





# The Divinity of Christ in a Pluralistic World – A Study of Johannine Christology

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explored the doctrine of the divinity of Christ within the context of a pluralistic world, where multiple religious traditions coexist, each claiming distinct revelations of divine truth. The Christian belief in the unique divinity of Jesus Christ has often been challenged by such pluralism, especially in the face of modern interreligious dialogues. This paper examined the historical, biblical, and theological foundations of Christ's divinity, focusing on Johannine Christology as a primary source of high Christology. Additionally, it engaged contemporary debates on religious pluralism, exploring inclusivistic, exclusivistic, and pluralist approaches to Christ's divine identity. The paper argued that while the divinity of Christ remains a central and non-negotiable tenet of Christian theology, an inclusive approach to interfaith dialogue can be adopted without compromising this belief. This perspective not only preserves the integrity of Christian doctrine but also offers a constructive framework for engaging with religious diversity, thereby highlighting the significance of maintaining Christ's divinity in interfaith dialogues and its implications for Christian theology in a pluralistic society.

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## INTRODUCTION

The doctrine of Christ's divinity stands as one of the central tenets of the Christian faith. According to Christian theology, Jesus Christ is both fully divine and fully human, a belief deeply rooted in the biblical witness, particularly in the New Testament. However, in a religiously pluralistic world, where various faith traditions claim their own understanding of the divine, the affirmation of Christ's divinity becomes a contested issue. This paper seeks to investigate the theological implications of Christ's divinity in a world where religious pluralism prevails. A particular focus will be placed on Johannine Christology, which offers a profound theological articulation of Christ's divine identity through themes such as the Logos, the "I am" statements and the relationship between the Father and the Son. These elements of high Christology are crucial for articulating and defending the divinity of Christ in the midst of religious diversity. By engaging with key theological arguments and addressing contemporary

challenges in interfaith dialogues, this study aims to demonstrate how the Gospel of John provides a robust framework for affirming Christ's divinity while navigating the complexities of a pluralistic context. To fully grasp the implications of Christ's divinity in a pluralistic context, it is essential to outline the methodology of this study.

## METHODOLOGY

This paper employed a systematic theological approach that integrated biblical exegesis, historical analysis, and theological reflection. The primary focus was on the Gospel of John, noted for its emphasis on Christ's divine nature. The study conducted a close reading of key Johannine passages, including John 1:1-18, John 10:30-38, and John 14:6-11, utilizing historical-critical methods to contextualize these texts within early Christian debates on Christology.

Additionally, the researchers engaged with secondary literature by contemporary theologians and biblical scholars, such as Richard Bauckham, Raymond E. Brown, N.T. Wright, and Karl Rahner, explored the historical development of Christological doctrines. A comparative analysis of exclusivist, inclusivist, and pluralist theological frameworks will enhance understanding of how various theological traditions respond to the challenges posed by religious pluralism regarding Christ's divinity. This comparative approach revealed the nuances of each perspective and how they navigate affirming Christ's unique divine status in a diverse religious landscape.

This methodological triangulation allowed for a holistic exploration of the doctrine of Christ's divinity in both historical and contemporary contexts. Such an approach is particularly effective for addressing complex doctrinal issues in a pluralistic environment, as noted by scholars like Kevin J. Vanhoozer, who advocate for integrating historical-critical analysis with theological reflection to provide a comprehensive understanding of doctrinal developments.<sup>1</sup>

## Historical Foundations of Christ's Divinity

The early Christian community's understanding of Jesus' divine status is intricately tied to its Jewish monotheistic roots. Richard Bauckham argues that early Christians, particularly the authors of the New Testament, saw Jesus as integrated into the unique identity of God, a belief that was revolutionary given Jewish monotheism.<sup>2</sup> The Gospel of John, with its emphasis on Jesus as the pre-existent Logos (Jhn 1:1), provides one of the clearest affirmations of Christ's divinity.

Raymond E. Brown points out that Johannine Christology represents one of the highest forms of early Christian belief in Jesus' divine status. His exploration of the Prologue to the Gospel of John highlights how the Logos is both distinct from and yet fully divine, presenting an incarnational Christology that has significantly influenced Christian doctrine throughout history.<sup>3</sup>

The development of Christological doctrine in the early church is further clarified by James D.G. Dunn, who traces the gradual recognition of Jesus' divinity through the lens of his resurrection. Dunn argues that while Jesus' followers believed in his special status during his earthly ministry, it was the resurrection that fully convinced them of his divine nature, marking a pivotal moment in the early church's understanding of Christ's identity.<sup>4</sup>

Alister McGrath notes that the Council of Nicaea (AD 325) and the subsequent Council of Chalcedon (AD 451) were pivotal in formally articulating the doctrine of Christ's divinity and humanity. These councils established creedal statements that are foundational for Christian orthodoxy, affirming the belief in Christ's dual nature as both fully divine and fully human.<sup>5</sup>

These historical foundations provide the necessary backdrop against which modern theological debates about Christ's divinity must be understood, particularly in the context of religious pluralism.

## Understanding Religious Pluralism

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<sup>1</sup> Kevin J Vanhoozer, "The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology," (Westminster John Knox, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel: God Crucified and Other Studies on the New Testament's Christology of Divine Identity* (Eerdmans Young Readers, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> Raymond Edward Brown, *The Gospel According to John: Introduction, Translation and Notes*, vol. 1 (New York: Doubleday, 1971).

<sup>4</sup> James D G Dunn, *Christology in the Making: An Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation* (SCM Press, 1989).

<sup>5</sup> Alister E McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (John Wiley & Sons, 2016).

Religious pluralism, in its broadest sense, refers to the coexistence of diverse religious beliefs and practices within a society.<sup>6</sup> This pluralism can be categorized into two types: theological pluralism and social pluralism. Theological pluralism asserts that no single religious tradition holds a monopoly on truth and that all religions provide equally valid paths to the divine.<sup>7</sup> This perspective presents a direct challenge to the Christian doctrine of the unique divinity of Christ, as articulated in Johannine Christology (Jhn 14:6), which claims that Jesus is the exclusive way to the Father.<sup>8</sup>

This theological challenge is significant because it directly confronts the historical foundations of Christ's divinity established by early Christian theologians and church councils. For example, the high Christology found in the Gospel of John and the doctrinal affirmations made at the Councils of Nicaea and Chalcedon assert the unique and non-negotiable divine status of Christ. Theological pluralism, therefore, demands a re-examination of these foundational beliefs in a context where multiple religious narratives are seen as equally legitimate.

Conversely, social pluralism refers to the societal reality where individuals and communities with different religious convictions live together, respecting each other's rights to religious expression.<sup>9</sup> While theological pluralism questions the exclusive claims of Christianity, social pluralism requires Christians to engage with other faiths in a way that is respectful yet faithful to their own theological convictions.<sup>10</sup>

This distinction between theological and social pluralism is crucial for framing contemporary Christian engagement with a pluralistic world. A nuanced understanding allows Christians to participate in interfaith dialogues from a position of theological integrity, acknowledging the legitimacy of peaceful coexistence while maintaining the belief in Christ's divinity as foundational to their faith.<sup>11</sup> To fully grasp the implications of Christ's divinity in a pluralistic context, it is essential to first understand how various religious traditions perceive and respond to this foundational belief.

## **Engagement with Non-Christian Perspectives**

### **1. Introduction to Non-Christian Perspectives on Christ's Divinity**

To comprehensively address the challenges faced by Christian theology in a pluralistic context, it is essential to explore how major world religions perceive the person of Jesus Christ. This section examines the perspectives of Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, and Buddhism, highlighting the divergent views on Christ's identity and the implications these have for interfaith dialogue.

### **2. Analysis of Specific Religious Perspectives**

#### ***a. Islamic Perspective on Christ's Divinity***

Islam acknowledges Jesus (Isa) as a prophet and a messenger of God, but it categorically denies his divinity and sonship, considering such beliefs to be a form of shirk (association of partners with God). The Qur'an explicitly states that Jesus was neither crucified nor divine but was instead a servant of Allah. This perspective presents a significant theological divergence from Christianity, which asserts the incarnation and atoning death of Christ as foundational doctrines. This divergence creates a complex dynamic for Christian-Muslim dialogue, where the challenge is to witness the unique nature of Christ while respecting Islamic convictions.<sup>12</sup>

#### ***b. Jewish Perspective on Christ's Divinity***

Judaism traditionally regards Jesus as a historical figure who was a teacher and possibly a prophet but not the Messiah or divine. The claim of Jesus' divinity and messiahship is considered incompatible

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<sup>6</sup> Diana L Eck, *Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banaras* (Beacon Press, 2014).

<sup>7</sup> John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths: Essays in the Philosophy of Religion* (London, Palgrave: Macmillan, 1973).

<sup>8</sup> D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 30–34.

<sup>9</sup> Miroslav Volf, *A Public Faith: How Followers of Christ Should Serve the Common Good* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2011), 40–45.

<sup>10</sup> Gavin D'Costa, *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000), 22–27.

<sup>11</sup> Harold Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism: The Challenge to Christian Faith & Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2001), 50–55.

<sup>12</sup> W. Montgomery Watt, *Muslim-Christian Encounters: Perceptions and Misperceptions* (London: Routledge, 1991), 88–89.

with Jewish monotheism and Messianic expectations. This viewpoint challenges Christian theological claims and has historical implications that have influenced Christian-Jewish relations. Understanding this perspective is crucial for engaging in meaningful dialogue that acknowledges these deep-rooted theological differences.<sup>13</sup>

### ***c. Hindu Perspective on Christ's Divinity***

In Hinduism, Jesus is often seen as one of many divine incarnations or avatars. This pluralistic perspective allows for the acceptance of Jesus as a divine being without the exclusivist claims found in Christianity. While seemingly open and inclusive, this view dilutes the uniqueness of Christ's divinity and poses a challenge for Christian witness in a Hindu context, where the uniqueness of Christ is relativized among other deities and avatars.<sup>14</sup>

### ***d. Buddhist Perspective on Christ's Divinity***

Buddhism typically views Jesus as an enlightened teacher or Bodhisattva, but it does not attribute to him any unique divinity. This philosophical and non-theistic approach contrasts sharply with the Christian understanding of Jesus as the incarnate Word of God. Engaging with this perspective requires a thoughtful approach that respects the non-theistic worldview while articulating the Christian claim of the incarnation.<sup>15</sup>

## **3. Synthesis and Implications for Interfaith Dialogue**

The exploration of these non-Christian perspectives on Jesus Christ highlights the diverse and often conflicting views present in a pluralistic world. Each perspective presents unique challenges to the Christian proclamation of Christ's divinity. For example, the Islamic and Jewish denials of Christ's divine nature directly challenge the fundamental Christian doctrine of the Trinity, while the Hindu and Buddhist views, though seemingly more accepting, relativize Christ's uniqueness by positioning him among many divine figures or enlightened teachers. This context requires Christian theologians to articulate the divinity of Christ in a way that is both faithful to the Christian tradition and respectful of other religious convictions.<sup>16</sup>

While the divinity of Christ is a non-negotiable tenet of Christian faith, engaging with these diverse religious perspectives reveals the need for a nuanced and respectful approach to interfaith dialogue. By acknowledging and understanding the theological positions of other faiths, Christians can more effectively bear witness to the unique identity of Jesus Christ in a pluralistic world, fostering dialogues that are both respectful and transformative.<sup>17</sup>

These diverse views underscore the necessity of a robust theological framework that can affirm Christ's divinity while engaging with the realities of interfaith dialogue.

## **Theological Implications of Christ's Divinity in Johannine Literature**

### ***Summary of Johannine Christology***

The Gospel of John offers a distinct and profound portrayal of Jesus' divine identity, different from the Synoptic Gospels. Johannine Christology is characterized by the explicit declaration of Jesus as the pre-existent Word (Logos) who was both with God and was God (John 1:1). This theological framework is foundational for understanding the unique divine nature of Jesus as presented in the Fourth Gospel. It underscores his role in creation, his incarnation, and his mission to reveal God to humanity, making it a cornerstone for the early Christian understanding of Christ's divinity.

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<sup>13</sup> Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus* (New York: HarperOne, 2006), 150-152.

<sup>14</sup> Francis X. Clooney, *Hindu God, Christian God: How Reason Helps Break Down the Boundaries between Religions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 23-26

<sup>15</sup> Paul F. Knitter, *Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian* (Oxford: ONeworld Publications, 2009), 78-82

<sup>16</sup> Paul F. Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions* (Maryknoll, NT: Orbis Books, 2002), 96-98

<sup>17</sup> Leonard Swidler, *Dialogue for Intrareligious Understanding: Strategies for the Transformation of Culture-Shaping Institutions* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 15-20

## Scholarly Interpretations and Theological Implications

Larry Hurtado argues that the early Christian devotion to Jesus, which included practices of worship and prayer, reflects an early acknowledgment of his divine status.<sup>18</sup> This devotion, Hurtado suggests, indicates that the belief in Jesus' divinity was not a later development but an intrinsic aspect of the early Christian faith, reinforced by the theological assertions found in Johannine literature.

In the Gospel of John, this divine identity is highlighted through Jesus' self-revelatory statements. Phrases such as "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30) and "Before Abraham was, I am" (John 8:58) assert his unity with God and his eternal existence, echoing the divine name revealed to Moses in Exodus 3:14. These declarations are central to the Johannine portrayal of Jesus as not merely a messenger but as God incarnate.

Craig S. Keener emphasizes the role of the Holy Spirit in revealing Jesus' divine identity to his disciples. According to Keener, Johannine pneumatology is crucial for understanding the early church's recognition of Jesus as fully divine.<sup>19</sup> The Spirit's work, as described in John 14-16, illuminates the true nature of Christ, enabling the disciples to comprehend the depth of his unity with the Father and his divine mission.

Gerald O'Collins highlights the intimate relationship between Jesus and the Father as a defining aspect of Johannine Christology. He argues that this relationship is not only a matter of functional unity but also of ontological oneness, where Jesus, in his actions and teachings, fully reveals the Father to the world. O'Collins contends that this unity underscores the Christian claim of Jesus' unique divine status, which is central to the Christian understanding of God's revelation in history.<sup>20</sup>

The Johannine presentation of Christ's divinity, through its emphasis on pre-existence, unity with the Father, and the revelatory role of the Holy Spirit, provides a theological framework that profoundly shapes Christian doctrine. The implications of this Christology are far-reaching, affirming the foundational Christian belief in Jesus' divine nature and his unique role in God's redemptive plan for humanity. This theological foundation remains pivotal in the ongoing dialogue between Christianity and other religious traditions that question the uniqueness of Christ's divinity. With a solid understanding of Johannine Christology established, it is crucial to consider how these theological insights inform contemporary debates regarding the exclusivity of Christ in an increasingly pluralistic world.

## Debates on the Exclusivity of Christ in a Pluralistic World

The question of Christ's exclusivity as the divine Savior is a significant theological issue in today's pluralistic context. The debate typically revolves around three primary perspectives: exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism.

### *Theological Positions*

Karl Rahner's concept of "anonymous Christians" has been a pivotal influence on the inclusivist approach. According to Rahner, while Jesus Christ is the definitive revelation of God, individuals outside the explicit Christian faith can still receive salvation through God's grace, which operates beyond the visible boundaries of the Church. In Christian faith.<sup>21</sup> Rahner's inclusivism allows for a more open dialogue with other religious traditions, suggesting that God's salvific work is not confined to Christianity alone. This view facilitates interfaith dialogue by acknowledging the presence of divine grace in other religions without compromising the centrality of Christ.

On the other hand, Ronald H. Nash represents the exclusivist position, asserting that the New Testament clearly teaches that salvation is available only through Christ. Nash critiques pluralist and inclusivist approaches for undermining the unique role of Jesus as the sole mediator between God and humanity.<sup>22</sup> For Nash, any attempt to relativize Christ's role in salvation diminishes the core message

<sup>18</sup> Larry W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 115–119.

<sup>19</sup> Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, vol. 2 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 694–697.

<sup>20</sup> Gerald O'Collins, *Christology: A Biblical, Historical, and Systematic Study of Jesus*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 79–82.

<sup>21</sup> Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, vol. 6, trans. Karl-H. Kruger (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1969), 390–394.

<sup>22</sup> Ronald H. Nash, *Is Jesus the Only Savior?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 52–54.

of the Gospel and compromises Christian witness. This exclusivist stance challenges Christians to hold firmly to the belief in Christ's uniqueness while navigating interfaith interactions.

Clark Pinnock offers a mediating view that upholds the centrality of Christ while advocating for a broader understanding of salvation. He suggests that God's grace is indeed inclusive, extending beyond the Church, yet Christ remains the decisive revelation of God.<sup>23</sup> Pinnock's position encourages Christians to engage in interfaith dialogue with humility and openness, recognizing the possibility of God's work in other faiths without relinquishing the essential truth of Christ's divinity and salvific role.

N.T. Wright, focusing on the resurrection, argues that Christ's vindication through his resurrection establishes his unique divine identity in a way that no other religious figure can claim.<sup>24</sup> For Wright, the resurrection is the cornerstone of Christian faith and the definitive proof of Christ's lordship over all creation. This view reinforces the exclusivist claim while providing a strong theological foundation for Christian witness in a pluralistic society.

### **Practical Implications for Interfaith Dialogue and Christian Witness**

These differing theological perspectives have significant implications for how Christians engage with people of other faiths. Inclusivism, with its openness to the presence of divine grace in all cultures, encourages respectful dialogue and mutual understanding, fostering a collaborative environment for addressing common social and moral issues. However, it also challenges Christians to articulate clearly why they believe in the uniqueness of Christ amid this inclusivity.

Exclusivism, while firm in its commitment to the singularity of Christ's salvific work, can sometimes hinder open dialogue if not approached with sensitivity and respect. It calls for Christians to witness to their faith boldly, yet with love and humility, recognizing the dignity and worth of all individuals, regardless of their religious background.

Pinnock's mediating view provides a balanced framework for engaging in interfaith dialogue. It allows Christians to affirm their core beliefs while remaining open to learning from other traditions, thus enriching their own understanding of God's work in the world.

In conclusion, the debates on Christ's exclusivity in a pluralistic world invite Christians to reflect deeply on their own theological convictions and the manner in which they engage with those of other faiths. Whether one leans towards inclusivism, exclusivism, or a mediating position, the challenge is to witness faithfully to the uniqueness of Christ while participating in a dialogue that is respectful, compassionate, and transformative.

These debates not only reflect differing theological positions but also lead us to reconsider how suffering and divine identity intersect in the context of Christological discussions.

### **Modern Christological Debates: Suffering and the Divine**

A critical aspect of modern Christological debates is the paradox of Christ's divinity and his profound suffering on the cross. This tension raises important theological questions about how a divine being can experience human suffering and death. Understanding this paradox is essential for a comprehensive view of Christ's divine identity, especially in a world grappling with the reality of suffering and evil.

Jürgen Moltmann, in his seminal work *The Crucified God*, asserts that Christ's suffering and abandonment on the cross should be seen as a divine event. For Moltmann, Christ's cry of dereliction—"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"—reveals a profound moment of divine solidarity with human suffering.<sup>25</sup> Moltmann's theology challenges traditional notions of an impassible God by presenting a God who willingly enters into the depths of human despair, thus making the cross central to understanding both God's nature and his engagement with the world.

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<sup>23</sup> Clark H. Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 110–113.

<sup>24</sup> N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 312–318.

<sup>25</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology\** (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 68–72.

Millard Erickson provides a more traditional interpretation, affirming that orthodox Christology maintains a delicate balance between Jesus' full humanity and full divinity. Erickson argues that the mystery of the incarnation allows for both divine suffering and divine triumph.<sup>26</sup> For Erickson, the resurrection is pivotal, as it demonstrates the victory of divine life over death, thus affirming Christ's divine nature even in the midst of suffering.

Richard Swinburne, meanwhile, highlights the resurrection as the ultimate confirmation of Jesus' divine status. He contends that the resurrection not only vindicates Jesus' teachings but also sets Christianity apart from other world religions, which do not claim a divine figure who overcomes death. According to Swinburne, this unique combination of suffering and resurrection underscores the unparalleled nature of Christ's divinity.<sup>27</sup>

This exploration of suffering and divinity in modern Christological debates reveals the complexity of affirming Christ's divine identity while addressing the existential problem of suffering. For contemporary Christian witness, it is crucial to articulate a theology that does not shy away from the harsh realities of the cross, while also proclaiming the hope and triumph inherent in the resurrection.

Recognizing the complexities of modern Christological debates allows us to explore practical applications for articulating Christ's divine identity in a diverse religious landscape.

### **Contextualizing Christ's Divinity for the Contemporary World**

In a pluralistic world, Christians are challenged to articulate the divinity of Christ in ways that are faithful to the biblical witness while being sensitive to other religious traditions. This is particularly relevant in contexts where diverse beliefs coexist, making it crucial to communicate the Christian understanding of Christ's unique divine identity with both conviction and respect.

Clark Pinnock suggests that engaging in interfaith dialogue does not require compromising the core belief in Christ's divinity. He advocates for a respectful acknowledgment of the presence of truth in other religions while affirming Christ as the definitive revelation of God. This approach allows for meaningful dialogue without diluting the uniqueness of Christ.<sup>28</sup>

Karl Rahner also proposes an inclusivist stance, arguing that while Christ remains the normative revelation of God, God's grace can be at work in other faith traditions. This perspective invites Christians to be open to the possibility that people of other religions may experience God's grace in ways that are not fully understood within the Christian framework, all the while upholding Christ as the ultimate source of salvation.<sup>29</sup>

Craig Evans, through his archaeological work, supports the historical reliability of Jesus' divine claims, providing a robust foundation for engaging with other faiths from a position of scholarly and historical credibility. Evans' findings give Christians confidence in asserting the divinity of Christ as a historical and theological fact, which is crucial when engaging in interfaith dialogue.<sup>30</sup>

### **Application to Ministry Contexts**

#### **1. Introduction to Practical Applications for Ministry**

Theological discussions on the divinity of Christ are not just academic; they have significant implications for ministry leaders who operate in diverse religious environments. For pastors, missionaries, and those involved in interfaith initiatives, effectively communicating the unique identity of Christ is essential.<sup>31</sup> The following strategies provide practical approaches for ministry leaders to engage with individuals from other faiths, maintaining the integrity of the Christian proclamation while fostering respectful and meaningful dialogue.

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<sup>26</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *The Word Became Flesh: A Contemporary Incarnational Christology\** (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1991), 132–137.

<sup>27</sup> Richard Swinburne, *The Resurrection of God Incarnate* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003), 203–207.

<sup>28</sup> Pinnock, A Wideness in God's Mercy, 141–143.

<sup>29</sup> Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, 403.

<sup>30</sup> Craig A. Evans, *Jesus and His World: The Archaeological Evidence* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 83–85.

<sup>31</sup> Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism: The Challenge to Christian Faith and Mission*, 45.

## **2. Strategies for Effective Ministry in Pluralistic Contexts**

### ***a. Contextualized Preaching and Teaching***

Ministry leaders should aim to present the divinity of Christ in ways that resonate with the cultural and religious backgrounds of their audience. For instance, in predominantly Hindu or Buddhist contexts, emphasizing Christ's role as the divine Word (Logos) who brings enlightenment and transformation can draw meaningful parallels to familiar religious concepts, without compromising the distinctiveness of the Christian message. This contextualized approach can make the gospel more accessible, helping listeners to understand the relevance of Christ's divinity within their own worldview.<sup>32</sup>

### ***b. Building Respectful Interfaith Relationships***

Establishing genuine relationships with leaders and members of other religious communities is crucial. Ministry leaders can host interfaith dialogues and participate in community events to foster mutual respect and understanding. Such relational approaches create a foundation for discussing theological differences, including the divinity of Christ, in a respectful and non-confrontational manner.<sup>33</sup> This not only demonstrates a commitment to peaceful coexistence but also opens up avenues for deeper, more impactful conversations about faith.

### ***c. Witnessing through Service and Compassion***

Actions often speak louder than words in interfaith contexts. Ministry leaders can witness to the divinity of Christ through acts of service, compassion, and social justice initiatives. By embodying the love and character of Christ in tangible ways—such as providing healthcare, education, or community support—Christians can demonstrate the transformative power of the gospel. This holistic witness can open doors for deeper theological conversations about the nature of Christ, showing how his divinity translates into a lived expression of God's love for humanity.<sup>34</sup>

## **3. Case Studies of Ministry in Pluralistic Contexts**

### ***Case Study: Interfaith Dialogue in a Multi-Religious Community***

In a community where Christians, Muslims, and Hindus coexisted, a local church organized a series of interfaith dialogues focusing on shared values such as peace, justice, and community service. These events provided a platform for discussing theological differences, including the nature of Christ, in a respectful and open manner. The church's commitment to social initiatives, such as healthcare and education, further solidified its witness, demonstrating the practical outworking of their belief in Christ's divinity through service. This approach not only strengthened the church's relationship with other religious communities but also provided opportunities for sharing the gospel in a contextually sensitive way.<sup>35</sup>

## **Addressing Common Challenges in Interfaith Ministry**

### ***a. Navigating Doctrinal Differences***

One of the significant challenges in interfaith ministry is addressing doctrinal differences without appearing confrontational or dismissive. Ministry leaders should be well-versed in both their own theological traditions and the beliefs of other religions to engage in meaningful dialogue. Preparation involves studying key religious texts and traditions to understand how to communicate the uniqueness of Christ's divinity in a way that is both theologically sound and contextually appropriate.<sup>36</sup>

### ***b. Balancing Witness and Respect***

Ministry leaders must balance the call to witness with respect for the deeply held beliefs of others. This requires a posture of humility and a commitment to listening before speaking. By genuinely

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<sup>32</sup> Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2002), 55.

<sup>33</sup> Paul F. Knitter, *One Earth Many Religions: Multifaith Dialogue and Global Responsibility* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995), 63

<sup>34</sup> John R. W. Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 89.

<sup>35</sup> Arvind Sharma, *A Primal Perspective on the Philosophy of Religion* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2006), 112.

<sup>36</sup> Miroslav Volf, *Allah: A Christian Response* (New York: HarperOne, 2011), 96.

understanding the faith journeys of others, Christians can share the gospel in a way that is empathetic and respectful, thus enhancing the credibility of their witness.<sup>37</sup>

### **Equipping Ministry Leaders for Pluralistic Contexts**

In conclusion, engaging in ministry within a pluralistic world requires ministry leaders to be both rooted in the truth of Christ's divinity and sensitive to the diverse religious landscapes they navigate. By adopting contextualized approaches, building respectful relationships, and demonstrating Christ's love through service, ministry leaders can effectively bear witness to the unique identity of Jesus Christ. As they do so, they will be better equipped to navigate the complexities of interfaith dialogue, making the gospel accessible and relevant without compromising its transformative power.<sup>38</sup>

By applying these contextualized approaches, we can better understand the implications of Christ's divinity for both theology and practice in a pluralistic context.

### **Contributions to Knowledge**

This paper makes several key contributions to the ongoing theological debate about the divinity of Christ in a pluralistic world. First, it underscores the importance of Johannine theology as a foundational framework for understanding Christ's divine identity, particularly in the context of modern interreligious challenges. Second, by engaging with contemporary scholars such as Karl Rahner, Clark Pinnock, and N.T. Wright, it offers a nuanced discussion of how Christ's divinity can be understood in relation to other religious traditions. Third, it provides practical recommendations for engaging in interfaith dialogue without compromising the core Christian belief in Christ's unique divine status. Finally, this paper advances the broader field of Christology by demonstrating how the traditional Christian doctrine of Christ's divinity can be meaningfully contextualized in contemporary interreligious dialogue. By situating Christ's divinity within the framework of pluralism, this study facilitates an inclusive theological conversation that affirms Christ's uniqueness while being open to the reality of religious diversity. These contributions highlight the importance of an inclusive yet firm stance on Christ's divinity, setting the stage for a final reflection on our central thesis.

### **CONCLUSION**

In a pluralistic world, articulating the divinity of Christ requires a thoughtful approach that respects diverse religious perspectives while maintaining the core tenets of the Christian faith. This paper has examined the theological implications of Christ's identity through the lens of Johannine literature, highlighting its significance amidst modern interreligious challenges. By engaging with scholars such as Karl Rahner, Clark Pinnock, and N.T. Wright, we see that Christ's divinity can be understood in relation to other faiths without compromising its uniqueness. The practical suggestions for interfaith dialogue underscore the importance of contextualized communication, respectful relationships, and acts of service as avenues for witness. These strategies enable Christians to effectively articulate their beliefs while fostering a climate of mutual understanding. Ultimately, this study affirms that the doctrine of Christ's divinity remains vital in a pluralistic context. By situating this belief within a framework of respect and openness, Christians can engage in meaningful dialogue that honors both their faith and the diversity of the world around them.

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<sup>37</sup> Mark D. Chapman, *Christianity on Trial: African and Global Perspectives* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2011), 144.

<sup>38</sup> Robert J. Schreiter, *The New Catholicity: Theology between the Global and the Local* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1997), 51-52.

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