

UPSC CIVIL SERVICES MAINS · PHILOSOPHY OPTIONAL

Philosophy Optional

Paper II · Philosophy of Religion

Section B notes from the notions of God to the nature of religious language: every syllabus topic explained for beginners and toppers alike, with diagrams and previous year questions.

Compiled by Arvind KrS

**10**

UNITS

81

CHAPTERS

415

PYQS · 1992–2026

300

DIAGRAMS



Philosophy Optional — Paper II

Section B: Philosophy of Religion

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UNIT 01

8 CHAPTERS

Notions of God

Attributes; Relation to Man and the World. (Indian and Western).

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PHILOSOPHY OPTIONAL

PAPER II · SECTION B

6 PYQS · 2013–2023

The Idea of God

Religion, Theology and Philosophy of Religion, God as the Object of Religion (the Sacred, the Holy and Otto's Numinous), Theological vs Non-theological Concepts, Polytheism–Henotheism–Monotheism–Monism, and “Is Hinduism Polytheistic?”

Before we can ask what God is like, how God is related to the world, or whether God exists at all, we must be clear about **what the word “God” means** and **how a philosopher should study it**. Religions speak of Allah, Yahweh, the Holy Trinity, Brahman, Īśvara, Viṣṇu, Śiva and the Dao; some speak of no God at all and still call themselves religions. This article lays the foundation for the whole unit: it separates **religion, theology and philosophy of religion**, explains **realist and non-realist** ways of taking talk about God, maps the main **types of belief** (from atheism to monism), distinguishes the **God of religion, of philosophy and of mysticism**, examines whether **the Sacred and the Holy** or **God** is the real object of religion, and answers two classic questions — **what a non-theological concept of God is**, and **whether Hinduism is polytheistic**.

SYLLABUS Notions of God — Notions of God

CONTENTS

01	Context & Problem	02	Core Doctrine
03	Critical Evaluation	04	Cross-Tradition Comparison
05	Synthesis (Siddhānta)	06	Previous Year Questions

IN SIMPLE WORDS

Think of the word “mother”. A child calls out to her mother when afraid; a novelist writes *about* mothers in a story; a psychologist studies what “motherhood” means across cultures without taking anyone's side. All three use the same word in different ways. “God” is like this: the believer **talks to** God, the theologian **talks of** God with reverence, and the philosopher **talks about** God with detachment — asking what the word means and whether what it claims is true.

Context & Problem

What Philosophy of Religion Studies

- **Philosophy of religion is philosophical reflection on religious ideas.** Its scope is narrow (religious ideas only) but its tools are those of the whole of philosophy — **metaphysics** (what is real) and **epistemology** (how we know).
- **"Philosophical reflection"** means the careful analysis of **words, reasons and evidence** for religious claims, hypotheses and arguments.
- **"Religious ideas"** are the central concepts debated within religious traditions for centuries: the **existence and nature of God or Ultimate Reality**, **conflicting truth-claims** of religions, **science and religion**, **creation**, **nirvāṇa**, **salvation** and so on.
- **These are not ivory-tower questions.** They are living issues in traditions that give deep existential meaning to most of humanity.
- **Who does it?** Analytic and continental philosophers, Eastern and Western thinkers, believers and agnostics, sceptics and atheists — and it draws on theology, history, sociology, psychology and the natural sciences.
- **A setback and a revival.** In the early-to-mid twentieth century the **logical positivists** held that a meaningful factual claim must be **empirically verifiable**; since claims about God are not, religious talk was dismissed as **meaningless**. From the 1970s, thinkers such as **John Hick** and **Alvin Plantinga** defended the philosophical respectability of religious belief, and the field has flourished since.

The Variety of Religious Beliefs

- **Monotheists** hold that a **personal God** exists and that God is **good**.
- **Buddhists** hold that the **Four Noble Truths** show the path to enlightenment — without a creator God.
- **Many Hindus** affirm that **Brahman** is the **one reality**.
- **Daoists** affirm that the **Dao** is the fundamental process of reality.
- So the first philosophical question is not "Does God exist?" but **"What kind of claim is a religious claim?"** — is it true or false in the way a scientific claim is?

Religion, Theology and Philosophy of Religion

- **Religion is a system of lived experience.** It uses **first-order language** in which the believer expresses feelings, thoughts and acts towards the object of devotion. A theist **prays to God, talks to God**, turns to God in distress, joy and gratitude, and feels **no need to prove** God's existence.
- **Why theology arises.** No believer lives in prayer all day. He earns a living, keeps a social life, takes part in politics, culture and learning. Very few can keep a watertight wall between religious and non-religious life. The demand for an **integrated life** forces the believer to unify these experiences using the **intellectual categories of his age** — and that is philosophising.

- **Theology** is this use of one's age's concepts to **clarify, explain and systematise** the beliefs and practices of a religion.
 1. **"Theology" literally means "discourse about God"** — in theology we do not talk to God but **about** God.
 2. **Theology is the philosophy of one religion.** There are as many theologies as religions, and several within one religion (Buddhism, Christianity and Islam each have many).
 3. **It defends as well as explains** — against sceptics, agnostics and rival religions.
 4. **It is not disinterested.** It shares the commitment of its religion — and so risks staying tied to an old conceptual framework.
 5. **Yet theologies change with the intellectual climate:** early Christian thinkers used the Greek **logos** philosophy, Aquinas absorbed **Aristotle**, a generation of theologians were **Hegelians**, and many contemporary ones are **existentialists**.
- **Theology and current philosophy.** Analytic philosophy takes **science** as the model of knowledge — detached and impersonal — while religion demands **self-involvement, passion and commitment**. So analytic philosophy suits theology poorly; **existentialism**, which studies persons in moments of crisis and decision, suits it better — which is why the theology of **Karl Barth, Rudolf Bultmann and Paul Tillich** is hard to state in analytic terms. Still, a theologian must use the philosophy of his age, or he will be **"religious on Sundays and secular on all other days"** — a split personality that is neither possible nor healthy.
- **Why a philosophy of religion is needed.** Each theology tends to present itself as a "world theology", and so religions meet and clash. A **philosophical theology** (a **meta-theology**) clarifies the concepts of all theologies so that dialogue and an ecumenical understanding become possible. For example, "God" is used by many theistic religions, but not in the same sense: **the God of the Gītā is more monistic than theistic**, and **the God of Spinoza is more pantheistic than deistic or theistic**.
- **Even "religion" is ambiguous.** Must a religion believe in some being **higher than man**, or can it be an all-out **orientation towards an object of devotion**? Western theists take the first view; many Indian thinkers do not require a being higher than man to worship, though they assume **some metaphysical commitment**; only the modern **secular humanist** makes no metaphysical commitment at all.
- **Philosophy of religion** therefore applies the methods of current philosophy to **analyse and clarify** religious and theological concepts and beliefs. It is a branch of philosophy, differing only in its subject matter; it is **neither religion nor theology**.

	RELIGION	THEOLOGY	PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION
What it is	Lived experience, self-involvement, full commitment to the object of devotion	Interpretation of religious experience in current concepts, in the interest of one's own commitment	Analysis of religious concepts within a general framework, with detachment
How many	No single "religion in general" — only religions	One theology per religion (and more within it)	One discipline — a meta-theology examining all theologies

	RELIGION	THEOLOGY	PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION
Level of statements	First-order (prayer, confession, praise)	Second-order — statements about religious statements	Third-order — statements about theological statements
Attitude to God	The theist talks to God	The theologian talks of God with reverence and piety	The philosopher talks about God with disinterestedness

PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION · FOUNDATIONS

Three Levels of Talk about God

The same word "God" is used in prayer, in doctrine and in analysis — at three different levels

1st · 2nd · 3rd ORDER

FIRST ORDER Religion

talks TO God

"O Lord, protect my child; I surrender to You."

Lived experience, prayer and devotion. **Full commitment**; no felt need to prove God.

SECOND ORDER Theology

talks OF God

"God is one in three persons; Christ redeems sinners."

Explains and defends **one** faith in the concepts of its age.
Reason **inside** commitment.

THIRD ORDER Philosophy of Religion

talks ABOUT God

"What does 'God is good' mean? Is it true? How do faiths differ?"

A **meta-theology** across all faiths. **Detachment** with sympathy.

← MORE COMMITMENT

MORE DETACHMENT →

In simple words: **the believer prays, the theologian explains one faith, the philosopher examines them all.**

Notions of God

FIG. 1.1 Three levels of talk about God: the believer talks to God in first-order language, the theologian talks of God in second-order language within one faith, and the philosopher of religion talks about God in third-order language across all faiths

Detachment and Involvement

- **The believer** uses religious concepts in their customary sense, without critical analysis; he cares about the **end result — the culture of the soul**.
- **The philosopher of religion** need not be religious, need not be a theist or even a humanist, but **should not lack sympathy** for religion. He must be committed to **truth** and to rigorous analysis.
- **Both must alternate**. The philosopher must enter the spirit of religion — “put on the spectacles of the believer” — or he will not understand it; the theologian must step back from the ground he holds holy and judge its holiness if he wants to show its **universal** validity. So **commitment and detachment** are needed by both, and they must stay in dialogue.

02 Core Doctrine

Realism and Non-realism: Is “God” About Something Out There?

- **Realism**. Most believers are **religious realists**: their beliefs are about what **really exists independently** of human minds. For a Muslim, “Allah is the one true God” is true if there **actually is** a being, independent of human thoughts and practices, identifiable as Allah. The same holds for Brahman, mokṣa or rebirth.
- **Non-realism**. A minority hold that religious claims are **not about realities beyond human language, concepts and social forms** — not about something “out there”.
 1. **The Equator analogy**. One leading non-realist put it vividly: a realist is like a passenger who, when his ship crosses the Equator, **looks overboard expecting a black line on the ocean**. The non-realist sees latitude and longitude as a **framework we impose** to find our way. For the realist, truth is “ready-made out there”; for the non-realist, **we are the makers of truth**.
 2. **Religion as human improvisation**. All religious and moral ideas are human, with a human history; doctrines become **guiding myths to live by** (a path mapped by Kant, Kierkegaard and Bultmann); there is no supernatural world beyond. Yet such non-realist religion, it is claimed, **still works as religion**.
- **Non-realists hostile to religion**.
 1. **Sigmund Freud**: religious ideas are **illusions** — fulfilments of “the oldest, strongest and most urgent wishes of mankind”; belief in God is the **projection of a father-image**.
 2. **Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett**: religion spreads through **memes** — units of cultural imitation that leap “from brain to brain” as genes leap from body to body. Dawkins lists religious memes such as “you will survive your own death”, “belief in God is a supreme virtue”, “faith is a virtue” and “there are weird things (the Trinity, transubstantiation, incarnation) we are not meant to understand”. The “god meme” spreads like a **virus**; religion is “an **accidental by-product — a misfiring of something useful**”.
- **Non-realists friendly to religion**.
 1. **Ludwig Wittgenstein** took religion seriously (he even considered the priesthood) but opposed **natural theology** — proving God from nature. In his later philosophy, language is a set of activities, “**language-games**” woven into **forms of life**: in his **builder’s example**, the builder calls “block!”, “slab!”, and the assistant brings the stone — the meaning of a word is its **use**. So “God”, “Brahman”,

“nirvāṇa” or “Dao” get their meaning from their use in religious practice, not from picturing a reality beyond it.

2. **No proof has succeeded**, such non-realists add; so it is better to read religion through non-realist lenses.
 3. **Context shapes meaning**. Since religious claims are always made inside a human context, and the mind structures all perception within it, positing transcendent realities beyond language “simply goes too far”.
- **Realist replies.**
 1. Some admit there are no conclusive proofs but hold that faith **does not require evidence**.
 2. Others claim there **are good reasons and evidences** for faith.
 3. Much of religious language is indeed human, but it does not follow that all its meaning **reduces to** human language — that would be **reductionism**.

IN SIMPLE WORDS

A traffic signal’s red light means “stop” only because people agree on it — that is a “non-realist” meaning, made by us. But when you say “there is a tree in the courtyard”, the tree is there whether or not anyone agrees — that is a “realist” claim. The debate is whether “God exists” is more like the red light (a meaning that lives inside a way of life) or more like the tree (a fact that holds whatever we think).

The Vocabulary of Belief: From Atheism to Monism

The names for the main ways of thinking about God are built on the Greek **theos** or the Latin **deus**. Arranged from the negative end of the scale to the positive end:

- **Atheism (“not-God-ism”)** — the belief that **there is no God** of any kind.
- **Agnosticism (“not-know-ism”)** — the belief that we have **no sufficient reason either to affirm or to deny** God’s existence. The word was coined by **T.H. Huxley** (1869); the attitude is old (Protagoras: about the gods “I cannot know whether they exist or not”).
 1. **How agnostics see religion and God**. For the agnostic, the question of God is **unanswerable by reason**, so religion cannot rest on a known God. Some agnostics keep religion as **morality, ritual or community** without metaphysical claims; others treat religious experience as a **live but unproven possibility**; others suspend both belief and practice. Agnosticism thus **separates religion from certainty about God** — which is why Buddhism’s silence on metaphysical questions is sometimes called agnostic.
 2. **Agnosticism is not atheism**. The atheist **denies**; the agnostic **suspends judgement**.
- **Scepticism** — simply **doubting**.
- **Naturalism** — the theory that every aspect of human life, **including moral and religious life**, can be fully explained in terms of our existence as **intelligent social animals** in a natural environment.
- **Deism** — either an **“absentee” God** who long ago set the universe in motion and has left it alone, or, historically, the view of the eighteenth-century English deists that **natural theology alone** (knowledge of God by reason) is religiously sufficient.

- **Theism** — belief in a **personal deity** (often used as a synonym for monotheism).
- **Polytheism ("many-gods-ism")** — belief in **many personal gods**, each ruling a department of life, as in ancient Greece and Rome (**Poseidon** of the sea, **Ares** of war, **Aphrodite** of love).
- **Henotheism** — belief in many gods but **allegiance to one** of them, usually the god of one's tribe or people. **Max Müller**, studying the R̥g Veda, used **henotheism** and **kathenotheism** ("one god at a time") for the Vedic habit of praising **each god in turn as if supreme**.
- **Pantheism ("God-is-all-ism")** — God is **identical with nature** or with the world as a whole.
- **Panentheism ("everything-in-God-ism")** — all things exist **in God**, but God is **more** than the world.
- **Monotheism ("one-God-ism")** — there is **one supreme Being, personal and moral**, who seeks a **total and unqualified response** from human beings: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might."
- **Monism** — there is **one ultimate reality** (not necessarily a person): Advaita's Brahman, Spinoza's Substance, Hegel's Absolute.

THEOS · DEUS · THE VOCABULARY OF BELIEF

The Scale of Belief about God

From denying God, through God beyond the world and a personal Lord, to God as one with all that is

ATHEISM → MONISM

NEGATIVE END

NO GOD · OR UNKNOWN

Atheism

There is **no God** of any kind.

Scepticism

Simply **doubting**.

Agnosticism

No sufficient reason to **affirm or deny**.

Huxley

Naturalism

All of life, religion included, explained as **natural**.

GOD BEYOND THE WORLD

Deism

God made the world, set its laws, and **stepped back**.

absentee landlord

PERSONAL GOD(S)

Polytheism

Many gods, each ruling a department.

Poseidon, Ares, Aphrodite

Henotheism

Many gods, but **one worshipped as supreme** (one at a time).

Vedic hymns — Max Müller

Monotheism · Theism

One personal, moral God; creator, beyond and within the world.

Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Rāmānuja

GOD AND WORLD ONE

Panentheism

All is **in** God; God is **more** than all.

Pantheism

God **is** the whole of nature.

Spinoza

Monism

One ultimate **reality**, not necessarily a person.

Brahman, the Absolute

UNITIVE END

In simple words: **each label answers two questions — is there a God, and how close is God to the world?**

Notions of God

FIG. 1.2 The scale of belief about God: atheism, agnosticism and naturalism at the negative end; deism, polytheism, henotheism, monotheism and theism in the middle; pantheism, panentheism and monism at the unitive end

How Monotheism Arose

- **From tribal god to universal God.** The Hebrew scriptures record a long struggle of monotheism with polytheism and henotheism. **Yahweh** was first worshipped as the god of Israel, over against **Dagon** of the Philistines and **Chemosh** of the Moabites.

- **The prophets' insight.** Amos, Hosea, Isaiah and Jeremiah taught that Yahweh is not only the God of the Hebrews but the **Maker of heaven and earth** and **Judge of all peoples**. "A God who is righteous first and last must be as **universal as righteousness itself**."
- **An earlier experiment.** In the fourteenth century BCE the Egyptian pharaoh **Ikhnoton** established the sole worship of the sun-god **Aton**, but it collapsed after his death.
- **Consequences.** If one God rules all life, there is **no separate religious sphere** set apart from the secular, and service of God includes **responsibility to all human beings**. This monotheism continues in **Christianity and Islam**.

Three Faces of God: The God of Religion, of Philosophy and of Mysticism

"God" is the name religions give to the supreme deity of the monotheistic worldview. But we should distinguish three ways of conceiving God.

	GOD OF RELIGION	GOD OF PHILOSOPHY	GOD OF MYSTICISM
Basis	The numinous — awe before the holy	Intellectual speculation allied with belief	Mystical or yogic experience
Nature	Personal and anthropomorphic	Abstract principle	Transpersonal and ineffable
God-self relation	Dualistic	Dualistic	Monistic
Example	The Lord who creates, reveals scripture, rewards and punishes	Aristotle's Unmoved Mover, the First Cause, the Necessary Being	The Sufi's union with God; Advaita's Brahman realised as one's own Self

- **The God of religion.** Most religions explain the meaning of life and the origin of the universe through a **supernatural being** who creates everything out of nothing, then **reveals Himself through a scripture**; whoever follows it is rewarded with heaven, whoever does not is punished. The weakness: since each religion has its own scripture, each believer tends to say **only his religion is true** — the root of holy wars, crusades, inquisitions and forced conversions. And when science threatens the believer's picture, some build a pseudo-science of their own (so-called "creation science").
- **The God of philosophy.** A far more **abstract principle** — the First Cause, the original Spirit, "**that than which nothing greater can be conceived**" — developed by medieval theologians seeking to support faith with reason. The criticism: the God of the philosophers can be **so abstract as to be meaningless**, just as the God of popular religion can be **so petty as to be ridiculous**.
- **The God of mysticism.** Theistic mysticism (Sufism, Christian mysticism) keeps a conception of God but sees God as **ultimately non-different from the self**; the goal is **union with God**. Alongside the personal God there is an **impersonal Ultimate Reality** — not an unknowable principle but **one's own innermost Self** (or "not-self", in Buddhism). This view is most clearly worked out in **Indian traditions**, but is also found in the West and the Middle East.

ONE WORD, THREE CONCEPTIONS

Three Faces of God

The God we pray to, the God we reason to, and the God we realise within

RELIGION · PHILOSOPHY · MYSTICISM

 God of Religion <i>the Lord we pray to</i>	 God of Philosophy <i>the principle we reason to</i>	 God of Mysticism <i>the Self we realise within</i>
BASIS The numinous — awe before the Holy	BASIS Reason and speculation allied with belief	BASIS Mystical or yogic experience
NATURE Personal , anthropomorphic: loves, wills, judges	NATURE Abstract : First Cause, Necessary Being, Unmoved Mover	NATURE Transpersonal , ineffable — beyond words
RELATION Dualistic — worshipper and worshipped	RELATION Dualistic — thinker and object of thought	RELATION Monistic — union, non-difference
EXAMPLE Creator who reveals scripture; Viṣṇu or Śiva of bhakti	EXAMPLE Aristotle, Aquinas's proofs; Nyāya's Īśvara by inference	EXAMPLE Sufi union; "That thou art"; Brahman as the Self
RISK So petty as to be ridiculous; "only my scripture is true"	RISK So abstract as to be meaningless	RISK Hard to share, test or worship

In simple words: **the heart seeks a Lord, the mind a First Cause, the mystic a oneness** —
Śāṅkara keeps all three.

Notions of God

FIG. 1.3 Three faces of God compared: the God of religion (personal, based on the numinous, dualistic), the God of philosophy (abstract, based on reason, dualistic) and the God of mysticism (transpersonal, based on mystical experience, monistic)



INDIAN CONNECT — THREE FACES IN INDIAN THOUGHT

- **God of religion:** the Viṣṇu, Śiva or Devī of temple worship, purāṇic story and bhakti — personal, loving, accessible.
- **God of philosophy:** Nyāya's Īśvara, proved by inference as the intelligent maker of the world; Yoga's **Puruṣa-viśeṣa** reached through the idea of unsurpassed knowledge.

- **God of mysticism:** Advaita's **Brahman** realised as **"I am Brahman" (aham brahmāsmi)**; the Upaniṣadic **"That thou art (tat tvam asi)"**.
- Śaṅkara's **two standpoints** hold all three together: the personal **Īśvara** for worship and the world, the impersonal **Brahman** for final realisation.

God as the Object of Religion: The Sacred and the Holy

- **Why "sacred" and "holy" became general names.** Because many religions have no God in the monotheistic sense, scholars sought a neutral name for **"whatever religion is about"**. "Sacred" and "Holy" came to serve.
- **Durkheim: the sacred as "set apart".** For the sociologist **Émile Durkheim**, religion divides the world into the **sacred** (things **set apart and forbidden**) and the **profane** (ordinary things). A stone, a tree, a flag or a totem becomes sacred by being set apart by the community.
- **Rudolf Otto: the Holy and the numinous.** In *The Idea of the Holy*, Otto called the core of religious experience the **numinous** — the experience of a **"wholly other"** reality, *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*:
 1. **Mysterium** — it is a **mystery**, beyond concepts.
 2. **Tremendum** — it **overwhelms**, evoking fear, awe and trembling; one feels like **"dust and ashes"**.
 3. **Fascinans** — at the same time it **attracts, fascinates and compels**, drawing the worshipper near.
- **Features of the numinous experience.** It has a **personal quality** — communion with a "Holy Other"; it is felt as **irrefutable**; it is directed to an **object** (just as perception reveals a table or a rose, the numinous experience reveals the presence of God); and it is claimed to be **self-validating**. Otto held that the numinous is the **one common factor in all religious experience**, whatever the culture. It may focus on a person (Jesus, Kṛṣṇa), an object (an icon, a stone), or on nothing identifiable.
- **Mircea Eliade: hierophany.** The sacred **shows itself** (a "hierophany") in ordinary things — a mountain, a river, a temple — which thereby become different from the profane world around them.
- **Primitive religion.** The sacred is felt in **stones, amulets, bones of the dead, unusual animals**, sacred **trees, groves and shrines**, and in earth, water, sky and stars; **shamans** are believed to commune with the holy.
- **The holy in monotheism.** For the Hebrew prophets God is **"the Holy One"**, "the high and lofty One who inhabits eternity", whose "thoughts are not your thoughts" — the awareness of God as holy is awareness of One who is **terrifyingly mysterious**, before whom human beings can only **bow in silent awe**.



IN SIMPLE WORDS

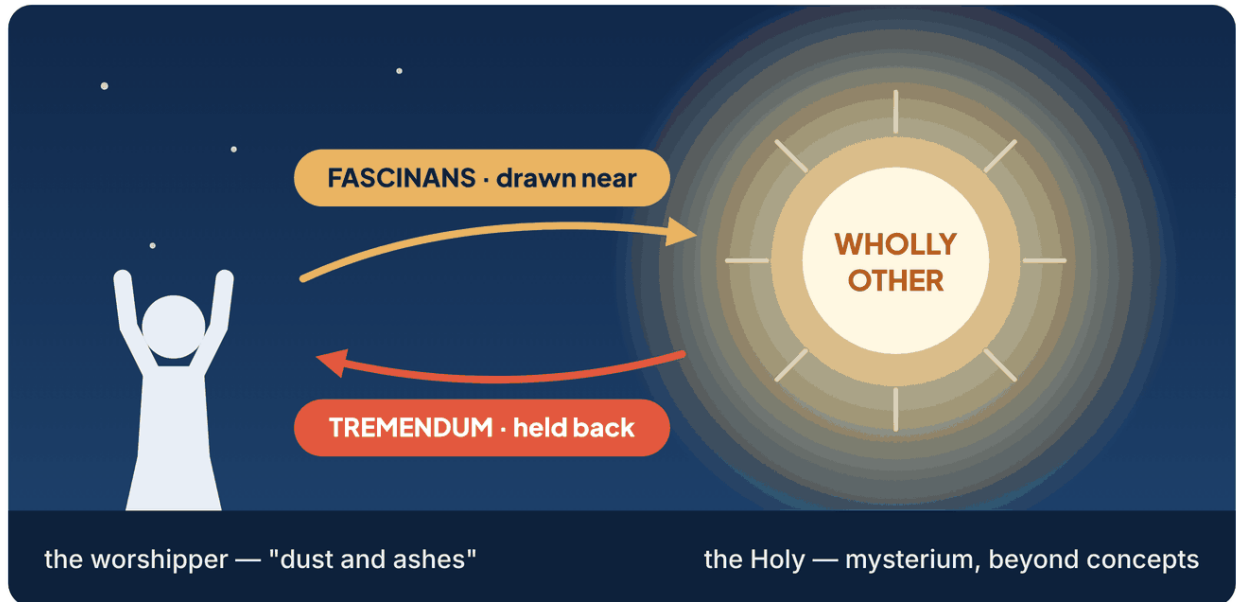
A national flag is only cloth, yet soldiers salute it and people weep before it — it has been **set apart** (Durkheim's "sacred"). Standing at the edge of the sea at night, you feel small and afraid, yet you cannot stop looking — that mix of **dread and fascination** is what Otto calls the **numinous**. The flag shows how a community makes things sacred; the sea shows how the Holy feels from inside.

RUDOLF OTTO · THE IDEA OF THE HOLY

The Numinous: Awe and Attraction

Before the "wholly other", the worshipper trembles and is drawn near at the same time

MYSTERIUM TREMENDUM ET FASCINANS

**MYSTERIUM**

A **mystery**: the "wholly other", beyond all concepts and comparison.

TREMENDUM

Awe, dread, trembling before overwhelming majesty and power.

FASCINANS

Attraction, love, longing — the same presence draws one close.

FEATURES

Felt as **personal** (a "Holy Other"), **irrefutable**, directed to an **object**, and **self-validating**.

In simple words: **the Holy is like a vast ocean at night — terrifying and irresistible at once.**

Notions of God

FIG. 1.4 Otto's numinous: a worshipper before a radiant "wholly other" presence, pushed back by awe and trembling (tremendum) and drawn forward by fascination and love (fascinans)

Can God Be the Object of Religion?

- The case for "Yes".

1. In the **Abrahamic religions** and in **theistic Hinduism**, the object of worship is explicitly **God** — an eternal, omniscient, omnipotent, free and perfectly good Spirit who **reveals himself** (to Moses, Muhammad and Saint Paul unbidden; to mystics through discipline).
2. Otto's numinous has a **personal quality** — it is a meeting with a **Holy Other**, a self or will, which is what "God" names.
3. Even where God is not named, the sacred is usually **personalised** in practice: Buddhists bow before the Buddha, Jainas before the Tirthankaras.

- **The case for “Not necessarily”.**

1. **Yandell’s five kinds** of religious experience show that the object varies: **monotheistic** (God), **nirvāṇic** (Buddhist enlightenment), **kevalic** (Jaina omniscience), **mokṣa** (Hindu release from karma) and **nature** experiences.
 2. In **Indian traditions** the object of religious experience is often **some basic fact or feature of reality** — emptiness, the pure self, Brahman — rather than an entity separate from the universe.
 3. **Buddhism, Jainism, Sāṃkhya and Pūrva Mīmāṃsā** are religions without a creator God; their object is nirvāṇa, kaivalya, the moral law (karma) or the eternal Veda.
- **Balanced view.** “Sacred” and “Holy” are **wider** than “God”: every God is holy, but not everything holy is God. **God can be the object of religion** — and in theistic religions is its supreme object — but God is **one form** that the Sacred takes, not the only one. The “Sacred” is the **genus**, “God” one of its **species**.

Theological and Non-theological Concepts of God

- **Theological (theistic) concept.** God as conceived **within a religion**, chiefly through **revelation and faith**: a **personal** being whose names include **creator, redeemer, sanctifier, lover, knower, the holy one, the powerful one, the eternal one**. It is the God of **Judaism, Christianity, Islam**, and of Indian theists such as **Rāmānuja** (who held such a view with no knowledge of Abrahamic thought). This God is **worshipped, prayed to, and acts** in history.
- **Non-theological (non-theistic) concepts.** Conceptions of the **ultimate or divine** that **depart** from this personal, revealed God:
 1. **Philosophical Absolutes** reached by **reason**: **Aristotle’s Unmoved Mover** (pure thought thinking itself, unaware of the world), **Spinoza’s God-or-Nature**, **Hegel’s Absolute Spirit**, **Bradley’s Absolute**, **Tillich’s “being-itself”**, **Whitehead’s God** in process philosophy.
 2. **Humanistic “gods”**: **Feuerbach** (God is the projected essence of man), **Comte’s Religion of Humanity**, **John Dewey** (God as the active **union of the ideal and the actual**), **Gandhi’s “Truth is God”**, **Einstein’s** reverence for the order of nature.
 3. **Indian non-theistic divines**: the **Mīmāṃsakas** took the **Veda** — eternal, authorless sound — as the maximally significant reality, the sustaining feature of a well-ordered universe; **Advaita** takes the **nondual Brahman**, without qualities, as the real; **Buddhists** treated the **Buddha** as of maximal and final significance — single, omniscient, beyond time — while arguing against any eternal creator (Buddhism has been called **“transpolytheistic”** rather than simply atheistic, since it accepts gods like Indra and Brahmā but places them below the Buddha); **Jainas** honour the **Tirthaṅkaras** and the liberated **kevalin**, perfect in knowledge, without making them creators.

	THEOLOGICAL CONCEPT	NON-THEOLOGICAL CONCEPT
Source	Revelation, scripture, faith	Reason, metaphysics, ethics, mystical insight
Nature of God	A person — knows, wills, loves	An Absolute, principle, ideal or process
Relation to the world	Creator, ruler, judge; acts in history	Ground, totality, law or ideal of the world; often does not “act”

	THEOLOGICAL CONCEPT	NON-THEOLOGICAL CONCEPT
Religious attitude	Worship, prayer, obedience, grace	Contemplation, knowledge, moral striving, intellectual love
Examples	Yahweh, the Trinity, Allah, Rāmānuja's Nārāyaṇa	Aristotle's Unmoved Mover, Spinoza, Hegel, Bradley, Tillich, Brahman, the Buddha, Dewey



IN SIMPLE WORDS

The theological God is like a **father you talk to**; the non-theological God is like the **law of gravity or the idea of justice** — it explains and guides everything, but you do not pray to it for help. Both can be called "ultimate", but only one can answer.

- **Why the difference matters.** The theological God answers the **heart's** need for a Thou; the non-theological God answers the **intellect's** need for an ultimate explanation free of human limitations. Most great systems try to hold both — Śaṅkara (Īśvara and Brahman), Hegel (religion as picture-thinking of what philosophy knows as the Absolute), Bradley (God as the highest appearance of the Absolute).

Is God Indispensable for Religion?

- **Those who say "Yes."** Many Western thinkers hold that **religion and God are inseparable**: without a personal God there is no one to worship, pray to or receive grace from. Some even argue that Jainism and Buddhism, by worshipping images of **Mahāvīra** and the **Buddha**, have made **gods** of them.
- **Those who say "No."** **Non-theism** simply rejects a personal God (omnipotent, omniscient, creator, sustainer and destroyer); it does **not** reject every supernatural or spiritual reality. **Jainism, Buddhism and Sāṃkhya** reject God but accept **nirvāṇa, kaivalya, the law of karma, prakṛti and puruṣa**. What religion needs is a **supernatural or ultimate object** of commitment, **not necessarily a personal God**; the Buddha and the Tīrthaṅkaras are objects of worship without being creators, so these are **non-theistic religions**. (This question is treated fully under *Religion without God*.)
- **The concept of God as a "prerequisite".** For theistic religions God is the **foundation** (the object of faith, the source of revelation and moral law). Philosophically, however, the **essence of religion** is better described as an **ultimate concern** (Tillich) or an orientation to the **Sacred**; God is the **most common** but not the **only** form this takes.

Is Hinduism Polytheistic?

- **Why it looks polytheistic.** Hindus worship **Viṣṇu, Śiva, Devī, Gaṇeśa, Sūrya, Hanumān** and countless village deities; the Vedic hymns praise **Agni, Indra, Varuṇa, Soma**; temples, festivals and myths are full of gods.
- **Why the label misleads.**
 1. **Henotheism.** In the Vedic hymns, each god, while being praised, is treated as **supreme and all-embracing** — Max Müller's **henotheism** or **kathenotheism**. A true polytheist ranks gods as limited departmental rulers; the Vedic poet does not.

2. **One Being, many names.** The Ṛg Veda itself says "**Ekaṃ sad viprā bahudhā vadanti**" — "**Truth is one; the wise call it by many names**" (they call it Indra, Mitra, Varuṇa, Agni).
3. **One Brahman.** The *Nāsadiya* hymn speaks of "**That One (tad ekam)**" before all gods; the Upaniṣads teach that **Brahman** is the one reality and that the gods are its forms or powers.
4. **Trimūrti and avatāra.** Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva are **three functions** (creation, preservation, dissolution) of one Supreme; the **avatāras** are **descents** of one God.
5. **Chosen deity (iṣṭa-devatā).** A devotee worships the form he loves **as the Supreme**: "**Whatever form a devotee seeks to worship with faith, I make that faith of his steady**" (Gītā); "**As people approach me, so do I accept them.**"
6. **Philosophical schools.** Nyāya, Yoga, Viśiṣṭādvaita, Dvaita and the bhakti schools are **monotheistic** (one Īśvara); Advaita is **monistic** (one Brahman); Sāṃkhya and Mīmāṃsā are **non-theistic**.

IN SIMPLE WORDS

One person may be "Papa" to his children, "Sir" to his students and "Ravi" to his friends — three names, one man. The Ṛg Vedic seer says the same of the Divine: Indra, Agni and Varuṇa are **names**, not **separate** beings.

- **Conclusion.** Hinduism is **polytheistic in its forms of worship** but **monotheistic or monistic in its understanding of the Ultimate**. It is better described as **unity in diversity** — one Reality worshipped in many forms. Thinkers like **Vivekananda** and **Radhakrishnan** put it so: the many gods are "**many names and forms of the one God**". A purely polytheistic label also ignores the **non-theistic** and **monistic** strands within the same tradition.

COMMON CONFUSION

Is henotheism just another word for polytheism? No. **Polytheism** believes in many gods, each **limited** to a department (sea, war, love). **Henotheism** also accepts many gods, but **worships one as supreme** — either one at a time (Max Müller's kathenotheism) or one chosen god (a tribe's god, an iṣṭa-devatā). **Monotheism** denies that other gods exist at all. Vedic religion is henotheistic and Upaniṣadic thought monistic; neither is simple polytheism.

Is God Dead? Nietzsche and the Living God of Faith

- **Nietzsche's announcement.** In *The Gay Science*, a **madman** runs into the marketplace with a lantern in broad daylight crying "**God is dead! ... And we have killed him.**" The crowd of unbelievers laughs; he says he has come **too early**.
- **What it means.** Not that a being has died, but that **belief in God has lost its power** in modern European culture — through science, historical criticism and secular life. The danger Nietzsche sees is **nihilism**: if the foundation of values is gone, values must be **revalued**, and humanity must create meaning (the **Übermensch**, "overman").
- **The believer's reply.** For the faithful, God is **living**: known in prayer, worship and experience, not as a hypothesis that science could kill. **Kierkegaard** (truth is subjectivity), **Buber** (God as the eternal **Thou**,

met in relation, not as an object), **Tillich** (God as **ultimate concern**) and the **bhakti** saints insist that what Nietzsche buried was a **cultural idol**, not the living God.

- **Balanced view.** Nietzsche correctly diagnosed the **decline of God as a public, cultural foundation**; but he did not refute the possibility of a living relation to God. Both sides agree that a God reduced to a **social convention** is indeed “dead”.

03 Critical Evaluation

Objections to the Idea of God (Pūrva-pakṣa)

- **Projection. Feuerbach:** God is human qualities (love, wisdom, power) projected and worshipped; **Freud:** God is an exalted father; **Marx:** religion is “the **opium of the people**”.
- **Anthropomorphism. Xenophanes** mocked the Greeks: Ethiopians picture their gods dark, Thracians red-haired — and **if horses had hands they would draw gods like horses**. A personal God looks like man writ large.
- **Meaninglessness. Logical positivists:** “God exists” is neither tautology nor verifiable, so it is **literally meaningless**.
- **Cultural evolution. Dawkins and Dennett:** belief in God spreads as a **meme**, not because it is true.
- **Indian critiques. Cārvāka** rejects God as unperceived; **Buddhists** (e.g. **Aśvaghoṣa**) and **Jainas** argue that an eternal creator is incoherent; **Sāṃkhya** explains the world by **prakṛti** alone; **Mīmāṃsā** finds the Veda and karma sufficient.

Replies (Siddhānta)

- **Origin is not validity.** That belief has psychological or social **causes** does not show it is **false** (the “genetic fallacy”); our belief in the external world also has causes.
- **Analogical language.** Talk of God need not be crude anthropomorphism: God is “**at least personal**”, not “a person” magnified; words are used **analogically**.
- **Verification is too narrow.** The verification principle is itself **unverifiable**; religious statements may be meaningful in other ways — as **eschatologically verifiable** (Hick), or as a **form of life** (Wittgenstein).
- **Properly basic belief. Plantinga** argues that belief in God can be **rational without proof**, like belief in other minds.
- **Experience.** The near-universal witness of **numinous and mystical experience** is evidence that should not be dismissed.



COMMON CONFUSION

Do “**credo ut intelligam**” and “**fides quaerens intellectum**” mark the difference between **theology** and **philosophical scrutiny**? No — some notes present them that way, but both are **Anselm’s** formulas for the **same** attitude: “**I believe in order to understand**” (*credo ut intelligam*) and “**faith seeking understanding**” (*fides quaerens intellectum*). Both describe **theology** — reason working

within faith. Philosophy of religion, by contrast, examines religious claims **without presupposing** faith.

Critics and Defenders

✗ CRITICISM — CRITICS OF THE IDEA OF GOD

- **Feuerbach, Marx, Freud** — God as projection, opium, father-image.
- **Xenophanes** — gods made in human image.
- **Logical positivists** — “God” talk is meaningless.
- **Nietzsche** — “God is dead”; values must be revalued.
- **Dawkins, Dennett** — the “god meme” spreads like a virus.
- **Cārvāka, Buddhist, Jaina, Mīmāṃsā** — no creator God is needed or coherent.

✓ DEFENCE — DEFENDERS AND STRENGTHS

- **Origin ≠ truth** — psychological causes do not refute a belief.
- **Hick, Plantinga** — revived the rationality of belief; properly basic belief.
- **Otto** — the numinous as a universal, irreducible experience.
- **Analogy (Aquinas)** — avoids both crude anthropomorphism and empty abstraction.
- **Wittgenstein** — religious language has its own grammar and use.
- **Indian theists** (Nyāya, Rāmānuja) — rigorous rational defence of Īśvara.

04

Cross-Tradition Comparison

QUESTION	WESTERN TRADITION	INDIAN TRADITION
Main conception	Monotheism — one personal Creator (Judaism, Christianity, Islam)	Many models — monistic (Advaita), theistic (Nyāya, Rāmānuja, Madhva), non-theistic (Sāṃkhya, Mīmāṃsā, Buddhism, Jainism)
Is God needed for religion?	Mostly yes	Not necessarily — karma, dharma, mokṣa and nirvāṇa can be ultimate
God of philosophy	Unmoved Mover, First Cause, Necessary Being	Nyāya’s Īśvara proved by inference; Yoga’s Puruṣa-viśeṣa
God of mysticism	Christian and Sufi union with God	Brahman realised as the Self; Upaniṣadic identity
Many gods	Rejected (polytheism = idolatry)	Accepted as forms of the One (henotheism, iṣṭa-devatā)
Object of religion	God, the Holy One	Brahman, Īśvara, nirvāṇa, kaivalya, dharma — the Sacred in many forms



INDIAN CONNECT — KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Indian thought **separates religion from belief in a creator** more easily than the West — hence non-theistic religions are natural there.
- The Ṛg Vedic “**One Truth, many names**” anticipates the modern philosophical idea that the Sacred is wider than any one name for God.
- Śaṅkara’s two standpoints give a **ready framework** for holding the God of religion and the God of mysticism together.

05

Synthesis (Siddhānta)

- “**God**” is a family of ideas, not one idea. It ranges from the personal Lord of devotion to the abstract First Cause to the Self realised in mystical union. Much confusion — and much conflict between religions — comes from not noticing which God is being discussed.
- **Philosophy of religion has a distinctive task.** It is not prayer (religion) or defence of one faith (theology) but **third-order analysis** of all of them, combining **sympathy** with **detachment**.
- **The Sacred is wider than God.** God is the supreme object of theistic religion, but Buddhism, Jainism, Sāṃkhya and Mīmāṃsā show that religion can centre on **nirvāṇa, kaivalya, dharma or the Veda**. The Sacred is the **genus**; God is its richest **species**.
- **Hinduism shows “one and many” together.** Its many gods are **forms of one Reality**, making it a living example of unity in diversity rather than a simple polytheism.
- **Contemporary relevance.** In a plural world, clarifying these concepts is the first step to **inter-religious dialogue** — the ecumenical role of philosophy of religion. It also helps a secular, scientific culture see that the question of God is not only a scientific hypothesis but a question of **meaning, value and ultimate concern**.

“Truth is one; the wise call it by many names.” — Ṛg Veda



Previous Year Questions

2023

What is Agnosticism? How do agnostics conceptualize the relation between religion and God? Discuss. 10 marks

2020

Critically examine the concept of God as prerequisite for a religion. 15 marks

2018

The terms '**Sacred**' and '**Holy**' have come to serve as generic names for the object of religion. **Do you agree that one can have God as the object of religion?** Discuss.

20 marks

2018

Is Hinduism poly-theistic? Give reasons for your answer.

10 marks

2017

What is a non-theological concept of God? How is it different from theological concept of God? Discuss with arguments.

15 marks

2013

Is God indispensable for religion?

10 marks

LOTUSARISE IAS

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