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Beyond Pluralism: Esoteric Unity of Religions and the Ontological Reframing of Comparative Theology

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Abstract

This article examines the epistemological limitations of modern religious pluralism in comparative theology and proposes perennial philosophy as a metaphysical alternative. While pluralism has contributed to reducing interreligious conflict through ethical convergence and epistemic egalitarianism, it often suspends ontological questions concerning the nature of ultimate reality. This study argues that such an approach risks reducing religious diversity to symbolic or moral variations, thereby neglecting the metaphysical depth of religious traditions. By employing a qualitative conceptual analysis, this research engages the perennial framework articulated by Frithjof Schuon and Seyyed Hossein Nasr, particularly the distinction between esoteric unity and exoteric diversity. It demonstrates that religious plurality can be understood not as epistemic relativism, but as a differentiated manifestation of a single transcendent reality. In this view, doctrinal, ritual, and symbolic differences reflect necessary expressions of the same metaphysical principle rather than contradictions in ultimate truth.
The findings suggest that perennial philosophy offers a critical intervention in contemporary comparative theology by reintroducing metaphysical reflection into the study of religious diversity. It provides a conceptual framework that transcends both exclusivism and relativistic pluralism, enabling a more integrative understanding of religious plurality while preserving theological distinctiveness.

Keywords : Perennial Philosophy; Religious Pluralism; Comparative Theology; Transcendent Unity; Religious Diversity.

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Introduction

Exclusivism and pluralism are the two basic stances that dominate the discussion of religious variety in modern theological discourse. Exclusivism upholds the idea that one religious tradition is the most authoritative or comprehensive truth; as a result, other religions are viewed as having insufficient validity to describe ultimate reality(Hick, 2006). This stance upholds doctrinal coherence and the limits of religious identity and is based on a deep internal theological commitment (Leontiev, 2024).

On the contrary, pluralism emerged as a response to the tensions generated by those exclusive claims. This approach emphasizes that religious traditions have equal value and are equally oriented toward goals considered good, both in terms of salvation and ethics (Objantoro, 2018). By shifting the focus from truth claims to coexistence and mutual recognition, pluralism plays an important role in reducing interreligious conflict and building a more inclusive space for dialog.

Nevertheless, these two approaches operate with different orientations. Exclusivism seeks to maintain the theological integrity of a tradition, while pluralism seeks to create social harmony in the context of diversity. This difference in orientation often causes discourse about religion to become trapped in the dilemma between firmly maintaining truth claims or reducing differences to achieve equality. In many cases, greater attention is given to the social implications of diversity rather than to the conceptual structures underlying the religious claims themselves (Hick, 2006).

In this context, pluralism has become the most dominant position in contemporary theological discourse, particularly because of its ability to provide a normative framework for coexistence in multi-religious societies (Amani et al., 2024). However, this dominance also means that pluralism is rarely questioned deeply at the epistemological level. If exclusivism can be easily criticized for its restrictive nature, pluralism is often accepted as a solution without critical analysis of the underlying conceptual assumptions.

Therefore, the issue of religious diversity in the contemporary context cannot be understood merely as a problem of social relations between traditions, but also as an epistemological issue regarding how religious truth is constructed and positioned. In this framework, pluralism needs to be examined further, not merely as a normative solution, but as a configuration of thot that shapes the way religions are understood within the modern horizon.

Modern religious pluralism is not merely a theological position, but is also rooted in a particular epistemological configuration concerning knowledge, truth, and the limits of human understanding of reality. One of its basic assumptions is that truth claims across religions possess equal epistemic status. Within this framework, religious traditions are understood as different responses to the same transcendent reality, such that none can claim absolute cognitive superiority. Doctrinal differences are no longer interpreted as ontological contradictions, but rather as variations of perspective shaped by their respective historical and cultural contexts.

This epistemological configuration cannot be separated from the influence of post-Kantian thought, which sharply distinguishes between reality in itself (noumenon) and reality as understood by human beings (phenomenon) (Minazzi, 2022). Within this horizon, human knowledge is always bound by cognitive categories and empirical experience, making direct claims about transcendent reality problematic(Atkinson, 2019). The implications for modern theology are significant: religious doctrines are no longer understood as objective descriptions of ultimate reality, but as symbolic expressions of religious experience that are contextual in nature (Widiyaningtyas et al., 2024).

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This tendency is clearly evident in the thought of pluralist figures such as John Hick, who proposed the concept of "the Real" as a transcendent reality that surpasses all religious representations. Nevertheless, this Reality is understood in an apophatic sense, unknowable in itself and only accessible through the symbolic constructions of the religions. This strategy allows for the recognition of soteriological equality, but at the same time postpones any firm affirmation regarding the concrete ontological structure of that Reality. In a more practical form, Paul Knitter's approach even shifts the focus of pluralism toward interreligious ethical collaboration, such that questions concerning the nature of Ultimate Reality are no longer central to theological reflection (Burley & Burley mmburley, n.d.).

In this context, modern pluralism tends to develop what may be called an *ontological silence*: not an explicit rejection of metaphysics, but rather a systematic suspension of ontological inquiry in order to preserve space for dialogue and coexistence. The unity of religions is thus more easily formulated at the ethical level as a shared moral orientation than at the metaphysical level concerning the structure of reality itself (Cornille, 2024). Consequently, doctrinal differences, which fundamentally contain strong ontological claims, tend to be reduced to symbolic or cultural expressions relative to the perspectives of each tradition.

Modern pluralism not only offers a model for interreligious relations, but also shapes a particular way of understanding religious truth. By prioritizing epistemic equality and caution toward metaphysical claims, pluralism creates an inclusive space for dialogue, yet at the same time limits the exploration of the ontological dimension of religion (Cornille, n.d.). Therefore, there arises a need to reexamine these epistemological assumptions by considering an alternative framework that does not suspend, but rather integrates, metaphysical questions into the understanding of religious plurality. In this context, perennial philosophy is positioned not as a variant of pluralism or a form of religious relativism, but as a critique of the epistemological foundations of modern pluralism.

In contrast to pluralism, which emphasizes epistemic equality among traditions, perennial philosophy proposes a layered ontological structure in which the unity of religions lies in a transcendent metaphysical principle, rather than in doctrinal similarity (Huxly, 1947). From this perspective, plurality is understood as differentiated expressions of the same underlying reality.

Accordingly, this article aims to reconstruct the understanding of religious plurality through the esoteric–exoteric distinction, in order to integrate ontological unity and phenomenological diversity without reducing religious truth to epistemic relativism, while also shifting the focus of comparative theology from ethical coexistence toward reflection on the structure of religious reality.

Literature Review

From Exclusivism to Ethical Pluralism

The development of modern religious pluralism did not emerge suddenly, but is the result of a long process within theological reflection on religious diversity (Hick, 2006). In its early stages, exclusivism was the dominant position, affirming that truth and salvation are normatively available only within a single particular religious tradition. This approach preserves internal theological consistency, but at the same time limits the possibility of recognizing religious validity beyond the boundaries of that tradition.

In response to these limitations, the position of inclusivism emerged, opening the possibility of salvation outside the formal community of a given religion, while still maintaining the normative superiority of a particular tradition as the primary frame of reference. Although more open than exclusivism, inclusivism continues to operate within a hierarchical structure that places other

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religions in a subordinate position. It is this tension between openness and hierarchy that ultimately gave rise to religious pluralism in a more systematic formulation in the twentieth century (Cornille, n.d.).

However, this shift toward pluralism carries with it complex epistemological implications. Although modern pluralism places soteriological equality and moral convergence as the primary points of contact between religions, this does not mean that the question of ultimate reality is completely abandoned (Burley & Burley mmburley, n.d.). In the thought of John Hick, for example, the concept of the Real continues to function as a metaphysical horizon underlying the diversity of religious experience. However, this reality is understood as something that transcends human conceptual reach and cannot be directly accessed as it is (Hick, 2001, p. 162). Therefore, religious doctrines are not treated as final representations of the nature of ultimate reality, but rather as different historical and cultural responses to the same transcendent reality.

From this perspective, interreligious differences are not seen as ontological competitions to be resolved through metaphysical verification, but rather as consequences of human epistemological limitations in understanding a reality that transcends empirical experience and conceptual language. Thus, the primary focus of modern pluralism lies not in the rejection of ontology, but in the limitation of epistemological claims regarding human ability to fully know the nature of ultimate reality. The resulting shift is therefore more accurately understood as a change in how the relationship between ontology and epistemology is constructed (Anderson, 2008). In here, modern pluralism moves into the ethical realm. However, attention to the ethical and dialogical dimensions is not a replacement for the metaphysical horizon, but rather a consequence of an awareness of the limitations of human knowledge in claiming exclusively transcendent truth (Mao, 2018).

Awareness of human epistemic limitations, along with an acknowledgement of the role of the metaphysical horizon in shaping religious practice and discourse, demands systematic and ongoing research into metaphysical dimensions. Such research is not intended to replace or discredit the ethical-dialogical orientation of modern pluralism, but rather to deepen understanding of how transcendental concepts influence interpretation, practice, and moral obligations in the context of contemporary religious pluralism.

Re-reading Perennial Philosophy beyond Pluralism

The epistemological limitations of modern pluralism, particularly its tendency to suspend ontological questions, indicate the need for an alternative framework that not only maintains a commitment to dialogue but is also capable of restoring the metaphysical dimension in understanding religious diversity. In this context, perennial philosophy offers an important point of entry, although its position within contemporary discourse is often misunderstood (Leontiev, 2024).

In many modern readings, perennial philosophy is frequently associated with religious pluralism and even regarded as one of its philosophical foundations. This assumption arises because both address the unity of religions. However, such an equation tends to obscure the fundamental differences between them. Whereas modern pluralism is grounded in the assumption of epistemic equality among religious traditions (Leontiev, 2024), perennial philosophy instead affirms a layered ontological structure within religious reality (Jones, 2022). The unity of religions, from the perennial perspective, is not based on the relativization of truth claims, but on the recognition of a single metaphysical principle that transcends all doctrinal formulations.

For perennialists, the existence of common metaphysical structures is not inferred from similarities in religious doctrines or practices, but rather from the recurring occurrence of

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certain metaphysical themes across various religious traditions, such as the notion of transcendent reality, the interconnectedness of the Absolute and the relative, and the spiritual orientation of humankind toward a source of being that transcends the empirical world to the hierarchical relationship between levels of existence (Jones, 2022). In this framework, the recurring occurrence of these structures indicates a metaphysical correspondence that cannot be fully explained by historical or cultural factors alone (Taylor, 2023).

Within the framework developed by Frithjof Schuon and Seyyed Hossein Nasr, religious plurality is understood through the distinction between the esoteric and exoteric dimensions. The exoteric dimension encompasses the outward aspects of religion—such as doctrine, law, and ritual practices—which develop within particular historical contexts and are therefore inherently diverse. In contrast, the esoteric dimension refers to the metaphysical core or transcendent principle that serves as the source of all these religious expressions(Davar et al., 2021). It is at this level that the unity of religions can be understood, not as a literal doctrinal sameness, but as a convergence toward the same Ultimate Reality.

This distinction shows that perennial philosophy does not seek to reduce theological differences to epistemic equality, as in modern pluralism, but rather situates them within a hierarchical framework that allows diversity and unity to be understood simultaneously (Bano & Ahmad, 2020). From this perspective, contradictions at the exoteric level do not necessarily negate the possibility of unity at the esoteric level, since both operate within different ontological horizons (Schuon, 1984). Thus, religious plurality is not understood as a fragmentation of truth, but as differentiated expressions of a single transcendent reality.

A reexamination of perennial philosophy in this context allows for a more precise repositioning within the study of comparative theology. Rather than being understood as another form of pluralism or as a syncretistic project, perennial philosophy can be seen as a metaphysical critique of the epistemological assumptions of modern pluralism, particularly its tendency to suspend the ontological dimension (Taylor, 2023). By restoring attention to the structure of reality underlying religious experience, this approach opens up the possibility of understanding religious diversity without reducing truth claims to merely symbolic or cultural expressions.

Within this framework, perennial philosophy can be considered not as a normative solution to interreligious conflict, but as a theoretical intervention that reconfigures how religious diversity is understood. It does not replace pluralism at the ethical level, but transcends it at the metaphysical level by offering a model that integrates ontological unity and phenomenological diversity. This position becomes important as a foundation for developing further analysis regarding the relationship between the esoteric and exoteric dimensions in understanding the plurality of religions.

Perennial Philosophy as a Metaphysical Reorientation

The tendency of modern pluralism to suspend the ontological dimension indicates a need for an alternative framework capable of reintegrating metaphysical reflection into the study of religious diversity(Anderson, 2008). In this context, perennial philosophy can be considered a conceptual point of reference, although its position is often simplified as part of the pluralist discourse itself (Taylor, 2023).

Fundamentally, perennial philosophy differs from modern pluralism in how it understands the unity of religions. While pluralism rests on the assumption of epistemic equality among religious traditions, the perennial approach instead emphasizes a layered ontological structure, in which unity does not lie in the similarity of truth claims, but in metaphysical principles that transcend doctrinal formulations. Thus, plurality is not reduced to mere variations of perspective, but is understood as differentiated expressions of a single transcendent reality (Cavallarin, 2025).

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Within this framework, the distinction between the esoteric and exoteric dimensions becomes key to understanding how unity and diversity can coexist simultaneously. However, in this section, perennial philosophy is not intended to be elaborated comprehensively, but rather to indicate the possibility of a conceptual repositioning in response to the limitations of modern pluralism. Further elaboration of this framework will be discussed in the following section as a basis for reconstructing an understanding of religious plurality.

Method

This study employs a qualitative library-based approach within the fields of philosophy of religion and religious studies. The research examines contemporary religious pluralism through the interpretive framework of perennial philosophy, focusing on questions concerning religious diversity, ultimate reality, and religious unity. Rather than comparing pluralism and perennialism as equivalent theoretical systems, this study uses perennial philosophy as an analytical perspective to re-examine the philosophical assumptions underlying modern pluralist discourse. (Jones, 2022). The primary sources consist of selected works by John Hick and Paul Knitter as major representatives of religious pluralism, alongside the writings of Frithjof Schuon and Seyyed Hossein Nasr as principal exponents of perennial philosophy. These texts were selected because of their significant influence on contemporary discussions of religious diversity, interreligious relations, and metaphysical interpretations of religion.

The analysis combines conceptual analysis and metaphysical interpretation. Its analytical categories are derived from recurring themes in perennial philosophy, particularly as articulated by Frithjof Schuon and Seyyed Hossein Nasr, including the affirmation of an ultimate transcendent reality, the relationship between the Absolute and contingent existence, hierarchical conceptions of reality, and the orientation of human spiritual life toward a transcendent source. These themes provide the framework for examining how religious plurality is understood within perennial thought and for assessing the extent to which perennial philosophy offers an alternative metaphysical interpretation of religious diversity (Baharudin & Luthfan, 2017).

Results

Esoteric Unity as Metaphysical Convergence

In the study of religions, there is often a focus on doctrinal aspects or outward religious practices (exoteric). Such approaches tend to position differences as the primary feature of religious plurality (Tobler & Danca, 2023). For instance, as noted by Panikkar, comparative analyses of religions are often limited to the moral and normative domain—such as ethical rules, religious laws, or social values—without engaging the metaphysical substance or ontological principles that form the very foundation of religion itself (Panikkar, 1978).

This phenomenon is reflected, for example, in comparative studies of practices such as zakat in Islam, dāna in Buddhism, and tithing in Christianity, which are often reduced to mere ethical obligations involving the distribution of resources to others. Such approaches tend to overlook the metaphysical dimensions underlying these practices, such as the ontological relationship between humans and the Absolute, the concepts of attachment and detachment within the structure of existence, and participation in the divine will (Zahrah, 2025). Likewise, practices of fasting—such as Ramadan in Islam, Lent in Christianity, and uposatha in Buddhism—are often understood in a limited sense as instruments of moral discipline and self-control, without uncovering their ontological significance as a medium of existential transformation toward transcendent reality (Fatima et al., 2024).

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Criticism of this approach can be found in the thought of Wilfred Cantwell Smith, who argues that the categories used in the study of religion need to be revised in order to more adequately and universally represent human religious life. He states that “what we have been calling ‘religion’ can be more adequately understood in terms of two distinct components: personal faith and cumulative tradition” (W. C. Smith, 1963). Within this framework, Smith distinguishes between the inner dimension of religion, which is personal and existential, and its historical expressions, which include doctrine, ritual, law, and symbols.

This distinction is important because it opens up the possibility of viewing religion not merely as an institutional system or a historical construct, but also as an inner experience that transcends its external forms. However, Smith’s framework remains at the phenomenological and existential level, without explicitly elaborating the metaphysical dimension underlying such experience (S. Smith, 2013). In other words, although Smith successfully shifts the focus from external structures to the internal dimension of religion, he does not fully explain how this inner dimension relates to a deeper structure of reality.

A number of scholars have questioned the perennialist assumption of a universal metaphysical core underlying all religious traditions. Steven Katz argues that mystical experience is always mediated by specific language, doctrine, and cultural context and therefore cannot be separated from the tradition that gave rise to it (Katz, 1978). Similar critiques have been developed in critical approaches to the study of religion, which reject universal and transhistorical claims about the nature of religion (McCutcheon, 1997). From this perspective, similarities found across religious traditions do not automatically indicate the existence of a shared metaphysical reality but can be understood as the result of conceptual and interpretive constructions shaped by specific historical contexts. Nevertheless, this debate remains open, as demonstrated by contemporary attempts to reformulate perennialism in a more moderate and phenomenological form (Stoeber, 2008).

However, this article does not intend to definitively prove the ontological validity of perennial philosophy or to refute these criticisms. Rather, perennial philosophy serves as an interpretive framework to explore the possible relationship between the diversity of religious forms and human orientations toward transcendent reality (Nasr, 1989, p. 99).Therefore, the focus of the analysis does not lie in proving that all religions have an identical metaphysical core, but rather on how the concept of esoteric unity can function as a conceptual model in reading the relationship between unity and diversity in comparative religious studies.

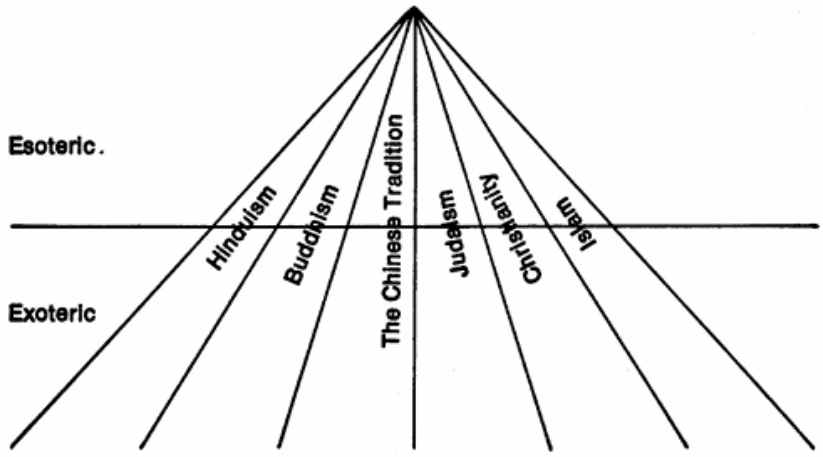

Image 1 : Transcendent unity of religions (Schuon, 1993).

From the perspective of perennial philosophy, religious traditions exhibit both profound differences and meaningful points of convergence. At the exoteric level, religions differ in their

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doctrines, rituals, symbols, sacred narratives, and theological formulations. These differences are not regarded as accidental, but as integral expressions of particular historical, cultural, and spiritual contexts. At the same time, perennial thinkers argue that the existence of such differences does not necessarily preclude the possibility of a deeper level of convergence. The notion of esoteric unity therefore does not require the identification of equivalent doctrines across traditions, nor does it assume that all religions describe ultimate reality in the same conceptual terms (Jones, 2022). Rather, it proposes that religious diversity may coexist with the possibility of a transcendent dimension that exceeds the boundaries of any single religious formulation.

Within this framework, similarities among religious traditions should not be interpreted as evidence of doctrinal sameness, while differences should not automatically be understood as indications of irreconcilable opposition. Instead, perennial philosophy approaches religious plurality as a complex relationship between unity and diversity, in which distinct religious forms remain preserved while being situated within a broader metaphysical horizon (Krisak, 1995). The significance of esoteric unity therefore lies not in eliminating theological differences, but in providing a conceptual basis for understanding how diversity and transcendence may be related without collapsing one into the other.

Exoteric Diversity as Necessary Differentiation

If at the esoteric level there exists a metaphysical convergence, then at the exoteric level religions instead display a tangible and unavoidable diversity. This diversity appears in the form of theological doctrines, legal systems, ritual practices, and religious symbols that develop within different historical and cultural contexts (Bano et al., 2022). In the perspective of perennial metaphysics as articulated by Frithjof Schuon and further developed by Seyyed Hossein Nasr, the exoteric dimension is not understood as a deviation from metaphysical truth, but rather as a necessary differentiation through which the transcendent principle can be understood and lived within particular historical situations (Bano & Ahmad, 2020). In other words, exoteric plurality is a consequence of the process of translating universal metaphysical reality into symbolic, doctrinal, and institutional languages that are accessible to diverse human communities.

> “the most important among the conceptions that are inaccessible to exoterism is, in certain respects at least, that of the gradation of universal Reality: Reality affirms itself by degrees, but without ceasing to be “one,” the inferior degrees of this affirmation being absorbed, by metaphysical integration or synthesis, into the superior degrees. This is the doctrine of the cosmic illusion: the world is not only more or less imperfect or ephemeral, but cannot even be said to “be” at all in relation to absolute Reality, since the reality of the world would limit God’s Reality and He alone “is.” Furthermore, Being Itself, which is none other than the Personal God, is in its turn surpassed by the Impersonal or Supra-Personal Divinity, Non-Being, of which the Personal God or Being is simply the first determination from which flow all the secondary determinations that make up cosmic Existence. Exoterism cannot, however, admit either this unreality of the world or the exclusive reality of the Divine Principle, or above all, the transcendence of Non-Being relative to Being or God” (Schuon, 1984, p. 38).

From this perspective, differences among religions do not merely reflect epistemic contradictions, but also serve historical and pedagogical functions. Doctrines, laws, and rituals function as guiding structures that align religious experience with the spiritual, social, and cultural conditions of particular communities. Diversity within the exoteric domain thus becomes a means through which metaphysical reality can be concretely practiced in religious life. As expressed by Seyyed Hossein Nasr:

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> Christianity as a way of love must have its path of knowledge in its Eckharts and Nicolas of Cusas. Islam which emphasizes direct access to God must have its intercession in the Shı'ite Imams. And even Buddhism which emphasizes so much man's own effort in reaching nirv¯ana through following the eightfold path must have room for mercy which appears in both Tibetan Buddhism and Amidhism. It is for this reason that to have lived any religion fully is to have lived all religions and that in fact to realize all that can be realized from the religious point of view man can in practice follow only one religion and one spiritual path which are at the same time for that person the religion and the path as such (Nasr, 1989, p. 256).

Plurality at the exoteric level is not a sign of relativism, but rather part of a dynamic differentiation that sustains the continuity of religious traditions while simultaneously opening the possibility for interreligious understanding within a deeper metaphysical framework.

Exoteric diversity can be understood as a historical and pedagogical means through which communities live out transcendent principles within different socio-cultural contexts. However, this understanding still leaves an epistemological problem regarding how plurality can be acknowledged without falling into relativism. In this regard, perennial philosophy offers a framework that situates unity at the metaphysical (esoteric) level while at the same time recognizing the diversity of expressions (exoteric), so that religious plurality is understood as a manifestation of a single Ultimate Reality without requiring the equalization of all truth claims.

Perennial Philosophy beyond Relativism

Perennial philosophy is often assumed within modern pluralism discourse to be part of the same effort to affirm equality among religions. However, unlike modern pluralism, which in many cases tends toward epistemological relativism, perennial philosophy offers a metaphysical framework that situates the unity of religions at a higher level without equating all truth claims epistemically (Nasr, 2024). The transcendent unity of religions does not mean that all doctrinal formulations possess identical validity, but rather that various traditions point toward the same source of reality through different forms of expression.

Within this framework, perennial philosophy also acknowledges a hierarchy of truth at the metaphysical level. This hierarchy is not intended as a form of theological domination of one tradition over another, but as a recognition that understanding of Ultimate Reality can appear at different levels of depth, whether in symbols, doctrines, or religious experience (Huxly, 1947). The perennial approach seeks to maintain a balance between affirming metaphysical unity and respecting the diversity of religious forms (Ebrahimi, 2023). The results of this analysis indicate that perennial philosophy provides a conceptual alternative to pluralism that tends to relativize truth claims, while at the same time avoiding exclusivism that denies the possibility of metaphysical convergence among religions.

Thus, religious plurality does not merely indicate outward differences, but rather represents a manifestation of a higher unity. Each tradition offers a unique path that guides human beings toward Ultimate Reality, while at the same time affirming a balance between respect for diversity and recognition of transcendent unity.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that the main problem in modern pluralism does not lie in its recognition of religious diversity, but rather in its epistemological framework, which limits the exploration of ontological dimensions. By prioritizing epistemic equality and exercising caution toward metaphysical claims, pluralism succeeds in creating an inclusive space for dialogue, yet at the same time shifts attention away from questions concerning the nature of ultimate reality. Thus, the limitation of pluralism is not ethical in nature, but ontological.

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In this context, perennial philosophy offers a conceptual reorientation by distinguishing between the exoteric and esoteric dimensions of religion. At the exoteric level, differences in doctrine, symbols, and ritual practices are inevitable consequences of the historical, cultural, and symbolic development of each tradition (Cox, 2010). However, at the esoteric level, religious traditions reveal the possibility of metaphysical convergence centered on the recognition of an Ultimate Reality that transcends particular theological formulations (H. Smith, 1985, p. 80). Religious plurality is therefore not understood as a conflict of truths, but as a differentiation of expressions from the same transcendent source. This unity at the esoteric level does not lead to the standardization or homogenization of traditions. As emphasized by Frithjof Schuon and Seyyed Hossein Nasr, each religion possesses its own symbolic system for expressing transcendent truth, so that differences in doctrine and practice do not obstruct unity, but instead affirm the symbolic function of such plurality (Nasr, 2005, p. 67). Within this framework, unity does not lie in literal conceptual similarity, but in a metaphysical orientation directed toward the Absolute.

This approach also enables a more balanced critique of two dominant tendencies in the study of religion, namely theological exclusivism and modern pluralism. Exclusivism denies the possibility of truth beyond the boundaries of its own tradition, while pluralism tends to reduce theological differences to mere ethical variations. Perennial philosophy transcends both by affirming that the unity of religions does not reside in the equalization of doctrines or ethics, but at a deeper metaphysical level, allowing differences to be preserved as authentic expressions without negating the possibility of convergence at the level of essence. In this perspective, comparative theology no longer functions merely as an effort to seek moral similarities or doctrinal compromise, but as a means to understand how each tradition represents divine reality through its own distinctive symbolic language (Chittick, 2007). This allows interreligious dialogue to take place without erasing the theological identity of each tradition, while at the same time opening space for deeper reflection on the structure of reality that underlies religious experience.

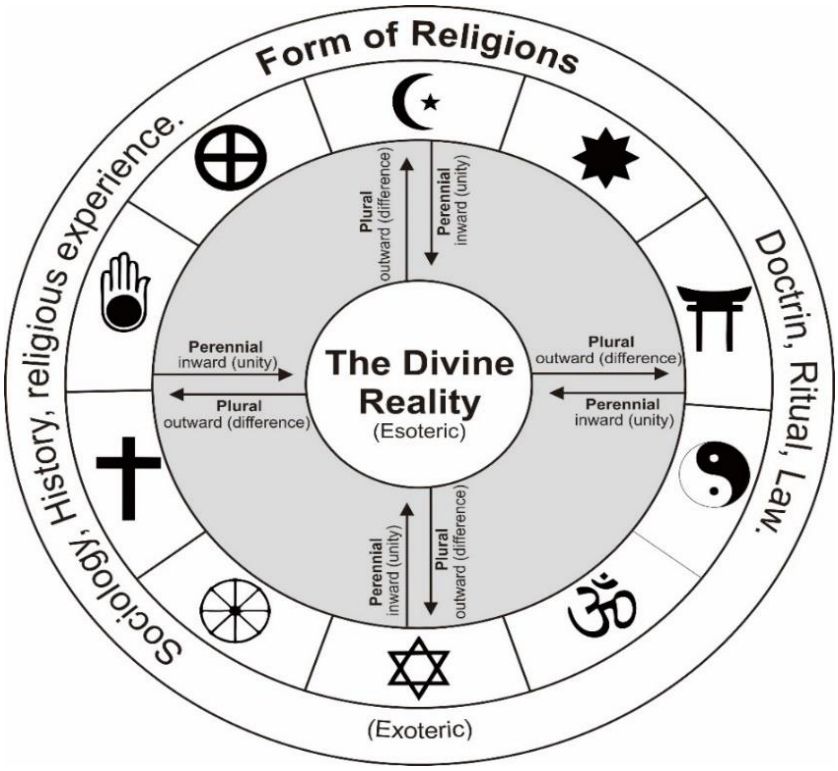

Image 2 : Religious plurality, illustrating outward differentiation and inward metaphysical unity. (authors own)

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The diagram presented in this study represents the relationship between the exoteric and esoteric dimensions, in which plurality appears on the outer circle as historical and symbolic differentiation, while metaphysical unity is located at the center as Ultimate Reality. The relationship between the two is not contradictory, but complementary, thus enabling a simultaneous understanding of both diversity and unity in religion.

Furthermore, this approach has significant relevance in the context of the contemporary world, which is characterized by value fragmentation, secularization, and the weakening of the sacred dimension in human life. When religion is reduced to social identity, moral systems, or political instruments, the metaphysical dimension that constitutes the core of religious traditions tends to be marginalized. Although modern pluralism does not fail in its ethical aims, it remains limited in its ontological capacity.

Thus, this article reconstructs the discourse of comparative theology by critiquing the assumption of epistemic equality and replacing it with a framework that affirms ontological unity behind the symbolic differentiation of religions. This approach not only broadens the horizon of religious studies, but also enables the integration between recognizing the diversity of traditions and maintaining an understanding of religious truth that is not reduced to relativism.

Conclusion

This article asserts that the impasse in modern discourse on religious diversity does not merely lie in doctrinal conflict, but in epistemological assumptions that limit the interpretation of religious reality. By shifting the focus from epistemic equality toward ontological differentiation through the framework of perennial philosophy, this study demonstrates that religious plurality can be understood as a layered structure: diversity at the exoteric level and the possibility of unity at the esoteric level. This shift enables a reformulation of comparative theology that does not stop at ethical dialogue, but moves toward deeper metaphysical reflection without reducing theological differences.

However, this article has several limitations. The analysis developed remains at a conceptual level and therefore has not fully engaged with the historical and practical complexities of religious traditions. In addition, the use of the perennial philosophy framework may generate tension with approaches that emphasize the historical particularity and social context of religion. At the same time, the esoteric–exoteric distinction employed as the main framework still requires further elaboration in order to function as a more robust analytical foundation in comparative theology.

Accordingly, future research is expected to expand the theoretical elaboration of the relationship between the metaphysical and historical dimensions of religion, as well as to deepen critical reflection on the position of perennial philosophy within the landscape of contemporary religious studies. Such efforts are essential for developing an approach that is not only sensitive to the diversity of religious forms, but also capable of maintaining analytical depth regarding the structure of reality that underlies religious experience.

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