.  
That there has come into being difference among the Muslim, Zoroastrian, and Jew”.*  
– Rumi

The following section explores one of Nasr's crucial concepts for comprehending religious pluralism. It is worth noting that like his other ideas, this concept also stems from traditional metaphysics, many of which are derived from Islamic Sufi teachings. This is the principle that expresses religious pluralism in Nasr's view in the best and clearest way. The concept of *exoteric* and *esoteric* is important for understanding the *transcendence unity of religions* because it recognizes that while different religions may have different external practices and beliefs, they may also share similar internal spiritual teachings and practices that lead to a deeper understanding of the divine. Recognizing the *esoteric* dimension of religion can help foster greater understanding and appreciation between different religious traditions and may also offer insights into the underlying unity of all religions.

Nasr's idea of the *transcendent unity of religions* is based on the premise that there is a distinction to be made in all traditions between the *exoteric* (outward) and the *esoteric* (inward) aspects of tradition<sup>32</sup>. The first dimension is *exoteric* which encompasses the doctrines and dogmas of religion that contain the rules and regulations necessary for the salvation of the common religious populace. *Exoterism* in the work of Nasr refers to the outer or external aspects of religion that are visible to the public and accessible to the senses. Nasr discusses the concept of *exoterism* in his book *The Need for a Sacred Science* (1993) where he explains that *exoteric* practices are necessary to facilitate the inner, *esoteric* dimension of religion (Nasr, 1993, p. 58). Nasr argues that the *exoteric* dimension includes religious practices such as prayer, fasting, pilgrimage, and other rituals that are performed by members of a religious community. These practices are often visible and observable, and they provide a framework for religious life. He suggests that the *exoteric* dimension is necessary for the maintenance of religious traditions and the preservation of the collective memory of a community. However, he also stresses that *exoteric* practices are not an end in themselves, but rather a means to facilitate the inner, *esoteric* dimension of religion (Ibid., 60).

Thus, the *exoteric* category of a religious tradition encompasses the rites, ceremonies, rituals, prayers, doctrines, dogma, theologies, pilgrimages, and laws that are associated with the tradition. For example, in Islam and Judaism, the *exoteric* dimension of pilgrimage involves traveling to holy sites like Mecca and Jerusalem, while in Christianity and Buddhism, it may involve visiting shrines, and relics, or undertaking long-distance journeys to sacred destinations like Santiago de Compostela or Bodh Gaya. Sacred texts and scriptures, such as the Bible in Christianity, the Torah in Judaism, or the Quran in Islam, are considered *exoteric* as they provide guidance and instruction for religious practices. Doctrines and dogmas, such as the belief in a personal God in Abrahamic religions or the concept of non-personal Void (*Śūnyatā*) or Supreme Principle (*Tao*) in Eastern traditions, also fall under the *exoteric* dimension. In addition, ethics and morality, such as the Ten Commandments in Judaism and Christianity or the Five Precepts in Buddhism, guide the behavior and actions of followers. Or religious institutions, such as churches, temples, or mosques, serve as places of

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<sup>32</sup> The Quran (57:3) describes God as both "outward" and "inward." As posited by the Companions of the *Tariqa*, it can be argued that all things in the world possess an external form or appearance and an inner essence or meaning. While the former pertains to the world of multiplicity, the latter leads to unity, which constitutes the source of all phenomena. This holds particularly true for religion, which, according to Nasr, represents a direct manifestation of God in the human system and, therefore, must embody both form and meaning (Nasr, 1993, p. 58). Nasr posits that all beings have both external and internal aspects. If the source of all objects, beings, and forms, as religions maintain, is the God, then every being must possess both external and internal facets (Nasr, 2007a, p. 75).

worship, education, and community for members of a religious group. Religious differences are mostly evident in these areas.

The second dimension is its internal aspect, which is *esoteric* and provides the adherent with a profound spiritual awareness. The internal dimension of religion enables one to fully realize the metaphysical veracity of that specific religion (Aslan, 1998, pp. 161-162). According to Nasr, the *esoteric* dimension of religion concerns the inward, spiritual aspect of religious practice, which involves seeking spiritual realization and attaining union with the divine. The *esoteric* dimension is concerned with the mystical or contemplative aspects of tradition that are beyond the visible and tangible world. It involves a quest for sacred knowledge (*scientia sacra*) and understanding of the divine Reality and is related to the Supreme Essence or Absolute Being (Nasr, 1993, p. 60). Nasr argues that the *esoteric* dimension of religion is concerned with the transcendent Reality that underlies the visible world. It involves accessing a deeper level of consciousness that enables individuals to experience the divine directly. This experience can be achieved through spiritual practices such as meditation, prayer, and contemplation, which help transcend the ego's limitations and reveal the true nature of reality (Nasr, 1989, p. 77).

Nasr claims, the *esoteric* dimension of religion is not accessible to all individuals, but only to those who have achieved a certain level of spiritual maturity and preparedness (Nasr, 1993, p. 59). It is often associated with spiritual masters or adepts who have undergone intensive training and practice to achieve spiritual realization. The *esoteric* dimension of religion is considered to be the ultimate goal of religious practice, as it represents the attainment of spiritual union with the divine and the realization of the true nature of Reality. Nasr believes that this is the realm in which the ultimate unity of religions can be perceived, and where one can acknowledge that all religions stem from a "*primordial tradition*" that originated from a divine archetype and manifested in diverse forms, expressions, and languages (Ibid., 60).

As previously discussed, Nasr views every religion as having a *perennis sophia* at its core, which is related to the *esoteric* dimension of religions. This *perennis sophia* consists of a doctrine concerning the nature of Reality and a means of attaining the Real. While the specific doctrinal language and methods may differ across religions, such as the concepts of *Śūnyatā* or Yahweh, or Vedic sacrifices and Muslim daily prayers, the underlying essence and goal of the doctrine and method are universally similar to every religion (Nasr, 2007a, p. 26).

According to Nasr, *Esoterism* is the inner dimension of tradition directed towards the inner self, or the "*hōē so anthrōpos*" of Saint Paul. The term "*esoteric*" denotes the dimension concerned with the formless and essential elements that facilitate the attainment of an individual's Supernal Essence. This realm is directly related to sacred knowledge and enables one to access higher levels of existence and consciousness (Nasr, 1989, p. 77). The keys to unlocking one's inner being and navigating the cosmic labyrinth toward *gnosis* are provided by the appropriate rites, ancient frameworks, forms, symbols, and the grace of revelation. The *esoteric* realm allows one to achieve their full intellectual potential and experience a sense of unity with God (Ibid., 148-149). To unravel the mysteries hidden within the external forms of various traditions, one must possess the key to the *esoteric* realm, allowing them to journey from the realm of form to that of essence, and from the outer facade to the inner sanctum. This process requires an interiorizing and penetrating intelligence that is infused with the sacred, allowing one to comprehend the Reality symbolized by the external symbols. Only through *esoteric* knowledge can one unlock the hidden secrets of different religions and gain a deeper understanding of the various religions (Ibid., 282). Therefore, according to Nasr, only those who have fully dedicated themselves to the *esoteric* path can engage in profound interreligious studies without jeopardizing the explicit nature, assurance, and absolute quality that define a specific religious framework. He believes the presence of wise sages and mystics would undoubtedly enhance genuine inter- and intrareligious dialogue<sup>33</sup> (Ibid., 302).

Consequently, *Esotericism* is a concealed aspect of religion that is accessible only to a select few, as throughout human history, only a small number of individuals have possessed the necessary qualities to attain such a level. This aspect of tradition is considered hidden and only accessible to a select few, as the saying of Christ that 'Many are called but few are chosen' (Matthew 22:14). This is because, according to Nasr, in the current era of human

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<sup>33</sup> For Nasr, the reason why comprehending and accepting religious pluralism can be challenging for many individuals and especially post-traditional Christianity is that they lack the *esoteric* knowledge to recognize that the surface-level discrepancies among religions do not imply an inherent contradiction between them. As a result, they tend to view all religions, apart from their own, as being false and devoid of Divine Truth. Nasr opines that a significant tragedy has occurred in Christianity, affecting not only the religion but also Western civilization and the rest of the world. He believes a wall was erected gradually after the Renaissance, rendering Western Christianity's inner dimension inaccessible and eclipsed to a considerable degree. Despite having numerous earlier great saints and mystics, Nasr argues that Christianity has not produced influential figures such as Meister Eckhart, Saint Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), or Johannes Tauler (1300–1361) in the last two or three hundred years. As a result, individuals with Christian backgrounds often turn to Buddhism, Islam, and Hinduism for the inner dimension of religion (Jahanbegloo, 2010, p. 173). On the other hand, for instance, Islam sustains this approach through its internal dimension, Sufism, which is a dynamic and evolving practice in the present day.

history, only a few individuals are cognizant of the inner dimensions of their nature<sup>34</sup>. In contrast, most others exist only on the periphery of their own existence, unaware of the Centre that is connected to the circumference or periphery by the *esoteric* dimension of tradition. The *esoteric* component is the radius that enables individuals to move from the periphery to the Centre (Ibid., 77).

According to Nasr, developing *esoteric* awareness is crucial for individuals to move beyond the form of religion to its essence, from the external to the internal, and from symbols to their true meaning. The attainment of such understanding can solely be achieved by utilizing the approach of hermeneutics that acknowledges the hidden aspect of things. These underlying truths are obscured by various psychological, historical, and linguistic complexities that have constrained the very concept of hermeneutics in contemporary times. Nasr believes that humans are a manifestation of the Ultimate and therefore possess inherent qualities that connect them to the cosmos as well as to the Divine. Through this sacred substance, inherent in human nature, individuals can engage meaningfully with the religious and cosmic dimensions of the Absolute (Aslan, 1998, p. 162). In accordance with the verse composed by the 11th-century Persian philosopher Nasir-I Khusraw, which reads as follows:

Gaze upon the inner dimension of the world

With the eye of inwardness,

For with the outward eye

Thou shalt not see the inward (Nasr, 1996a, p. 17).

The conventional notion of *esotericism* has the potential to serve as a foundation for a traditional account of religious pluralism, which is why Nasr draws on Sufism, the discipline of Islamic *esotericism*, to develop his pluralistic ideas. For instance, Ibn-Arabi, a Sufi philosopher, regards the founder of each religion as an expression of universal Logos (Aslan, 1998, p. 164). In Islam, a distinction is made between the *esoteric* and *exoteric* dimensions,

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<sup>34</sup> Regarding the concept of God and religion, it may seem that the notion of *esotericism* can be construed as a form of elitism, in the sense that not everyone has the ability to understand religious truths and know God. As Nasr quoted Quran (39:9) states, 'Are those who know equal to those who do not know?'. Nasr does not deny the issue. As he quoted Christ, the chosen ones are few. However, he contends that *perennial philosophy* is elitist in a manner comparable to modern physics. Namely, according to Nasr, the traditional viewpoint is elitist in that only a limited number of individuals possess the capacity to attain religious knowledge at such a profound level. This aligns with the underlying principle that anyone can study a complex subject, such as the 'hard problem of consciousness' and 'Quantum mechanics.' Still, not everyone possesses the ability to fully comprehend its intricacies, engage in relevant research, and generate innovative hypotheses (Nasr, 1993, p. 59).

referred to as *Shariah* and *Tariqa*, respectively. Similarly, in Judaism, the Kabbalah is considered *esoteric* in contrast to the *exoteric* interpretation of the Talmud<sup>35</sup>. The *esoteric* aspects of traditions are seen as their essential and central components (Nasr, 1989, p. 76-77).

According to Nasr, the ultimate purpose of human life is the *esoteric* dimension of religions, specifically the journey towards God, or *Haqiqah* in Islamic terminology. In Islamic thought, the Divine Truth, the essence and centre of Islam, is referred to as *Haqiqah*, the innermost layer and the centre of the circle. An outer layer from the center *Tariqah*, which is the spiritual road towards *Haqiqah* and is related to Sufism. And finally, the outermost layer, the circumference of the circle *Sharia*, is Islam's *exoteric* dimension and is Divine Law that controls one's daily life. However, inner integration requires first practicing *Shariah* as the norm and then turning to higher levels of the human microcosm through modes of prayer, meditation, and virtue cultivation, all of which are important to the work toward integration. Sufism emphasizes the unification of the psyche, spirit, and body with the help of these three layers of Islam (Nasr, 2007a, pp. 76-79).

According to Sufi thought, there are numerous possible paths to God, and all religions are like different ways to reach God. When examining the *esoteric* dimension of various religions, in the works of mystics and Gnostics, it becomes evident that many similarities exist among these religious traditions, even in their most intricate teachings. One example of this is the Sufi belief in *fana*, which is the recognition of our nothingness before God. This involves the complete dissolution of the human ego before God and the dismantling of the individual ego. Through this process, individuals can recognize the essential oneness of God, creation, and the individual Self<sup>36</sup>. This concept is similar to the Hindu idea of '*That art Thou*'.

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<sup>35</sup> From Nasr's perspective, Kabbalah represents the esoteric dimension of Judaism. This is because Kabbalah is concerned with Jewish tradition's inner, spiritual aspects, such as mystical experiences, hidden meanings, and the nature of God. Kabbalah emphasizes the pursuit of divine knowledge and the attainment of spiritual enlightenment, considered the ultimate goal of the *esoteric* path. On the other hand, Talmud represents the *exoteric* dimension of Judaism. This is because the Talmud consists of legal and ethical discussions and debates among Jewish scholars regarding the practical application of Jewish law. The Talmud is primarily concerned with the external aspects of Jewish tradition, such as the observance of commandments, the conduct of daily life, and the interpretation of the written Torah.

<sup>36</sup> There are differences between "ego" and "Self" in many spiritual traditions. The ego is seen as the false sense of self that arises from identifying with one's thoughts, emotions, and material possessions. It is often associated with human nature's lower, more selfish aspects, such as pride, greed, and attachment. The ego is seen as a barrier to spiritual growth and enlightenment because it keeps one trapped in a limited and delusional understanding of oneself and the world. In contrast, the Self is often associated with the divine nature of humans. It is seen as the true, authentic self that exists beyond the illusions of the ego. The Self is often associated with qualities such as compassion, wisdom, and inner peace. In traditional religions, the Self is often seen as the divine spark or essence within each individual, connecting them to a greater spiritual reality (Hall, 1942, p. 115). For instance, in Hinduism, the Atman,

which emphasizes the oneness of Absolute Reality. According to both traditions, everything else is considered limited and relative in comparison to the Absolute. In Hinduism, this realization is referred to as the union of the *Atman* with *Brahman*. Similarly, the Buddhist concept of *nirvana* also represents the ultimate state of soteriological release, which is analogous to a state of liberation, freedom, and perfection. *Nirvana* can be compared to *fana* in that it can be described as a state of ultimate bliss, peace, and enlightenment. It is a state of complete awakening where individuals become aware of the true nature of reality and the interconnectedness of all things. In this state, there is no longer a sense of individual ego, but rather a sense of unity with all living beings and the entire universe (Ibid.).

For Nasr, seeking a deeper unity transcending the surface-level diversity of religions is crucial. The diversity we witness in religious traditions is merely a formal diversity that pertains to the external manifestation of the same truth in different forms. However, as mentioned in the previous chapters, this does not imply that each religion's unique features and differences should be disregarded or deemed insignificant. These religions, in a parable, flow from different sides of the mountain of existence. This divine Reality, like a huge spring that erupts on the top of a mountain, causes the water of the slopes to flow with more and more dispersion from all sides. However, all the waters of the slopes come from a single spring. The essence of them is ultimately the same water flowing from the spring at the top of the mountain (Nasr, 1996a, p. 13). In another example, the difference in religions can be compared to the difference in roads, and it can be said that divine laws are all roads that reach the same destination. Or religions are like doors that open to the same room. Therefore, if someone follows the rituals and ethics of a traditional religion, it is as if he believes in all of them.

In addition, Nasr postulates that the diversity of religions is an expression of God's intention to unveil various dimensions of His names and attributes. Each religious tradition, according to him, accentuates a distinct facet of divinity. Thus, the multiplicity of religions arises from the infinite richness of the divine essence. However, the ultimate unity among religions can be traced only at the level of the Absolute Essence or the *esoteric* plane, beyond which the teachings of religions are dissimilar. At lower levels, the doctrines and practices of

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which is subjectively perceived as an individual entity, is in fact a manifestation of the all-encompassing transcendent reality known as Brahman.

religions manifest in different forms and are not necessarily identical. As Rumi famous Sufi sings:

The names that fit that one are countless  
That one is to thy personality a father,  
In regard to another person He may be Son  
In relation to another He may be wrath and vengeance,  
In relation to another, mercy and goodness  
He has thousands of names, yet is One  
Answering to all of His descriptions, yet indescribable.  
Pass over names and look to qualities,  
So that qualities may lead thee to essence!  
The differences of sects arise from His names  
When they pierce to His essence they find His peace! (Whinfield, 2001, p. 160)

According to Nasr, some theological differences exist in the *exoteric* dimension among the *Tao*, *Śūnyatā*, Allah, and *Brahman*. One way to explain these theological differences is by considering the emphasis varies by different religions. In simpler terms, each religion emphasizes more on a particular aspect of the Ultimate Reality, but this does not imply that the Ultimate Reality itself is different in each religion. Certain traditions may focus more on particular characteristics, while others pay less attention to that specific characteristic. For instance, Islam and Judaism emphasize God's singularity and oneness, while Christianity emphasizes His triune nature. Monotheistic religions emphasize the personal aspect of God, while Confucianism and Taoism focus more on the impersonal aspect of the Supreme Reality known as the *Tao*. In the Abrahamic world, God is the supreme Object, whereas Hinduism describes the Ultimate Reality as both the supreme Object and Subject or *Atman*. While Buddhism mainly discusses the Immanent Deity related to *nirvana* and pays less attention to an objective Reality. While all of these aspects can be found in many of these traditions, as demonstrated by the examples provided by John Hick in section 2.3 that illustrate both personal and impersonal aspects of God in all of these religions, each religion places greater emphasis on certain aspects of the Real over others. Thus, for Nasr, it is plausible to reside in any of these traditional worlds, clinging to the center of one's universe



while recognizing the legitimacy and relevance of the other centers, without any eclecticism or superficial amalgamation of different sacred forms (Nasr, 1996b, pp. 322-323).

According to Nasr, despite these *exoteric* differences in the forms of doctrines and theological teachings, there is still a notable consensus among various traditional religions and philosophies and significant similarities between various theologies. Therefore, it is inaccurate to claim that only differences and conflicts exist in the external realm of religions. Even at the level of theological description of God, such as attributes and qualities, they share striking similarities and harmonies. For instance, the notions of compassion, mercy, or infinity cannot be negated from any description of the Ultimate Reality and its manifestations in the traditional worlds (Ibid.). Many essential aspects of religion can be found in all religions, although they may not manifest similarly. These belief systems serve as the guiding principles and governing ideas of various traditional cultures and civilizations. Nasr aims to highlight the commonalities among religious doctrines that may be articulated in diverse languages and forms. Specifically, there is an agreement regarding the purpose of human life, the importance of the good as the driving force behind human actions, and the existence of a transcendent aspect of human existence (Ibid.).

In other cases, religions commonly express a shared sentiment of loss related to the Origin and Centre, as well as a means to recover the lost state of perfection. Or the centrality of prayer, in all its forms, is a common thread that runs through all religions, and it is universally regarded as a means of remoulding human beings. All religions acknowledge that reality is not solely confined to this world's temporal and spatial experience and that there is an existence beyond it that the soul of man seeks to attain. This applies even to the Buddhist doctrine of *anattā* (no-self), which posits a state beyond the *samsaric* existence that humans can attain (Nasr, 1989, p. 299).

Another important instance, according to Nasr, is the distinction between the "Absolute" and the "relative," which is present in all religions (Nasr, 1993, p. 61). In all traditions, the dichotomy between the Absolute<sup>37</sup> and relative has inspired worship, prayer, and self-cultivation. The crux of attaining the timeless wisdom of *Sophia* lies in pure intellection or metaphysical discernment, which entails distinguishing between the Real and

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<sup>37</sup> In traditional cosmology, the goal is to elucidate the understanding of the forms each stage of existence takes. The entire metaphysics of Islam is encapsulated in the first Shahada (*La'ala-il-Allah*), which ultimately implies that God alone is the absolute and ultimate reality, and everything else is relative (Nasr, 1993, p. 61).

the illusory, the Absolute and the contingent, and the Necessary and the possible, *Atma* and *Maya* (Oldmeadow, 2010, p. 88).

On other occasions, Nasr emphasizes the significance of the feminine aspect of the Divine. He compares the Virgin Mary, the source from which the Word is born, and the soul (*Nafs*)<sup>38</sup> of the Muhammad, who received and propagated the Quran as God's Word. This viewpoint acknowledges the necessity of the feminine aspect of Logos, which exists in various forms and degrees across different traditions. Nasr recognizes the presence of this feminine aspect of the divine in Christianity and Islam as a similar reality in two related religions and associates this reality with *Kwan-Yin*, the feminine consort of *Krsna* or *Siva* in various spiritual domains. Nasr also speaks about the essential importance of the commonalities between *Siva* and Dionysus, along with specific aspects of Hermes and the Buddha (Nasr, 1989, p. 297). While these analogies may hold true on an *exoteric* level, Nasr contends that only through principal knowledge or the traditional perspective can such comparisons be made on a deeper level and have spiritual efficacy. This allows for understanding the connection between primordial and archetypal religious models within various religious universes (Ibid., 298).

In addition to the aforementioned similarities, several other aspects of religious belief overlap with one another and point to a fundamental similarity among the major traditions. According to Nasr, another crucial resemblance found in many ancient traditions is the existence of three fundamental elements: "work, love, and knowledge." These three elements represent the basic ways humans relate to God and correspond to the three recognized mystical stages of contraction, expansion, and union in practical spiritual life. Though these aspects are expressed differently in each tradition based on their unique characteristics and historical development, they are present in all the major faiths of humanity (Ibid., 299). In religious traditions, these three elements have formed the basis of a philosophical and mystical school. These elements correspond to the *karma marga*, *bhakti marga*, and *jnana marga* of Hinduism or *al-makhafah*, *al-mahabbah*, and *al-marifah* of Islam. According to Nasr, this hierarchy also applies to the followers of each religion, who can be classified into types based on their approach to the Ultimate Reality. In the Greek tradition, these types were known as the *hylikoi*, *psychoi*, and *pneumatikoi* (Nasr, 1993, p. 59).

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<sup>38</sup> Both the Islamic notion of *nafs* and the Judeo-Christian idea of *Sophia* pertain to feminine parts of the divine. According to the Islamic religion, each person's "*nafs*" (soul or self) is where their inherent good and evil qualities originate. Through engaging in spiritual disciplines like prayer, fasting, and charity, one's *nafs* can be cleansed and one's relationship with God deepened. *Nafs* is more commonly connected with female traits like intuition, emotion, and receptivity.

This category can be observed to a certain extent, even in larger dimensions. For instance, Judaism tends to emphasize fear and work and primarily is a religion based on law, Christianity emphasizes love and is mainly on the base of spirituality, and Islam emphasizes mainly on knowledge<sup>39</sup>. Nevertheless, Nasr notes that all three elements are present in each religion, albeit in varying degrees. In Islam, which emphasizes the universal relationship between humanity and God through knowledge and reason, a combination of fear and awe, as well as love and affection in Islamic Sufism, strengthens and deepens this bond. According to Nasr, if any of these components are missing, it hinders the relationship between God and man. He notes that in Judaism, the perspective of fear presented in the Pentateuch is followed by love found in the Song of Songs and the Psalms, and only centuries later completed by the *gnosis* of the Kabbalists. In Christianity, the ascetic attitude of the Desert Fathers based on fear is quickly followed by the spirituality of love, but the sapiential dimension of Christianity does not fully flourish until the end of the Middle Ages, and its development is cut short by the Renaissance's revolt against Christianity (Nasr, 1989, p. 299).

Nasr highlights significant principles and similarities in religions that have their foundations in a unified reality even in the *exoteric* dimension of traditions. The existence of numerous shared fundamental elements among different religions suggests a certain unity among them. This unity arises from the fact that the root of these religions is the same, and thus the leaves that spread from this root on the surface of the earth often share similarities and commonalities.

In summary, according to Nasr, the reason for the existence of many religions is that the Absolute Essence is unique, and thus, its manifestations must also be unique. This helps to explain why each religion has its unique character in its external forms. He believes that there is only one Truth, which manifests itself in all genuine religious traditions, and that God would not be just and merciful if this were not the case (Jahanbegloo, 2010, p. 291). Multiple religions exist because they embody different supreme ideals that reflect an aspect of Ultimate Reality. Each religion represents a unique way of expressing a single Truth and reveals a supreme ideal that reflects the divine at its core. While their descriptions of Ultimate Reality may differ due to the variety of ideals they embody, each religion offers insight into the divine and reflects a sacred manifestation deserving of respect. To achieve unity among religions,

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<sup>39</sup> The golden age of Islamic civilization is a notable example of this fact. During this period (8th century to the 13th century), which flourished for a relatively short period after rising of Islam, the Islamic world made significant advancements in all fields of knowledge, science, and philosophy. This civilization had a remarkable impact on the world of thought and expanded its influence through its many contributions to the areas of art, architecture, philosophy, mathematics, medicine, and astronomy. This era represents a testament to the power of knowledge and the significant role it plays in shaping the world around us.

exploring the fundamental aspects of the religious world, including rituals, codes, symbols, and doctrines, is crucial. Although religious language and modes of worship vary across different religions, the ultimate objective, purpose, and inner essence remain universal. It is not through the *exoteric* level of religions, characterized by their divergences, that one can truly understand and accept other religions, instead, through *esotericism*, which surpasses the formal dimensions of religions, one can have an uncompromising adherence to the authenticity of all revelations by recognizing in them a supra-formal unity that transcends these very differences. Therefore, it is essential to understand the underlying spiritual reality that all religions seek to convey rather than merely focusing on their external differences.

#### 4.0 Comparing the pluralistic views of John Hick and Hossein Nasr

*I meditated upon religions, making great effort to understand them,*

*And I came to realize that they are a unique Principle with numerous ramifications. –  
Hallaj*

Thus far, as evidenced by the information presented up to this point, John Hick and Hossein Nasr are two prominent thinkers who have written extensively about religious pluralism. However, they approach the topic from various perspectives. Before delving into the distinctions discernible upon scrutinizing their works, it is imperative to enumerate some main similarities in their perspectives succinctly.

Firstly, both Hick and Nasr agree that religious followers should eliminate their claims to be the one and only truth. Although both emphasize the theory of religious pluralism, the principles and approach of each of them have some differences in explaining this theory and we are going to discuss those differences. Both Nasr and Hick believe there are many ways to reach the divine. They claim that no religion or spiritual tradition monopolizes the truth and that each offers its followers a unique perspective on the divine. Hick and Nasr believe a healthy society needs different religious traditions. They argue that a diverse religious landscape enriches society and allows for spiritual growth and self-improvement. They support religious minorities and oppose allowing any religion to dominate public life.

Secondly, it is the shared belief of both Hick and Nasr that a universal reality exists, called "the Real," referenced by all religious traditions. Thirdly, Hick and Nasr believe real

religious life includes inner experience and spirituality. They believe religious truth can be found through personal experience, spiritual activities, and mysticism. They emphasize building a relationship with the divine and living according to one's spiritual values. Finally, both believe religious pluralism is desirable and essential in today's globalized society. This is because individuals who are aware and have knowledge of many religions are more likely to interact with one another. They think a pluralistic approach to religion can build better mutual respect and understanding and encourage peaceful cohabitation among people of different faiths. This section of the study examines the main differences between the two approaches. The following are some notable differences in their perspectives.

#### 4.1 Tradition vs. Reform in Hick and Nasr:

*"There are many paths to the top of the mountain, but the view is always the same."* –  
Chinese proverb (often cited by Sufi teachers)

Hick and Nasr share the perspective that adherents of religious traditions ought not to regard their respective religion as possessing the *exclusive* and absolute truth leading to salvation and enlightenment. An *exclusivist* stance, which views followers of other religions as being lost in delusion and falsehood, is deemed problematic by both scholars. They seek to address this issue in their own distinct ways.

Hick believes that each adherent of a particular religious tradition must set aside dogmatic beliefs and irrational teachings to view followers of other religions as fellow recipients of the truth and the path to salvation. He believes that his idea of religious pluralism should be regarded as the ultimate destination that all religions are working towards. He believes that the world's religions are moving closer and closer together and that this convergence will one day make the distinctions between them unnecessary. In other words, Hick believes that current faiths can and should be altered, reformed, and modified under the principles of religious pluralism. Hick holds the view that religions are moving towards a unity that could eliminate their divisions (Hick, 1973, p. 146). According to Aslan, Hick suggests that religious pluralism has the potential and necessity to transform religious doctrines. The aim is to eliminate the divisive doctrines among religions, and instead promote doctrines that foster harmony and peace among them, ultimately leading to the resolution of conflicts (Aslan, 1998, p. 115). In other words, the current era of modernism and globalization, as well as the increased ease of communication between religions, allow us to

rectify incorrect doctrines through dialogue and arrive at a universal truth that is shared among all religions.

Hick's objective of fostering spiritual unity among different religions through reforming irrational doctrines was reflected in his rejection of the conventional understanding of the "incarnation" doctrine. He argued that to achieve a spiritual communion, it is imperative to reform irrational teachings and *exclusivist* doctrines. Such revisions are crucial to overcoming the obstacles to spiritual harmony presented by irrational and *exclusivist* teachings. Hick posits a profound transformation of religions resulting from the convergence or interaction of faiths and the ultimate dissolving of borders between them (Hick, 1973, p. 146 & Aslan, 1998, p. 123).

On the other hand, Nasr views religious pluralism as a way to accept and comprehend the sacred elements that can be found in other religions, and he is in opposition to reformism and any modern or liberal interpretation of religion. He does not think that the coexistence of multiple religions will result in the formation of religions that are sharing same principles and doctrines. Instead, he views it as a means of fostering respect for every religious tradition while also drawing attention to the differences between them. Nasr believes that a specific religion's principles, sacred rites, and sacred texts are sacred and unchangeable over time. He believes religion is the Divine response to humanity's requirements. Therefore, religious scholars should not try to change any religion's principles and instead celebrate the doctrines as sacred texts (Aslan, 1998, p. 115). Nasr believes that traditional values and practices are crucial for individual and societal survival and that a religious transformation will occur through the rediscovery of tradition.

In other words, Nasr advocates for the preservation and revitalization of tradition and the past, while Hick envisions a religious future in which religions become more alike through the elimination of doctrines that impede religious pluralism, such as the concept of incarnation. Nasr expresses contentment with upholding the *perennial* knowledge that can be derived from shamanism, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, and other religions through their traditional teachings and practices. In contrast, Hick advocates for a reform movement involving Muslims and Jews modifying their respective faiths to eliminate the *exclusivity* that he finds objectionable. For example, as we saw Hick suggests a reinterpretation of the Christian doctrine of the incarnation and advocates for Christians to abandon the dogmatic belief that God is only manifested in Christ and not to interpret it literally. According to him,

this doctrine is a hindrance to interfaith dialogue. This proposal leads to a remarkable and unusual spectacle where a Christian scholar (Hick) strives to reform Christianity by dismissing the orthodox understanding of the incarnation and Trinity concept while being advised by a Muslim scholar (Nasr) not to abandon the incarnation and Trinity (Legenhausen, u.d.). Therefore, it is important to note Nasr is critical of interfaith dialogue that seeks to find a way to reform doctrines between religions, arguing that it can lead to a dilution of religious identity, syncretism, and compromise of traditional values. Instead, for Nasr, the objective of interfaith dialogue is to achieve 'transcendental unity of religions.' The asserted unity is 'transcendental' in the sense that it exists within the world's religions without denying their forms (Jahanbegloo, 2010, p. 14).

Nasr responds to Hick by acknowledging that his proposal to reform Christianity stems from a desire to foster a more significant comprehension of other religions, which is a commendable objective. Nasr also notes that some Christian theologians advocate for renouncing the belief in the incarnation in a literal sense to improve understanding between Christians and Muslims. However, Nasr questions the rationale behind this recommendation and suggests that if Christians adopt such a stance, they might as well consider converting to Islam instead of remaining Christian (Nasr, 1989, p. 289).

Regarding the doctrine of the incarnation and Hick's proposal, Nasr asserts that God would not allow a major religion to remain in error for thousands of years, indicating that the doctrine of the incarnation is not a false teaching<sup>40</sup>. Nasr goes so far as to suggest that even if historical evidence showed that Jesus Christ and his disciples did not believe in the trinity and incarnation, these teachings are still considered divine providence for later Christians.

Additionally, Nasr asserts that the descriptions of God presented in orthodoxy and religious revelations are not man-made and, as such, should not be targeted for modification through any reform program. While Hick thinks that human elements cause religious

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<sup>40</sup> Nasr contends that the continued existence and productivity of the doctrine of the Trinity and the Incarnation over two millennia of Christian history is evidence of its truth. This perspective aligns with the *Gamaliel Principle*, which posits that teachings from God cannot be overthrown, while those of human origin will inevitably perish. Nasr maintains that if the Christian beliefs in the Trinity and the incarnation were invalid, they could not have withstood the test of time and evolved into a distinctive culture. The fact that these beliefs have persisted for so long and garnered millions of adherents implies the possibility of ethical, metaphysical, and epistemological truths within Christianity that have captivated individuals and propelled them to safeguard and propagate this wisdom. This concept reinforces the notion of religious pluralism and underscores the significance of preserving and upholding religions as a testament to their lasting worth. Nasr asserts that the verse from the Quran (17:81), "*Say: Truth has come, and falsehood has vanished. Indeed, falsehood will certainly vanish,*" aligns with this idea.

disparities, Nasr maintains that God ordains these discrepancies due to human differences. Nasr claims that in comprehending the veracity and universality of other religions, it is unnecessary to manipulate or alter the dogmatic and foundational teachings of one's own faith. He maintains that the immutable divine precepts of Islam and Judaism cannot be changed; he does propose that religious evolution must be gradual and natural. In other words, he says that any effort to change or reform religion should be made in a way that respects the traditional teachings and practices and that any changes should happen slowly and naturally over time (Ibid.).

The precise meaning intended by Nasr in suggesting a gradual and natural transition in religious beliefs remains somewhat unclear. Nasr may intend to convey that any changes to religion should not contradict the fundamental tenets of established religious practices. Even though the religious tradition has undergone evolution and some level of renewal<sup>41</sup>, there have been no substantive changes. For instance, Thomas Aquinas's philosophical contributions during the Middle Ages revolutionized Christian thought, yet they did not fundamentally alter Christian doctrine. Therefore, changes and transformations within a religion should not undermine the religion's identity, which is derived from revelation. Furthermore, there should be no deliberate effort to fundamentally modify and reform a doctrine in an entirely new direction. This is a concern that John Hick has been accused of, as he sought to develop a pluralistic interpretation with his reinterpretation of the doctrine of the incarnation.

#### 4.1.1 The Incarnation: Essential or Accidental?

Nasr holds a rigid stance against any reformation in religious teachings due to his *traditionalism* standard. I suggest distinguishing between religions' *essential* and *incidental* aspects to address this issue. Certain aspects of religion are shaped by historical and cultural circumstances, which can make them obsolete in modern times. Alternatively, considering the intricacies of language games, these concepts may need to be reinterpreted in a new language. Hick is correct in his assertion that the language used to describe the incarnation can be considered "mythical." It could be argued that Hick's contribution to the doctrine of the

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<sup>41</sup> Nasr favors a type of change that does not completely alter the orthodoxy of each religion, and he is supportive of instances where mystics and philosophers have brought about renewal within their respective traditions. For example, the concept of *mujaddid* is an Islamic term that refers to an individual who brings about "renewal" (*tajdid*) to the religion. As per prevalent Muslim tradition, the term signifies a person who emerges at the start of every century of the Islamic calendar to revitalize Islam by purifying it of superfluous elements and reinstating it to its original purity. This *tajdid* was a natural recovery of the traditional doctrine, and it is different from what Hick is doing with the trinity and incarnation.



incarnation does not involve any substantial changes. Hick provides a realist interpretation of this teaching that centers around semantics. Specifically, he asserts that Jesus Christ was an actual historical figure with a corporeal existence and a sagacious teacher whose teachings resulted in the transformation of his followers. Simultaneously, his adherents identified him as God since they could genuinely perceive the divine essence in Jesus Christ, and his life demonstrated God's beauty and splendour.

The issue at hand is whether Hick's work conflicts with Christian tradition or if it is simply an effort to clarify the incarnation's true meaning. Nasr believed that Hick's attempt to reinterpret the doctrine of the incarnation was a departure from traditional beliefs. Nasr maintained that the teaching of the incarnation was a divine revelation that should not be challenged. However, it could be argued that Hick did not reject the incarnation. Instead, he viewed it as a symbolic and mythical expression that needed to be understood correctly in our time. However, Nasr and numerous Christian theologians oppose Hick's attempt to modify the traditional interpretation of the incarnation. They believe that denying the reality of incarnation would have significant implications and ultimately will fundamentally alter Christianity as we know it. There are many Christians who oppose Hick's views, seeing them as wrong Christology and an attempt to alter Christ's teachings<sup>42</sup>.

Nasr is fundamentally opposed to any form of reform or liberal reinterpretation of traditional teachings. He maintains that the tradition, having been directly bestowed upon humanity by God, cannot be altered without diminishing its divine aspect. His primary concern, therefore, is the preservation of the tradition. However, this position raises questions about the practicality of preserving all traditional teachings, including those about rules, ethics, and beliefs. Moreover, it prompts inquiries as to whether all teachings in the tradition can be considered divine, and whether a distinction can be drawn between *essential* and non-essential elements.

Accordingly, it is crucial to distinguish between *essential* and *accidental* elements in religion, as many differences between various religious traditions and changes through history can be attributed to the latter. For example, variations between the Orthodox and Catholic Churches in matters such as a bishop's beard or the disagreement between the Catholic and

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<sup>42</sup> For further studies on critiques of John Hick's Christology, see *The Person of Christ* (1998) by Donald Macleod, *A Critique of John Hick's Christology and Reaffirmation of the Exclusiveness of Christ* by Philippe Tachin (2011), and *God the Son Incarnate: The Doctrine of Christ* (2016) by Stephen J. Wellum.

Protestant Churches regarding the presence or absence of a statue of Jesus Christ on the cross in the church are not *essential* to the religion's core teachings. Similarly, social laws and their associated punishments depend on the time and place in which they were formulated and can therefore be reformed or even eliminated without compromising the fundamental essence of the religion. Or in the Middle Ages, the Catholic Church prohibited the charging of interest on loans, known as usury. However, over time, the Church's position on usury evolved, and today, many Christians do not view interest on loans as inherently sinful. Or the Catholic Church believed during the Middle Ages that unbaptized children would go to *limbo*, but it has since revised its position on this matter. Or the directive from Paul the Apostle to silence women in the church (1 Corinthians 14:34), while present in the biblical text, is understood as a specific command arising from local and temporal conditions rather than as a universal mandate or an *essential* aspect of Christianity. Similarly, in Judaism, although the Old Testament (Deut 22:21) describes the stoning of women who committed adultery, this practice is not currently implemented in Rabbinic Judaism.

Similarly, the issue of slavery, which was commonplace in ancient societies with a lord-serf system and a slave-based economy, was addressed in religious texts, and specific religious laws were established concerning the conditions of enslaved people. At one time, many Christians believed that slavery was morally permissible, and some even used biblical passages to justify the practice<sup>43</sup>. However, over time, Christian thinkers and leaders began to oppose slavery and work toward its abolition. It can thus be posited that slavery was imposed on religions due to the exigencies of the time. However, with the abolition of slavery in the 19th century, which was championed by many religious leaders, the laws about slavery in religions have become obsolete and are no longer deemed a constituent part of religious beliefs. Therefore, it can be inferred that such laws are *accidental* and subject to revision, reform, and reinterpretation over time. In fact, many of these accidental laws have been modified even in pre-modern times. Consequently, the social issues and *accidental* aspects of religion could undergo change rather than the essence of religion itself.

On the other hand, the concept of the *essential* aspects of religion can be influenced by the particular religion being studied. However, the *essential* aspects of religion are often

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<sup>43</sup> The "Curse of Ham" biblical passage was frequently cited to justify slavery. This passage describes how Ham, Noah's son, witnessed his father's nakedness and reported it to his brothers. As a consequence, Noah cursed Canaan, the son of Ham, to serve his brothers. This passage was interpreted by pro-slavery advocates to imply that black people are descendants of Ham and were therefore destined to be slaves.

referred to as the "essence" or "core" of religion, and they are considered unchanging that constitutes the essence of those religions. The essence of a religion refers to the fundamental identity of a religion, rooted in its beliefs and practices, and embodying the ultimate goal of that religion. The essential aspects of religion can include a belief in a higher power or Ultimate Reality, which is foundational for understanding the nature of the world and one's place within it. Additionally, rituals and practices are also often viewed as essential to religion, as they provide individuals with opportunities to connect with the divine or attain spiritual growth. Furthermore, moral values and ethical principles are often considered fundamental to many religions, as they provide a framework for guiding individual behaviour and interpersonal relationships. These *essential* aspects are fundamental to a religious tradition, and while interpretations of them may change over time, the underlying principles are believed to be unchanging and indispensable to the religion.

Such as, a universal *essential* aspect of religion is concerned with the direct experience of the divine, which can be attained through spiritual practices such as prayer, meditation, fasting, abstinence, and self-discipline. The essence and core of religion is the ability to achieve internal change within human beings. This inner transformation is the ultimate goal of faith. The *esoteric* and *essential*<sup>44</sup> aspects of religions are frequently linked to seeking inner transformation, self-knowledge, and spiritual awakening. Any alteration of these essential aspects risks emptying a religion of its original identity and purpose. Therefore, these *essential* teachings transcend time and place. As a result, the crux of religion lies in unique paths to reach God and achieve salvation and self-transformation. Consequently, amending some *incidental* aspects of religion would not adversely impact these primary concerns.

Thus, the question that needs to be asked, which may not have a clear and straightforward answer, is whether the doctrine of incarnation is an *essential* component of Christianity. As demonstrated in section (2.2), Hick does not view the doctrine of the incarnation as being synonymous with Christianity. Consequently, the Nicene and Chalcedonian theological positions may be questioned or regarded as mythological constructs that require a novel interpretation. In contrast, one can argue that the doctrine of the

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<sup>44</sup> My categorization of religion links *essential* aspects to *esotericism*, but not all *exoteric* elements are inherently *accidental*. Unlike Nasr's *esotericism* and *exotericism*, my *separation* between *essential* and *accidental* elements differs. Nasr considers religious rituals, theology, doctrines, and laws as part of the external aspect of religion. In contrast, my categorization views only a specific subset of religious laws and teachings as *accidental*, offering an alternative paradigm. For example, *Hajj* in Islam and Holy Communion in Christianity are viewed by Nasr as part of the external or *exoteric* dimensions of religion. However, I consider these rituals *essential* aspects of Islam and Christianity, as they cannot be altered or changed.

incarnation should be understood and accepted in its traditional form, as established by councils such as Nicene, which is considered the orthodox understanding of the doctrine. This traditional interpretation has served as the foundation for the 2000-year-old Christian tradition, influencing various aspects such as its art, philosophy, mysticism, and worldview. The concept of incarnation played a crucial role in shaping the form of Christian life. Had this teaching been understood differently, the Christian world and way of life would have been different as well.

Answering this question presents a challenge due to the complex nature of the doctrine of the incarnation. On the one hand, this doctrine has been an official and orthodox Christian belief since the early Christian centuries, serving as a core aspect of Christian identity. However, on the other hand, there exists no singular understanding of this doctrine, as evidenced by the opposition of the Oriental Orthodox Churches to the Chalcedonian Council's rejection of the "*dyophysitism*" interpretation of the incarnation in favor of their own *monophysitism* interpretation.

Despite these differences, all major Christian denominations, including Catholic, Orthodox, Oriental, and Protestant churches, share the belief that Jesus Christ is literally God, and that God directly became flesh. This belief was not due to the understanding of the apostles about the importance of the role of Christ, as suggested by Hick. Any reinterpretation of this doctrine could result in a significantly different theology that conflicts with the fundamental essence of Christianity, which holds that Jesus is divine. If we accept Hick's perspective, the doctrine of incarnation loses its *essential* nature, becoming instead an *accidental* belief. This fluidity may lead to the development of a new theology that denies the divinity of Christ, erasing the unique aspect of Christianity in this respect and rendering it more similar to Islamic theology.

#### 4.2 Religious Pluralism: A Moral or Metaphysical Concern?

*"All religions are branches of one big tree. It doesn't matter what you believe, just be a good person."* – Rumi

As previously mentioned, Nasr's conception of the "*transcendent unity of religions*" or pluralism stems entirely from the Islamic tradition, particularly Sufism metaphysic. This represents a crucial point of divergence between Hick and Nasr. While John Hick argues that *inclusivity* is a fundamental aspect of certain Christian mystics, such as Nicholas of Cusa, his

pluralistic approach cannot be traced back to the Christian mystical tradition and metaphysic or intra-religious discussions within Christianity. Hick did not introduce the concept of religious pluralism through the teachings of the Christian tradition. Rather, his justification for religious pluralism is rooted in Kantian philosophy. The central issue for Hick is the immorality of religious *exclusivity*, which compelled him to devise a systematic philosophical framework based on Kantian philosophy to support religious pluralism. Therefore, Hick's rationale for religious pluralism is based on philosophical and extra-religious justifications.

In contrast, Nasr views pluralism as a valid perspective on religions through Sufi metaphysics and Quranic teachings. Nasr and other traditionalists have developed their ideas regarding reality, religion, humanity, cosmology, and nature by solely relying on religious traditions. While they have conveyed these ideas using contemporary language, they have not generated any entirely novel worldview. In other words, the traditionalists have not established a novel truth, but rather have reproduced the truths found in various religions. Thus, it can be observed that pluralism in Nasr's thought is firmly rooted in traditional metaphysics. His philosophical justifications, such as the distinction between *esotericism* and *exoticism*, are also derived from the Quranic and Sufi teachings, not an extra religious deliberate and conscious attempt to create new metaphysics to justify religious pluralism.

Therefore, another difference between Hick and Nasr lies in their priorities and it lies in the fact that, according to Hick, the issue of pluralism and *exclusivism* primarily concerns moral preservation rather than epistemological and metaphysical aspects. Hick asserts that religious pluralism should guide individuals toward developing religious tolerance, promoting peaceful dialogue, and impacting their existential lives. He underscores the ethical implications of religious pluralism and emphasizes the urgent need to formulate a strategy enabling existing major traditions to foster peaceful coexistence among themselves. According to Aslan, Hick argues that intellectuals from all traditions must collaborate to achieve this goal, and a pluralistic outlook would be beneficial in this regard (Aslan, 1998, p. 116).

As we observed, Hick's fascination with the concept of religious pluralism originated in Birmingham, where he witnessed the worship practices of adherents of different religions, and also during his journey to India, which instigated his skepticism towards the church's doctrine of *exclusivity* and its ethical implications. Hick places great emphasis on the peaceful coexistence of human beings and considers the primary objective of his approach to be the collaborative efforts of humanity toward the survival of the human race and the establishment of a global society. To this end, Hick rejects the ancient Christian *exclusivity* and deems it

unethical, as it raises the question of how individuals in non-Christian religious traditions, who are pure and righteous, could be considered outside the path of salvation. In fact, Hick's understanding of the immorality of the church's teachings stemmed from his interactions with believers of other religions and traditions. In Hick's view, the moral issue was paramount, and he could not condone the church's self-centered judgment of the majority of the world's people, whom it deemed deserving of eternal damnation. Therefore, Hick sought to defend and justify religious pluralism. He arrived at epistemological pluralism due to his moral concerns and endeavored to find a logical basis to support this idea.

On the other hand, Nasr views the diversity of religions primarily as a metaphysical issue, or more specifically, an epistemological matter, while still acknowledging its moral and salvific aspects. Nasr upholds the superiority of the traditional viewpoint of pluralism, as it aligns more closely with the fundamental tenets of religion and contains the metaphysical truth. This viewpoint seeks to impart excellent value to everything deemed sacred, enabling the establishment of a sacred environment in which the singularity and diversity of each religious tradition can be respected. Nasr's interest in the "*transcendent unity of religions*" does not stem from ethical considerations but from a metaphysical standpoint. While he acknowledges the moral benefits that may result from this viewpoint, such as tolerance and peace, he considers them secondary outcomes of metaphysical understanding. On the other hand, Hick's moral position on the subject of *religious exclusivity*, based on his interaction with followers of other religions, led him to conclude that the church's doctrine of exclusive salvation for Christians is not morally justifiable. Hick then attempted to provide a logical justification for religious pluralism with the help of the Kantian dichotomy of *noumenon* and *phenomenon*.

I contend that religious pluralism's moral and metaphysical aspects are crucially important. While Hick draws on Kant's metaphysical concepts, his central focus is promoting global awareness, facilitating communication among followers of diverse religions, and fostering religious tolerance and peaceful coexistence. On the other hand, Nasr's emphasis extends beyond the moral benefits of his viewpoint, as he places a greater emphasis on the introduction and promotion of traditional beliefs and the metaphysical truth that underlies all religious traditions.

Hick's perspective on religious pluralism centers on transforming individuals from an ego-centered to a divine-centered orientation. However, when considering the moral dimension of religious pluralism, it raises the question of whether it is reasonable to label the claims of *exclusivists* as self-centered. *Exclusivists* assert the superiority of their faith or

worldview over others. From a psychological perspective, such assertions may stem from an individual's own needs and desires. Hick argues that a Christian would not believe that salvation can only be found through the Church or that the historical Jesus is the only path to truth if they were born in Japan. In a similar vein, it is difficult to establish a credible and intersubjective rationale for the claim that salvation in the hereafter is contingent only on one's belief in the Prophethood of Muhammad and the Qur'an. This is to say that no believer has been able to convincingly persuade another believer that their religion is superior to another, even in debates between avowed *exclusivists* such as Christians and Muslims or Jews and Christians. The focus on one's own religion and belief system in such *exclusivist* claims can be seen as ego-centered from a psychological perspective.

Indeed, that is a common argument made by proponents of religious pluralism. They assert that the *exclusivist* belief in the superiority of one's own religion is often rooted in a desire for power, control, and tribal identity, rather than a rational examination of the evidence for various religious claims. This can lead to conflict and intolerance as different religious groups vie for dominance and influence. On the other hand, religious pluralists argue that all religions are equally valid paths to the divine and that true spirituality transcends religious boundaries. I contend that *exclusivist* claims are a matter of subjective preference, akin to preferring one type of language and architecture over another. From an objective perspective, asserting that one religion is superior to another is challenging, much like it is difficult to proclaim that one form of art is better than another. However, it is reasonable to state that Christianity or Buddhism is a superior religion for an individual's personal experience of peace and contentment. Nevertheless, asserting that a particular religion is the best for all people worldwide is an impossible objective claim that relies on emotional or self-centered arguments rather than rational ones. In conclusion, regardless of whether the grounds for prioritizing religious pluralism are ethical or metaphysical, it can be asserted that the perspective of those who advocate for religious pluralism is more virtuous and moral than those who adhere to *religious exclusivity*.

#### 4.3 The Possibility of Acquiring Knowledge About the God

*"The righteous of all nations have a share in the world to come."* – Talmud

It is important to mention a further aspect in comparing religious pluralism between the perspectives of Hick and Nasr, which concerns Hick's understanding of the concepts of "God" or "Absolute Truth." From an epistemological standpoint, Hick's view of "Absolute Truth"

appears to be fully aligned with the empiricist underpinnings of Western philosophy, given his reliance on Kant's epistemology and the distinction between *noumenon* and *phenomena*, which are indicative of his significant indebtedness to empiricist epistemological models. Following Kantian philosophy, the individual's cognitive capacity is considered to be fundamentally circumscribed by subjective conditions, thereby rendering the Absolute beyond human reach. Such a perspective presupposes an ontological separation between man and God, whereby human faculties are constrained to the sensory realm and a finite intellect that is inherently restricted. Consequently, the human comprehension of the Absolute Truth is restricted to a partial and obscured view hidden behind the personal veil of subjective limitations (Hick, 1993, p. 177).

Hick posits that the human condition imposes inherent constraints upon individuals, such as limitations of time, space, and other personal constraints that function as an inescapable barrier. Accordingly, when addressing the subject of truth, Hick contends that he is actually discussing the impact of truth on human beings and their experiential engagement with it, rather than the Truth *per se*. Consequently, when humans can apprehend only fragments of the truth, these partial revelations can never amount to a complete understanding and will invariably be imbued with subjective biases. As we observed (section 2.3), Hick asserts that concepts such as compassion, merciful, omnipotence, and omniscience, commonly attributed to God, are merely human constructs that do not accurately reflect the "infinite" or the "Ultimate" in their purest form (Ibid.). Hick states that while the Real cannot express the characteristics of its manifestations, such as love and justice for the Christian God and consciousness and bliss for Hindu *Brahman*, it is the *noumenal* source of these traits. Hick concludes that each characteristic revealed by a manifestation of the Real can be assigned to the Real in the sense that the Real limitlessly is the source of that characteristic. Hick believes Allah's attributes like creator, sustainer, and compassionate can be associated with the Real, not because the Real is creator, sustainer, and merciful, but because the Real is the ultimate foundation of these qualities, which makes it conceivable for Allah to be these qualities (Hick, 2004, pp. 246-247).

According to Hick, the Real or *Noumenon* is beyond the scope of human comprehension and can solely be grasped by negating what it is not (*via negativa*). Since the infinite is inherently inaccessible to human experience, any assertions regarding it are inherently limited by our finite perceptions. Although Hick employs various descriptors such



as "ground," "one," "real," "cause," and "infinite" to refer to the Real, he stresses that these labels are ultimately human attempts to comprehend and articulate the Real based on religious encounters. As such, any characteristic attributed to the Real is relative and reflective of our subjective imaginings during *religious experiences*, precluding the possibility of making definitive claims about the Real. Hick espouses that assigning any attribute to God would preclude His infinitude. He posits that the 'gods' of religions cannot be infinite, given that as finite observers we could never directly experience, observe, [or] verify, the infinite dimensions of an infinite Reality (Ibid., 259).

According to Hick's perspective, humans are responsible for creating concepts that pertain to God. As a result, the idea of God or Absolute Divinity within each religious tradition is a result of the historical and cultural context in which its followers exist. It is impossible to comprehend these concepts without taking into account their specific historical backgrounds. Hence, the unique conceptions of God within different religions have either been influenced by various cultural components or have had an impact on them (Ibid., 163, 244, 245).

In contrast to Hick's perspective, Nasr posits that *phenomena* serve as the portals to *noumenal* realities. The universe, whether viewed through a religious or cosmic lens, is understood as composed of symbols that reflect archetypes or supernal realities associated with the Divine. Every element within the cosmos is a manifestation of the Divine Substance. The world, therefore, functions as both a veil that obscures and a revelation of the realities that exist beyond it, serving as a gateway to the inner or *noumenal* world. Thus, nothing within the world can be considered merely external since the very concept of externality presupposes an inward dimension. For Nasr, every form possesses an inner significance and can lead the observer to a deeper understanding of that significance, provided the observer possesses a vision that has been freed from the constraint of seeing only the outward dimension (Nasr, 1996a, p. 15 & Nasr, 1989, p. 286).

Nasr believes that the cosmos is like a theater, where the Divine qualities are reflected in various aspects, similar to a reflection of the face of the Beloved in numerous mirrors. He argues that The Real, which is at the center of man's being, manifests itself as a *theophany* in the cosmos (Nasr, 1989, p. 180). He argues that Divine attributes, such as infinity, perfection, beauty, or goodness, are the hypostases of the Real and are mirrored in the manifested order, including the cosmos. He also asserts that the Real is responsible for creating the world in a

way that allows humans to experience Divine qualities and that the attribute of absoluteness is present in all aspects of reality (Ibid., 135). Thus, Nasr maintains that descriptions of God as presented in revelation are not human constructs and, therefore, are not amenable to any potential reformulation efforts. Initially, it should be noted that Nasr's theological viewpoint does not suggest a complete disconnection between the cosmos and God. Instead, as previously outlined, Nasr perceives God as present in nature, humanity, and religion, whereby the Divine is revealed to us in His true essence.

Secondly, Nasr contends that elucidating Reality or Absolute Truth is fundamentally a metaphysical explanation grounded not in rational reasoning (*ratio*). He posits that the Truth in its essence cannot be apprehended through analytical thinking. Still, attaining metaphysical knowledge<sup>45</sup> and certainty is feasible through two sources: revelation and intellect (*nous*), which is the "mystical vision" (Ibid., 45). He maintains that these two primary sources are inherently linked, as gaining wisdom is achievable only through revelation. Human intellect reaches inner knowledge through divine providence originating from the source of revelation. Through this intellectual insight, individuals can access God's metaphysical knowledge as Truth *per se*. In contrast to Hick's claim that the Truth *per se* or Reality *in itself* is unknowable, Nasr contends that the human mind can apprehend the Truth *per se*, as it is God who manifests his attributes and qualities in the human mind (Nasr, 1996a, p. 18).

Nasr contends that traditional metaphysics differentiates between various degrees of existence. At the highest level of metaphysics, there is God as Ultimate Reality or the Absolute, which can solely be attained through *intellectual intuition*. Knowledge of this realm is esoteric. Beneath this level lies a theological plane in which God is encountered through faith and revelation, characterized as *exoteric*. At the third level, the philosophical plane, phenomena that are conceptualized by the faculty of *ratio* are present. Finally, at the lowest level, the scientific plane, the physical world that is perceived through the senses and

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<sup>45</sup> For Nasr, Metaphysics deals with Reality in its natural state, and philosophy is limited to addressing the mind, whereas metaphysics speaks to the heart. Unlike philosophy, which is culturally confined, metaphysics is not restricted by personal limitations and reflects the Absolute through the *esoteric* teachings of traditions. Nasr asserts that the intellect is capable of comprehending the Absolute. He further argues that encapsulating all of the Reality within a single closed-off system of thought is not feasible. Understanding Reality requires intuition rather than logic, and rationality, which pertains to relativity, is inadequate for apprehending the Absolute. Based on my understanding, Nasr classifies mystical works that are derived through inner intuition, such as the works of Meister Eckhart, Shankara, Ibn Arabi, Kabbalists, Sufis, and Esoteric sages, as belonging to the realm of metaphysics rather than deductive logic. In contrast, peripatetic school and reasoning philosophers like Thomas Aquinas, Ibn Rushd, and philosophers of the modern era are classified under the field of philosophy.

scientific observation is situated. In this arrangement, the hierarchical structure of Being corresponds to a hierarchical structure of knowledge. Diverse forms of knowing are envisioned, depending on the level at which the knower operates. At the lowest level, the physical world is understood through sense data analysis, while at the highest level, the Absolute is apprehended through *intellectual intuition* (Nasr, 1989, p. 131).

Nasr sees all levels of existence within the human being as stated in the Emerald Tablet's adage "as above so below." Therefore, if an individual is conscious of the existence of a reality, for example, *noumenon*, it means that a particular realm of existence (*noumenon*) has been experienced by some humans. When Kant referred to "*noumenon*," it prompts us to inquire about his comprehension of such a reality. Awareness of a thing or a reality is only feasible through personal experience; otherwise, its existence remains unknown. Necessarily, knowledge about *noumenon* must be possible, otherwise, how did Kant or Hick know *noumenon* exist at all? Even the statement "*noumenon* is indescribable and unknowable" constitutes a form of knowledge, serving as an epistemological proposition providing insights into the reality of *noumenon*.

However, experience and knowledge of *noumenon* are possible through the heart or *intuitive intellect* and not logical analysis. Therefore, Nasr contends that the human being is comprised of various layers of existence, which the Western tradition condenses into the triad of "spirit, soul, and body" (also written as *pneuma*, *psyche*, and *hyle*, or *spiritus*, *anima*, and *corpus*) (Ibid., 152). According to Nasr's theory, the spirit of a human being is both a reflection and an extension of the spirit of God (Nasr, 1993, p. 26). As mentioned, he contends that the concept of "intellect," which sits at the centre of a person's spiritual heart, is synonymous with the human spirit (Nasr, 2007a, p. 74). The intellect represents the sacred light that shines upon the human mind (Jahanbegloo, 2010, p. 206). In other words, the intellect is the subjective aspect of the Logos in humans. Thus, intellect could extend all the way to the Ultimate and most fundamental level of reality, which is referred to as Absolute Reality (Nasr, 1989, p. 119).

For Nasr, the universe and humans are infused with the Sacred essence that reveals Itself to those who have sufficiently prepared themselves for such knowledge. Influenced by the Islamic concept of *ilm* (knowledge) as a divine attribute of Allah, Nasr regards knowledge as a "reality" that exists in conjunction with the Divine. Thus, knowledge, whether realized through the macrocosm or microcosm, remains inseparable from God, since the very

substance of knowledge is the knowledge of that reality, which is the Supreme Substance, the Sacred (Ibid., 130-131). In other words, intellect is akin to a ray that emanates from and returns to the Absolute, thus endowed with the potential to apprehend Ultimate Reality. Since this sacred faculty remains at the core of human beings, one may always surpass duality and embark on the path toward union with the Sacred (Ibid., 2-3). To put it differently, Huston Smith comprehensively analyses Nasr's works, arguing that God knows Himself through humans<sup>46</sup> (Hahn, 2001, p. 145).

In summary, according to Nasr, human beings can attain metaphysical knowledge of God through their *intuitive intellect*, transcending their limitations, such as time and space, allowing them to experience God as He truly is. Thus, when the sacred text describes God, it is not based on personal perception or understanding but on the reality that these attributes actually exist in God. In the contemporary era, some individuals have expressed the belief that knowledge of Truth *per se* is unattainable. One explanation for this view is the secularization of science and scholarship, which has reduced knowledge to study the physical world and its mathematical properties. It may be argued that Hick's approach is rooted in the legacy of Western rationalism based on Kantian philosophy. Hick maintains that it is impossible to have direct knowledge of the Real which differs from Nasr's perspective.

#### 4.3.1 Paradox of Reality-perception?

It is necessary to acknowledge potential issues and criticisms in Hick's argument and question the extent of the dissimilarity between Truth and its perception. In other words, it is crucial to note that if the gap between Truth and its perception is too wide or one does not believe that perception is consistent with Reality, then none of any religion's fundamental beliefs and teachings are congruent with Reality. In addition, if two ideas or concepts are contradictory, then one of them must be false. It is illogical for two teachings to be correct if they are diametrically opposed. One possible criticism that may arise is Hick has not resolved this predicament but has transformed the religious conflict into a truth-perception paradox rather than a dilemma regarding Truth *per se*. Therefore, the assertion of the authenticity of religions

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<sup>46</sup> The essence of this statement is that the recognition of oneself leads to the recognition of God. Moreover, the knowledge one has of themselves is akin to God's knowledge of Himself. There is no inherent difference between an individual who has discovered their true self, satisfied the levels of the soul, and God. This is because the individual's "self" has merged with the "absolute Self," and God has come to know Himself through that person. In Christianity, Jesus Christ is known as the one who knows the "Father," and the Father knows Himself through the Son. This phenomenon is not limited to Jesus Christ alone; it can occur in any human being. As the Prophet of Islam stated, "One who knows oneself, knows their Lord."

is incongruous with the notion that two religions can represent two perceptions of the same Reality if one does not perceive the vision of reality to be consistent with Reality itself.

It is reasonable to pose the following question to Hick, given the nature of the Real or the *Noumenon*, which cannot be directly known, it is challenging to conceive of a model that could establish a correlation between the Real and its manifestations. In the cases where there are paradoxes among various religions, it becomes difficult to reconcile how Hick could establish a connection between the Real and its appearance in diverse religions. Specifically, how can the representations and manifestations of the Real in different traditions not be identical and, in certain instances, appear to contradict one another?

However, it is possible to counter this critique by asserting that the apparent contradictions and conflicts in religious doctrine may stem from our own misunderstandings of those beliefs. For instance, some Muslim theologians contend that the doctrines of the Trinity in Christianity and Monotheism in Islam are incompatible. However, by delving into Islamic and Christian mysticism and metaphysical traditions and interpreting these teachings correctly, some mystics and thinkers did not see a contradiction between them and compiled them together<sup>47</sup>. The inconsistency arises from a cursory and superficially incorrect grasp of the various tenets.

I intend to tackle this matter by presenting one of Nasr's concepts that may be beneficial to a certain extent. Nasr suggests that the paradox may be reconciled by examining it from various angles and "levels of knowing."<sup>48</sup> Thus, it can be argued that the resolution of the paradox depends on our understanding of certain religious teachings. Both Christian and

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<sup>47</sup> Aquinas' understanding of the Trinity is based on the relationships that exist within God, which are attributed to God's self-knowledge and love. This idea aligns with a long-standing theological tradition, particularly with the views of Augustine of Hippo. Aquinas believes that the Trinity reflects the same relationship of self-knowledge and love within God. The Father represents God, while the Son represents God's concept of himself or his self-knowledge, which proceeds from God. Similarly, Ibn Arabi influential Islamic mystic, wrote about the concept of threeness (*tathlith*) and the notion of the "three knowledges" in God. He writes:

My Beloved is three although He is one,  
even as the (three) Persons (of the Trinity) are made one Person in  
essence.

Reynold A. Nicholson, the translator of these lines, read in them and in their commentary supplied by Ibn 'Arabi an attempt at showing the uniformity of Christian Trinity and Islamic Unity (Shahzad, 2013)

<sup>48</sup> When Nasr talks about "levels of knowing," he means that people can reach different ways of understanding and perceiving as they try to learn more. These different ways of knowing don't always contradict each other. Instead, they build on each other and help people understand reality better. Nasr thinks that these different ways of knowing can be found in different religious and mystical traditions and that each gives a different view of reality. For example, he might say there is a difference between knowing God through religious doctrine and knowing God through direct mystical experience.

Islamic theologies do not fundamentally contradict each other in terms of describing God. The Absolute Reality is the sole absolute in all major religions, and God is believed to be infinite, timeless, boundless, and all-encompassing. Although the issue of reconciling the concepts of Trinity and Monotheism is complex and requires extensive analysis, including the presence of multiple sources from Islamic and Christian philosophy to demonstrate that the doctrine of Trinity is articulated with distinct terminology in Islam, such an in-depth examination is not necessary for our current purposes. In this instance, we will only focus on the following point to demonstrate that one of these apparent conflicts is not inherent and that Nasr's idea of "levels of knowledge" can resolve such contradictions.

To demonstrate the absence of contradiction between the Trinity and the Oneness, it is first necessary to provide a clear understanding of the concept of the Trinity in Christian philosophy. Additionally, it is crucial to establish that this teaching is present in other religious traditions and that the metaphysical truth of the Trinity extends beyond Christianity. The concept of the Trinity in Christianity can be seen as a reinterpretation of traditional monotheistic concepts and a philosophical interpretation of God's self-awareness, establishing an inherent link between God and Himself. This idea is also present in other religions, such as Islam's notion of the unity of "knower-known-knowledge" as espoused by Islamic metaphysicians. Moreover, Trinity can be perceived in other religious traditions as an acknowledgment that God is both transcendent and immanent. For instance, Buddhism's *Trikaya* or "three bodies of the Buddha," Taoism's "Three Pure Ones", Hinduism's unity of *Atman* and *Brahman*, Judaism's "*Ein sof*, *Memra*, and *Shekinah*" and to Plotinus's "the One, the Intellect, and the Soul". In this way, the metaphysical sense of the concept of the Trinity in Christianity bears significant similarities to these other religious traditions.

While a critic may argue that the Christian concept of the Trinity differs from the teachings mentioned above, however, it is important to recognize that various religions have recognized the "triune" aspect of God in different ways. It should be acknowledged that religions have gained intellectual insight and mystical experiences of this triune aspect of Reality, which may have slight variations in their descriptions. However, the universal acceptance of this teaching in its diverse forms and terminologies suggests that there must be an underlying truth about the Trinity.

But since the current master's thesis doesn't look at Nasr and Hick's views on how trinity and monotheism can be combined, it's not feasible to look at this debate in detail. In

short, the apparent contradictions can be reconciled through a comprehensive exploration of various religious teachings, which entails delving deeper into their fundamental principles and recognizing that certain tenets expressed in one tradition may manifest in differing forms and terminologies in other religions yet remain inherently synonymous. In addition, it is possible for a doctrine to be considered central, fundamental, and vital in one religion, like the Trinity in Christianity, but in other religions, the same truth may be expressed using different terminology and may only be revealed to some mystics, metaphysician, and sages, while remaining unknown to laypeople. It can be argued that the emphasis of these religions has been on different aspects or perspectives of the concept of Reality.

However, Hossein Nasr's approach to resolving the apparent conflict between Islamic and Christian teachings, such as the incarnation and the Trinity, involves adopting an epistemology that recognizes the validity of both perspectives. Nasr does not suggest accepting one party's version and rejecting the other. Rather, he argues that both Muslims and Christians would benefit from acknowledging that there are two equally valid perspectives on the same reality. In his view, this approach would allow for greater mutual understanding and respect between the two religions rather than perpetuating a sense of superiority or *exclusivity* on either side. He explains:

... A single reality can be seen in two different ways without causing what appears to the modern mind as logical contradictions. From the traditional philosophical point of view, it is possible for a single reality — especially for the order of Christ's final end— to be seen in two ways by two different world, or from two different religious perspectives, without there being an inner contradiction. It is modern Western philosophy that does not allow such a thing. By creating a one-to-one correspondence between a reality perceived and the knowledge thereof, while negating multiple levels or the hierarchy of beings, this philosophy denies the possibility that God in his infinite power and wisdom could create two major world communities holding two different views concerning the earthly end of Christ (Nasr, April 1987, p. 100).

In summary, critiques of Hick's theory on reality perception can be approached in various ways. For instance, the seeming contradictions between Islamic and Christian teachings, such as monotheism versus the Trinity, or the status and position of Christ, can be reconciled by recognizing that both provide valid perspectives on the same Ultimate Reality. Both understandings enable believers to access God and experience the divine in their lives, which is why both religions have produced numerous saints and sages through their traditions. As Nasr suggests that Muslims and Christians are essentially seeking the same thing and that Allah and Christ represent different manifestations of the same underlying Truth. Nasr

indicates that God has provided distinct paths to salvation for different people, which may appear incompatible at first glance but are ultimately consistent with one another. For both Muslims and Christians, the object of worship is the same Absolute Reality. Muslims and Christians can approach God through different ways reach to the same Reality. Therefore, Nasr believes that the variance between Christianity and Islam concerning Christ is founded on the different roles of Christ in the two religions, guiding people with distinct cultural and historical backgrounds toward salvation. Consequently, all religions fundamentally convey the same message inwardly but express it differently.

#### 4.4 Origins of Religion: A Human Interpretation or a Divine Manifestation?

*"Truth is one, sages call it by different names."* – Rig Veda

Drawing upon the preceding section (4.3), a conclusion can be inferred from their standpoint, resulting in another contrast in their viewpoints. One pivotal contrast between the two viewpoints pertains to Hick and Nasr's distinct interpretations of the evolution of religions. Hick regards religion as a human construct, contending that it arises when humans encounter the Real. According to Aslan, Hick emphasizes the human contribution to the development of religion, asserting that humans possess the capacity to create "the truth." (Aslan, 1998, p. 110). Despite dissenting with the perspectives of scholars such as Durkheim, Marx, Freud, Comte, and Weber, who view religion as a product of social, economic, or psychological factors, Hick regards religion as a human construct through *religious experiences*. He posits that the genesis of religion lies in *religious experience*, thus asserting that differences between religions should be explicated in terms of varying human responses to the Truth. Consequently, although Hick regards religion as a response to the Truth, in contrast to the aforementioned scholars who view it as a product of social, economic, or psychological factors, he still regards it as a "human reaction" shaped by human influence.

Thus, Hick believes different religions are "human responses" to *religious experience* and human understanding of their own experience and not God's response to human differences. Hick also does not espouse the notion that a singular, all-encompassing reality exists. Instead, he posits that the *noumenal* world is separate from the human world. Hick views religions as culturally shaped systems that allow people to engage with the transcendent.



In contrast, Nasr contends that truth emanates from a divine source, and humans must demonstrate subservience to this truth. It is not legitimate to strive towards constructing a notion of truth; instead, one should act as a "mirror" of this truth and reflect it accurately. Thus, Nasr's viewpoint endeavors to exalt the sanctified aspects of the religion while refraining from imposing anything onto the religious truth (Nasr, 1989, p. 191). Nasr's conceptualization of God is based on his manifestations in sacred texts through revelations. This viewpoint posits that God is an omnipotent, omniscient, and conscious entity responsible for creating everything in existence. He maintains that revelations, which entail God disclosing propositional truth in sacred scriptures, are accurate, objective, and not based on human interpretation (Ibid., 135-136).

Hick posits that the human ability to make sense of the immediate and ultimate environment depends on our efforts, utilizing various tools such as sense perception, philosophical reasoning, and *religious experience*. His philosophical system aims to provide a "found truth" within the context of the Real. In contrast, Nasr focuses on how to intellectually explain the revealed truth, for instance, as presented in the Quran, regarding the characteristics of God, his relationship with humanity and nature, and other assertions. According to Aslan, Nasr accepts these assertions as unequivocal facts and seeks to establish a metaphysical system that can explain their significance rather than attempting to establish "truth" through logical thinking (Aslan, 1998, p. 155). In this regard, the attribute of absoluteness is present in every facet of existing reality, and it is not just an interpretation of humans through *religious experiences*, as Hick suggests.

So, as outlined in preceding sections (3.3), Nasr's comprehension of reality is characterized by a comprehensive viewpoint, in which God, both as the ultimate and current Reality, is interconnected with all that exists. As previously discussed, Nasr adopts an approach not limited to materialistic analysis of the history of religions. Instead, he seeks to locate the origins of all religions in the divine source or *archetypal realm*. Religion and the world share a hierarchical structure that originates from the Absolute Truth and is rooted in the celestial sphere. He considers religion to be a supernatural revelation, with various religions representing the manifestation of the Absolute Truth or Divine origin, which is revealed through diverse revelations under the principles and order of the divine realm. Nasr maintains that a religion's sacred beliefs, rituals, and scriptures are sacred and inviolable because they constitute "divine responses" to the needs of human beings.

Based on my interpretation, Hick's perspective is characterized by "all religions, in general, are human creations and reaction to Divine Truth," which differs from Nasr, with the mental background that "all religions are divine manifestations and divine response to different cultures." To clarify, Hick asserts that humans play a role in shaping the structure and appearance of religions. Conversely, Nasr contends that religions have been molded by God and not by the will of humans. Hick's stance thus relegates religion to a cultural answer of diverse nations. On the other hand, Nasr advocates for supporting various religious traditions, seeing them as expressions of the Real that manifest in myriad ways. Hick explains religious differences as varying cultural and historical responses to the Real (*bottom-up approach*), while Nasr thinks that the variety of religious traditions is God's way of dealing with the complexity of humanity and explains them as distinct manifestations of the Real (*Top-down approach*).

In my perspective, both viewpoints capture an aspect of reality and can be reconciled. Undeniably, humans have acted as discoverers of various phenomena in our society, including art, laws, government, and religion. In this sense, religion can be viewed as an expression of humaneness. My stance is that humans discover the sacred, which is, in fact, manifested in the human mind. Thus, tradition represents the manifestation of the sacred or God in human culture, language, and thought. To grasp the essence of our traditions, one must interpret them and penetrate their mystical core by shedding their mythological shell. From my perspective, both Nasr's and Hick's perspectives are valid, as Hick asserts that religion is a human creation and, therefore, would not exist without human existence. This aligns with the notion that all aspects of human society, including culture, thought, and knowledge, are products of the human mind and language, leaving nothing outside of it. Hence, it is inevitable that religion is a human creation, supporting Hick's claim.

However, I contend that Nasr's perspective delves one level further. The sacred and Ultimate Reality are revealed in cosmic manifestations throughout history. From this viewpoint, humans themselves are mere expressions of the Ultimate Reality. Therefore, the sacred is made manifest in history and humans, with humanity serving as nothing more than a manifestation of this Ultimate Reality. Consequently, in a dynamic and dialectical process, the Ultimate Reality is revealed and apprehended by humans, who are nothing other than manifestations of Ultimate Reality.

Thus, both perspectives converge in the sense that humans are discoverers of the Ultimate Reality through their *religious experiences* and revelations while simultaneously being nothing more than manifestations of God on earth. Accordingly, religion is a product of human creation and, therefore, intrinsically human. Yet, it is simultaneously divine as humans ultimately manifest the Ultimate Reality.

## 5.0 Conclusion:

*"My heart has become capable of every form: it is a pasture for gazelles and a convent for Christian monks, and a temple for idols, and the pilgrim's Ka'bah, and the tables of the Torah and the book of the Quran. I follow the religion of Love: whatever way Love's camels take, that is my religion and my faith."* – Ibn Arabi

In conclusion, I would like to revisit my initial point and inquire about its significance. Is the topic at hand of importance? The answer is an unequivocal yes, as it carries immense weight. We exist as members of a global human community that is engaged in internal warfare. Numerous regions have been afflicted by violence where individuals, including women and children, are being slaughtered, with religion serving as both a catalyst and an amplifier of emotions. In societies characterized by fundamentalist theocratic beliefs, it is not uncommon for religious minorities to experience deprivation of their fundamental rights and to be subjected to oppression based on religious pretenses that lack validity. This is feasible because each faith has traditionally asserted its absolute claim to be the sole and ultimate true faith, with absolutes being capable of justifying any action. Presently, asserting the exceptional superiority of one's own faith only adds to the existing problem. How can two opposing absolutes coexist peacefully? Acknowledging the equal legitimacy of diverse faiths is paramount in resolving this conflict. In the words of the Catholic theologian Hans Kung, 'There will be no peace among the peoples of this world without peace among the world religions' (Musser & Sunderland, 2005, p. 1).

Additionally, I would assert that attaining genuine peace among world religions is unattainable as long as each faith perceives itself as inherently superior to all others. Therefore, interfaith dialogue must continue to grow in both size and scope. However, sustainable, and lasting peace will only be achievable through mutual acceptance and recognition of the world's religions as distinct yet equally valid relationships to the Ultimate Reality.

Thus, similar to Nasr's approach as a Muslim philosopher who validated pluralistic interpretation through Islamic traditions and teachings of the Quran, I believe Islamic scholars must undertake further efforts to recognize pluralistic components of their religious tradition. It is imperative to understand that Islam is a religion that has the capability of acknowledging the validity of other faiths. Concurrently, Christians must also acknowledge that there are various resemblances and realities, such as the manifestation of the Logos, that are prevalent in other religions, and to accept that accepting Christ and being a Christian does not need to render other religions as false or non-divine.

Comparing religions in terms of superiority or inferiority is unsuitable and violates religious freedom and diversity. Each person possesses the right to select their religion or belief system, and it is imperative to honor and acknowledge their choices without bias or discrimination. Additionally, it is crucial to acknowledge that diverse religions have distinct beliefs, practices, and cultural backgrounds that grant them significance and value to various individuals. Consequently, the academic community must emphasize the concept of religious pluralism. Regrettably, it is surprising that many scholars are still unaware of this concept, highlighting the need for increased awareness and education on this topic.

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