

EVALUATING WORLD RELIGION PARADIGM THROUGH THE IDEA OF ULTIMATE REALITY

Andi Alfian^{1*}

¹Center for Religious and Cross-cultural Studies (CRCS), Gadjah Mada University, andialfianx@gmail.com

*Corresponding Author



©2022 by the authors. Submitted for open access publication under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License-(CC-BY-SA) (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>)

DOI : <http://dx.doi.org/10.30983/it.v6i1.5537>

Submission: 07 May 2022

Revised: 06 June 2022

Published: 30 June 2022

Abstract

This study aims to evaluate whether the idea of ultimate reality in world religions contributes to the characteristics of the world religion paradigm, which is hierarchical cosmology or “subject-object cosmology.” Several research on this topic claims that one of the characteristics of the world religion paradigm is its hierarchical perspective. Discussing this issue is important to distinguish the world religions as the paradigm and the world religions as the most widely embraced religion. This study argues that the hierarchical perspective of the world religion paradigm can be rooted in the idea of ultimate reality, that there is a supreme, foremost, and most principal reality in the continuity of this universe, namely the supernatural or God. The hierarchical cosmology consists of three main domains: supernatural/God, culture/human, and nature. This study uses a literature study methodology, relying on books, journals, and texts related to research questions. This study finds that the world religion paradigm or hierarchical cosmology or “subject-object cosmology” is prominent, especially in Abrahamic religions such as Islam, Christianity, and Judaism, even though the concept of ultimate reality in these three religions is different.

Keywords: Cosmology; World Religions; Ultimate Reality; World Religion Paradigm.

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengevaluasi apakah gagasan tentang realitas tertinggi dalam agama-agama dunia turut berkontribusi membentuk karakteristik paradigma agama dunia, yaitu kosmologi hierarkis atau “kosmologi subjek-objek”. Beberapa penelitian tentang topik ini mengklaim bahwa salah satu karakteristik paradigma agama dunia adalah perspektifnya yang hierarkis. Membahas masalah ini penting untuk membedakan agama-agama dunia sebagai paradigma dan agama-agama dunia sebagai agama yang paling banyak dianut. Kajian ini berpendapat bahwa perspektif hierarkis paradigma agama dunia dapat berakar pada gagasan tentang realitas tertinggi, bahwa ada realitas tertinggi, utama, dan paling utama dalam kelangsungan alam semesta ini, yaitu supernatural atau Tuhan. Kosmologi hierarkis terdiri dari tiga domain utama: supernatural/Tuhan, budaya/manusia, dan alam. Penelitian ini menggunakan metodologi studi kepustakaan, dengan mengandalkan buku, jurnal, dan teks-teks yang berkaitan dengan pertanyaan-pertanyaan penelitian. Kajian ini menemukan bahwa paradigma agama dunia atau kosmologi hierarkis atau “kosmologi subjek-objek” menonjol, terutama dalam agama-agama Abrahamik seperti Islam, Kristen, dan Yudaisme, meskipun konsep realitas tertinggi dalam ketiga agama tersebut berbeda.

Kata Kunci: Kosmologi; Agama Dunia; Realitas Tertinggi; Paradigma Agama Dunia.

Background

Almost every world religions believe that there is an ultimate reality that is the basis of this life¹. The ultimate reality can be defined in

three main ways, first, ultimate reality as a personal being (a personal, loving God), second, ultimate reality as an impersonal being (the origin and destination of all things), and third, ultimate reality as the most fundamental truth or

¹ John Corrigan et al., *Jews, Christians, Muslims: A Comparative Introduction to Monotheistic Religions*, vol. 4 (Routledge, 2016); Bradley W. England, “Encyclopedia of

World Religions: Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Zen, Hinduism, Prehistoric & Primitive Religions” (New York: Octopus (in association with Phoenix), 1975).

principle of this universe². Although the ultimate reality is often claimed to be an eternal reality, does not change, and is the basis for all principles in this life, in reality, the concept of ultimate reality in world religions continues to change and develop with the times. In certain religions, for example, the concept of ultimate reality can be described in various forms and various interpretations³. This happens because religion is not born in a vacuum, religion—both religion as theory and religion as practice—will always be related to the context in which religion is practiced⁴.

Since religion is inseparable from the context in which religion is practiced, it must be seen as something dynamic. Diane L. Moore (2007) explains that there are three misconceptions about religion, one of which is the belief that religion is static and separate from historical development. Whereas, in reality, religion has always existed in a certain space and time and is constantly being interpreted and reinterpreted by people who believe⁵. Here, Moore mentions one case as an example, for example, the practice of slavery in a monotheistic religious tradition has been justified and rejected. Justification and denial are closely related to their social and historical context. That is, in a case, religion can have a different response depending on the social context. The concept of ultimate reality in world

religions has developed along with the development of the human perspective on life and the social reality around it.

This fluid change and development necessitate an attitude of suspicion, meaning that because religion is constantly changing its shape and position, we must be critical and try to understand it properly, especially because the discourse on world religions is very complex. For example, if we mention the word “world religions”, then what is pictured in our minds? In my opinion, world religions, from various readings that I have read, can mean two things: first, world religion means the religion that is most widely embraced by people in the world, and second, world religion means a point of view (paradigm)⁶.

Then, what do I mean here by “world religion paradigm”? The world religion paradigm that I refer to here is a point of view that has at least two indications. First, is the perspective that sees the universe as a hierarchical reality between supernatural or divinity, culture of humanity, and nature. The relationship between the three realities occurs in hierarchical stages, meaning that the supernatural aspect (divinity) is much more important than cultural aspect (humanity), and cultural aspect is much more important than natural aspect (nature). Second, the hierarchical perspective is universally applied as if that were

² Ernest Valea, “Comparative Religion - The Ultimate Reality in World Religions,” 2019, <https://www.comparativereligion.com/god.html>; Ernest Valea, *Buddhist-Christian Dialogue as Theological Exchange: An Orthodox Contribution to Comparative Theology* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: James Clarke & Co, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1cgf201>.

³ James C. Livingston, *Anatomy of the Sacred: An Introduction to Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1989); Andi Alfian, “Symbolic Violence in Religious Discourse in Indonesia,” in *International Conference on Social and Islamic Studies* (Proceedings of the International Conference on Social and Islamic Studies 2021, 2021), 205–14, <https://proceedings.uin-alauddin.ac.id/index.php/sis/SIS2021/paper/view/53>.

⁴ Ninian Smart, *The Sacred: An Anatomy of the World's Beliefs* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: Harper Collins Publishers, 1996).

⁵ Diane L. Moore, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy: A Cultural Studies Approach to the Study of Religion in Secondary Education, Religious Education* (United States of America: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), <https://doi.org/10.1080/00344080802427325>.

⁶ Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity, American Journal of Islam and Society* (United States of America: Stanford University Press, 2003); Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India, and “The Mystic East,” Orientalism and Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203006085>; Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions, Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*, vol. 20 (London: The University of Chicago Press, 2005); Christopher R. Cotter and David G. Robertson, eds., *After World Religions: Reconstructing Religious Studies* (London and New York: Routledge: Taylor & Francis Group, 2016).

the standard for any religion⁷. Because there is a level between these three aspects or elements or categories, because the supernatural/divinity aspect is the highest, natural aspect (nature) is often regarded as something lower than others.

With such characteristics, the world religion paradigm makes the practice of worshiping nature become an animistic and non-religious act⁸, when in fact; the local or customary people who act have acceptable reasons⁹. The politics of the world religion paradigm is that instead of understanding their point of view, the world religion paradigm has eliminated indigenous religions. For example, in indigenous religion theory, indigenous people see the universe as something equal (subject-subject relationship), they act to see nature as a subject as well, which is as important as itself. In other words, the indigenous religion paradigm emphasizes that being religious is being and interacting in “inter-subjective relations” and the commitment to being and interacting “inter-subjectively” must also be responsible, ethical, and reciprocity as the main principle in the indigenous religion paradigm¹⁰.

In essence, the world religion paradigm sees this universe as a hierarchical reality (hierarchical cosmology), while the indigenous religion paradigm sees this universe as a relational reality (interrelated cosmology)¹¹. These two perspectives are being studied and

discussed a lot in the current era, seeing that there are many negative implications of the world religion paradigm, especially to the perspective of religious people towards exploitative nature. The question now is what makes the world religions have such a hierarchical worldview? Is the world religion’s view of “ultimate reality” the key to understanding this hierarchical worldview like that? Do all the world’s religions have a view of “ultimate reality” as something hierarchical? Or does even this hierarchical-cosmology view only describe a particular religion which is then universally applied to all world religions?

To answer these questions, this research uses the literature study method. The data that became the answers to these questions were collected through the literature study data collection method, as the purpose of the literature study was to find data and answers to research questions¹².

Evaluating the Idea of Ultimate Reality

The idea of the highest reality is the center of almost all religions of the world. We can find this concept in every major world religion such as Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and even Hinduism. This is because ultimate reality is the idea of something “transcendent impersonal”, and this ultimate reality is the main source of all forms of existence in this universe¹³. For

⁷ Samsul Maarif, “Indigenous Religion Paradigm: Re-Interpreting Religious Practices of Indigenous People,” *Studies in Philosophy* 44 (2019): 103–21, <https://doi.org/http://doi.org/10.15068/00155157>.

⁸ Maarif.

⁹ Samsul Maarif, “Indigenous Religion Paradigm: Re-Interpreting Religious Practices of Indigenous People,” *Studies in Philosophy* 44 (2019): 103–21, <https://doi.org/http://doi.org/10.15068/00155157>.

¹⁰ Maarif; Samsul Maarif, “Dimensions of Religious Practice The Ammatoans of Sulawesi, Indonesia,” *Oriens* (Arizona State University, 2012), <https://doi.org/10.2307/1578909>; Samsul Maarif, “Ammatoan Indigenous Religion and Forest Conservation,” *Worldviews* 19, no. 2 (2015): 144–60, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15685357-0190200>.

¹¹ Maarif, “Indigenous Religion Paradigm: Re-Interpreting Religious Practices of Indigenous People”

Studies in Philosophy 44 (2019): 103–121, <http://doi.org/10.15068/00155157>; Michael Anthony Hart, “Indigenous Worldviews, Knowledge, and Research: The Development of an Indigenous Research Paradigm,” *Journal of Indigenous Voices in Social Work* 1, no. 1 (2010): 1–16, <http://hdl.handle.net/10125/15117>; James L. Cox, *From Primitive to Indigenous: The Academic Study of Indigenous Religions* (Burlington, USA: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2007).

¹² W Lawrence Neuman, *Social Research Methods: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*, 7th Revise (United States of America: Pearson Education Limited, 2014); Alan Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, Fourth (Oxford University Press, 2012); Earl Babbie, *The Practice of Social Research*, 14th ed., vol. 22 (Belmont: Cengage Learning, 2014).

¹³ Corrigan et al., *Jews, Christians, Muslims: A Comparative Introduction to Monotheistic Religions*.

example, in Hinduism, the idea of ultimate reality is well illustrated in the concept of *Brahman*, while in Taoism; it is well illustrated through *Primal Unity*¹⁴. Meanwhile, in the Buddhism and Hinduism traditions, the concept of *Atman* is known, which is also good enough to describe the concept of ultimate reality as the center of religious teachings. Similar characteristics can also be found in Confucianism and other world religions¹⁵.

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, ultimate reality means something that is the supreme, final, and fundamental power in all reality¹⁶. The idea of ultimate reality in world religions is seen in various forms¹⁷. Through this section of the discussion, we will see whether there are similarities and differences in the perspectives of the world religions towards the ultimate reality or to the “supreme, final, and fundamental”.

The Ultimate Reality in Judaism

Judaism is referred to as the earliest religion in the Abrahamic tradition, or the traditions of monotheistic religions, although some critics of history have called it political to claim that Judaism was the first in the Abrahamic tradition, as if Abrahamic religion is the justification, especially in critical historical readings. But we would not go into that, it is just additional critical reading. What I want to say is

that as an early religion in the monotheistic tradition, the “ultimate reality” in Judaism is manifested in the form of God, this is understood through God’s revelation¹⁸. The various religions of the world offer different meanings of ultimate reality but are in line with the version of Judaism that we will consider.

Jewish teachings come from the holy book Torah which contains a collection of religious teachings and so on, this book contains laws, teachings, and information about God, especially about ultimate reality. The ultimate reality in Judaism is understood as God. Most Jews believed that God could not be named or that no name could represent him¹⁹. However, there are also many Jews who believe that God has a name, and those names usually refer to the Jewish God, namely Y-H-W-H. In the Bible, for example, Y-H-W-H is referred to in various ways including the word *Elohim* (God), *El Elyon* (Supreme God), or *El Shaddai* which means “The All-Powerful God”²⁰.

The ultimate reality in Judaism refers to a personal God, who conveys information about himself through Jewish stories, which can be found in the Jewish holy book, namely the Torah. This holy book of the Torah later was also called the Old Testament by Christians. In this holy book, the Torah, God is described as the creator of the universe, who created the universe from nothing (*ex nihilo*). Why is it called

¹⁴ Solomon A. Nigosian, *World Religions: A Historical Approach* (Hampshire: Macmillan Publishers, 2007); James Miller, *Daoism: A Beginner’s Guide* (Oneworld Publications, 2003).

¹⁵ John L. Esposito, Darrell J. Fasching, and Todd T. Lewis, *World Religions Today* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.3366/swc.2007.13.3.301>; Nigosian, *World Religions: A Historical Approach*; Sébastien Billoud and Joël Thoraval, “The Contemporary Revival of Confucianism,” *China Perspectives* 2008, no. 3 (2008): 88–106, <https://doi.org/10.4000/chinaperspectives.4123>.

¹⁶ Merriam-Webster, “Ultimate Reality Definition & Meaning,” accessed March 27, 2022, [https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ultimate reality](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ultimate%20reality).

¹⁷ Peter Archer, “Religion 101: From Allah to Zen Buddhism, an Exploration of the Key People,

Practices, and Beliefs That Have Shaped the Religions of the World” (Adams Media, 2013); Huston Smith, *The World’s Religions* (Harper San Francisco, 1991), <https://doi.org/10.1177/001452468910000914>; Robert S. Ellwood and Gregory D. Alles, *The Encyclopedia of World Religions* (New York: Facts On File, Inc, 2007).

¹⁸ Paul Johnson, *A History of the Jews* (Harper Perennial, 1988), <https://doi.org/10.5840/thought194823443>; Lester L. Grabbe, *Introduction to Second Temple Judaism: History and Religion of the Jews in the Time of Nehemiah, the Maccabees, Hillel, and Jesus* (T&T Clark International, 2010).

¹⁹ Corrigan et al., *Jews, Christians, Muslims: A Comparative Introduction to Monotheistic Religions*.

²⁰ Esposito, Fasching, and Lewis, *World Religions Today*; England, “Encyclopedia of World Religions: Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Zen, Hinduism, Prehistoric & Primitive Religions.”

from nothing? Because before God created the universe, there was nothing other than him. In *Psalms*, it says:

In the beginning, you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. They will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment. Like clothing, you will change them and they will be discarded. But you remain the same, and your years will never end²¹.

What is interesting is, the Jews believe that the process of creation that occurs not because of God's need, but as a form of God's love, solely because of love²². This means that the reason God created this universe is his personal choice as God, not as a blind manifestation of his desires as contained in the notion of pantheism. Therefore, in Judaism, it is understood that God is the ultimate reality, which is higher than humans and the universe. Some religious historians claim that Judaism's concept of ultimate reality became the basis for later Abrahamic religions because Judaism is the oldest monotheistic religion and was then widely practiced²³. For this reason, the concept of ultimate reality in Judaism has similarities to other religious traditions such as Christianity and Islam, although the form is conveyed in different and religious ways the idea of ultimate reality is significantly similar.

The Ultimate Reality in Christianity

As in Judaism, the concept of ultimate reality in Christianity also refers to God,

however, the difference is, that God in Christianity is reflected in a person and a trinity. There is God the Father, there is God the Son, and there is God the Holy Spirit²⁴. These three have no beginning and no origin. The interesting thing is that this trinity of God is not understood as a triple God or tri-theism. But how is this Holy Trinity understood? Christians believe that there is no great or ultimate reality other than these three realities: *the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit*²⁵. Apart from that, they also believe that this reality is integrated and inseparable, nor is it stratified as is the case in Hinduism, which recognizes that Brahman is superior to other gods. In Christianity, the ultimate impersonal reality is embodied in the person of the holiest Trinity for love. That embodiment is expressed through love, omnipotence, and omniscience.

The concept of ultimate reality depicted in the Holy Trinity can be interpreted as a form of the perfect fellowship of love. For example, when the Apostle John states that "*God is love*", this is interpreted as expressing the ultimate unity of the fellowship of three persons. That is, not as a primordial expression that God is abstract-quality love, but God is love, which exists not for itself but others in the same bond of love. All three manifest one thing intertwined, all three are manifestations of aspects of the absolute and impersonal God as in Isaiah 44.6: "*I am the first and I am the last; apart from me there is no God*"²⁶.

In Christianity, it is believed that God created the universe, as in the Bible Genesis 1:2-

²¹ This verse is found in Psalm 102, p 25-27, see more at Adele Berlin, Marc Zvi Brettler, and Michael Fishbane, *The Jewish Study Bible: Featuring The Jewish Publication Society TANAKH Translation* (United States of America: Oxford University Press, 2004).

²² The Jewish Publication Society of America, *Torah: The Five Books of Moses* (Illinois, USA: VARDA Books, 2001).

²³ Grabbe, *Introduction to Second Temple Judaism: History and Religion of the Jews in the Time of Nehemiah, the Maccabees, Hillel, and Jesus*; Corrigan et al., *Jews, Christians, Muslims: A Comparative Introduction to Monotheistic Religions*.

²⁴ Valea, "Comparative Religion - The Ultimate Reality in World Religions."

²⁵ Corrigan et al., *Jews, Christians, Muslims: A Comparative Introduction to Monotheistic Religions*; Ellwood and Alles, *The Encyclopedia of World Religions*; England, "Encyclopedia of World Religions: Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Zen, Hinduism, Prehistoric & Primitive Religions."

²⁶ Benjamin Phillips et al., *The Bible Book (Big Ideas Simply Explained)* (Dorling Kindersley, 2018).

31. The process of creating this universe took 6 days starting from the creation of the earth, sky, land, oceans, plants, animals, and humans²⁷. From this, we can understand that the cosmology of Christianity is hierarchical. God created nature and humans. Furthermore, humans in Christianity are given a higher place than nature. This is seen in the Bible, Genesis 1:29, which states: “Behold, I give you every herb that has seed on all the earth and every tree that bears fruit with seed”. Although the context of the word is that humans can live through nature, there are indications that nature is an element of fulfilling human needs. Thus, such a cosmological perspective creates a hierarchy, that God is higher than humans, while humans are higher than nature and so on.

The Ultimate Reality in Islam

In Islam, the concept of ultimate reality refers to one God, so Islam is also called monotheistic. That is, Muslims believe in one God, which is the foundation and most important aspect of Islam. God, in Islam, is the God who governs all this universe, creates the universe, gives life to humans, and provides sustenance and everything. Even in the worship of Muslims, it is called for that the life and death of Muslims are for God. Everything comes from God and returns to him. Islam adheres to one God which it refers to as Allah and recognizes Muhammad as a prophet, the messenger of God²⁸. In the 112th surah, *Al-Ikhlâs*, there is a verse that states that God is one:

Say, He is God, the One! God, the eternally Besought of all! He neither begets nor was

*begotten. And there is none comparable to Him*²⁹.

The teachings of Islam are mainly sourced from its holy book, namely the Koran or Qur’an³⁰. Apart from the Qur’an, Islamic teachings are perfected, meaning that the explanation is continued, through the explanation of the Hadith of the prophet Muhammad. So, if there is a lack of clarity in the teachings of the Qur’an, then the Hadith can clarify or help to get further information about the teachings. The Qur’an, as Muslims believe, is a book that was revealed by God through the intermediary of the angel Gabriel to Muhammad, which was then conveyed by Muhammad to the Arab community at that time³¹. God’s words were written and recorded as holy books. While the Hadith are the words, deeds, statutes, and approvals carried out by the Prophet Muhammad during his life. Hadith becomes important to explain many things that are not specifically explained in the Qur’an.

In the matter of ultimate reality, Muslims believe that the universe was created by God from nothing. Then, one day it will end, or experience the end of the universe. In the life of this universe, humans are given the trust to manage this universe. In the Qur’an, for example, it is stated that humans on this earth were created to be “caliphs” or leaders of the universe³². This verse is often interpreted that humans are the regulators of this universe, and nature is the one who is governed. This perspective gives birth to the exploitation of the universe as an object for the satisfaction of human life. Although there are a small number of Muslims who try to interpret such verses to

²⁷ Kevin Vanhoozer, *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (North America: Baker Book House Company, 2005), <https://doi.org/10.1177/004056390606700408>.

²⁸ Tim Winter, *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology (Cambridge Companions to Religion)*, ed. Tim Winter (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

²⁹ This verse is contained in the Qur’an Surah Al-Ikhlâs, read more at Kementrian Agama RI, *Al-Quran*

Tajwid Dan Terjemahnya, Terj. Lajnah Pentashihan Mushaf Al-Quran (Bandung: Syaamil Quran, 2010).

³⁰ Kementrian Agama RI.

³¹ Todd Lawson, *Reason and Inspiration in Islam: Theology, Philosophy and Mysticism in Muslim Thought* (London, New York: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 2006).

³² Sabine Schmidtke, *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology* (Oxford University Press, 2016).

be more friendly to nature, in reality, Muslims, especially in modern life, have become very anthropocentric, sometimes even theocentric.

Both anthropocentric and theocentric Muslims are very hierarchical, that God is the ultimate reality, and then humans are representatives of God on earth, who regulates and maintains nature for their benefit, and after humans, then nature universe. Such levels represent the hierarchical character of the “world religion paradigm”. Although, in Islam itself, there are many different interpretations of the teachings contained in it.

The Ultimate Reality in Hinduism

Hinduism is a religion that adheres to many gods, some academics-researchers-writers say that Hinduism is a monotheistic religion; most others say that Hinduism is not a monotheistic religion, but henotheism or polytheism³³. However, if we observe and explore carefully the Hinduism view of ultimate reality, we will find three main features. First, the concept of ultimate reality is found in ancient *Vedic* religions, including *Vaishnavism* and *Shaivism* (this concept states that there are many gods in Hinduism, but one is higher than the other). Second, the concept of ultimate reality in the perspective of pantheism is contained in the *Upanishads* and *Vedanta* (this concept states that ultimate reality is an impersonal transcendent being)³⁴. Third, is the concept of ultimate reality in *Samkhya* and *Yoga Darshana Patanjali* (this concept recognizes that there are two fundamental realities, so it is also called dualistic ultimate reality)³⁵.

In Hinduism, there are four Vedas, namely *Rig-Veda*, *Yajur-Veda*, *Sama-Veda*, and

*Atharva-Veda*³⁶. These four holy books contain hymns that represent gods, works of gods, and praises addressed to gods through rituals performed. There are many gods, but in general, in the four *Vedas*, there are indications that the god *Varuna* is superior to the other gods³⁷. In some of those books, there are many stories about the god *Varuna*, such as the one below which illustrates how *Varuna* has a hand in human affairs, and that the god *Varuna* can pay vengeance for sins and diseases to humans who violate moral laws:

*O, Varuna, what was my chief transgression. That thou wouldst slay a friend who sings thy praises? Tell me, God undecieved and sovereign, guiltless. Would I appease thee then with adoration?*³⁸

What I want to say in this first part is, that in the four Vedas, we find that the concept of ultimate reality can be seen in many gods, but in certain scriptures, there is one God who is superior to the others. While in the second part, the ultimate reality is seen from the *Upanishads* and *Vedanta*, that the highest reality is *Brahman*. *Brahman* does not refer to male or female, even impersonal. *Brahman* is a form of action (physical) and moral (spiritual). Meanwhile, the third ultimate reality concept is seen in *Samkhya* and *Yoga Darshana Patanjali*. The concept of ultimate reality recognizes that there are two main, fundamental realities, namely *Purusha* (equivalent to atman) and *Prakriti* (primordial substance). Thus, this concept is also known as dualistic-ultimate-reality.

The Ultimate Reality in Buddhism

There are two main sects of Buddhism known to this day: (1) Theravada, also known as

³³ Martin Ramstedt, *Hinduism in Modern Indonesia*, ed. Martin Ramstedt (USA & Canada: Routledge, 2004).

³⁴ Canute T. Benedict, *One God In One Man* (AuthorHouse, 2007).

³⁵ Ellwood and Alles, *The Encyclopedia of World Religions*; England, “Encyclopedia of World Religions: Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Zen, Hinduism, Prehistoric & Primitive Religions.”

³⁶ Lewis M. Hopfe, Mark R. Woodward, and Brett Hendrickson, *Religion of the World* (New York: Pearson, 2016).

³⁷ Hopfe, Woodward, and Hendrickson.

³⁸ Look at Rig Veda 7, 86, 4, and more at Bibek Debroy and Dipavali Debroy, *The Rig Veda (Great Epics of India)* (UK & USA: Books For All / Low Price Publ., 2016).

the conservative sect, and (2) the Mahayana sect, also known as the liberal sect³⁹. The Theravada sect claims that what they practice to this day has not changed, including their concept of ultimate reality. This sect believes that there is no personal god, no spiritual or material substance in this world⁴⁰. What exists in this world is nothing but the existence of reality itself. What we see does not originate from the ultimate reality like *Brahman* in Hinduism, but is the result of functionally interdependent existences⁴¹.

The world exists because of causal actions, all things are produced by causal actions and all beings are governed and bound by causal actions. They are fixed like the rolling wheel of a cart, fixed by the pin of its axle shaft⁴².

Various references state that Buddha did not worship gods, that gods did not represent morality, and that Gods did not give happiness. The ultimate reality in Buddhism is the transcendent truth, which governs nature and life, as described in Buddhaghosa, Visuddhi Magga 16:

There is grief but no suffering. There is no doer though there is action. There is quietude but none tranquil. There is the path but none walks upon the path⁴³.

The second sect is Mahayana; this sect sees that the ultimate reality is the truth of emptiness. Many of the rituals developed by this second sect are based on the doctrine of the truth of emptiness, which more or less sees that emptiness is inherent in the physical, mental, and in the doctrine itself. This doctrine asserts

that the pinnacle of achievement is self-emptying. In addition, these two sects of Buddhism have taught that everything in the universe is related. So, what we do to an object or an entity will have an impact on ourselves as well. In its concept of ultimate reality, Buddhism is very different from Hinduism, which still believes in a hierarchical God.

The Ultimate Reality in Confucianism

Confucianism believes that the ultimate reality is a moral law⁴⁴. The moral law is a universal principle of this life and can be found in every aspect of human beings and this universal life. However, moral law does not mean personal life; it always means a harmonious social relationship.

There is no place in the highest heavens above or in the deepest waters below where the moral law is not to be found⁴⁵.

The main concern that Confucianism places most emphasis on in its teachings is the question of “how to be human” in the right way, about the moral cultivation of man⁴⁶. One way is through rituals. Rituals here can be interpreted as a way of behaving. Rituals are not only practices carried out in places of worship, for example, but are also carried out in all aspects of human life, including politics. For example, in politics, ritual, for Confucius, is the way or way a country is governed. The state will be good and just if the state is run based on good and right rituals. For example, there is a teaching that goes something like this: “*Guide*

³⁹ Valea, “Comparative Religion - The Ultimate Reality in World Religions”; Valea, *Buddhist-Christian Dialogue as Theological Exchange: An Orthodox Contribution to Comparative Theology*.

⁴⁰ Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics: Foundations, Values, and Issues* (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

⁴¹ Donald K Swearer, *The Buddhist World of Southeast Asia* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010).

⁴² See in the Sutta-Nipata, p. 654, and at H. Saddhatissa, *The Sutta-Nipata: A New Translation from the Pali Canon* (London and New York: Routledge: Taylor & Francis Group, 2013).

⁴³ Read at Visuddhi Magga 16 and also at Valea, “Comparative Religion - The Ultimate Reality in World Religions.”

⁴⁴ Rodney L. Taylor, *Religions of the World: Confucianism* (United States of America: Chelsea House Publishers, 2004).

⁴⁵ Doctrine of the Mean, p. 12, read more at Confucius, *Confucian Analects, The Great Learning & The Doctrine of the Mean* (United States of America: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2016).

⁴⁶ Ruth H. Chang, “Understanding Di and Tian: Deity and Heaven from Shang to Tang Dynasties,” *Sino-Platonic Papers*, no. 108 (2000).

them with benevolence, maintain them according to ritual, and they will, apart from having shame, correct themselves”⁴⁷ In general, Confucianism pays a lot of attention to how to live as a social being. Confucianism is closer to a philosophy than a religion, although, in Indonesia, Confucianism or Confucianism is considered a religion because it can accommodate Chinese people or people belonging to the Chinese family in one religious identity and is recognized as a religion⁴⁸, even though the number is somewhat smaller than the world religions which others such as Islam and Christianity. In short, Confucianism also has a divine concept as it is known as T'ien or Tian.

The Ultimate Reality in Daoism

The concept of ultimate reality in Daoism can be traced from Lao Tse's notes in his important book, namely the *Tao-te Ching*. In the book, it is explained that ultimate reality is something that is the principle of this universe. Lao Tse referred to it as *Tao*. For example, in the book, he wrote:

*There was something undifferentiated and yet complete, which existed before heaven and earth. Soundless and formless, it depends on nothing and does not change. It operates everywhere and is free from danger. It may be considered the mother of the universe. I do not know its name; I call it Tao.*⁴⁹

As in other Chinese religious traditions, *Tao* also has the belief that two principles form the basis of life in this universe. These two principles are mutually opposite and complementary, namely *Yin* and *Yang*. *Yin* is the principle of women, darkness, evil, etc., while *Yang* is the principle of man, enlightenment, light, etc.⁵⁰ Although in some readings it is

stated that the interpretation of *Yin* and *Yang* cannot be related to gender, both can only be interpreted as the most principle elements of the universe and life⁵¹.

The two principles of *Yin* and *Yang* are then dialectical so that the universe operates so that there is night and day, life and death, happiness and willing, hot and cold, and so on. Belief in gods too, in Taoism, is an integral part of *Yin* and *Yang*.⁵² There are several names of Gods who are believed to be the God-Emperor of Heaven (*Yu-Huang*), God of the First Headmaster (*Yuan-Shis Tien-Tsun*), and God of the Pure (*San-Ch'ing*), and other gods⁵³. But what is interesting about the teachings of Taoism is that it prioritizes balance, both between humans and the universe. Thus, according to Taoism, being religious is “interconnected” with the natural surroundings. Taoism believes that *Tao* and the universe are the places of ultimate reality, so interactions with the natural surroundings should be prioritized and guarded.

Conclusion

The idea of “ultimate reality” is the most fundamental in almost every world religion. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the foundation of the world's religions is the idea of the ultimate reality, the reality that is the motivation and goal of every believer. This highest reality is the guide for human existence on this earth. In the evaluation above, it is found that Islam and Judaism practice strict monotheism, while Christianity, although also believes in monotheism, is in a trinity form. However, the three religions discussed in the first part still believe in the ultimate reality which is depicted in one God. Meanwhile, in world religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism,

⁴⁷ Read also Chang.

⁴⁸ Evi Lina Sutrisno, “Negotiating the Confucian Religion in Indonesia: Invention, Resilience and Revival (1900 – 2010)” (University of Washington, 2018).

⁴⁹ Lao Tzu and John Minford, *Tao Te Ching: The Essential Translation of the Ancient Chinese Book of the Tao* (Viking, 2018).

⁵⁰ Miller, *Daoism: A Beginner's Guide*.

⁵¹ Catherine Despeux and Livia Kohn, *Women in Daoism* (Three Pine Press, 2005).

⁵² Valea, “Comparative Religion - The Ultimate Reality in World Religions.”

⁵³ Valea.

Confucianism, and Daoism, there are also similarities but their perspective on ultimate reality is far more complex.

For example, in Hinduism, it is believed that many gods are the ultimate reality, but in its interpretation, certain gods are higher than other gods, namely Brahman. In contrast to that, Buddhism even rejects that there is one God who is the highest reality, according to Buddha, trying to escape from a life full of suffering is the highest reality. The Buddha's view of nature is also very important. For example, through his doctrine of Karma, human treatment of the universe will return to humans. While Confucianism emphasizes more aspects of human social life than ritualistic life. Then, Daoism, as we have seen, has teachings that place great emphasis on the relationship with the universe, and the nature around us. Through the idea of ultimate reality, Daoism teaches us to be passive and to guard others against destructive active actions.

This evaluation found that the world's religions have a hierarchical characteristic, seeing the universe as the product of the "ultimate reality". God is the essence and the others are manifestations of God. However, there are also some features of some religions that are not, such as Buddhism and Daoism for example. Both are closer to the perspective of the "indigenous religion paradigm" which emphasizes aspects of inter-relationship, the interrelation between one another. This aspect is also important in the indigenous religion paradigm. Therefore, I conclude that the "world religion paradigm" is political, only representing certain religions.

In short, by exploring the idea of ultimate reality in several religions, this study contributes to providing an evaluation as well as an illustration that religion is basically interpretative, dynamic, and contextual. The idea of the ultimate reality in one condition can be interpreted hierarchically and from another perspective, it can be interpreted in an

egalitarian or intersubjective-relational way that is more equal. As we have seen, this study presents a fundamental picture of the notion of ultimate reality that can be explored further in a more specific context.

References

- Archer, Peter. "Religion 101: From Allah to Zen Buddhism, an Exploration of the Key People, Practices, and Beliefs That Have Shaped the Religions of the World." Adams Media, 2013.
- Asad, Talal. *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*. American Journal of Islam and Society. United States of America: Stanford University Press, 2003.
- Babbie, Earl. *The Practice of Social Research*. 14th ed. Vol. 22. Belmont: Cengage Learning, 2014.
- Benedict, Canute T. *One God In One Man*. AuthorHouse, 2007.
- Berlin, Adele, Marc Zvi Brettler, and Michael Fishbane. *The Jewish Study Bible: Featuring The Jewish Publication Society TANAKH Translation*. United States of America: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Billioud, Sébastien, and Joël Thoraval. "The Contemporary Revival of Confucianism." *China Perspectives* 2008, no. 3 (2008): 88–106.
<https://doi.org/10.4000/chinaperspectives.4123>.
- Bryman, Alan. *Social Research Methods*. Fourth. Oxford University Press, 2012.
- Chang, Ruth H. "Understanding Di and Tian: Deity and Heaven from Shang to Tang Dynasties." *Sino-Platonic Papers*, no. 108 (2000).
- Confucius. *Confucian Analects, The Great Learning & The Doctrine of the Mean*. United States of America: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2016.
- Corrigan, John, Frederick M. Denny, Carlos M. N. Eire, and Martin S. Jaffee. *Jews, Christians, Muslims: A Comparative Introduction to Monotheistic Religions*. Vol. 4.

- Routledge, 2016.
- Cotter, Christopher R., and David G. Robertson, eds. *After World Religions: Reconstructing Religious Studies*. London and New York: Routledge: Taylor & Francis Group, 2016.
- Cox, James L. *From Primitive to Indigenous: The Academic Study of Indigenous Religions*. Burlington, USA: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2007.
- Debroy, Bibek, and Dipavali Debroy. *The Rig Veda (Great Epics of India)*. UK & USA: Books For All / Low Price Publ., 2016.
- Despeux, Catherine, and Livia Kohn. *Women in Daoism*. Three Pine Press, 2005.
- Ellwood, Robert S., and Gregory D. Alles. *The Encyclopedia of World Religions*. New York: Facts On File, Inc, 2007.
- England, Bradley W. "Encyclopedia of World Religions: Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Zen, Hinduism, Prehistoric & Primitive Religions." New York: Octopus (in association with Phoenix), 1975.
- Esposito, John L., Darrell J. Fasching, and Todd T. Lewis. *World Religions Today*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.3366/swc.2007.13.3.301>.
- Grabbe, Lester L. *Introduction to Second Temple Judaism: History and Religion of the Jews in the Time of Nehemiah, the Maccabees, Hillel, and Jesus*. T&T Clark International, 2010.
- Hart, Michael Anthony. "Indigenous Worldviews, Knowledge, and Research: The Development of an Indigenous Research Paradigm." *Journal of Indigenous Voices in Social Work* 1, no. 1 (2010): 1–16.
- Harvey, Peter. *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics: Foundations, Values, and Issues*. United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- Hopfe, Lewis M., Mark R. Woodward, and Brett Hendrickson. *Religion of the World*. New York: Pearson, 2016.
- Johnson, Paul. *A History of the Jews*. Harper Perennial, 1988.
- <https://doi.org/10.5840/thought194823443>.
- Kementrian Agama RI. *Al-Quran Tajwid Dan Terjemahnya, Terj. Lajnah Pentashihan Mushaf Al-Quran*. Bandung: Syaamil Quran, 2010.
- King, Richard. *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India, and "The Mystic East."* *Orientalism and Religion*. New York: Routledge, 2013. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203006085>.
- Lawson, Todd. *Reason and Inspiration in Islam: Theology, Philosophy and Mysticism in Muslim Thought*. London, New York: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 2006.
- Livingston, James C. *Anatomy of the Sacred: An Introduction to Religion*. New York: Macmillan, 1989.
- Maarif, Samsul. "Ammatoan Indigenous Religion and Forest Conservation." *Worldviews* 19, no. 2 (2015): 144–60. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15685357-0190200>.
- . "Dimensions of Religious Practice The Ammatoans of Sulawesi, Indonesia." *Oriens*. Arizona State University, 2012. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1578909>.
- . "Indigenous Religion Paradigm: Re-Interpreting Religious Practices of Indigenous People." *Studies in Philosophy* 44 (2019): 103–21. <https://doi.org/http://doi.org/10.15068/00155157>.
- Masuzawa, Tomoko. *The Invention of World Religions. Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*. Vol. 20. London: The University of Chicago Press, 2005.
- Merriam-Webster. "Ultimate Reality Definition & Meaning." Accessed March 27, 2022. [https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ultimate reality](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ultimate%20reality).
- Miller, James. *Daoism: A Beginner's Guide*. Oneworld Publications, 2003.
- Moore, Diane L. *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy: A Cultural Studies Approach to the Study of Religion in Secondary Education*. *Religious Education*. United States of America: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

- <https://doi.org/10.1080/00344080802427325>.
- Neuman, W Lawrence. *Social Research Methods: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*. 7th Revise. United States of America: Pearson Education Limited, 2014.
- Nigosian, Solomon A. *World Religions: A Historical Approach*. Hampshire: Macmillan Publishers, 2007.
- Phillips, Benjamin, Tammi J. Schneider, Shelley L. Birdsong, Andrew Kerr-Jarret, Guy Croton, Nicholas PUmphrey, and Andrew Stobart. *The Bible Book (Big Ideas Simply Explained)*. Dorling Kindersley, 2018.
- Ramstedt, Martin. *Hinduism in Modern Indonesia*. Edited by Martin Ramstedt. USA & Canada: Routledge, 2004.
- Saddhatissa, H. *The Sutta-Nipata: A New Translation from the Pali Canon*. London and New York: Routledge: Taylor & Francis Group, 2013.
- Schmidtke, Sabine. *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology*. Oxford University Press, 2016.
- Smith, Huston. *The World's Religions*. Harper San Francisco, 1991. <https://doi.org/10.1177/001452468910000914>.
- Resilience and Revival (1900 – 2010).” University of Washington, 2018.
- Swearer, Donald K. *The Buddhist World of Southeast Asia*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010.
- Taylor, Rodney L. *Religions of the World: Confusianism*. United States of America: Chelsea House Publishers, 2004.
- The Jewish Publication Society of America. *Torah: The Five Books of Moses*. Illinois, USA: Varda Books, 2001.
- Tzu, Lao, and John Minford. *Tao Te Ching: The Essential Translation of the Ancient Chinese Book of the Tao*. Viking, 2018.
- Valea, Ernest. *Buddhist-Christian Dialogue as Theological Exchange: An Orthodox Contribution to Comparative Theology*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: James Clarke & Co, 2015. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1cgf201>.
- . “Comparative Religion - The Ultimate Reality in World Religions,” 2019. <https://www.comparativereligion.com/god.html>.
- Vanhoozer, Kevin. *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*. North America: Baker Book House Company, 2005. <https://doi.org/10.1177/004056390606700408>.
- Winter, Tim. *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology (Cambridge Companions to Religion)*. Edited by Tim Winter. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

Sutrisno, Evi Lina. “Negotiating the Confucian Religion in Indonesia: Invention,