



## THE CHRISTIAN UNDERSTANDING OF RELIGION AND THE RELIGIOUS UNDERSTANDING OF CHRISTIANITY: A HERMENAUTICAL TRAJECTORY

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### Abstract

This study focuses on examining the divergence between the Christian understanding of religion and the religious understanding of Christianity. The Christian understanding of religion is characterised by internal theological principles and beliefs specific to the faith, which includes but not limited to the divinity of Jesus Christ, the authority of the Bible, and the concept of salvation through faith. This perspective emphasizes practices and rituals central to Christian life, including worship, moral teachings, and community activities. It also encompasses doctrinal frameworks and eschatological views that shape how Christians live out their faith. Conversely, the religious understanding of Christianity involves a broader, external analysis of Christianity as it fits within the global context of world religions. This perspective includes the historical development of Christianity, from its origins in the early Church to its contemporary manifestations. It also involves a comparative study of Christianity's beliefs and practices relative to other major religions, examining similarities and differences in theology, ritual, and social impact. Employing the methods of critical analysis and hermeneutics approach, this paper also considers the cultural and societal influence of Christianity, including its role in shaping societal norms and its interactions with other religious traditions. Reflecting on these two perspectives, the research aims to provide a view of how Christianity is understood both from within the faith itself and from academic and interreligious perspectives. This dual approach showcases the complexities of religious identity and interfaith dialogue in a nuanced global context.

### Keywords:

Christian understanding, religious understanding, world religions, culture, theology.



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## **Introduction**

Is the Christian understanding of religion the religious understanding of Christianity? This is a question of primary significance that forms the crux of this study. The relationship between Christianity and religion presents a multifaceted subject, distinguished by internal faith-based perspectives and external academic analyses. The Christian understanding of religion is deeply rooted in the theological and doctrinal constructs of the faith. For adherents, religion is perceived through the lens of core beliefs about Jesus Christ as the Son of God, the authority of the Bible, and the path to salvation (Wright, 2013; McGrath, 2011). In the words of Hauerwas (2001) and Long (2009): This perspective is characterized by specific practices such as worship, sacraments, and moral teachings that are integral to Christian life and communal identity.

In contrast, the religious understanding of Christianity involves a broader examination of how Christianity is situated within the spectrum of world religions. This approach considers the historical development of Christianity, including its origins and subsequent development (Ehrman, 2003; MacCulloch, 2003). It also entails a comparative analysis with other major religions, exploring doctrinal similarities and differences, rituals, and societal impacts (Stark, 2005; Brown, 2011). Moreover, this external perspective assesses the influence of Christianity on culture and societal norms, as well as its interactions with other religious traditions (Noll, 2001; Pelikan, 2003). The implication of this is that, in delineating the religious perception of Christianity, the place of diverse religions will be delineated proximately or remotely.

Therefore, grappling with these diverse characterizations is crucial for appreciating how Christianity is experienced from within the faith and analyzed from an academic standpoint. By addressing both the internal and external perspectives, this exploration offers a view of Christianity's role and significance in a diverse global context.

## **An Insight into the Christian Understanding of Religion**

Christian religion is a religion that is about 2000 years old with its prospects, successes, and challenges. Founded by Jesus Christ, and entrusted to the Apostles, Christian religion focuses on humansalvation as its key vision and mission. The Christian understanding of religion is a complex and multi-dimensional framework rooted in theological principles, doctrinal beliefs, and lived experiences of faith. This perspective offers a unique lens through which adherents perceive and practice their religion, distinguishing it from secular or academic interpretations. For clarity and precision, this reflection examines the core beliefs, practices, and theological frameworks that constitute the Christian understanding of religion.

It has to be recapitulated that at the heart of Christianity is the belief in Jesus Christ as the Son of God and the Saviour of mankind. According to Wright (2013), Jesus' role is central to Christian theology, as he is seen not only as a historical figure but as the divine incarnation who offers salvation through his life, death, and resurrection. The New Testament of the Bible provides the primary source of information about Jesus' teachings and the implications for salvation (The Holy BibleNIV, 2011). Christians believe that faith in Jesus Christ is the path to eternal life and reconciliation with God, a concept deeply rooted in the doctrine of salvation (McGrath, 2011). By implication, human salvation is the fundamental, and in fact, symbolically embedded in the teachings of Christian religion.

The Bible, composed of the Old and New Testaments, serves as the cornerstone of Christian faith. It is regarded as divinely inspired and authoritative, providing guidance on theological beliefs, moral conduct, and worship practices (The Holy BibleNIV, 2011). The Old Testament includes the foundational texts of Judaism, while the New Testament focuses on the life and teachings of Jesus and

the early Christian Church. There are ethical (moral), historical, spiritual, and living perspectives in both Old and New Testaments. Instantiating this claim, Long (2009) writes: The Bible is not only a historical document but also a living text that informs the spiritual and ethical dimensions of Christian life.

Christian practices and rituals play a significant role in the religious life of adherents. Worship, which includes communal gatherings and individual prayer, is central to Christian practice. According to Hauerwas (2001), worship serves as a means of expressing devotion to God, seeking spiritual growth, and reinforcing communal bonds within the church. Key rituals such as Baptism and the Eucharist (Communion) are considered sacraments that signify and facilitate the believer's relationship with God. Baptism symbolizes the initiation into the Christian faith, while the Eucharist commemorates the Last Supper of Jesus and represents the ongoing sustenance of spiritual life (Stott, 1999). It is the Eucharist that forms the heart of the Christian worship. Institution of the Eucharist is closely associated with the Eucharist. In fact, without the Eucharist, there is no priesthood and vice versa. Both are inextricably linked in the economy of human salvation in which Jesus Christ Himself is the Eternal High Priest who offers Himself as the Bread of life Christians receive in the Eucharist.

Ethical behaviour and moral living are another essential aspects of the Christian understanding of religion. Christians are guided by ethical teachings derived from the Bible, particularly the teachings of Jesus and the Ten Commandments. Hauerwas (2001) argues that Christian ethics emphasizes virtues such as love, compassion, and justice, which are expected to manifest in personal behaviour and social interactions. There are other characterizations of Christianity. Uzoigwe and Chukwuma-Offor (2021) write: There are other indices like faith, hope, charity, metanoia, endurance, benignity and, of course, salvation which one necessarily has to count while talking about Christianity. The Sermon on the Mount, for instance, outlines principles of love and forgiveness that challenge Christians to live out their faith in everyday life (McGrath, 2011). Without an authentic practice of love for one another and forgiveness, a Christian has not completely discharged his responsibilities. It then implies that love, compassion, forgiveness and all the other virtues are necessary conditions for authentic Christian living.

Trinitarian theology with its perichoresis forms the heart of Christian religion. Theological frameworks within Christianity further shape the understanding of religion. Christian doctrine encompasses various creeds and confessions that articulate fundamental beliefs about God the Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. The Nicene Creed, for example, affirms the divinity of Jesus and the concept of the Trinity, which are central to orthodox Christian belief (Packer, 1993). These doctrines provide a unified expression of Christian faith and help to distinguish it from other religious traditions. Similarly, the study of end times (eschatology), is another important dimension of Christian theology. Christians hold diverse views on eschatological matters, which include but not limited to beliefs about the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, the final judgment, and the nature of the afterlife. In the words of Bauckham (1999), these beliefs influence how Christians understand their present life and its ultimate purpose. The promise of eternal life and the hope of Christ's return provide a framework for enduring faith and moral perseverance. In fact, it is considered as virtuous when Christians endure and persevere in the face of extenuating circumstances of life, especially those ones that directly challenge their faith.

Christianity also has a significant impact on communal and individual identity. The Body of Christ (church community) plays a vital role in supporting believers, fostering spiritual growth, and engaging in collective worship and service. Noll (2001) notes that the church acts as a community of faith where individuals find support and encouragement in their spiritual journey. Additionally, Christian

values and teachings often influence personal and social ethics, shaping how adherents interact with the world around them. From the above analysis, the Christian understanding of religion is characterized by its focus on Jesus Christ, the Bible, and the practices and doctrines that define Christian life. This perspective provides a framework for understanding salvation, worship, moral conduct, and theological beliefs. By examining these elements, we gain insight into how Christians experience and practice their faith, as well as how they interpret their relationship with God and the world.

### **A Consideration of the Religious Understanding of Christianity**

The religious understanding of Christianity involves examining how this faith tradition is perceived and analyzed from an external perspective, contrasting with the internal theological and doctrinal views of adherents. This broader perspective includes but not limited to historical development, comparative analysis with other religions, and the socio-cultural impact of Christianity.

### **Development from the Historical Perspective**

The historical development of Christianity is a key aspect of understanding its role within religions across the globe. Christianity originated in the 1st century CE in the Roman province of Judea. For Brown (1989), the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, along with the activities of his disciples, led to the formation of the early Christian Church. The spread of Christianity was significantly influenced by the Apostle Paul, whose missionary journeys and epistles helped establish Christian communities across the Mediterranean (Horsley, 1999). As it were, the other Apostles and the Evangelists who authored chapters in the New Testament also made significant impacts in the spread of Christian religion.

Just like every human society, the early church faced numerous challenges, including persecution and doctrinal disputes. The Council of Nicaea in 325 CE was a crucial event in addressing these issues, establishing foundational Christian doctrines such as the nature of the Trinity (Horsley, 1999). The subsequent spread of Christianity through the Roman Empire, especially following Constantine's Edict of Milan in 313 CE, marked a significant shift from a persecuted sect to an officially recognized religion (Brown, 1989). This shows that Christian religion with its divine and human elements have had a plethora of experiences since its inception.

Furthermore, the Middle Ages saw the consolidation of Christian doctrine and the establishment of the Catholic Church as a powerful institution in Europe. The Protestant Reformation of the 16th century, initiated by figures such as Martin Luther and John Calvin, challenged the Catholic Church's practices and led to the formation of various Protestant denominations (MacCulloch, 2003). This period of religious upheaval and transformation reshaped the religious landscape of Europe and beyond.

### **Delineating the Convergence and Divergence**

In comparing Christianity with other major world religions, several key differences and similarities emerge. According to Smart (1998), one significant difference is the Christian concept of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, which contrasts with the paths to salvation or enlightenment in religions like Buddhism and Hinduism. Smart (1998) further argues that, Christianity's emphasis on grace and redemption is a defining characteristic, setting it apart from the self-effort-based salvation concepts found in Eastern religions. From the perspectives of ritual and practice, Christianity shares similarities with Judaism, such as the use of scripture and certain ethical teachings.

Considering the area of distinction, however, Christianity differs in its understanding of God and the Messiah. For instance, Christianity's belief in the Trinity and the divinity of Jesus is unique and not

found in Judaism (Gilbert, 1997). The role of sacraments such as Baptism and the Eucharist in Christianity also distinguishes it from other religions that do not have similar rites (Berg, 2014). Again, it is a strong position of Christian religion that Jesus Christ is the door to eternal life (John 14:6).

### **Reflecting on the Socio-Cultural Influence**

The socio-cultural impact of Christianity is profound and far-reaching. In Western societies, Christianity has influenced various aspects of culture, including art, literature, and social norms. The Renaissance, for example, saw a flourishing of Christian themes in art and literature, reflecting the deep integration of religious ideas into European culture (Burke, 1990). In addition to cultural contributions, Christianity has played a significant role in shaping social and political structures. The concept of human rights, for instance, has roots in Christian theological traditions that emphasize the inherent dignity of every individual (Horsley, 2009). Both educational institutions and charity organization were highly influenced by the Christian tradition. Supporting this view, MacCulloch, (2003) says, the development of charitable institutions and educational systems in the West has also been significantly influenced by Christian values and organizations.

The influence of Christian religion extends globally through missionary activities and the spread of Christian values. This global impact has led to both positive and contentious outcomes, such as the promotion of social justice and the imposition of Western values on indigenous cultures (Tucker, 1994). The missionary expansion of Christianity has often been accompanied by cultural assimilation and conflict, raising important questions about the interaction between religion and cultural identity (Tucker, 1994). This issue of religions and cultural identity has remained a polemical issue in the contemporary time.

### **Inter-religious Relations and Dialogue**

Inter-religious relations and dialogue are crucial in understanding the place of Christianity in a multi-religious world. Christianity engages in dialogue with other major religions to address common ethical concerns and promote mutual understanding. Interfaith dialogues often focus on shared values such as compassion, justice, and the pursuit of peace (Knitter, 2002). These dialogues help address misconceptions and build relationships across religious boundaries.

However, interfaith relations can also be complex and challenging. Historical conflicts, such as the Crusades and colonial missions, have left lasting scars on Christian relations with other religions (Brown, 1989). That is why there is need for openness and sincerity in inter-religious relations and dialogue. In this regard, Knitter (2002) asserts, that interfaith efforts seek to overcome these historical grievances and foster a more inclusive approach to religious coexistence. This shows that, inter-religious relations and dialogue are efforts towards enhancing cooperation, mutual understanding and harmonious living.

### **Delineating on the Contemporary Experience**

The 21<sup>st</sup> century is characterized by a plethora of gains and challenges for the Christian religion such as the idea of *myselfism*, agnosticism, secularism, relativism and so forth. Campbell and Tsuruda (2019) capture it thus: in the contemporary world, Christianity faces various challenges and opportunities. Issues such as secularism, pluralism, and the rise of non-religious identities pose significant challenges to traditional Christian practices and beliefs. They went much further to argue that, the growth of secular and non-religious populations in Western countries has led to a re-evaluation of Christianity's role in public life and its influence on cultural norms (Campbell & Tsuruda, 2019). Conversely, Christianity continues to thrive in various regions, particularly in Africa and Asia, where rapid growth and vibrant expressions of faith are evident (Miller & Yamamori,



2007). This global perspective highlights the diverse ways in which Christianity is practiced and understood, reflecting a dynamic interplay between tradition and modernity.

### **Implications of the Religious Understanding of Christianity**

The religious understanding of Christianity has profound implications across various domains, including theological discourse, intercultural relations, social ethics, and global dynamics. These implications shape both the internal and external interactions of Christianity within a diverse global context.

#### **Theological Discourse**

Theological implications of Christian religious understanding influence contemporary debates and doctrinal developments. The internal interpretation of Christian doctrines such as the nature of God, the role of Jesus Christ, and the concept of salvation has significant implications for theological discourse. For example, the understanding of the Incarnation and its implications for Christology affect how Christians engage with concepts of divinity and humanity (Horsley, 2008). It is strong position of Christian religious that Jesus Christ, the Son of God is both human and divine. Such theological frameworks inform not only ecclesiastical teaching but also broader discussions on morality and ethics within Christian communities. However, differences in various denominational practices are a serious concern for Christian religious. Corroborating this view, MacCulloch (2009) posits that, the diversity within Christianity, including various denominational perspectives, further complicates theological discourse. Different interpretations of key doctrines, such as the Eucharist or predestination, lead to varied practices and theological debates. Understanding these differences is crucial for appreciating the breadth of Christian thought and its impact on theological scholarship.

#### **Cross-cultural Relations**

Christianity's global spread has significant implications for intercultural relations. The interaction between Christianity and diverse cultures can lead to both positive and negative outcomes. On the one hand, Christianity's global presence facilitates cultural exchange and mutual understanding (Robinson, 2004). Missionary work and cross-cultural interactions often result in the sharing of ideas and practices that enrich both Christian and non-Christian communities (Kraft, 2005). Intercultural relations giveaway for inculturation. Meyer (2008) considered it from another perspective when he argues that, the spread of Christianity has sometimes led to cultural conflicts and the imposition of Western values on indigenous societies. The challenges of cultural assimilation and the preservation of local traditions highlight the complexities of religious expansion and its impact on cultural identities (Smith, 1996). Addressing these issues requires a sensitive approach to intercultural dialogue and an appreciation of the diverse ways Christianity is practiced around the world.

#### **Considering Social Ethics and Moral Behaviour**

The implications of Christian religious understanding extend to social ethics and moral behaviour. Christian teachings have historically provided a foundation for ethical principles that influence social norms and public policy. For example, the emphasis on compassion and justice in Christian doctrine underpins various social justice movements and humanitarian efforts (Wright, 2004). This ethical framework guides Christian involvement in addressing issues such as poverty, inequality, and human rights (Volf, 2001). Christian ethics also intersect with contemporary debates on social issues. The Christian perspective on topics such as reproductive rights, euthanasia, and marriage often influences public policy and legal discussions (Grenz, 2001). The implications of these ethical positions are evident in legislative decisions and social attitudes within predominantly Christian societies.

### **Global Dynamics at a Glance**

Christian religious has continued to spread in almost all the continent of the world. The global presence of Christianity has significant implications for global dynamics, including political, economic, and social interactions. The demographic shift of Christianity towards the Global South, particularly in Africa and Asia, has altered the center of gravity within the global Christian community (Horsley, 2009). This shift influences international Christian solidarity and the nature of global Christian discourse. Moreover, the relationship between Christianity and globalization presents both opportunities and challenges. Globalization facilitates the exchange of Christian ideas and practices, contributing to a diverse and interconnected Christian community (Tennent, 2010). However, it also raises concerns about cultural homogenization and the loss of local expressions of faith (Meyer, 2008). Balancing global influences with local traditions is crucial for maintaining the diversity and relevance of Christianity in a rapidly changing world.

### **The influence of Education and Culture**

Christian religious understanding has notable implications on education and culture. Christian institutions have historically played a significant role in shaping educational systems, including the establishment of universities and schools (Nielsen, 2012). The values and teachings of Christianity influence educational curricula and pedagogical approaches, impacting students' moral and intellectual development. From the cultural perspective, Christianity has contributed to artistic and intellectual movements throughout history. The Renaissance, for instance, saw a flourishing of Christian themes in art and literature, reflecting the religion's integration into European culture (Gombrich, 1995). Relatedly, Wright(2004) articulates that, contemporary Christian art, music, and literature continue to explore and express religious themes, influencing cultural production and public discourse. The implications for culture are evident in how Christianity intersects with contemporary issues such as secularism, diversity, and global cultural trends.

### **Conclusion**

The religious understanding of Christianity and the Christian understanding of religion carries extensive implications across theological discourse, intercultural relations, social ethics, global dynamics, and educational and cultural contexts. These implications shape how Christianity is practiced and perceived, influencing both internal theological debates and external interactions within a diverse global context. By exploring these dimensions, we gain a comprehensive view of Christianity's role in shaping contemporary society and its ongoing relevance in a globalized world. Understanding the multifaceted implications of Christianity helps appreciate its impact on various aspects of human life and its potential to contribute positively to global challenges. Engaging with these implications critically and constructively can enhance interfaith dialogue, promote social justice, and foster cultural exchange in a rapidly evolving world.

Practically, these hermeneutical trajectory impacts ecumenical and interfaith initiatives, personal and communal growth, and global challenges. Ecumenism and interfaith dialogue, aimed at promoting unity and cooperation, are crucial in fostering mutual respect and understanding among different religious traditions. Engaging with diverse religious perspectives can deepen one's faith and contribute to creating inclusive societies. Moreover, interfaith cooperation is essential in addressing global challenges such as social injustice, climate change, and conflicts, leveraging the moral and ethical teachings of various religions for collective action. In conclusion, the dynamic interplay between Christianity and other religions, guided by a hermeneutical approach, promotes a deeper, more respectful dialogue, fostering mutual understanding and cooperation in a pluralistic world.

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