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**Soteriological Apprehension in Modern Religious Thought:
From John Hick to Contemporary Cognitive and Affective
Approaches**

Simmo Kerem

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Philosophy and Religions

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the extent to which differences in religious interpretation arise not primarily from doctrinal divergence, but from historically conditioned cognitive and affective frameworks through which human experience is structured and evaluated. Taking the pluralistic philosophy of religion developed by John Hick as its point of departure, the study seeks to refine this approach by integrating insights from Buddhist philosophy, early modern empiricism, and contemporary cognitive and affective science.

The analysis proceeds in four stages. First, it examines the conceptual foundations of Hick's pluralism and the interpretive assumptions underlying his comparative framework. Second, it evaluates the methodological limitations of contemporary empirical approaches to religion, particularly in relation to conceptual under-specification. Third, it develops a model of constructed experience through a comparative analysis of Yogācāra thought, David Hume's account of the self, and predictive processing theories. Finally, it explores the affective foundations of ethical experience, with particular attention to the emergence of guilt and shame and their role in soteriological transformation.

The study argues that religious traditions can be understood as contextually mediated responses to shared cognitive and affective structures. It concludes that soteriological concepts and practices function, at least in part, as mechanisms for regulating affective tension and facilitating ethical transformation, thereby offering a more integrated framework for the comparative study of religion.

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Introduction

John Hick's pluralistic hypothesis represents one of the most influential attempts within the Western intellectual tradition to reconcile religious diversity with a coherent theological framework. His central claim—that the major world religions constitute culturally mediated responses to a single transcendent Reality—has proven both philosophically productive and ethically significant. Across the great religious traditions, salvation or liberation is understood as a transformation of human existence from self-centredness to Reality-centredness, mediated through diverse symbolic, doctrinal, and cultural forms.

The present study broadly accepts Hick's central conclusions. At the same time, it argues that his comparative evaluations are shaped by interpretive priorities rooted in theological and cultural horizons historically associated with Western Christianity in its culturally and, in part, demographically dominant forms. In addition to recognising religious pluralism, it is therefore necessary to account for the cognitive, affective, and conceptual conditions that shape how religious phenomena are identified, weighted, and compared.

This observation does not imply a methodological error in Hick's work. Rather, it reflects the more general point that comparative frameworks inevitably operate with prior assumptions concerning what counts as religiously salient. Such assumptions function as implicit evaluative lenses through which traditions other than one's own are interpreted and assessed.

In light of these considerations, the present study adopts an interdisciplinary approach that brings philosophical, comparative, and scientific perspectives into dialogue.

This thesis argues that differences in religious interpretation arise not primarily from doctrinal divergence, but from historically conditioned cognitive and affective frameworks through which human experience is structured and evaluated. By integrating insights from John Hick's pluralism, Buddhist philosophy, early modern empiricism, and contemporary cognitive and affective science, it demonstrates that religious traditions can be understood as contextually mediated responses to shared structures of perception, valuation, and meaning-making.

In addition to his career as a theologian and philosopher, Hick was a prolific writer and editor. Titles such as *God Has Many Names* (1982) and *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* (1987) indicate the trajectory of his thought toward an explicitly pluralistic theology of religions. For the purposes of this thesis, the

primary focus falls on Hick's later work, particularly *An Interpretation of Religion* (1989) and *The New Frontier of Religion and Science* (2006).

The following chapter examines the conceptual foundations of Hick's pluralistic framework and traces its development across the later decades of his work.

1. John Hick's Pluralistic Framework: Foundations and Conceptual Sources

This chapter examines the conceptual foundations of Hick's pluralistic hypothesis and identifies the interpretive assumptions that structure its comparative framework.

1.1. Foundations of Hick's Pluralism

1.1.1 Paul Tillich's Existentialism

One of the foundational pillars of John Hick's pluralistic vision is the existential theology of Paul Tillich. Outside specifically Christian cultural contexts, Tillich's thought has often been regarded as providing a particularly suitable basis for interreligious dialogue involving Christians (Suot et al. 2025).

Hick draws upon Tillich's expansive understanding of religion as a fundamental existential orientation of human life, while simultaneously cautioning against fixation on anthropomorphic representations, which both thinkers regard as a simplification and a potential source of idolatry. Central to this shared orientation is Tillich's concept of *ultimate concern*, experienced at the boundary conditions of human existence, which serves as a key reference point for Hick: "I suggest that Paul Tillich's concept of 'ultimate concern' ... can serve as a pointer in the right direction" (Hick 1989:4).

In Tillich's view, religion is defined not primarily by doctrinal formulations or institutional structures, but by an existential relationship to the transcendent. This perspective opens a conceptual pathway toward mysticism and esotericism by foregrounding the internal, transformative dimension of religious life—one measured not by external authority or formal adherence, but by the depth of engagement with the Real.

1.1.1.1 Cognitive Science of Religion (CSR) Parallels with Tillich

In recent decades, the Cognitive Science of Religion (CSR) has emerged as a multidisciplinary field examining religious belief and behaviour through naturalistic and evolutionary frameworks. Benjamin Grant Purzycki, one of the central figures in this field, has investigated how beliefs in supernatural monitoring agents shape moral cognition and social behaviour.

Although empirical in orientation, Purzycki's research resonates conceptually with Tillich's notion of *ultimate concern*, particularly in its demonstration of how humans project moral salience and existential significance onto unseen agents. His fieldwork among the Tyvan people illustrates how spirits are perceived as responding to threats against moral and communal integrity, thereby showing how existential values become encoded within supernatural cognition (Purzycki 2011; 2016). These findings (Purzycki & Sosis 2022) converge with Hick's emphasis on the shared soteriological orientation of the world religions,

even while diverging from his reliance on Karl Jaspers' Axial Age hypothesis, which recent CSR research suggests to be historically and cognitively oversimplified.

These parallels suggest that what appears within theological discourse as “ultimate concern” may also be understood, at least in part, as reflecting underlying cognitive and affective structures. This raises the question of how such structures influence not only religious experience itself, but also the ways in which religious traditions are interpreted and compared.

In this context, it is necessary to distinguish the specifically religious dimension of “ultimate concern” from its non-religious manifestations, which both Hick and Tillich tend to associate with forms of ideological absolutisation.

1.1.1.2 Tillich, Hick, and the Classification of Religions: Confucianism as a Borderline Case

The implications of these classificatory tensions become particularly clear in borderline cases such as the status of Confucianism within modern categories of religion.

Paul Tillich approaches the classification of religions not through absolute or formal criteria, but in relation to wider existential and cultural conditions. His critique of *pseudo-religions*—instances in which finite realities such as race, nation, or political ideology are elevated to the status of absolutes—highlights how the religious impulse may be redirected rather than eliminated.

Within this framework, Tillich characterises Confucianism as a “system of conventional rules” (Tillich 1957:66) and concludes that “its basic character is secular” (ibid.: 67). John Hick supplements this assessment with historical considerations, emphasising Confucianism’s original social and ethical orientation, its relative indifference toward transcendence, and its later canonical elevation under imperial authority.

Jiayi (2023) attempts to challenge Tillich’s position but becomes entangled in largely terminological disputes. While citing contemporary scholars who treat Confucianism as their *ultimate concern*, the analysis fails to distinguish clearly between these modern reinterpretations and the historically distinct Neo-Confucian—such as those associated with Zhu Xi (d.1200) and Lu Jiuyuan (d.1192), or even earlier movements—as well as their later intellectual successors.

Moreover, there is little, if any, evidence that Confucius’ earliest followers understood his teaching in explicitly religious terms. This further supports the view that the contemporary categorisation of early Confucianism as a “religion” reflects a retrospective misclassification rather than an emic self-

understanding. Later developments within the Confucian tradition—particularly during the Ming dynasty, when Confucian thought absorbed elements from Buddhism and Daoism—illustrate another pattern identified by Tillich: originally secular or humanist systems gradually acquiring religious dimensions through historical accretion.

Classical Chinese religiosity itself included a tripartite structure encompassing deities and immortals, spirits and functionaries, and ancestors and ghosts. Confucius, however, consistently avoids discussion of supernatural beings. His well-known statements from *Analects*—

(7.20) “The subjects on which the Master did not talk, were— extraordinary things, feats of strength, disorder, and spiritual beings”

and

(11.11) “While you are not able to serve men, how can you serve their spirits?” - (transl. Legge 1861)

—demonstrate a deliberate emphasis on administrative, ethical, and social concerns rather than metaphysical speculation.

Although ancestral rites remain important within Confucian practice, Confucius appears to reinterpret them in cultural–ethical rather than supernatural terms. This contrasts with Christian veneration of saints or with African religious traditions in which ancestors function as powerful invisible agents (Cordeiro-Rodrigues & Agada 2022:6). While Tillich acknowledges contemporary ancestral reverence as a “sacramental element,” this dimension is best understood as a later accretion, likely influenced by Daoist cosmology rather than by early Confucian teaching itself.

Hick’s position on this issue is consistent: the category of *religion* should be reserved for traditions that affirm a transcendent reality and articulate a path of transformative alignment with it. From this perspective, the classification of early Confucianism as a religion remains problematic in the absence of a clearly articulated transcendent soteriological framework.

These classificatory ambiguities suggest that the identification of a tradition as “religious” depends not only on its internal structure, but also on the interpretive frameworks through which it is viewed. The persistence of such divergences therefore reinforces the need to examine how inherited hermeneutical and phenomenological categories shape the perception, evaluation, and comparison of religious phenomena.

1.1.1.3 Daoism and the Religious Dimension of Classical China

This classificatory ambiguity becomes clearer when Confucianism is contrasted with Daoism, which exemplifies a more explicitly articulated religious paradigm within classical Chinese culture.

Western audiences most often encounter Daoism through its philosophical texts, largely because this material is more readily accessible in translation and has long been privileged within Western interpretive frameworks. Early Daoist traditions, however, emerged in continuity with ancient Chinese shamanic culture. The *wu* specialists engaged in trance states, spirit journeys, healing practices, exorcism, and cosmological ascent—features characteristic of shamanistic systems across cultures. Kristofer Schipper, both an ordained Daoist priest and a leading sinologist, affirms this continuity: “In every period Daoism has been defined in relation to shamanism” (Schipper 1982:6).

Despite significant historical disruptions, Daoism continues to encompass a wide range of lineages, including the esoteric and monastic Quanzhen tradition and the ritual-communal Zhengyi tradition, alongside earlier movements such as Shangqing, Celestial Masters, and Lingbao. Its canonical corpus, the *Daozang*, comprises over a thousand texts encompassing ritual manuals, cosmology, alchemy, liturgy, and philosophy.

The Daoist pantheon has historically been extensive. In the fifth century, Tao Hongjing’s catalogue of deities venerated within the Shangqing tradition alone extended to twenty-eight pages (Robinet 1992:18). Such material demonstrates a mythic and ritual richness that extends far beyond the philosophical layer associated with Laozi and Zhuangzi, which Western traditions most often isolate and treat as essential.

The anthropomorphic representation of transcendent realities as a simplifying strategy is a widespread feature across religious traditions. Beyond cultural variation, such exoteric forms support Hick’s soteriologically grounded thesis: the affirmation of divine agency reflects a perceived need for structures capable of addressing existential concerns.

The contrast between Confucianism and Daoism thus illustrates that the distinction between “religious” and “non-religious” traditions cannot be drawn solely on textual or doctrinal grounds. Rather, it depends on the interaction between lived practice, symbolic representation, and the interpretive categories applied by observers.

1.1.2 Kantian Epistemology and the Limits of Religious Experience

Immanuel Kant's distinction between the thing-in-itself (*das Ding an sich*) and phenomena as they are experienced plays a foundational role in Hick's pluralistic hypothesis. By distinguishing between the Real *an sich* and the Real as humanly experienced, Hick is able to account for the diversity of religious traditions within a unified metaphysical schema. At the same time, this move imposes a strict epistemic limitation: the Real remains ineffable and inaccessible in itself. Religious experience thus becomes an encounter not with the Real directly, but with culturally mediated manifestations shaped by human cognitive and symbolic frameworks.

This Kantian restriction is by no means unique to Hick. It has exerted a profound influence on Western theology and the academic study of religion more broadly, encouraging interpretations of religion primarily in ethical, existential, or symbolic terms, while systematically marginalising claims to direct experiential apprehension of ultimate reality.

Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan articulates a fundamental limitation of this framework when applied to religion:

If we assimilate religious experience to the moral consciousness, as Kant is inclined to do, we overlook the distinctive characters of the two activities... Religion is not mere consciousness of value... There is in it a mystical element, an apprehension of the Real, an enjoyment of it for its own sake..." (Radhakrishnan 1957)

Similar linguistic and conceptual patterns may emerge independently in contexts shaped by comparable intellectual and cultural pressures. Kant's moral philosophy presupposes a cognitive ideal marked by extreme formalism, rule-orientation, and affective restraint—features that may be described, in contemporary terms, as reflecting a highly formalised and system-oriented cognitive style. No psychological attribution is implied here; the observation is structural rather than diagnostic. But philosophical systems become influential not only because of their internal coherence, but also because they resonate with pre-existing affective and normative dispositions within a given cultural milieu.

The historical influence of Kant's moral philosophy may be understood not only in terms of its logical structure, but also in terms of its resonance with broader cultural patterns. Its emphasis on formal universality, abstraction from lived experience, vigilance toward inclination, and the primacy of law over immediacy gave philosophical articulation to tendencies already present within the intellectual and religious environment of Western Christianity. In this sense, Kant's system did not simply introduce new priorities, but rendered existing ones more explicit and systematically grounded.

This alignment helps to explain why Hick’s evaluative framework does not treat esoteric or experiential depth as a primary variable, despite its central importance in many non-Christian traditions.

The progressive privileging of *synderesis* over *prohairesis*—from its Augustinian interiorisation through the moral systematisation of Philip the Chancellor (Potts 1980:94–109)—prefigures the Kantian tendency to interpret religion primarily in moral terms. This move is critically examined within Indic philosophy by Radhakrishnan, and, from a different perspective, by Mulla Sadra. The latter’s warning concerning the limits of human cognition captures the force of this critique: “Beware of assuming with your limited intelligence...” (Amuli 2024:68)

Here, “limited intelligence” denotes not a deficiency, but a standpoint constrained by particular modes of understanding—an observation that resonates with contemporary models such as Friston’s free-energy principle, which similarly emphasise the bounded and predictive nature of cognition.

Taken together, these considerations suggest that the interpretation of religious experience is shaped not only by explicit philosophical commitments, but also by historically embedded patterns of cognition, valuation, and expectation. What appears as a neutral epistemic limitation may therefore also reflect the stabilisation of particular interpretive habits. The persistence of such habits raises the question of how these patterns are formed, maintained, and projected onto the interpretation of religious traditions.

1.1.2.1 Developments in Hick’s Later Work

John Hick’s later work, particularly *The New Frontier of Religion and Science*, marks a significant development in his pluralistic framework. Without abandoning Kantian terminology altogether, Hick increasingly turns toward neuroscience and empirical psychology, adopting a form of critical realism according to which religious experiences may be neurologically mediated while nonetheless remaining potentially veridical. The Real continues to elude direct conceptual grasp, but mystical experience is no longer excluded in principle. Even so, Hick does not fully depart from the Kantian inheritance that constrains the possibility of wholly unmediated apprehension of ultimate reality.

This later phase of Hick’s thought also exhibits a growing sensitivity to Buddhist philosophy, particularly to Mahāyāna traditions. While Hick does not adopt Buddhist metaphysics as such, Buddhism functions within his work as a critical counterweight to the theistic assumptions embedded in much of Western philosophy of religion. Its capacity to articulate a fully developed soteriology without recourse to the projection of anthropomorphic attributes—such as a creator deity—appears to have reinforced Hick’s

movement away from inadequately specified metaphysical realism and toward an emphasis on transformative experience.

Over time, this engagement strengthens Hick's inclination to treat doctrinal language as culturally conditioned and pragmatically oriented, rather than as descriptively referential of ultimate reality. Buddhism thus operates less as a source of doctrinal content than as a conceptual pressure that loosens the necessity of theistic categories while preserving the soteriological core of religious life.

This development further reinforces the need to examine the mechanisms through which religious experience is interpreted, classified, and evaluated across different conceptual frameworks.

1.1.2.2 Kantian and Buddhist Conceptions of Transcendence

As Hick's later work moves away from Kantian transcendental theology toward process-oriented accounts of religious experience, neuroscience, and engagement with Buddhism, the present study likewise does not employ the Kantian notion of the transcendental. Instead, it analyses modes of transcendence in a phenomenological and soteriological sense, where transcendence is understood as a transformation of self-relation, often involving the decentring or dissolution of the ordinary sense of self.

This usage aligns more closely with Buddhist, mystical, and neurophenomenological models of selfhood than with Kantian transcendental philosophy, which posits a transcendental self as the necessary condition for knowledge and morality.

Hick's later position departs from Kant in several significant respects. Kant's confidence in universal moral rationality as the ultimate unifying horizon is gradually relinquished in favour of an acceptance of multiple, tradition-shaped soteriological trajectories. Similarly, Kant's hierarchical distinction between philosophy as critical reason and religion as symbolic pedagogy is softened: philosophy assumes a primarily descriptive and mediating role, while religion emerges as the principal site of existential transformation. Most notably, Kant's suspicion toward mysticism and claims of experiential immediacy is moderated, as Hick increasingly allows ineffability and lived transformation to carry epistemic weight.

What remains Kantian is the recognition of epistemic limits; what is progressively set aside is the confidence that reason alone can adjudicate the full diversity of religious life.

This shift suggests that differences in the interpretation of transcendence cannot be explained solely by doctrinal variation, but must also be understood in relation to the conceptual and cognitive frameworks through which religious experience is approached.

1.1.3 Jaspers and the Axial Age Hypothesis

John Hick adopts Karl Jaspers' Axial Age hypothesis at a relatively early stage of his work as a framework through which to demonstrate coherence among the world religions. The appeal of Jaspers' model lies in its compatibility with an inherited Kantian reluctance to claim direct access to the Real in itself. Rather than grounding religious convergence in shared aspects of human cognition or constitution, the Axial Age hypothesis offers a historically framed account of parallel spiritual developments.

Jaspers characterises the Axial Age (c. 800–200 BCE) as a period in which multiple civilisations independently developed forms of self-transcendence, existential reflection, and soteriological concern. However, his insistence on near-simultaneity is difficult to sustain. Jaspers himself concedes that the evidence may amount to little more than “synchronistic curiosities” (Jaspers 1953:11), yet continues to pose the question of why such simultaneity should occur (*ibid.*:16).

Comparative evidence suggests that many themes treated as axial—such as sin, guilt, judgement, and redemption—appear in earlier Near Eastern traditions, including Sumerian and Akkadian sources. These include early cosmological narratives, moral frameworks, and conceptions of post-mortem existence (Kramer 1956, 1963). Similarly, key developments within Dharmic traditions extend beyond the temporal boundaries proposed by Jaspers.

While the Axial Age retains heuristic value as a comparative device, its explanatory scope is limited. It tends toward schematic simplification and does not adequately account for the deeper historical and cognitive processes through which religious ideas emerge and are transmitted.

Taken together, the limitations of both Kantian epistemology and the Axial Age hypothesis suggest that religious plurality cannot be fully explained either through abstract epistemic restriction or through simplified historical convergence. Rather, the persistence of divergent interpretations points toward underlying patterns in the ways human beings perceive, structure, and evaluate religious phenomena.

1.2 The Implicit Frame of Comparison

1.2.1 Critiques within the Christian World

Writing within a late modern Western context, John Hick effectively proposes what may be described as a Copernican revolution in Christian theology. While appearing to decentralise Christianity, Hick simultaneously re-centres “the Real”—a transcendental, Kantianly ineffable reality—at the core of all major religious traditions. This Real is never known directly but is always encountered through culturally

and doctrinally mediated forms. Consequently, salvation or transformation is understood not in terms of doctrinal correctness, but as moral and spiritual reorientation within one's respective tradition.

The intended outcome of Hick's proposal is increased mutual understanding, improved interreligious communication, and the possibility of peaceful coexistence grounded in interpretive patience and tolerance. Within the Western context, such a project is both intelligible and necessary. It is therefore unsurprising that Hick has been described by both supporters and critics as "possibly the most significant philosopher of religion in the second half of the twentieth century" (Nah 2012:1) and "one of the leading philosophers of religion of our time" (McCready 1996:257).

At the same time, a significant portion of the criticism directed at Hick from within the Christian world arises from doctrinally conservative positions that regard theological exclusivity and Christological finality as non-negotiable. From this standpoint, Hick's pluralist and metaphorical reconfiguration of Christology is perceived not as a constructive theological development, but as a departure from orthodoxy. Given Hick's own theological formation, such resistance is historically intelligible.

For the purposes of this thesis, however, the detailed internal debates of Christian systematic theology are not central. Questions concerning the precise classification of Hick's position are secondary to the fact that, in the present context, he functions primarily as a philosopher of religion concerned with the nature of religious truth rather than with the preservation of confessional boundaries.

Critiques such as Sonia Sikka's observation that philosophies of religious pluralism may overlook the role of religion as a marker of group identity (Sikka 2021:3–4) raise important sociological considerations. However, such critiques operate at a different analytical level, addressing collective identity and political dynamics rather than the philosophical comparison of religious traditions as soteriological systems. Hick's later work (2006) increasingly gestures toward questions of human constitution and affective vulnerability, but these concerns remain only partially integrated into his comparative framework.

From the perspective of this thesis, the primary significance of Christian critiques of Hick lies in what they reveal about inherited expectations within Christian thought. These critiques illuminate the interpretive priors—shaped by historical theology and cultural inheritance—that guide the weighting of religious features in comparative analysis. Heuristically, this dynamic may be described in Bayesian terms: prior assumptions condition what is perceived as salient, credible, or religiously central before explicit evaluation takes place.

Taken together, these internal responses to Hick's pluralism reveal not a failure of his framework, but the operation of historically embedded interpretive structures that shape what is perceived as religiously acceptable, intelligible, or threatening.

In his proposal for a "more pluralistic hypothesis," Mark S. Heim (1995) argues that religious traditions are oriented toward genuinely distinct soteriological ends, rather than representing different cultural responses to a single ultimate reality. While this position seeks to preserve the integrity of religious difference, it risks essentialising traditions as internally coherent and grammatically bounded systems, thereby underestimating the historically and cognitively conditioned nature of religious interpretation.

The significance of these structures becomes clearer when Hick's proposal is viewed from outside the Christian interpretive horizon. This shift in perspective raises a more general question: if the same religious phenomena can be interpreted so differently across contexts, what mechanisms generate such divergence in both comparative perspectives and the underlying interpretive structures that sustain them?

1.2.2 Perspectives from Outside the Christian World

Outside (post-)Christian cultural settings, Hick's articulation of religious pluralism has often been received with less sense of conceptual disruption. In many non-Christian contexts, the core intuition underlying his proposal—that diverse traditions may share a common soteriological orientation while differing in symbolic and doctrinal expression—has long been regarded as largely self-evident.

As Reza Aslan (1994) notes in his comparison of Hick and Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Hick's respectful treatment of the Prophet Muhammad and the Qur'ān—although differing from traditional Islamic understandings—nonetheless represents an important step toward recognition within Western discourse (Aslan 1994:225). Aslan further observes that the Qur'ān itself permits a more pluralistic reading than the New Testament (*ibid.*: 229–239), aligning with Hick's emphasis on shared soteriological orientation.

Hick himself acknowledged the gradual movement toward pluralism within Christian contexts, yet remained critical of the persistence of what he termed the "old sense of Christian superiority" (Hick 1987:21). From a broader comparative perspective, however, pluralism appears less problematic in traditions such as Hinduism, which may be more accurately described as a dynamic conglomerate of religious forms rather than a system organised around exclusive doctrinal boundaries. Using a Bayesian analogy, diverse teachings within Hindu traditions may be understood as adapting to pre-existing layers

of belief and practice, forming a stratified and evolving configuration rather than competing for exclusive dominance.

A similar ethos is expressed in the well-known statement of Swami Vivekananda: “We Hindus accept every religion...” (Vivekananda 1898).

Comparable patterns are evident in East Asian contexts, where religious practices have historically coexisted and overlapped. In Japan, for example, temples and ritual spaces have often been shared across traditions, while Buddhist schools such as Zen reflect significant Daoist influence alongside inherited Buddhist frameworks.

A contemporary illustration of this orientation appears in *Common Grounds Between Islam & Buddhism* (Kazemi 2010), where both the Dalai Lama and Prince Ghazi emphasise shared soteriological concerns. The former highlights compassion as central to liberation, while the latter draws on Qur’ānic affirmations that guidance has been extended to all peoples (Qur’ān 35:24).

Hick’s pluralism, rooted in his Christian theological background, was shaped by the need to reinterpret a tradition structured around strong claims of exclusivity. From the comparative perspective outlined above, however, his proposal may appear less as a radical innovation and more as a reformulation of intuitions already present in other religious contexts.

This contrast highlights the extent to which interpretive frameworks shape what is perceived as innovative, threatening, or self-evident within the philosophy of religion.

Taken together, these contrasting receptions suggest that the perceived novelty or disruption of pluralism depends less on its content than on the interpretive conditions under which it is received. At the same time, the uneven presence of pluralistic attitudes indicates that pluralism itself is not a given, but something that must be continually negotiated or reconstructed.

The following chapter addresses this problem by examining how such differences arise through the formation of interpretive habits and conditioned modes of perception.

1.3 Summary

This chapter has examined the conceptual foundations of John Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis and the interpretive assumptions that underlie his comparative framework. While Hick’s model provides a compelling account of religious diversity centred on the notion of the Real and the transformation from

self-centredness to Reality-centredness, it has been shown that his approach remains shaped by conceptual priorities rooted in the Western theological and philosophical tradition.

The analysis of Tillich, Kant, and Jaspers has demonstrated how these influences structure Hick's understanding of religion, particularly in relation to transcendence, moral transformation, and the limits of knowledge. At the same time, the examination of Confucianism and Daoism has illustrated how classificatory frameworks may reflect inherited interpretive categories rather than the internal structure of the traditions themselves.

The contrasting reception of Hick's pluralism within and outside the Christian world further reveals the extent to which comparative evaluation is conditioned by historically embedded assumptions. These findings suggest that differences in the interpretation of religious phenomena cannot be explained solely in terms of doctrinal variation, but must also be understood in relation to the cognitive, affective, and conceptual frameworks through which such phenomena are perceived.

The foregoing analysis suggests that differences in the interpretation of religious phenomena arise not only from doctrinal divergence, but from historically conditioned frameworks through which such phenomena are perceived and evaluated. These frameworks are not merely theological in nature, but reflect broader cognitive, affective, and conceptual patterns.

The following chapter develops this insight by examining whether contemporary approaches to the study of religion—particularly those informed by scientific and empirical methods—are able to account for these conditioning structures, or whether they remain constrained by comparable forms of conceptual under-specification. This shift is necessary because, if differences in religious interpretation arise from underlying cognitive and affective frameworks, then their analysis requires engagement with disciplines that explicitly address the structure of mind and experience.

2 Conceptual Limits of Empirical Approaches: Neuroscience, Interpretation, and the Study of Religion

2.1 Introduction

Building on the preceding analysis of interpretive conditioning, this chapter examines the extent to which contemporary scientific approaches to religion are able to address these underlying structures. In doing so, it also introduces Buddhist philosophical traditions as a comparative resource, whose longstanding analysis of mind and experience provides an important point of reference for evaluating such approaches.

In light of the interpretive challenges outlined in the previous chapter, the emergence of neuroimaging and related scientific approaches has been seen as offering a potential methodological advance in the study of religion. Functional MRI appeared to offer a methodological breakthrough capable of addressing long-standing questions concerning mystical experience and ritual transformation through empirical investigation.

Yet while the technological achievements of neuroimaging have been significant, their impact on the conceptual architecture of religious studies has remained comparatively limited. Neural correlates of meditation and prayer have been mapped with increasing precision, but foundational questions concerning the structure of selfhood and soteriological transformation remain largely unresolved. This asymmetry suggests that the present limitation may be conceptual rather than technological.

It is precisely at this juncture that Buddhist traditions assume central importance. Over centuries, Buddhist thinkers developed highly differentiated analyses of consciousness, affect, intention, and perception, articulating conceptual instruments capable of distinguishing phenomenological, ethical, and cognitive strata with remarkable precision. In this respect, Buddhism does not merely provide comparative material; it offers a historically elaborated model of mind against which contemporary neuroscientific and philosophical categories may be critically assessed.

The present chapter therefore examines both how Buddhism has often been interpreted through Western conceptual frameworks and how it appears within its own historical and intellectual development. By identifying recurrent patterns of misinterpretation, the analysis prepares the ground for a more adequate engagement with Buddhist conceptual resources in the following chapter.

2.2 Insufficient conceptual stratification in the Study of Religion

The introduction of neuroimaging into the study of religion generated considerable enthusiasm. Within cognitive neuroscience, such methods constituted a genuine methodological advance. Yet their impact upon the theoretical structure of religious studies has remained comparatively limited, suggesting a degree of conceptual under-stratification.

One of the most influential centres examining the cognitive dimensions of religion is the academic community associated with Armin W. Geertz, sometimes referred to as the “Aarhus School.” Its contributions have been both significant and methodologically innovative. In contexts where conceptual definitions remain in flux, exploratory approaches may indeed yield more insight than rigid adherence to prematurely fixed frameworks. The following examples are therefore not intended as criticism of empirical research itself, but as illustrations of a broader conceptual difficulty: without sufficiently articulated theoretical structures, empirical findings risk remaining underdetermined.

In his introduction to a 2014 collection, Geertz repeatedly employs the concept of “phylogeny,” signalling an interest in deeper evolutionary layers of human cognition and their relevance for religious phenomena. A similar orientation appears in later discussions, such as the editorial call for rethinking religion through evolution and cognition (Petersen et al., 2019). Such an “archaeology of mind” is entirely justified when addressing religious and proto-religious phenomena whose historical depth extends far beyond the emergence of Christianity.

A useful analogy may be drawn from archaeology. Victor Sarianidi, whose excavations in the BMAC region revealed ritual practices predating later Vedic traditions, emphasised that empirical discovery is guided by theoretical orientation: excavation confirms hypotheses developed through prior analytic reasoning. Without sufficiently defined conceptual frameworks, empirical investigation risks becoming indeterminate, producing data whose interpretive significance remains unclear.

This tension is reflected in the anecdote recounted by Klostergaard Petersen and Jensen (2019), in which preliminary brain imaging experiments produced ambiguous results: “Slightly surprising to all of us, there was more neural activity in the football than in Armin meditating upon his lecture” (ibid.:36). The point is not methodological failure but interpretive limitation: without stable conceptual categories, neural data remain difficult to interpret in a meaningful way.

A similar ambiguity appears in studies comparing different forms of prayer (Schjoedt 2009; 2014:307). While differences in activation patterns are observed, their significance depends on prior assumptions

regarding intentionality, agency, and relational cognition. In the absence of such conceptual grounding, empirical distinctions risk remaining descriptive rather than explanatory.

The limitations identified above suggest that further empirical refinement alone is unlikely to resolve the underlying conceptual indeterminacy. What is required instead is a framework in which cognition, affect, and transformation have already been systematically analysed. It is precisely at this point that Buddhist philosophical traditions become particularly relevant.

In addition to this theoretical scaffold, meditative practices most commonly associated with Buddhist traditions have now been extensively studied. A growing body of meta-analytical research indicates consistent positive changes grounded in neuroplasticity, observable both in brain structure (cf. Calderone et al. 2024; Fox et al. 2014) and in neurophysiological regulation. The latter includes alterations in stress-related hormonal profiles, such as reductions in cortisol levels (cf. Vargas-Uricoechea et al. 2024), as well as increases in compounds associated with social bonding and well-being, including oxytocin and beta-endorphins (cf. Philip et al. 2025).

This further reinforces the need for conceptual frameworks capable of integrating cognitive, affective, and soteriological dimensions—an integration that will be explored through Buddhist philosophical models in the following chapter.

2.2.1 Problems of Coherence and Levels of Analysis

The rise of so-called neurotheology—exemplified in works such as *Neurotheology and How God Changes Your Brain* by Andrew B. Newberg and colleagues—appeared to promise a form of empirical consolidation.

The familiar metaphor that “we all harbor a pack of neurological wolves” (Newberg & Waldman 2009:191) captures evolutionary layering in accessible terms. Yet such dualistic framing also illustrates a form of methodological compression: heterogeneous neural systems are organised into simplified moral hierarchies, while the phenomena under examination—ritual, transformation, and liberation—remain conceptually underdetermined.

A further complication concerns the affective processes already noted above. As affective neuroscience has demonstrated (Panksepp & Biven 2012), cortical structures are not strictly necessary for the generation of primary affective responses; rather, cortical functions modulate and refine subcortical activity. When examples drawn from mammalian behaviour are employed metaphorically, distinctions between

phylogenetically ancient mechanisms of affect regulation and culturally elaborated forms of moral transformation may become blurred. What appears as a unified explanatory framework may therefore conflate distinct levels of organisation.

A comparable ambiguity arises in discussions of ritualisation. In classical ethology, ritualisation refers to an evolutionarily conserved transformation of behaviour observable across animal species, including humans (cf. Lorenz 1981). In anthropological discourse, by contrast, ritual denotes historically embedded symbolic action. When phenomena characterised by “rhythmic and repetitive elements” (Newberg 2018:214) are described as “ritualisation” without specifying the explanatory level, neural description risks spanning both phylogenetically ancient regulatory mechanisms and culturally elaborated meaning-structures simultaneously.

Taken together, these examples indicate that the limitations identified above are not primarily technological but conceptual in nature. The central difficulty lies not in empirical inadequacy, but in insufficient stratification of conceptual levels.

Such conceptual compression obscures the extent to which interpretation itself is conditioned by the interaction of distinct cognitive, affective, and cultural levels.

2.3 Methodological Considerations: Sources, Translation, and Interpretation

The conceptual limitations identified above are compounded when religious traditions are approached through translation, inherited classificatory habits, and externally imposed categories.

2.3.1 Translation as Philosophical Interpretation

Issues of translation are crucial for understanding Buddhist texts. Since meaning in many Buddhist sources is conveyed through associative, symbolic, and transformative structures rather than through strictly propositional clarity, translation in such cases inevitably involves interpretation.

As Fabio Rambelli (2013) observes, different Buddhist schools historically developed “strategies to provide a more adequate representation of reality aimed at the attainment of enlightenment” (ibid., xii). These strategies included terminological systems carrying highly specific semantic and soteriological weight, eventually forming a specialised doctrinal vocabulary. The continued use of this vocabulary, Rambelli notes, “has now become a major obstacle for the understanding of Buddhism among the general public even in traditionally Buddhist countries in Asia” (ibid., xiii).

Even foundational doctrinal terms lack fully satisfactory and universally accepted one- or two-word English equivalents. As Linnart Mäll (2003:26) notes in relation to *dharma* and *prajñā*, translation remains conceptually unstable.

A particularly illustrative example, central to Buddhism, is *duḥkha*, often rendered—misleadingly—as “suffering.” At the level of everyday consciousness, “suffering” readily evokes associations with pain, trauma, or emotional distress. The well-known formulation “life is suffering” has thus contributed to the widespread perception of Buddhism as a pessimistic or depressive religion (Lopez 1995). Such associations significantly narrow the semantic field of the original concept.

A useful contrast may be drawn with modern psychiatric usage. Clinical psychiatry employs the notion of “suffering” in a restricted and diagnostically structured sense. For example, Kurt Schneider (1967) defines psychopathology in terms of whether an individual “suffers” or “makes others suffer.” As later analyses have shown (Crowhurst & Crows 1989; Ekselius 2018), this framework influenced psychiatric classification systems well into the late twentieth century. In such contexts, “suffering” refers primarily to experiential distress or social maladaptation—that is, deviation from normative functioning (Pyatnitskiy 2019).

While Paul Tillich came to recognise that psychological healing without explicit religious reference may itself possess a salvific dimension (Dourley 2008:144), this recognition also implicitly marks a boundary. It leaves unaddressed the spectrum and depth of conditions typically situated within the domain of psychiatry. In this sense, the “suffering” that defines psychopathology denotes something both qualitatively and quantitatively more intense than the forms of discomfort or existential unease commonly associated with everyday experience. This distinction further highlights the risk of translating *duḥkha* simply as “suffering,” insofar as the latter term carries strong clinical connotations in modern usage.

By contrast, *duḥkha* in early Buddhist thought includes pain but cannot be reduced to it. Rather, it refers to a condition arising from a limited or conditioned perspective: a structural incompleteness, ontological instability, and the friction generated by impermanence. Closely related to *anicca* (impermanence) and *anattā* (non-self), *duḥkha* denotes a pervasive unsatisfactoriness inherent in conditioned existence.

For this reason, Christopher Gowans (2003:121–128) prefers renderings such as “discomfort” or “uncertainty,” emphasising the existential and structural dimensions of the concept. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1923) translates it as “sorrow.” While none of these alternatives is fully adequate, they

are often considered less misleading than the narrow psychological connotations of “suffering.” At the same time, *duḥkha* encompasses a much broader range of meanings, including misfortune, instability, and the repetitive frustration inherent in cyclic existence (*saṃsāra*).

A particularly clear modern exposition is offered by Walpola Rahula in *What the Buddha Taught* (1974/1997), where he emphasises that *duḥkha* includes pain but extends beyond it to denote the unsatisfactory nature of conditioned existence. Even pleasurable states contain an element of *duḥkha*, insofar as they are unstable and dependent on impermanent conditions:

It is true that the Pali word *dukkha* ... means ‘suffering’... But the term *duḥkha* ... has a deeper philosophical meaning and connotes enormously wider senses. (Rahula 1997:17)

Translation choices thus operate through layered semantic networks and inevitably shape ontological interpretation. The absence of precise lexical equivalents necessitates careful contextualisation and sustained sensitivity to doctrinal nuance.

2.3.2 Contextual Proximity and Interpretive Accuracy

As discussed above, contextualisation is indispensable for the interpretation of Buddhist texts. It must address not only historical distance but also cultural distance. When translation occurs across deep civilisational boundaries, interpretation inevitably passes through conceptual frameworks shaped by the translator’s own intellectual inheritance.

Sri Aurobindo, regarded by Mahatma Gandhi as one of the major spiritual figures of his time, devoted significant attention to the interpretation of Indian textual traditions. Having been educated in the West, he possessed a dual perspective that sharpened his critique of early European Indology. Rather than opposing Buddhism to other Indian traditions, Aurobindo viewed it as part of a broader civilisational continuum. His well-known critique of early Vedic translation practices is deliberately provocative:

The handling of the Vedic hymns by the bold & ingenious scholarship of the Europeans has had at any rate one striking outcome,—it has converted the once admired, august & mysterious sacred books of the Hindus into a mass of incoherent rubbish. (Aurobindo 2016)

While polemical in tone, this statement reflects a broader methodological concern: that translation across civilisational frameworks may impose interpretive categories foreign to the original conceptual horizon.

It must be noted, however, that interpretive distortion is not limited to Western scholarship. Temporal distance itself introduces difficulty. Aurobindo observed that even in the pre-Śāṅkara period, the language of the Vedas had already become remote and obscure. No tradition is immune to semantic drift.

Later translators working within Buddhist traditions have likewise faced criticism. Edward Conze, one of the most influential translators of *Prajñāpāramitā* literature in the twentieth century, has been criticised for inconsistency and interpretive overreach. As Griffiths (1981:30) remarks:

“I chose this example not because Dr. Conze's translations are worse than anyone else's; in fact, they are better than most. Rather, it illustrates ... the kind of gibberish that is all too often produced by the Buddhological community...”

Such criticisms do not diminish Conze's contributions; rather, they highlight the inherent difficulty of rendering philosophically dense and context-dependent material into modern academic language.

The problem is further complicated by what has been described as “academic mythologization,” whereby conceptual models become stabilised through their repeated use within scholarly traditions. Theories and “facts” are communicated through symbolic frameworks that simultaneously construct and reinforce their own validity within discourse. What is transmitted across generations may therefore include not only interpretation but also inherited distortion (Frog 2015).

For these reasons, the present study gives priority to scholars trained within, or working in close continuity with, the relevant linguistic and doctrinal traditions. Such proximity does not guarantee correctness, but it increases sensitivity to semantic nuance and reduces the likelihood of conceptual displacement across civilisational boundaries.

These considerations further support the view that interpretation is not neutral but conditioned by linguistic, cultural, and conceptual frameworks.

2.3.3 Conceptual Misalignment and Category Imposition

A further form of interpretive distortion arises from the application of conceptual categories developed within one religious framework to traditions structured according to different premises.

A clear example is the frequent characterisation of Buddhism as a “god-denying” or “atheistic” religion. Such descriptions typically emerge from the application of Abrahamic theological expectations—particularly the assumption of a single omnipotent creator deity—to traditions that do not operate within

this conceptual framework. Early Buddhist texts (e.g. *Mahāsamaya Sutta*) do not present the anthropomorphic deities of the Vedic milieu as objects of systematic negation; rather, such beings appear within the cosmological order as participants in, or witnesses to, the Buddha's awakening. The shift introduced by the Buddha is therefore less a denial of divine beings than a soteriological reorientation, moving away from reliance on anthropomorphic projection toward insight grounded in experiential verification and ethical transformation.

The reduced prominence of deities within soteriological discourse does not imply their rejection. Absence of centrality is not equivalent to ontological denial; it reflects a shift in emphasis. In this sense, what is often described as "atheism" is more accurately understood as a reconfiguration of religious priorities.

At the same time, this reconfiguration does not entail the absence of supra-human or devotional elements. Across a wide range of Mahāyāna traditions, richly developed cosmologies include numerous celestial beings, bodhisattvas, and other supra-human agents. As Guang Xing (2005) observes, from its earliest phases Buddhism has sustained a dual perspective on the Buddha: on the one hand, as a teacher interacting with disciples and contemporary religious communities; on the other, as an "object of religious worship for his followers, a saviour of the world" (ibid.:7). This dual structure further illustrates that the relative absence of a creator deity does not equate to a lack of religious devotion or soteriological agency.

A further distortion arises from the tendency of Western philosophy of religion—shaped by its own historically centralised development—to treat Buddhism as an isolated or anomalous phenomenon. When internal plurality and shared civilisational horizons are overlooked, Buddhism is too easily misclassified as a self-contained system rather than as one trajectory within a broader intellectual and soteriological continuum.

In the cases conventionally labelled "Buddhism" and "the Upaniṣads," what is most significant is not opposition but divergence of emphasis. One develops primarily along a mystico-metaphysical trajectory, addressing questions of ultimate ground; the other along a mystico-philosophical trajectory oriented toward cognition, *duḥkha*, and liberation. Buddhism consistently refrains from speculative cosmology—an approach explicitly encouraged by the Buddha—whereas cosmological reflection is taken up within the Upaniṣadic tradition, as exemplified in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*.

This difference is further reflected in the relationship between esoteric insight and exoteric pedagogy. Mahāyāna traditions—particularly in their scholastic and contemplative developments—often display a

strong orientation toward the analytical and experiential articulation of ultimate reality, with comparatively less emphasis on cosmological speculation. By contrast, while Śāṅkara fully affirms the non-dual realisation of Brahman at the highest level, his interpretive framework retains a pedagogical accommodation to exoteric modes of understanding. Cosmological doctrines are thus treated as provisional rather than ultimate. As he notes, “those who intently think of the Ultimate Reality find no interest in (the theory of) creation... ‘Indra assumed diverse forms through Māyā’” (Nikhilananda 1949:41–42). Here, *māyā* denotes the principle of appearance or misapprehension (*avidyā*) through which ultimate reality is obscured and the phenomenal world is projected. Cosmological explanation therefore functions not as a final account of reality, but as a pedagogical device oriented toward differing levels of understanding.

Modern scholarship further complicates any notion of a homogeneous “Vedic culture.” Johannes Bronkhorst’s model of “Greater Magadha” and Asko Parpola’s accounts of cultural interaction suggest a more complex landscape characterised by overlap, exchange, and mutual influence. While debates continue regarding the relative weight of textual, archaeological, and genetic evidence, it is increasingly clear that the religious traditions of the subcontinent cannot be reduced to a single linear trajectory.

Classical thinkers such as Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan describe the Buddha as both “continuator” and “discoverer,” situating Buddhism within a shared civilisational framework rather than in opposition to it. At the same time, familiarity with Buddhist—particularly Mahāyāna—philosophy does not imply doctrinal identity. Some contemporary discussions suggest that, given the fragmentary survival of early materials, it remains difficult to determine whether later Vedāntic thinkers drew from Buddhist sources, whether Buddhist traditions drew from parallel developments, or whether both emerged from earlier, now lost strata of thought. What emerges more clearly is not strict opposition, but differences in emphasis, audience, and pedagogical strategy rather than rigid doctrinal conflict.

As Walser (2018) observes, even at the level of social identity, boundaries appear relatively fluid: “The only transition in identity that I see is laity deciding to follow a particular teacher and some individuals shifting from lay to ordained life” (ibid.:121). Such observations reinforce the interpretation of long-term symbiosis rather than civilisational rupture.

Even socio-religious categories frequently treated as markers of separation—such as *śramaṇa* and *āśrama*—demonstrate historical overlap and conceptual fluidity. As Patrick Olivelle (1993:18) notes, “the

distinction between these two meanings... is not as important as it might appear.” These patterns point not to sharply bounded traditions, but to interacting and evolving systems of practice and interpretation.

Both Buddhist and Upaniṣadic traditions thus emerge from a shared cultural and soteriological milieu, articulating different responses to overlapping existential concerns. Their approaches to transcendence differ not only in emphasis, but also in the structure of their pedagogical and conceptual articulation. Subsequent developments did not proceed along a single linear axis, but unfolded across multiple levels while remaining oriented toward what may be described as liberation, truth, or the Real.

If the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* expresses its insight in the formula *tat tvam asi* (“That thou art”), Buddhism may be understood as beginning precisely where such insight becomes existentially operative. The distinction, therefore, is not between theism and non-theism, but between modes of articulation and levels of understanding—between relational, symbolic, and pedagogical expression on the one hand, and direct experiential realisation on the other.

Taken together, these observations suggest that both the classification of Buddhism as “atheistic” and its treatment as an isolated phenomenon arise from the projection of externally derived conceptual frameworks. Rather than reflecting the internal logic of the traditions themselves, such interpretations reveal the conditions under which they are read.

2.3.4 The Nālandā Scholastic Tradition

In light of the interpretive difficulties outlined above, the Nālandā scholastic tradition offers a particularly suitable framework for conceptual clarification.

Drawing on the typology of mystical experience proposed by Gershom Scholem, a distinction may be made between immediate, eruptive forms of mysticism and reflective, analytically cultivated approaches to ultimate reality (Scholem 1965:5). While both modes are historically significant, the latter is of particular relevance to the present inquiry, and is exemplified in the philosophical traditions associated with Nālandā Mahāvihāra.

The Nālandā lineage is especially valuable for a study concerned with conceptual architecture because of its analytic and systematic orientation. The scholastic treatises (*śāstras*) emerging from this tradition are characterised by sustained argumentation, cross-textual referencing, and continuity across generations of commentators. This cumulative structure allows for the refinement of concepts over time, the clarification of terminological ambiguity, and explicit engagement with competing interpretations. As a result, these

texts tend to preserve a higher degree of conceptual stability when translated and studied within modern academic frameworks.

By contrast, *sūtras* often take the form of dialogues, sermons, or context-specific teachings adapted to particular audiences. Their oral transmission history shaped their rhetorical form: repetition, mnemonic structuring, metaphor, and narrative imagery function as pedagogical tools. While their revelatory and transformative value is not in question, their interpretive openness makes them more susceptible to variation in translation. Precisely because they rely heavily on symbolic and context-sensitive expression, they more readily reflect the presuppositions of the interpreter.

The present study therefore privileges analytic treatises associated with the Nālandā milieu. This methodological choice does not imply a hierarchy of spiritual value between textual genres, but reflects the aims of the inquiry. A thesis concerned with the conceptual structure of soteriological transformation benefits from engagement with texts in which argumentation, definitional precision, and philosophical continuity are foregrounded.

Nālandā developed into one of the most significant centres of Buddhist scholasticism in Asia, functioning as a residential monastic complex that attracted scholars from across the Indian subcontinent and beyond. Its intellectual legacy was preserved through the works of major Mahāyāna thinkers, many of whom continue to be recognised as authoritative within Tibetan and East Asian traditions.

The later Tibetan designation of the “Seventeen Nālandā Paṇḍitas” represents a retrospective consolidation of this scholastic lineage. Although the institutional complex declined following military incursions in the late twelfth century, its intellectual framework continued to exert influence through its transmission into other cultural contexts, particularly Tibet.

This provides the conceptual basis for the analysis of cognition and perception developed in the following chapter.

2.4 Summary

This chapter has argued that the limitations of contemporary approaches to the study of religion are not primarily technological, but conceptual. While scientific methods such as neuroimaging have generated important empirical findings, they do not by themselves resolve questions concerning the structure of selfhood, transformation, and religious meaning. The problem lies in insufficiently articulated conceptual frameworks and in the conflation of distinct levels of analysis.

The discussion of translation, contextual distance, and category imposition has further shown that interpretation is never neutral. Buddhist traditions have frequently been approached through externally derived theological and philosophical categories, resulting in distortions such as the reduction of Buddhism to “atheism” or its treatment as an isolated and anomalous phenomenon. Such misreadings reflect not the internal logic of the traditions themselves, but the interpretive assumptions brought to them.

For this reason, the chapter has given methodological priority to the Nālandā scholastic tradition, whose analytic and cumulative character offers a particularly suitable framework for conceptual clarification. The following chapter builds on this foundation by examining how cognition, perception, and valuation are structured within Buddhist philosophy, Enlightenment empiricism, and contemporary neuroscience.

While the foregoing analysis has identified limitations in current scientific approaches to religion, it also indicates the need for a more refined account of cognitive and affective structuring. The following chapter addresses this requirement by examining in greater detail the architecture of cognition through a comparative analysis of Yogācāra philosophy, Humean empiricism, and contemporary predictive-processing models.

3 Constructed Experience: Yogācāra, Hume, and Predictive Processing

3.1 Śūnyatā and the Architecture of Distortion

Building on the conceptual limitations identified in the previous chapter, this section turns to a more detailed analysis of the cognitive and interpretive structures through which religious experience is organised.

Within post-Augustinian Latin Christianity, increasingly shaped by institutional concerns, mechanisms emerged for stabilising truth-claims within ecclesial structures. Already in late antiquity, figures such as Filastrius of Brescia (d. c. 387) classified groups promoting alternative interpretations in strongly negative terms (Lieu 1985:87). This tendency reflects a broader orientation in which doctrinal deviation was interpreted not merely as error, but as a threat to the integrity of the religious community.

The methods employed to safeguard this order—expressed in formulations such as *extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*—were plausibly shaped by earlier collective experiences, including episodes of persecution under imperial authority. The Neronian persecutions, while not constituting the origin of such dynamics, represent a significant milestone in which Christians were publicly framed as malefactors, thereby contributing to the legitimisation of violence and leaving a lasting imprint on collective memory. These developments were later reinforced through martyrological literature, visual representation, and institutional practice. Thomas Aquinas explicitly draws on Augustine’s definition of heresy in the *Summa Theologica* (II–II, Q.11, Art.1), describing the heretic as one who devises or “follows false or new opinions” (Fathers 2006:167), and further classifying heresy as a form of unbelief that corrupts established doctrine (ibid.:168). The implications of this position are made explicit in II–II, Q.11, Art.3, where Aquinas affirms that “if heretics be altogether uprooted by death, this is not contrary to Our Lord’s command” (ibid.:174).

Such positions were not merely theoretical. Later interpretations of events such as the Cathar persecutions have led scholars such as Raphael Lemkin to describe them as “one of the most conclusive cases of genocide in religious history” (Lemkin 2012:71), while Kurt Jonassohn characterises them as an early instance of “ideological genocide” (Jonassohn 1998:50). Reflecting on practices of the eighteenth century, Montesquieu remarks on the severity with which offences such as heresy continued to be treated, more than five centuries after the Cathar persecutions (Moore 1987:1). Taken together, these examples illustrate a model in which the regulation of belief becomes closely tied to institutional authority and the suppression of interpretive plurality. This should not be understood as exhaustive of Christian intellectual history, but rather as indicative of dominant institutional tendencies within specific historical contexts.

This model stands in marked contrast to traditions in which plurality and textual multiplicity are structurally normative. Daoism, for example, has historically sustained multiple schools and lineages, preserved within a canon of over a thousand texts, the *Daozang* (Schipper & Verellen 2004). Yet when interpreted through inherited Christian categories, Daoism is frequently reduced in Western discourse to a “philosophical religion,” thereby obscuring its extensive ritual, cosmological, and soteriological dimensions. These include developed accounts of sin, salvation, post-mortem judgement, and a complex pantheon of divine beings (ibid.).

A similar plurality characterises classical Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism, particularly when situated within the Nālandā scholastic tradition introduced in the preceding chapter. Rather than halting with Nāgārjuna’s ontological deconstruction, subsequent developments continued within a shared intellectual framework. Disagreements—such as Candrakīrti’s critique of Yogācāra—were not resolved through exclusion, but through further synthesis, as exemplified in the work of Śāntarakṣita. This suggests a different model of intellectual development, in which tensions are continuously integrated rather than systematically suppressed.

While Nāgārjuna’s dialectical method is sometimes compared with apophatic strands of Christian theology—a comparison occasionally employed to facilitate its reception in Western contexts—such parallels risk reducing *śūnyatā* to a static metaphysical abstraction. In the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, however, emptiness functions not as an ontological endpoint, but as a methodological tool. The reification of emptiness itself is explicitly rejected.

Yet this recognition alone remains insufficient for the practical demands of the bodhisattva path. What is required is not merely negation, but flexibility: the capacity to engage with the conditions under which *duḥkha* arises and may be alleviated. From a soteriological perspective, later developments are therefore indispensable. As Tenzin Gyatso emphasises, the central aim of Mahāyāna teaching lies in cultivating a “mind wishing to benefit other sentient beings” (Padmakara 2006:6).

To interpret *śūnyatā* solely as an analogue of an ineffable Absolute is therefore to overlook the internal trajectory of Buddhist thought, which moves beyond metaphysical negation toward an analysis of lived experience. It is precisely this shift—from metaphysical fixation to the analysis of conditioned experience—that provides the conceptual basis for understanding how perception and interpretation may become structured and, at times, distorted.

This shift in emphasis marks the transition to accounts of cognition in which experience is understood as constructed rather than given, thereby preparing the ground for a more detailed analysis of cognitive architecture in the following sections.

3.1.1 Yogācāra

As Lambert Schmithausen has noted, our current understanding of Yogācāra remains, despite extensive scholarship, situated somewhere between plausibility and probability (1987:3).

By integrating the analytical precision of Abhidharma with Mahāyāna soteriology, Yogācāra developed a structured account of cognitive conditioning centred on concepts such as seeds (*bīja*), store-consciousness (*ālaya-vijñāna*), and the transformation of the basis (*āśraya-parāvṛtti*). This framework did not replace earlier dharma analysis, but reorganised it within a dynamic model of distortion and liberation.

This development was not merely speculative. Its psychological granularity rendered the tradition both pedagogically scalable and practically applicable. In works attributed to Vasubandhu, Asaṅga, and Maitreya, cognition is understood as a dynamic process conditioned by latent dispositions—habitual cognitive–affective patterns that shape perception and behaviour. Experiences and actions leave traces, conceptualised as “seeds” (*bīja*), which subsequently influence interpretation, intention, and response.

3.1.2 Hume

A central Yogācāra insight is that subject and object arise together as a cognitive construction, an idea clearly articulated in texts such as the *Triṃśikā* (Anacker 1984:186–189). The perceived world is neither purely external nor purely internal, but constructed within cognition. Hume arrives at a closely related conclusion: since we never observe anything beyond perceptions, the mind itself constructs objects and causal relations (cf. Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature*; Siderits 2007:45). Both systems thus undermine naïve realism.

The Yogācāra doctrine of the three natures (*paratantra*, *parikalpita*, and *pariniṣpanna*) provides a sophisticated model of cognitive construction that bears notable structural similarities to Hume’s account of impressions, ideas, and belief. Despite this similarity, Yogācāra introduces a deeper explanatory layer by accounting for the emergence of these projections through karmic “seeds” (*bīja*) stored in the *ālaya-vijñāna*, which accumulate as forms of cognitive conditioning (Brunnhölzl 2018).

This suggests a model in which interpretation is not merely associative, but historically and structurally conditioned—a point that becomes particularly relevant when considering cross-cultural variations in perception and meaning.

3.1.3 Contemporary Neuroscience

Contemporary neuroscience extends this line of inquiry by offering a mechanistic account of how such patterns of expectation and interpretation are generated and maintained within biological systems. In predictive-processing models, perception is understood as an active process in which the brain continuously generates predictions about incoming sensory input and updates them in response to discrepancies. Rather than passively recording stimuli, cognitive systems maintain hierarchical generative models that guide both interpretation and action. These models are shaped by prior experience and motivational orientation, enabling organisms to anticipate environmental patterns and respond adaptively (Friston & Kiebel 2009; Friston 2010).

While Hume explains expectation through the formation of habitual associations, predictive-processing models suggest that the brain actively constructs and refines models in order to minimise uncertainty and maintain viable interaction with the environment.

A similar concern with inferential cognition can be found in the work of Dharmakīrti (d. 670), whose theory of inference analyses how reliable relations between observable signs and their referents are established (Bogacz & Tanaka 2023). In predictive-processing models, perception likewise involves inferring the most probable causes of sensory input (Sprevak & Smith 2023). Although expressed in different conceptual vocabularies, both frameworks describe cognition as an interpretive process in which knowledge arises from learned regularities rather than from direct apprehension of reality.

3.1.4 Summary

Taken together, Buddhist soteriologically oriented philosophy, Enlightenment empiricism, and contemporary neuroscience converge on a shared insight: perception is not passively received but actively constructed. Each framework, in its own historical and conceptual context, describes how minds shaped by prior dispositions interpret recurring patterns of experience and thereby infer the structures that render the world intelligible.

Predictive-processing models extend this insight by providing a neurocomputational account of how such expectations are generated and updated through hierarchical modelling. While Hume describes the

phenomenon, he does not account for its biological grounding. Friston's free energy principle offers such an explanation, proposing that self-regulating systems must minimise exposure to unpredictable states that threaten their continued viability.

In this respect, both Nāgārjuna's critique of reification and predictive-processing models identify a related problem: *duḥkha*—or, more broadly, systemic dysfunction—arises when the mind becomes overcommitted to its own structuring activity and unable to revise or release models that no longer correspond to experience.

This convergence provides the conceptual basis for understanding how divergent religious interpretations may arise from shared cognitive processes operating under different conditions.

3.2 Human Values, Drives, and Motivations

While John Hick emphasised the importance of neuroscience for understanding religion, and Armin W. Geertz highlighted the significance of a phylogenetic perspective in his later work, Antonio Damasio develops this line of inquiry further by proposing that contemporary human values are grounded in aggregated patterns of prediction that proved adaptive over the course of evolution. On this view, human value systems are not arbitrary constructions but are constrained by biologically shaped tendencies that have emerged through long-term interaction with the environment.

Damasio thus suggests that a “biological blueprint was present in nonhuman species and early humans” (Damasio 2005:47), reinforcing the importance of phylogenetic continuity. At the same time, he explicitly cautions against reductionism:

“...we do not wish to minimize the role of social interactions and cultural history in the construction, refinement, codification and transmission of these values. We are not reducing human values to biological inherited instincts. We simply wish to suggest that the construction was constrained and oriented in certain directions by pre-existing biological conditions. It did not enjoy infinite freedom.” (ibid.:47–48)

Within this framework, homeostasis plays a central role in the formation of values. Perception signals deviations from an optimal state of regulation and thereby initiates action. These signals may be consciously experienced as feelings—such as compassion—or may operate below the level of awareness, becoming evident only retrospectively through changes in behavioural tendencies, hormonal states, or physiological regulation. On this basis, new evaluations, preferences, and memory traces are continuously formed.

Damasio distinguishes between two primary classes of triggers for action programmes: drives and emotions. Drives encompass instinctive behavioural complexes, such as caring for offspring, as well as more basic regulatory needs such as hunger and thirst. They are primary in the sense that they are constitutive of the organism's mode of existence. For example, mammals are not only capable of caring for offspring but are biologically structured to do so, deriving satisfaction from such activity. Evolutionary advantage thus emerges in conjunction with constitutional necessity and rule-governed behavioural patterns that may themselves evolve over time.

Damasio further notes that “the behavioral and neural aspects of drives and motivations have been especially well studied by Jaak Panksepp and Kent Berridge in mammals” (Damasio 2018:118). This observation provides a bridge to affective neuroscience, which offers a more detailed account of the primary systems underlying evaluation and action.

3.2.1 Affective Neuroscience

The framework of affective neuroscience—particularly as articulated by Jaak Panksepp—is adopted here as a central reference point. Its compatibility with broader psychological models has been explored both in relation to personality typologies (Panksepp & Davis 2018; Montag & Davis 2018) and through empirical measures such as the Satisfaction With Life Scale (Davis & Montag 2024).

Panksepp's work focuses on primary affective systems that are innate and rooted in subcortical brain structures. These systems manifest as both simple and complex behavioural patterns regulated by affective evaluation. From an evolutionary perspective, they represent relatively stable neural circuits located in phylogenetically older layers of the brain, forming—together with neuromodulatory and neurotransmitter systems—a broadly shared foundation across mammalian species.

A central distinction in Panksepp's framework is that between bodily affects (e.g. thirst) and emotional affects. Emotional affects may be understood as underlying dispositions or readiness states—neurophysiological preferences upon which more differentiated emotional experiences are later constructed through cortical processing and learning.

To describe these systems, Panksepp employs a set of capitalised terms, some derived from experiential language and others from behavioural descriptions. Positively valenced systems such as PLAY, SEEKING, CARE, and LUST are associated with behavioural patterns observable across mammalian species. Correspondingly, negatively valenced systems include FEAR and PANIC/GRIEF (also described as

separation distress or GRIEF/SADNESS). Importantly, Panksepp emphasises that FEAR and PANIC/GRIEF are supported by distinct neural mechanisms, despite the potential similarity of their outward emotional expression.

A third system often classified as negatively valenced, RAGE, occupies a more ambiguous position, as it may also be associated with positively experienced states, such as satisfaction in contexts involving dominance or self-assertion. Panksepp operationally defines affective valence in behavioural terms: negative affects are those that organisms learn to avoid, whereas positive affects are those that generate place preference (Panksepp & Biven 2012).

These systems provide the affective substrate upon which higher-order evaluations are constructed, thereby linking biological regulation to the formation of values, motivations, and ultimately interpretive frameworks.

This provides a basis for understanding how affective predispositions may shape not only behaviour, but also the interpretation of religious concepts and experiences across different cultural contexts.

3.2.2 Negatively Valenced Affects

Insofar as the cross-religious soteriological function may be understood as addressing the alleviation of the deepest forms of human distress, the present analysis focuses primarily on negatively valenced affects. The evolutionary function of such affects is directed toward the avoidance of conditions that may threaten the organism, and extends beyond immediate stimuli to indirectly associated cues, as part of processes that may be described in terms of active inference.

Evolutionary systems responsible for threat detection and affective readiness do not disappear with the emergence of complex civilisations. On the contrary, the relatively rapid transformation of social and cultural environments, when compared to the much longer phylogenetic timescale over which these systems developed, may give rise to a statistical mismatch between inherited vigilance mechanisms and contemporary conditions. Organisms evolved to maintain readiness for high-impact threats may therefore continue to generate anticipatory responses even in the absence of immediate danger. Such excess does not necessarily indicate pathology; rather, it reflects an adaptive design calibrated to ancestral environments.

Although the evolutionary function of these systems lies in ensuring readiness for appropriate behavioural responses, selective pressures have consistently favoured those individuals whose reactions were triggered

more frequently than the actual occurrence of threat. In evolutionary terms, it is less costly to over-detect danger than to miss it. However, this calibration is grounded in the statistical regularities of past environments—conditions shaped over extended phylogenetic timescales. In contrast, the probability of many such threats in contemporary social contexts, particularly following recent cultural and technological developments, has significantly diminished. Despite this, the underlying readiness remains operative, sustained by its deep evolutionary embedding.

This persistent readiness may manifest at the level of perception itself, biasing how experience is structured. As expressed in the *Dhammapada* (Ch. 1, v. 1):

Preceded by perception are mental states,
For them is perception supreme;
From perception have they sprung.
If, with perception polluted, one speaks or acts,
Thence suffering follows. (Carter & Palihawadana 1987:43)

In this sense, affectively biased perception may be understood as shaping the conditions under which experience is interpreted and acted upon, thereby sustaining cycles of distress even in the absence of proportionate external threat. This logic of anticipatory readiness is reflected not only in biological systems but also in cultural formulations, as captured in the maxim *si vis pacem, para bellum*, which expresses the principle that stability is maintained through continuous preparedness for threat.

A cross-religious examination of soteriological language suggests that salvation is frequently articulated in terms of affective transformation. In the Qur'an, a recurring conditional promise states that those who believe and act righteously “shall have no fear, nor shall they grieve.” This formulation is notable in that it does not describe a physical environment or reward, but specifies the removal of two fundamental forms of affective disturbance: fear, oriented toward anticipated future threat, and grief, associated with loss and the destabilisation of expected support structures. The distress associated with separation thus reflects not only the loss of attachment, but also a disruption of socially mediated predictive stability - insofar as others function as extensions of the organism's capacity to anticipate and respond to potential threats. In this sense, affective regulation is not solely individual but partially distributed across relational structures.

Within this framework, the removal of fear and grief may be understood as a stabilisation of the predictive system. From the perspective of the free energy principle, this corresponds to a reduction in the discrepancy between expected and experienced states.

In contrast, many religious traditions describe the resulting condition not in processual but in phenomenological terms, most commonly through the notion of “peace.” In Christian, Islamic, and other traditions, peace functions as a summary expression of the desired end state, appearing in scriptural formulations, liturgical closures, and everyday greetings. While such descriptions differ in context and emphasis, they converge in presenting peace as the experiential correlate of resolved tension, uncertainty, or conflict.

The distinction between these two modes of expression is analytically significant. Whereas formulations such as “no fear, nor grief” specify the resolution of core affective systems associated with threat and loss—comparable to what Panksepp identifies as FEAR and PANIC/GRIEF—the notion of peace designates the resulting state. Together, they suggest a dual-layered structure in which soteriological discourse encodes both the dynamics of affective regulation and its phenomenological outcome.

From an affective perspective, responses to evolutionarily salient threats are typically rapid and implicit, most often taking the form of avoidance. This tendency may extend beyond the original stimulus to indirectly associated cues, including linguistic markers and abstract symbols—a phenomenon often described as linguistic taboo or avoidance behaviour. Examples include the omission of certain numbers (such as 13 or 666), the avoidance of specific names in religious or folkloric contexts, or the use of euphemisms in place of perceived sources of danger.

Such patterns suggest that affective responses are not confined to immediate stimuli but propagate through associative networks, shaping both perception and behaviour. In this way, negatively valenced affect extends into language itself, influencing symbolic systems and reinforcing patterns of interpretation. Within Christian traditions, for example, salvation is frequently framed precisely in terms of release from such negatively experienced states, often expressed through motifs of resurrection and eternal life.

Common soteriological ground is also reflected in Hume’s observation in *The Natural History of Religion* that “the first ideas of religion arose... from the incessant hopes and fears which actuate the human mind.”

This convergence further supports the view that religious interpretations emerge from shared affective structures operating under different cultural and conceptual conditions. Taken together, these observations suggest that negatively valenced affects are not merely incidental features of human experience, but play a structurally central role in shaping perception, evaluation, and behavioural response. From a soteriological perspective, religious traditions may therefore be understood as systems oriented toward the

regulation and transformation of these affective dynamics. The alleviation of fear, grief, and related forms of distress thus emerges not only as a theological aim, but as a response to deeply embedded cognitive–affective processes, thereby providing the foundation for the ethical and transformative frameworks examined in the following chapter.

4 Affective Foundations of Ethical Transformation

Building on the preceding analysis of affective dynamics, this chapter examines how such structures are addressed within ethical and soteriological frameworks.

4.1 Ethical Developments in the Mature Phase

Within the developed phase of the Nālandā scholastic tradition, thinkers such as Śāntarakṣita (d. 788) developed a synthetic approach in which Yogācāra analyses of cognitive construction were employed at the conventional level, while Madhyamaka insights into emptiness were retained as the ultimate philosophical framework. Śāntarakṣita is also associated with the transmission of Buddhism to Tibet, as well as with translation activity and the institutional development of monastic centres such as Vikramaśīlā (Goodman 2022).

The scholastic synthesis associated with Nālandā finds one of its most refined ethical articulations in the work of Śāntideva (d. 763). Here, the deconstructive clarity of śūnyatā is translated into an analysis of lived moral experience. Rather than grounding duḥkha in ontological defect, Śāntideva locates its origin in conditioned perception and misapprehension. The focus thus shifts from metaphysical status to cognitive process.

Although Śāntideva does not claim to introduce fundamentally new doctrines, his two extant works—the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* and the *Śikṣāsamuccaya*—constitute a significant contribution to ethical thought, offering a detailed account of how the affective evaluations underlying moral judgement are shaped by prior conduct. In this sense, ethical transformation is inseparable from the restructuring of cognitive and affective patterns.

Śāntideva's treatment of wrongdoing does not centre on the condemnation of the wrongdoer, but on compassion toward the one who recognises error. Confession in *Bodhicaryāvatāra Ch.2* (Padmakara 2011) is understood as part of a process of inner transformation oriented toward the alleviation of suffering. Although Śāntideva's confessional language can resemble the intense penitential rhetoric found in later Christian traditions, its function remains fundamentally therapeutic. Wrongdoing is not treated as a fixed moral identity, but as a conditioned pattern—arising from ignorance and habit—that can be transformed through recognition, remorse, and renewed ethical commitment.

When examined from this perspective, Śāntideva's analysis of wrongdoing and guilt invites comparison with the writings of John Cassian (d. 435), a formative figure in early Western monasticism, situated prior

to the fuller institutional consolidation of Latin Christianity associated with Benedict of Nursia (d. 547). While the *Rule of St Benedict* reflects a stronger emphasis on institutional order, obedience, and discipline, Cassian's writings remain focused on the dynamics of inner experience and spiritual guidance at the level of the individual.

In works such as the *Conferences* (Ramsey 1997), Cassian offers a detailed account of the internal struggle with thoughts, drawing on the lived practices of early monastic communities. His model emphasises vigilant self-observation and the immediate disclosure of emerging thoughts: "For as soon as a wicked thought has been revealed it loses its power" (*Conference II*). Conversely, when such thoughts are concealed, "the judgment of our heart goes astray and is seized by the night of ignorance" (ibid.).

The aim here is not punitive judgement, but the transformation of cognitive and affective patterns through awareness and articulation. This process may also be understood in relational terms. The articulation of inner states restores forms of shared or socially mediated stability that are otherwise disrupted under conditions of internal conflict.

In this respect, Cassian's approach shows notable parallels both with Śāntideva's therapeutic orientation and with broader traditions of introspective practice, including what has been described in Sufi contexts as a "psychology of the heart." In each case, ethical practice may be understood as a form of regulation directed at affective and predictive processes, through which patterns of perception, evaluation, and response are gradually restructured.

In later Western Christianity, particularly with the development of scholastic theology, confession increasingly acquired juridical characteristics, with sin understood primarily as a violation of divine law. This marks a shift away from earlier monastic frameworks, in which wrongdoing was interpreted in terms of internal processes and transformation rather than fixed moral status. Both Śāntideva and Cassian, by contrast, treat harmful action as arising from causes and conditions, without positing an inherently evil self.

In this sense, just as Nāgārjuna may be understood as developing rather than negating earlier Buddhist thought, so too these later ethical articulations reflect a maturation of their respective traditions. The convergence observed here is therefore not a matter of doctrinal identity, but of structural similarity emerging within traditions that have reached a comparable level of reflective development.

A comparable emphasis on the temporal depth of moral conditioning can be observed across traditions. Biblical genealogical narratives extend moral history across successive generations, while Śāntideva employs similarly expansive temporal imagery—speaking of actions accumulated over countless lifetimes: “For all the sins that I have done in hundreds of ages I am heartily sorry...” (Bendall & Rouse 1922:160)—to convey the persistence of conditioned patterns shaping present experience and anticipatory responses. This ethical shift also invites a closer examination of the affective conditions under which moral evaluation emerges.

4.2 Affective Foundations: Evolution, Constraint, and Internalisation

Śāntideva’s portrayal of human beings as “like children” (ibid.: Ch.6 v.45-39) provides a useful point of entry into the affective dynamics underlying moral experience. Rather than presupposing fully rational agency, this analogy foregrounds the conditioned, developmental, and often impulsive character of human behaviour. In doing so, it aligns with a broader cross-disciplinary insight: affective processes precede and shape cognition, and moral evaluation emerges within systems that are neither fully voluntary nor fully transparent to introspection.

From an evolutionary perspective, affective systems developed as mechanisms for rapid evaluation and response to environmental conditions. These systems operate below the level of deliberate reasoning and are oriented toward survival. As research in affective neuroscience suggests, primary emotional systems such as FEAR, RAGE, and separation distress (PANIC/GRIEF) are phylogenetically ancient and widely shared across mammalian species. They operate at a subcortical level, generating rapid evaluative responses that shape behaviour before reflective cognition intervenes. Their function is not to produce moral judgement, but to ensure adaptive responses to threat, loss, and opportunity. In this sense, affect precedes morality; it provides the evaluative landscape upon which later moral interpretations are constructed.

Śāntideva’s observation that anger arises without prior intention—“never thinking ‘now I will be angry,’ people are impulsively caught up in anger” (ibid.: Ch6 v.24)—captures this pre-reflective dimension of affect. Anger, like other primary affective states, is not chosen but triggered. Yet its behavioural expression is not always possible. In many contexts—especially those characterised by asymmetry of power, dependency, or vulnerability—the direct expression of reactive tendencies such as RAGE may be inhibited. This is particularly evident in early developmental environments, where the child depends on caregivers

and cannot freely respond to perceived, or misperceived, injustice or frustration. Under such conditions, affective impulses cannot be discharged outwardly and must instead be regulated or suppressed.

It is within this context of constrained action that the internalisation of affect becomes significant. When reactive tendencies are inhibited, they do not simply disappear; rather, they are reorganised within the cognitive–affective system. One possible outcome of this reorganisation is the emergence of guilt. In contrast to models that treat guilt solely as a response to recognised wrongdoing, this perspective suggests that guilt may also arise from the internalisation of unresolved or unexpressed affective states. The organism, unable to act, reassigns the locus of evaluation inward. What could not be expressed as external resistance may instead be experienced as internal fault.

This dynamic is not limited to early childhood, but extends to other contexts in which agency is constrained. Situations of extreme asymmetry—such as those found in conditions of violence, coercion, or systemic oppression—may similarly produce internalised responses necessary for survival. Empirical observations, including survivor guilt among survivors of the Holocaust (Leys 2007) and of the massacre on Utøya island in Norway (Flood Aakvaag et al. 2014), as well as studies of PTSD in war-related settings (Murphy et al. 2016), suggest that individuals may experience guilt and shame even in the absence of clear moral transgression. Comparable patterns have also been documented among those exposed to prolonged bullying (Romera et al. 2019), childhood sexual abuse (Dorahy & Clearwater 2012), and intimate partner violence (Beck et al. 2011). Such cases complicate the assumption that guilt straightforwardly tracks objective wrongdoing. Instead, they point toward a more complex mechanism in which affective tension, inability to respond, and retrospective evaluation interact, thereby reinforcing the view that moral experience emerges within conditioned cognitive–affective frameworks rather than solely from objective transgression.

Within this framework, guilt appears to serve at least two interrelated functions. First, it operates as a moralising emotion, signalling the need for future behavioural adjustment and learning through negatively valenced feedback. Second, it may function as an adaptive mechanism in conditions of asymmetry or threat, enabling the inhibition of reactive responses—particularly aggression—when such responses would be detrimental to survival. This inhibitory capacity is likely shaped by early developmental environments, in which the child learns to regulate reactive impulses, especially in relation to caregivers, under conditions where direct expression is not possible. Such patterns have been noted across developmental psychology and ethological perspectives on behavioural inhibition (cf. Lorenz 1963).

On the one hand, guilt operates as a regulatory signal oriented toward the evaluation and modification of behaviour. On the other hand, it may emerge as a by-product of constrained conditions in which action is inhibited and affective processes are redirected inward. These two functions are not mutually exclusive; rather, they overlap and interact, contributing to the persistence and variability of guilt across different contexts.

Śāntideva's ethical analysis reflects an awareness of this complexity. His refusal to attribute anger and harmful behaviour to a stable, inherently culpable self, combined with his emphasis on confession and transformation, suggests an approach that neither denies the reality of moral experience nor reifies it. Instead, moral states are treated as conditioned processes that can be recognised and reconfigured. The emphasis on confession may thus be interpreted not merely as a doctrinal requirement, but as a functional mechanism for resolving internally sustained affective tension.

From the perspective of predictive models of cognition, this process can be described in terms of the reduction of persistent discrepancy between expected and experienced states. Unresolved affective responses—whether arising from action, inaction, or constraint—generate ongoing tension within the system. Practices such as acknowledgement, confession, and ethical reorientation may therefore function to stabilise these discrepancies, restoring a degree of coherence to the organism's internal model of itself and its environment.

Taken together, these considerations suggest that the experience of guilt cannot be fully accounted for by reference to moral transgression alone. Rather, it emerges at the intersection of evolutionary inheritance, affective activation, developmental constraint, and cognitive evaluation. In this sense, guilt is not a simple indicator of wrongdoing, but a complex phenomenon rooted in the conditions of embodied and socially embedded existence. This perspective also clarifies how divergent religious interpretations of moral experience may arise from shared affective structures operating under different conceptual frameworks.

4.3 The Emergence of Guilt: Inferiority and Moral Self-Evaluation

Building on the affective foundations outlined above, the ethical developments associated with the mature phase of religious traditions—exemplified by figures such as Śāntideva and John Cassian—shift the focus from metaphysical formulation to the transformation of lived experience. In both cases, the emphasis lies not on the ontological status of wrongdoing, but on the processes through which it is recognised, internalised, and transformed. This provides a natural point of departure for examining the emergence of guilt as a subjective structure.

Within this framework, guilt does not arise exclusively from the objective occurrence of harmful action. Rather, it emerges through the internalisation of inhibited affective responses under conditions of constraint. When action is limited—whether due to dependence on parental or collective approval, vulnerability, or the demands of self-preservation—the organism redirects evaluative processes inward. This internalisation may give rise to a persistent sense of inadequacy, uncertainty, or inferiority, experienced as a signal that something is wrong even in the absence of a proportionate external cause.

Such evaluative states tend to extend beyond immediate situations. At the level of individual experience, guilt is often accompanied by a growing sense of instability and diminished self-worth. At the collective level, these dynamics may become stabilised within cultural forms. Archaeological and historical evidence suggests that practices such as sacrifice, offerings, and the construction of temples may be understood not only as expressions of devotion, but also as structured responses to perceived moral or existential deficiency. While such practices are often interpreted as attempts to influence or appease supernatural agents, they may also function as mechanisms of self-regulation. The allocation of material resources and the performance of ritual acts provide a means of restoring coherence by reducing internal tension. What appears as an exchange with the divine may thus be understood as a reorganisation of the individual's own cognitive and affective processes.

This pattern is reflected in narrative structures across traditions. In the Biblical account, the condition of humanity following the fall is introduced at the very outset and remains a persistent theme throughout the subsequent textual tradition, indicating the structural centrality of this condition. It is characterised by a continuing sense of insufficiency, accompanied by the search for restoration through divine benevolence. The subsequent development of practices such as indulgences, votive offerings, or symbolic acts of reparation illustrates how this condition may become embedded within what might be described as a religious economy, operating simultaneously on material and cognitive levels. Even minor ritual acts, such as lighting a candle, may function as attempts to alleviate an internalised sense of imbalance, regardless of whether a specific transgression has occurred.

Comparable dynamics can be observed in other traditions, although their expression varies across doctrinal and ritual frameworks. Prayers such as the Lord's Prayer and passage 18 from the *Isha Upanishad* invoke deliverance from, or guidance away from, wrongdoing. In Christianity, participation in the Eucharist symbolically re-enacts a prior sacrifice and is associated with the remission of sins. Similarly, the *Bhagavad Gītā* describes those who partake in *prasādam* as being “released from all sin” (*Bhagavad*

Gītā 3:13). Despite these differences, such formulations converge in presenting the human condition as one in which deviation or imbalance is expected, and in which structured practices are required to restore alignment.

Taken together, these patterns suggest that guilt operates as a form of internalised evaluation that is not strictly dependent on objective wrongdoing. Rather, it reflects a more generalised condition in which affective signals of mismatch—originally adaptive in contexts of constraint—become stabilised within both individual experience and cultural systems of meaning. Ritual and prayer can thus be understood as culturally elaborated mechanisms for regulating persistent affective tension and restoring a sense of coherence. This internalisation also prepares the conditions under which guilt may follow divergent trajectories, leading either to adaptive regulation or to maladaptive consolidation in the form of shame.

This divergence further reflects how shared affective structures may give rise to distinct interpretive and doctrinal formations across religious traditions.

4.4 Divergent Trajectories: Guilt and Shame

As suggested in the preceding section, once internalised, guilt does not remain a uniform or stable phenomenon. Rather, it may develop along divergent trajectories depending on how the underlying evaluative processes are integrated within the self-model.

In its adaptive form, guilt remains oriented toward specific actions, omissions, or subjectively perceived transgressions. It functions as a regulatory signal that supports behavioural adjustment, often mediated through empathy and prosocial motivation. In this sense, guilt facilitates learning by maintaining a distinction between the self and the act, allowing the individual to recognise error without destabilising the overall sense of identity.

However, when evaluative processes accumulate without resolution, a shift may occur from action-based assessment to global self-evaluation. This transition marks the emergence of shame. Unlike guilt, which is directed toward what one has done or felt, shame is directed toward what one is perceived to be. The resulting negative self-evaluation forms the core of shame and may give rise to defensive strategies such as denial, avoidance, or concealment.

These shame-related strategies, while temporarily stabilising, are limited in their regulatory effectiveness. By inhibiting reflective processing, they prevent the integration of corrective feedback. As a result, learning is no longer oriented toward behavioural improvement but toward the concealment of perceived

deficiencies. Over time, the individual may increasingly evaluate the self in terms of the capacity to hide or manage these deficiencies rather than to resolve them.

This distinction has been clearly articulated in contemporary research. As Libing Shen observes: “Shame and guilt seem to be two synonymous moral emotions but actually lead to contrasting human behaviors or behavioral tendencies. Shame drives people to hide or deny their wrongdoings while guilt drives people to amend their mistakes” (Shen 2018).

Scriptural traditions also reflect an awareness of this divergence. The *Dhammapada* (v. 306) associates denial and falsehood with continued suffering, suggesting that the refusal to acknowledge error prevents its resolution: “The one who speaks lies, goes to hell” (*transl* Carter & Palihawadana 1987).

Similarly, in the Biblical account, the emergence of shame following the fall (“they were not ashamed” prior to it: Genesis 2:25, KJV) marks a transformation in self-relation. A comparable motif appears in the Qur’anic narrative (Al-A‘raf 7:20). These narratives, while differing in form, converge in linking shame with a shift in the structure of self-perception.

Empirical research supports these distinctions. Comparative studies among college students demonstrate a reduced tendency toward risk-taking and antisocial behaviour among guilt-prone individuals relative to those characterised by shame-proneness, with the former exhibiting significantly higher levels of empathy (Ortiz Barón et al. 2018). Longitudinal research further indicates that guilt-proneness in childhood predicts lower engagement in substance use, fewer sexual risk behaviours, and reduced involvement with the criminal justice system, whereas shame-proneness is associated with an increased likelihood of later deviant behaviour (Stuewig et al. 2016). Similarly, elevated shame combined with diminished guilt has been linked to higher recidivism rates in correctional populations (Tangney et al. 2014).

Taken together, these findings suggest that the divergence between guilt and shame is not merely conceptual but has measurable behavioural consequences. While guilt supports adaptive regulation and social cohesion, shame—particularly when coupled with denial—may reinforce maladaptive patterns and inhibit constructive change.

This divergence also clarifies why practices such as confession may function differently depending on whether guilt remains action-oriented or has developed into globalised shame.

4.5 Confession as Resolution: Interrupting the Transition from Guilt to Shame

Accumulated evaluative burdens may, beyond a certain threshold, give rise to a qualitative transformation in how the self is experienced. As suggested above, guilt can initially be related to, or retrospectively attributed to, specific actions, events, or desires. However, when such evaluations accumulate beyond a critical threshold, they may shift from object-directed assessment to subject-directed identification. In this transition, guilt gives way to shame: a globalised negative self-evaluation in which the individual increasingly understands themselves through a prevailing sense of inadequacy or defect.

This shift is particularly salient in early developmental contexts, where the capacity for reciprocal response is limited and evaluative patterns are internalised under conditions of dependency. The dynamics of this process are reflected in what has been described as the “scapegoat complex” in the Biblical tradition (Frazer 1913; Perera 1986), a recurring mythological and psychological motif in which the burden of collective transgression is displaced onto a single subject. While expressed in symbolic narratives, this pattern also captures a structural feature of human interaction: the redistribution and internalisation of unresolved affect within relational systems.

Clinical observations suggest that such dynamics may extend into psychosomatic domains. Drawing on work with patients suffering from *anorexia nervosa*, Dally (1977), former senior consultant psychiatrist at Westminster Hospital, proposed that the patient may function as a “scapegoat,” bearing and expressing tensions that are not otherwise resolved within the family system. While such interpretations must be approached with caution, they illustrate how accumulated evaluative burden may become embodied and enacted across multiple levels.

Within the individual, the consolidation of shame is frequently accompanied by defensive strategies, most notably denial. This may be understood as an imperfect response of a system under excessive evaluative load. Although temporarily stabilising, denial inhibits reflective processing and prevents the integration of corrective feedback. Rather than facilitating learning, it redirects cognitive resources toward concealment. The individual may thus come to evaluate themselves not in terms of the capacity to amend behaviour, but in terms of the capacity to manage or hide perceived deficiency.

In this respect, shame has been associated with a diminished capacity for contextual evaluation and adaptive self-regulation (cf. Orth et al. 2006). Many religious traditions therefore preserve structured mechanisms that appear to counteract this trajectory. Across traditions, a recurring sequence can be identified: acknowledgement (confession), reorientation (repentance), and reintegration (forgiveness).

This sequence functions not merely as a theological prescription, but as a psychologically coherent process through which accumulated evaluative burden may be reduced.

The completion of this cycle is typically accompanied by a subjective sense of release and restoration. Forgiveness allows for the reorganisation of memory and the attenuation of previously dominant negative evaluations, thereby restoring the capacity for future-oriented action. In this sense, confession may be understood as interrupting the transition from guilt to shame, preserving the regulatory function of guilt while preventing its consolidation into maladaptive identity.

Where such processes are absent or ineffective, negatively valenced affect may accumulate to the point at which it becomes constitutive of the self-model. The individual may then come to experience themselves as inherently flawed or irredeemable. In religious language, this condition is often expressed through allegories of exclusion, fall, or punishment. Stripped of their symbolic form, however, these narratives describe a psychological state in which unresolved evaluation leads to persistent maladaptive regulation.

Taken together, the dynamics outlined in the preceding sections suggest that the soteriological function of religious traditions may be understood, at least in part, as addressing the regulation of deeply rooted affective processes. Concepts such as sin, guilt, shame, confession, and forgiveness, while articulated within diverse doctrinal frameworks, converge in describing mechanisms through which human beings interpret, manage, and potentially transform conditions of internal distress. In this respect, Tillich's notion of religion as an expression of "ultimate concern" may be understood as pointing to the same underlying structure: a condition in which affectively charged evaluations acquire existential urgency and demand resolution.

Religious soteriology may therefore be understood not only as a response to metaphysical questions, but also as a structured engagement with the dynamics of human affect, prediction, and self-regulation. This perspective resonates with pluralistic accounts of religion, such as that proposed by Hick, in which diverse traditions may be understood as contextually mediated responses to a shared affective and cognitive structure of human experience.

5 Conclusion

The present study has argued that differences in religious interpretation arise not primarily from doctrinal divergence, but from historically conditioned cognitive and affective frameworks through which human experience is structured and evaluated. By integrating insights from John Hick's pluralism, Buddhist philosophy, early modern empiricism, and contemporary cognitive and affective science, it has shown that religious traditions may be understood as contextually mediated responses to shared structures of perception, valuation, and meaning-making.

This perspective challenges the assumption that religious diversity is best approached through competing truth-claims. Instead, it suggests that such differences emerge from variations in interpretive orientation shaped by both human constitutional and cultural conditions. In this sense, disagreement between traditions may reflect differences in cognitive structuring rather than fundamentally incompatible metaphysical commitments.

At the same time, the analysis reframes the soteriological dimension of religion. Concepts such as sin, guilt, and redemption may be understood not only as doctrinal categories, but as articulations of underlying affective dynamics. Religious practices—including confession, repentance, and forgiveness—can thus be interpreted as mechanisms for regulating affective tension and restoring psychological and social coherence, without reducing religion to psychology.

More broadly, the findings suggest a shift in emphasis within the study of religion: from the comparison of doctrinal systems toward the analysis of the conditions under which religious experience and interpretation arise. This approach highlights the value of historically elaborated traditions, such as those associated with the Nālandā school, in providing conceptually refined models of mind and transformation that remain underdeveloped in contemporary scientific frameworks.

Finally, this perspective opens further avenues for research, including the relationship between affective neuroscience, ritualisation, and religious practice; the role of predictive processing in belief formation; and the application of these models to wider psychosocial phenomena. The present study contributes to the development of a more integrated framework capable of bridging philosophical, scientific, and cross-cultural approaches to human experience.

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