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Does Hindu Theology Need God? A Critical Inquiry into Non-Theistic Absolutes

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Abstract

Is theology necessarily God-centred? This article argues that it is not, drawing its evidence from Hindu philosophy. Several of Hinduism's classical darśanas—Advaita Vedānta, Sāṃkhya, and Mīmāṃsā—construct complete accounts of metaphysics, moral order, and liberation around impersonal absolutes (Brahman, puruṣa, dharma) rather than a personal creator God. The article develops a functional definition of God and of "non-theistic absolutes," then tests the thesis against its strongest internal challenge: the theistic proofs of Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika and the qualified and dualist Vedānta of Rāmānuja and Madhva, both of which argue that impersonal principles cannot do the philosophical work non-theistic systems claim for them. Engaging this counter-case, rather than avoiding it, is shown to sharpen rather than undermine the thesis: theism in Hindu philosophy is an argued position, not a precondition of intelligibility. The article then situates this finding against Western attempts to define theology functionally—Paul Tillich's "ultimate concern" and the apophatic tradition—and against the comparative theology of Francis X. Clooney, Julius Lipner, and Anantanand Rambachan, arguing that Hindu non-theism does not abandon theology but relocates it, from reflection on a personal deity to systematic reflection on ultimacy. The implications extend beyond Hindu studies to the philosophy of religion's default assumption that religion is definitionally theistic.

Introduction

Is the notion of God required by Hindu theology? This inquiry challenges an assumption rarely examined in the contemporary academic study of religion: that theology necessarily involves a personal creator god. Hindu traditions complicate this assumption at the most fundamental level. Many of Hinduism's major philosophical systems account for reality, morality, and liberation without treating God as a foundational principle—not as a marginal eccentricity, but as one of the central currents of Hindu philosophical thought.

Hinduism is typically classified as a religious tradition because it has developed elaborate systems for meeting congregational and individual devotional needs. Yet there are strands of Hindu philosophy in which God is absent, optional, or secondary to the tradition's own account of ultimate reality. Scholars who classify Hindu philosophy as straightforwardly theistic risk reducing a plural intellectual tradition to a Western theological template rather than describing how these systems actually justify their own claims (Flood, 1996; King, 1999).

The most basic question is whether there is a place in Hindu tradition for belief in god(s): there clearly is. The harder question is philosophical: does Hindu theology *need* god(s) in order to remain internally coherent? Discussions of Hinduism often move from popular devotional practice directly to metaphysical claims, as though devotion at any level entails a divine being at the level of ultimate explanation. From a Hindu philosophical perspective, this does not follow.

Classical Hindu philosophy developed through a plurality of darśanas—disciplined ways of seeing reality, rather than confessional systems of faith. The darśanas examine existence, knowledge, suffering, and

liberation through argument, textual analysis, and appeal to experience. Their authority rests less on obedience to divine command than on internal coherence and their capacity to underwrite a path to liberation. Within this framework, ultimate reality is more often located in principle than in person (Radhakrishnan & Moore, 1957).

Brahman, as it appears in the Upaniṣads, is the paradigm case. The Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad famously characterizes ultimate reality only negatively—*neti neti*, "not this, not that" (Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad 2.3.6; Olivelle, 1998)—resisting predication rather than personifying it. Brahman is routinely qualified as being without attributes, agency, or volitional action; knowledge of this reality, rather than veneration of a creator, is held to be the condition of liberation. Śaṅkara's Advaita Vedānta extends this premise by arguing that Īśvara (the personal God) is not an independently existing metaphysical reality but a construct of reasoned explanation useful for navigating empirical existence (Śaṅkara, trans. Mayeda, 1992).

Other systems dispense with God more thoroughly still. Classical Sāṃkhya accounts for the unfolding of the universe through the interaction of puruṣa (consciousness) and prakṛti (material nature), with no need for a divine creator or director (Larson, 1987). Mīmāṃsā, concerned above all with ritual and moral obligation, grounds normativity in the self-authenticating authority of the Veda rather than in divine will (Clooney, 1990). These are not marginal positions: they are among the most systematic and philosophically rigorous accounts of reality that classical India produced.

The persistence of these non-theistic systems poses a genuine problem for the philosophy of religion. If Hinduism can sustain a coherent metaphysical, ethical, and soteriological framework independent of God, the conventional equation of religion with theism is called into question. Recent scholarship has begun to register this difficulty, noting that Hindu traditions resist clean categorization as either theistic or atheistic (Hick, 2004; Bilimoria, 2015). What has received less attention is what this tension implies for the definition of "theology" as such—and, just as importantly, how the thesis survives contact with the darśanas that argue hardest *for* God's necessity, a challenge this article addresses directly rather than setting aside.

The aim is not to deny the significance of God in Hindu religious life, which remains vivid and central for the great majority of practicing Hindus. It is to show that Hindu philosophy remains intelligible and complete even in God's absence—a fact that compels a reconsideration of how theology is defined, both within Hindu studies and beyond.

Methodological and Conceptual Framework

The method of this inquiry is to examine God within the terms of classical Hindu philosophy itself, rather than through theological frameworks developed within traditions where a personal creator is a foundational premise. Much of the apparent puzzle of Hindu non-theism arises from conceptual mismatch rather than textual ambiguity: frameworks built by and for God-centred traditions have been applied to systems that never took God's conceptual necessity for granted.

In Western intellectual history, theology has typically meant systematic reflection on God as an individual creator, moral lawgiver, and ultimate source of meaning; theology, on this view, simply is thinking about God. Hindu philosophy developed from a different starting point. Its major systems are expressed as darśanas—disciplined ways of perceiving reality—rather than as doctrines of belief. The darśanas address metaphysical understanding, the criteria of evidence, moral order, and liberation from suffering, with their authority derived from logic, textual authority, and experience rather than from divine revelation as such. Some darśanas include God; none make him a structural requirement (Radhakrishnan & Moore, 1957; Ganeri, 2001).

“Hindu theology” is used here in a deliberately untraditional sense: as the systematic reflection on ultimacy, normativity, and liberation carried out within Hindu traditions, independent of grounding in a personal God. Theology, in this usage, names a function rather than a doctrine.

For the purposes of this paper, God is defined functionally, to avoid ambiguity. A God-concept is one that fulfills one or more of the following roles: (1) personal creator of the universe; (2) moral governor, providing order in the moral universe; (3) intentional agent responsive to prayer or devotion; (4) necessary condition of liberation or ultimate meaning. A system counts as theistic, in the strong sense relevant here, only if one of these four roles cannot be discharged without a personal agent. Conversely, a system is non-theistic if it can perform the corresponding *explanatory*, *ethical*, and *soteriological* work of these four roles—accounting for the universe, grounding moral obligation, and rendering liberation intelligible—without invoking personal agency, will, or intentional address at any of these points. The three functional domains (explanatory, ethical, soteriological) are thus not a separate taxonomy from the four roles of God; they name the underlying work that any one of the four roles is meant to do, and non-theism is the claim that impersonal principles can do that work unaided.

Non-theistic absolutes, in turn, are principles conceived as impersonal in the highest degree. Four features distinguish them: they ground metaphysical explanation; they establish normative and moral order; they render liberation intelligible; and they do not require agency, will, or personality. Brahman in Advaita Vedānta, puruṣa in Sāṃkhya, and dharma in Mīmāṃsā are the clearest Hindu instances. They do not merely replace God with an abstraction; they relocate ultimate reality from the personal to the structural register, from command to intelligibility, from divine intention to metaphysical necessity (Bilimoria, 2015).

Identifying this category allows Hindu systems to be compared without being forced into a binary of theism versus atheism, and it reveals a distinctive feature of Hindu philosophy: that impersonal principles are treated as adequate sources of meaning and liberation in their own right. The analysis that follows draws on classical Sanskrit philosophical texts and their commentarial traditions, in dialogue with current scholarship in Hindu studies and philosophy of religion, with particular attention to Advaita Vedānta, Sāṃkhya, and Mīmāṃsā, whose positions on God are articulated with unusual conceptual clarity—and, to the traditions that contest them.

A note on sources is in order. Primary passages are cited to standard editions and translations rather than to secondary paraphrase alone wherever a specific doctrinal claim is made: the Upaniṣads in Olivelle's (1998) annotated translation; the Brahma Sūtra via Śaṅkara's commentary; the Sāṃkhya Kārikā via Larson's (1987) study and translation; the Mīmāṃsā Sūtra via Clooney's (1990) study of Jaimini; and Śaṅkara's own shorter work via Mayeda's (1992) translation of the Upadeśasāhasrī. Udayana, Rāmānuja, and Madhva are cited through the standard secondary studies of Chemparathy (1972), Carman (1974), and Sharma (1962) respectively, since no single English edition of the relevant primary texts is uniformly cited across the field. This mixed citation practice—primary texts and translations where a specific verse or passage is at issue, secondary studies where a school's overall position is being characterized—follows the convention of comparable work in Hindu studies and philosophy of religion.

The scope of the inquiry should be stated plainly. The argument is restricted to classical, Sanskrit-medium philosophical argument as preserved in the darśana literature and its commentarial tradition; it does not extend to vernacular theological writing, to regional bhakti movements' own doctrinal self-understanding, or to the lived, ethnographic texture of contemporary devotional practice, each of which would require different methods and might complicate the picture offered here. Nor does the paper attempt a complete survey of every Hindu philosophical school: Yoga, Vaiśeṣika considered apart from its Nyāya alliance, and the several Vedāntic sub-schools beyond Advaita, Viśiṣṭādvaita, and Dvaita are not treated in detail, though nothing in the argument depends on their exclusion. The claim defended is accordingly a claim about the darśana tradition of philosophical argument specifically, not about "Hinduism" as a single, undifferentiated whole.

This paper does not offer a sociological account of belief or devotional practice. Its concern is the philosophical sufficiency of Hindu philosophical systems considered on their own terms, not the prevalence of non-theistic belief among practitioners. What is analysed here is not what Hindus believe, but what Hindu philosophies can sustain and justify.

At a more general level, the paper tests the thesis that theology is necessarily God-centred. If Hindu traditions can sustain coherent accounts of reality, normativity, and liberation without divine personhood—and can do so while remaining in active philosophical contest with traditions that argue the opposite—then theology as a category requires revision. This has implications not only for Hindu studies but for the philosophy of religion generally.

Non-Theistic Absolutes in Hindu Philosophy

The section examines how three major Hindu philosophical schools explain ultimate reality independently of God or any comparable personal being. The claim is not that these schools are straightforwardly irreligious, but that each sustains a complete and rational account of reality, a basis for moral evaluation, and a path to liberation without recourse to a personal deity. Taken together, they show that non-theism is not an exception within Hindu philosophy but a legitimate and historically significant account of the ultimate nature of reality.

Advaita Vedānta offers one of the most sophisticated accounts of ultimate reality in world philosophy, and it is non-theistic in the strict sense that it does not treat God, or any personal being, as the ground of ultimate reality. That ground is Brahman, defined in the Upaniṣads as the underlying reality of all that exists. Brahman's crucial description is that it is *nirguṇa*—without qualities, characteristics, or intentional agency (Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad 2.3.6; Olivelle, 1998). Brahman is not one being among others, nor a supreme person who wills, acts, or creates within time.

On this account, Brahman does not function as a theistic God: it issues no commands, answers no prayers, and does not intervene within a moral order. Brahman is pure being-consciousness, realized through knowledge rather than propitiated through worship. Mokṣa, liberation from the cycle of rebirth, is attained only through *jñāna*—the recognition of the non-duality of self (ātman) and Brahman. The fundamental human problem is therefore ignorance (avidyā) rather than sin, and its remedy is knowledge rather than redemption.

Advaita does not deny God outright; it reassigns his role. Īśvara operates as a teaching device within the empirical world, explaining cosmic order and underwriting devotional practice at the level of conventional truth (vyavahārika satya). From the standpoint of ultimate truth (pāramārthika satya), however, Īśvara dissolves along with the entire world of distinctions (Śaṅkara, trans. Mayeda, 1992). The philosophical stakes are significant: Advaita locates ultimacy in an impersonal reality rather than a personal God, and its account of reality, morality, and liberation remains coherent and complete independently of any personal foundation.

Where Advaita diminishes God's role, classical Sāṃkhya dispenses with it altogether. Sāṃkhya is strictly dualist, deriving the entirety of the universe—including its mental and moral dimensions—from the interaction of two irreducible principles, puruṣa (pure consciousness) and prakṛti (material nature), with no need for a divine creator (Larson, 1987). Puruṣa is passive and without agency; prakṛti evolves through the operation of its own inherent guṇas. The relationship is captured in the Sāṃkhya Kārikā's own analogy: prakṛti acts for the liberation of puruṣa unintelligently, as milk flows for the nourishment of a calf without conscious intention (Sāṃkhya Kārikā 57; Larson, 1987). Suffering, on this account, is not a matter of moral culpability requiring divine forgiveness but a structural misidentification of consciousness with material process; liberation (kaivalya) follows once puruṣa discriminates itself from prakṛti, without need of divine intervention or a moral governor to guarantee cosmic justice. Sāṃkhya's atheism is not incidental but functional: later commentators on the Kārikā make the point explicitly, arguing that since prakṛti already accounts for the world's arising, functioning, and dissolution without external direction, positing an additional Īśvara to perform work prakṛti already performs would be otiose—a parsimony argument, not merely an omission (Larson, 1987). Introducing a creator God would add no explanatory value and would complicate the system's internal logic.

Mīmāṃsā rejects the relevance of a deity to ethical and ritual life for related reasons (Clooney, 1990). Its central concern is dharma, the normative basis of action and duty, whose authority Mīmāṃsā grounds not in divine command but in the Veda itself, understood as eternal, authorless (apauruṣeya), and self-

authenticating—a position the school stakes out from its opening inquiry into the nature of dharma (Mīmāṃsā Sūtra 1.1.1). God is not required to explain scriptural authority, ritual efficacy, or the binding force of moral obligation: ritual results follow from an inherent relation between act and outcome (apūrva), not from divine adjudication, and the moral order operates without oversight, judgement, or grace. Mīmāṃsā's account of moral order without a moral overseer remains one of the most fully worked out non-theistic ethical theories to have shaped Indian philosophical debate; it demonstrates that obligation and consequence can be sustained without a god responsible for either.

Early Buddhism and Jainism reinforced this broader trend toward non-theistic models of liberation, though they are typically treated as heterodox with respect to the Vedic schools. Developing during the same period and engaging many of the same debates about suffering, causation, and liberation, early Buddhism denies both a permanent self (anātta) and a creator god, offering instead a path to liberation grounded in causal analysis and ethical discipline. Jainism accepts a plurality of souls (jīvas) but attributes cosmic order to the operation of karma rather than to divine will (Bronkhorst, 1993). Rather than opposing the Hindu darśanas from outside, these traditions belong to the same intellectual environment—one in which God had never been an unquestioned philosophical necessity—and their influence pressed Hindu philosophers to develop non-theistic accounts of liberation that were both rigorous and existentially compelling. The presence of these systems illustrates that non-theistic reasoning was never a threat to Hindu philosophy's continuity, but one live option among several within a plural intellectual culture.

Considered together, these systems reveal a consistent pattern: ultimate reality, moral order, and liberation are treated as independent of God as a person. Theism, where it appears, functions as one means among several of expressing these commitments rather than as their necessary foundation. This raises the question: what happens to this reading when it meets the darśanas that argue precisely the opposite?

The Theistic Counter-Case: Nyāya and Qualified Vedānta

The argument so far invites an obvious objection: it has been built entirely from schools that minimize or eliminate God. Classical Hindu philosophy also contains its most sustained arguments *for* God's philosophical necessity, and any claim about Hindu philosophy as a whole must engage them rather than pass over them in silence.

The clearest case is Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika, whose theistic argumentation reaches its most developed form in Udayana's *Nyāyakusumāñjali*. Udayana offers a family of arguments for Īśvara's existence, reasoning broadly along cosmological and moral lines: the world, as a composite effect, requires an intelligent agent-cause capable of arranging its parts, much as a pot requires a potter; and the impersonal law of karma, which correlates past action with present result, requires a conscious dispenser to administer that correlation, since an unconscious moral residue (adṛṣṭa) cannot by itself apply itself correctly to sentient agents (Chemparathy, 1972). Naiyāyikas supplement these arguments with an appeal to

scriptural testimony, treated not as self-authenticating in Mīmāṃsā's sense but as the reliable word of a trustworthy speaker—which, they argue, presupposes an author. Crucially, these are philosophical arguments addressed to opponents within the Hindu fold: Mīmāṃsakas and Buddhist logicians attacked Nyāya's proofs on their own terms, disputing the inference from effects to an intelligent maker and the necessity of a conscious dispenser of karmic result. The theism-versus-non-theism debate in classical India was thus conducted as philosophy, using shared canons of evidence (pramāṇa), not imposed as revealed dogma against which philosophical argument had no purchase.

Theistic Vedānta mounts a parallel challenge from within Vedānta itself. Rāmānuja's Viśiṣṭādvaita ("qualified non-dualism") argues that Śaṅkara's nirguṇa Brahman is not merely austere but incoherent: an ultimate reality wholly without qualities cannot, on Rāmānuja's account, be an object of knowledge, discourse, or scriptural testimony at all, since even the assertion that Brahman is without qualities is itself a qualification. Rāmānuja's Brahman is instead saguṇa—personal, possessed of auspicious qualities, and related to the world and to individual souls as a body (śarīra) is related to its indwelling self (śarīrī); the world's dependence on Brahman is real, not a product of beginningless ignorance (avidyā) to be dissolved by knowledge (Carman, 1974; Lipner, 1986). Madhva's Dvaita Vedānta goes further, insisting on an irreducible ontological distinction between an independent (svatantra) God, identified with Viṣṇu, and dependent (paratantra) souls and matter, and rejecting Advaita's non-dualism as both scripturally untenable and logically self-undermining (Sharma, 1962). Madhva presses this charge at its sharpest point against Advaita's account of avidyā (ignorance) and māyā, which Śaṅkara's tradition describes as *anirvacanīya*—neither existent nor non-existent, and so strictly indeterminable. For Madhva, a category that can be shown to violate the law of excluded middle is not a subtle metaphysical achievement but an incoherence, and a system whose central explanatory device is incoherent cannot be credited with the completeness this article attributes to it (Sharma, 1962).

Advaita is not without a reply to Rāmānuja's parallel charge that a wholly qualityless Brahman cannot coherently be spoken of or known. The standard Advaitic response distinguishes between an essential definition of Brahman (*svarūpa-lakṣaṇa*)—which nirguṇa Brahman strictly lacks, since it has no defining attributes—and an indicative or pointing-out definition (*taṭastha-lakṣaṇa*), by which language can gesture toward Brahman via provisional qualifications (such as being the ground of the world) without thereby predicating real attributes of it. Later Advaitins, defending the school against precisely this line of Vaiṣṇava criticism, argue that even the Upaniṣadic *neti neti* is itself only intelligible as such an indicative use of language, not a determinate description; scriptural statements about Brahman function didactically, at the level of conventional truth, to lead the inquirer toward a knowledge that ultimately exceeds all statement. Rāmānuja's rejoinder—that this distinction merely relocates the incoherence rather than resolving it, since an indicative definition of an entity with no properties is itself parasitic on properties it does not really have—remains, on most accounts, unresolved between the two schools. The dispute is instructive less for whichever side one judges to have the stronger argument than for what its persistence shows: three schools sharing a common textual canon and broadly overlapping standards of argument reach incompatible conclusions about whether ultimate reality can be impersonal, using arguments answerable, and answered, entirely in-house.

For Rāmānuja and Madhva alike, the explanatory and soteriological work non-theistic absolutes claim to perform cannot in fact be done without a personal, intentional God—devotion to whom is not merely pedagogically useful, but metaphysically required.

These traditions do not refute the thesis of this paper; properly engaged, they sharpen it. The claim being defended is not that no rigorous Hindu philosophy affirms God's necessity, but that Hindu philosophy as a whole does not entail it—that equally disciplined systems, working from shared premises about evidence and liberation, reach opposite conclusions about whether a personal God is required. The very existence of Udayana's proofs, and of Rāmānuja's and Madhva's polemics against Advaita, is evidence for this reading rather than against it: theism in the Hindu darśana tradition is a philosophical position that must be argued for and can be philosophically contested, not a precondition without which Hindu thought becomes unintelligible. If God's necessity were simply obvious within the tradition, Udayana would have had no need to devote a treatise to proving it, and Rāmānuja and Madhva would have had no need to spend theirs attacking Śaṅkara. That the strongest theistic arguments in classical Hindu philosophy take the form of contested inferences—answerable, and in fact answered, by non-theistic opponents working within the same tradition—is precisely what one would expect if theism is one defensible philosophical position among others, rather than the condition of Hindu philosophy's coherence as such.

Theistic Hinduism as a Strategic, Not Necessary, Development

The prominence of theistic elements across much of Hinduism might seem to undercut the argument made so far—as though the sheer visibility of devotional practice and divine imagery settled the philosophical question in God's favour. That inference confuses practical importance with philosophical necessity. Rather than expressing a metaphysical requirement, theism in Hindu philosophy functions strategically: as a pedagogical and ethical resource that makes philosophical understanding livable and transmissible, and, as a position some Hindu philosophers considered independently defensible on properly philosophical grounds.

This section argues that theism functions strategically in this more limited sense: it facilitates moral formation, emotional engagement, and communal continuity, without thereby supplying what Hindu metaphysics is otherwise shown to sustain on its own.

The rise of bhakti marks a decisive shift in the expression of Hindu religiosity. Devotional traditions centred on a personal deity—Viṣṇu, Śiva, the Goddess—cultivate emotional closeness, surrender, and the possibility of ethical transformation as central elements of worship. This development produced enduring communities, offered models of living modelled on the deity or the devotional community, and created forms of religious participation accessible regardless of philosophical training (Hawley, 2015).

The personal God's role within bhakti is best understood functionally rather than as a metaphysical foundation. Personal deities provide relational focus, moral orientation, and existential reassurance; they

answer human needs for relationship, address, and trust, rather than gaps in metaphysical argument. Bhakti is thus grounded in lived experience rather than in a deficiency of philosophical explanation.

Even canonical devotional literature registers this distinction. In the Bhagavad Gītā, Kṛṣṇa speaks directly to his devotees, inviting them into a personal relationship structured around devotion to him; yet the structure of reality within which this invitation operates remains, on many readings, impersonal at its deepest level. Kṛṣṇa's devotees attain liberation through devotion to him as a personal God, even as the reality they ultimately reach is not itself composed of personal beings (Malinar, 2007). Bhakti, in this sense, functions as an accessible mode of engagement with ultimacy; it does not thereby redefine ultimacy itself.

At the level of philosophical system-building, theism operates in a different register still, centred on Īśvara rather than on bhakti's devotional register. Rather than an ontological necessity, Īśvara functions primarily as a response to explanatory and pedagogical demands within Hindu philosophy. The shift from bhakti to Īśvara marks not only a change in how the divine is understood to function, but a move from lived devotional experience toward a more purely conceptual reconciliation within metaphysics.

In later Vedāntic thought, Īśvara explains cosmic order, the coordination of karma, and the transmission of teaching from a divine to a human register, functioning as an efficient cause within the phenomenal world without disturbing Vedāntins' underlying commitment to an impersonal absolute reality. This layered structure allows philosophical rigor and devotional practice to coexist without contradiction (Deutsch, 1969). Most significantly, Īśvara does not establish the metaphysical first principles on which the system as a whole rest; when the demands of explanation or instruction recede, so does the necessity of invoking God within the metaphysical system proper. The core metaphysical categories therefore remain intact without reference to a divine agent.

This pattern supports the paper's broader thesis: in the traditions considered, God is not invoked to explain what would otherwise remain unexplained, but to render an already complete metaphysical structure compatible with ethical formation and devotion. Theism enhances the practice of Hinduism without forming the foundation of its metaphysics—a conclusion that theistic traditions would themselves dispute, and whose contestability is part of what makes the overall picture a genuinely philosophical one rather than a settled consensus.

With this account of theism's strategic role in place, the paper turns to a final theoretical question: what becomes of "theology" once God is no longer treated as conceptually indispensable to it.

Rethinking "Theology" in the Hindu Context

The preceding sections raise a theoretical problem that cannot be avoided: a successful account of Hindu philosophical systems requires examining metaphysical explanation, moral order, and liberation without presupposing God as conceptually necessary to any of them. This raises questions about the

category of theology itself, and about the assumptions that shape how religion is identified, classified, and compared across traditions (King, 1999; Nicholson, 2010).

Definitions of theology within Western religious philosophy typically make God the object of study: theology is reflection on God's nature, will, and relationship to the world, a definition rooted in Christian intellectual history that has set an influential parameter for what counts as theology as such. This definition represents a limiting framework for traditions without divine personhood at their conceptual core (Hick, 2004). Hindu religious philosophy shows that a coherent and sustained consideration of ultimacy is possible without invoking God as its organizing concept (Flood, 1996).

Western theology has itself produced resources for this move, most notably in Paul Tillich's account of faith as the state of being "ultimately concerned," and of God as the "Ground of Being" rather than a being among beings—a God, in Tillich's phrase, that must in some sense be transcended by "the God above God" if faith is to survive the collapse of any particular symbol for the divine (Tillich, 1951, 1957). Tillich's move, made from within a Christian tradition negotiating its own relationship to a personal creator, anticipates the reorientation this paper traces in Hindu philosophy: theology as reflection on ultimacy rather than deity. The traditions differ in what follows from that reorientation—Tillich retains "God" as a name for the Ground of Being, whereas Advaita, Sāṃkhya, and Mīmāṃsā largely do not—but the underlying strategy, of defining theology by its object of ultimate concern rather than by a predetermined personal referent, is shared. A comparable move recurs in the West's own apophatic tradition, from Pseudo-Dionysius's insistence that the divine exceeds every name and category (Luibheid, 1987) to Meister Eckhart's distinction between "God" and the "Godhead" that lies beyond God (McGinn, 2001). Hindu non-theism is therefore not without Western analogue; what distinguishes it is the degree to which several major darśanas dispense with personal theistic language altogether, rather than retaining it, as Tillich and the apophatic tradition largely do, under erasure—as a symbol acknowledged to point beyond itself while still being used. Advaita's Brahman, by contrast, is not "God" spoken of negatively; it is, on Śaṅkara's own account, not properly an object of the word "God" at all, Īśvara being a distinct and conventional-level construct. The difference is one of degree rather than kind, but it is philosophically significant: Hindu non-theism, in its strongest forms, does not merely qualify theistic language, as apophatic theology typically does, but declines to treat theistic language as the primary register of ultimacy in the first place.

This convergence and divergence bear directly on the question of whether "Hindu theology" is a coherent category at all—a question addressed directly in the comparative theology of Francis X. Clooney, who has argued that theological reflection can proceed across religious boundaries without requiring a shared commitment to a personal God as its starting premise (Clooney, 1993, 2001). Julius Lipner has similarly cautioned against assuming that "theology," in its Christian theistic sense, transfers straightforwardly onto Hindu material, while nonetheless defending its qualified use for Hindu systematic reflection on ultimacy (Lipner, 1994). Anantanand Rambachan's constructive project, explicitly titled *A Hindu Theology of Liberation*, takes the further step of building a theology from within Advaita's non-dual account of Brahman, treating the very impersonality that this article has identified as

a resource for theological construction rather than an obstacle to it (Rambachan, 2006, 2015). Read together, these scholars suggest that the present paper's argument is not merely a description of what Hindu philosophy happens to do, but a contribution to a live and unsettled question about what theology, as a category, ought to mean.

This yields a more functional, though still properly theological, account of Hindu systems. They are theological in that they answer traditionally theological questions—the nature of ultimate reality, the source of norms, the path out of suffering—but they do so use impersonal absolutes, causal structures, and systematic argument rather than a divine being or divine commands (Radhakrishnan & Moore, 1957; Ganeri, 2001). Theology, on this reading, becomes reflection on ultimacy rather than on God.

This shift carries several implications. It undermines the assumption that religion and theism are equivalent, and it shows that religious meaning can be secured without a personal creator or moral governor: religious order can rest on impersonal concepts such as dharma, and liberation can be reached through knowledge or discipline rather than grace (Clooney, 1990; Larson, 1987). Neither position is a modern or secular reinterpretation; both belong to the foundational structure of classical Indian philosophy.

This reconceptualization also complicates the theism–atheism binary that continues to dominate much contemporary discourse. Hindu non-theism neither rejects transcendence nor collapses into materialism or scepticism; it affirms ultimacy while declining to personify it. Scholars increasingly note that such positions fall outside taxonomic categories developed primarily within Abrahamic paradigms (Bilimoria, 2015; Ganeri, 2018).

A further consequence concerns theism's place within Hindu religious philosophy once it is understood functionally rather than as a metaphysical default: deities are relocated rather than eliminated. Theism becomes one mode of relating to ultimate reality, grounded in moral, emotional, and pedagogical considerations rather than metaphysical necessity, allowing devotional traditions to flourish without needing to revise their philosophical foundations (Malinar, 2007; Hawley, 2015)—though, again, this is a description theistic Vedāntins would themselves resist, for the reasons given in Section 4.

Comparative theology requires a correspondingly wider methodology. Avoiding the distortion of one tradition's categories by another's requires resisting uncritical universalization. Twentieth-century Western theology's rigid definitions have made it difficult to compare superficially similar theological systems across traditions, given their underlying differences. A functional approach to theology, attentive to the role played by different concepts of ultimacy, offers a more accurate basis for cross-cultural comparison, and helps prevent criteria developed within one culture from being imposed inappropriately on another (King, 1999; Nicholson, 2010).

Retaining "theology" as a category need not depend on retaining God as its object. Theology can instead be understood as systematic reflection on that which carries ultimate meaning, whether personal or impersonal, depending on the tradition in question. Hindu philosophy does not replace theology; it

models a form of theology that has generally gone unrecognized within dominant theoretical frameworks.

The question posed at the outset can now be given a more definite shape. Hindu theology does not depend on God, because it was never built on that necessity in the first place, but on the demands of explaining suffering and securing liberation. God enters where relational, ethical, and pedagogical needs arise, but does not thereby anchor the system's foundations—except, where philosophers within the tradition have argued that he must.

This reorientation prepares the ground for the concluding discussion, where the implications of Hindu non-theism for contemporary philosophy of religion are drawn together.

Implications for Philosophy of Religion

The analysis developed here bears on the philosophy of religion as a discipline, not only on Hindu studies narrowly conceived. Hindu non-theism is not a marginal case within an otherwise God-centred field; it exposes limitations in how religion, theology, and ultimacy are generally conceived (King, 1999; Bilimoria, 2015).

Much of the philosophy of religion implicitly assumes that belief in God is definitive of religion as such. Its central problems—the nature of God, arguments for God's existence, the problem of evil, divine command theory—take God's explanatory centrality for granted, and religious traditions are then assessed by their conformity to, or departure from, this standard (Hick, 2004).

Hindu philosophy challenges this assumption structurally. As shown above, several classical Hindu traditions provide metaphysical explanation, moral norms, and a path to liberation without reference to a personal creator or governor, while others within the same tradition argue, on comparable philosophical grounds, that such a being is required. Both the coherence of the non-theistic systems and their historical continuity in active argument with theistic rivals demonstrate that God-centred religion is not a universal feature of religious thought but one tradition-specific configuration among others (Flood, 1996; Larson, 1987).

This is not to say that God-centred inquiry lacks philosophical legitimacy; it is to say that it cannot claim to be methodologically universal. The philosophy of religion should distinguish traditions in which God is foundational from those in which ultimacy is expressed through impersonal or non-agentive principles—and, should further distinguish traditions in which this question is itself an object of internal philosophical dispute. Absent this distinction, there is a real risk of projecting a local theological grammar onto traditions organized on different terms (King, 1999).

The double contestation traced in this paper—non-theistic systems developed, and their theistic critics engaged directly—also bears on how the philosophy of religion should treat internal religious pluralism, as distinct from pluralism across traditions. Comparative philosophy of religion has generally been

organized around comparison between traditions: Christian theism compared with Buddhist non-theism, for instance, or with Advaita's impersonal absolute. The Hindu case shows that an analogous and equally rigorous dispute over God's necessity can occur within a single broad tradition, conducted by philosophers who share scripture, method, and much of their technical vocabulary, yet reach opposite conclusions. This suggests that the relevant unit of analysis for the philosophy of religion is not always "a religion" treated as a bounded whole, but the specific philosophical commitments internal to a given school or lineage. A philosophy of religion built to compare Hinduism with other traditions risks flattening exactly the internal disagreement—between Advaita and Nyāya, or between Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja—that this paper has argued is central to understanding what Hindu philosophy actually claims.

Once theology is understood as systematic reflection on ultimacy, normativity, and liberation, and not necessarily on a divine being, non-theistic traditions cease to appear as historical curiosities or conceptually deficient variants of "real" theology. The account developed here offers a more expansive and defensible understanding of theology as a category.

On this account, the major Hindu philosophical systems can properly be called theological. They address ultimate reality through concepts such as Brahman and puruṣa, ground moral obligation in dharma, and describe paths to liberation through knowledge, discrimination, and disciplined action. They do not reject theological reflection as such; they reject the assumption that all theological reflection must rest on a personal God (Radhakrishnan & Moore, 1957; Clooney, 1990).

This redefinition carries methodological consequences for comparative theology: it allows theologians to compare traditions without privileging one metaphysical account over another, and without treating traditions lacking belief in a personal deity as less complete than those that possess one. A revised conception of theology permits genuine comparison across traditions, rather than assimilating each to a single template (Bilimoria, 2015).

There is a further implication for the theism–atheism dichotomy that dominates much contemporary philosophical discussion of religion, which typically treats the existence of God as the central question to be settled. Through Hindu non-theism, existence claims are de-emphasized in favour of questions about the nature, structure, and purpose of ultimacy (Ganeri, 2018).

The rejection of a personal deity does not entail the rejection of transcendence, normativity, or liberation within Hindu philosophical systems. Non-theism here is neither a modern polemical atheism nor a secular naturalism; it recognizes an ultimate reality while denying that this reality can be represented in personal form (Bilimoria, 2015; Hick, 2004). Scholars increasingly recognize that such positions resist easy accommodation within established taxonomies of belief or religion.

This shift requires a correspondingly revised approach to classifying philosophical systems. Classifying philosophies simply as theistic or atheistic is no longer sufficient; a more adequate framework attends

instead to a system's account of the ultimate, of causation, of moral order, and of liberation, reducing the tendency to treat non-theistic philosophies as defined by absence or negation.

Taken together, these considerations point toward an increasingly pluralistic and analytical approach to the philosophy of religion—one that does not rely on a single theological model as the basis for universal validity, and that avoids applying external criteria when assessing whether a given practice or system counts as genuinely religious.

The methodological point generalizes beyond the Hindu case. Christian theology's own internal disputes between classical theism and process theology, or between kataphatic and apophatic modes of speaking of God, exhibit a structurally similar pattern: philosophers and theologians sharing scripture and much of their conceptual vocabulary reach substantially different conclusions about how personal, or how impersonal, ultimate reality can coherently be. Buddhist philosophy contains comparable internal debates over how strictly its founding rejection of a creator god should be read against later, more devotionally inflected developments. If the approach argued for here is correct, the philosophy of religion should expect, and be methodologically equipped to handle, this kind of internal contestation as a normal feature of mature religious-philosophical traditions, rather than treating it as an anomaly to be resolved before comparison across traditions can begin.

Hindu non-theism does not require philosophy of religion to abandon its traditional questions; it requires that those questions be properly contextualized. Where an inquiry is God-centred, a God-centred approach is adequate to it; where it is not, that same approach will be inadequate, however successfully it has been applied elsewhere. Hindu philosophy is thus not only a source of alternative answers, but a source of alternative criteria for religious belief and justification—showing that religion and theology can remain consistent without God, and thereby requiring the philosophy of religion to reconsider the most basic assumptions underlying its own categories.

Conclusion

This paper set out to answer a deceptively simple question: does Hindu theology require God? Within many of the philosophical foundations of Hindu thought, the answer is no. In several well-established Hindu philosophies, metaphysical explanation, moral order, and liberation do not depend on treating God as the ultimate principle—a pattern that appears to be a genuinely functional feature of Hindu philosophy's internal structure, rather than an incidental one (Flood, 1996; Larson, 1987).

Advaita Vedānta locates ultimate reality in an impersonal absolute and treats "God" chiefly as a pedagogical device; Sāṃkhya develops a complete cosmology without appeal to a creative or governing agent; Mīmāṃsā grounds the ethical normativity of Hindu ritual without appeal to divine will. Later theistic traditions do not eliminate these structures; they run alongside them, meeting ethical, emotional, and pedagogical needs that the non-theistic systems, on their own account, do not claim to meet. That parallel existence is contested rather than settled: Nyāya's theistic proofs and the theistic Vedānta of Rāmānuja and Madhva argue, on properly philosophical grounds, that impersonal absolutes cannot in

fact do this work unaided. The resulting picture is not a single Hindu answer to the question of God, but a live philosophical disagreement, conducted for centuries within a shared framework of argument—which is itself evidence that Hindu theology, considered as a whole, does not treat God's existence as a settled precondition of its own coherence.

This has broader implications: it undermines the assumption that theology is necessarily God-centred, and speaks to ongoing debates in the philosophy of religion (King, 1999; Hick, 2004). Hindu thought demonstrates that theology can be organized around ultimacy and structure rather than deity and agency, exposing the limits of the theism–atheism dichotomy and making room for expressions of religiosity that recognize transcendence without personification—expressions that Tillich's "Ground of Being" and the Western apophatic tradition suggest are not unique to Hindu thought, even if Hindu philosophy develops them with unusual systematic rigor (Tillich, 1951; McGinn, 2001).

None of this is meant to diminish the significance of the divine within the religious worldviews of practicing Hindus. Devotion, worship, and a personal sense of the divine remain a prominent and, for most Hindus, indispensable part of religious life. The claim is more specific: that God enhances devotional practice within Hinduism without thereby providing the sole possible ground for its metaphysics—a claim that theistic Vedāntins would contest, and whose contentedness is part of the argument rather than a weakness in it. This distinction allows Hindu traditions to be understood philosophically on their own terms, whichever side of the theistic question a given tradition ultimately takes.

Recognizing this has methodological consequences for comparative religion and philosophy of religion: greater attentiveness to internal philosophical logics, and greater restraint in universalizing tradition-specific concepts, following the comparative theology of Clooney, Lipner, and Rambachan discussed above. Hindu non-theism does not undermine theology; it compels its redefinition, in dialogue with a tradition that has already, and independently, contested the same question from within.

Future research might investigate how non-theistic absolutes function in contemporary Hindu philosophy and practice, how Hindu non-theism compares with structurally similar movements in other religious traditions, and how non-theistic absolutes bear on present-day debates over secularism, spirituality, and religious pluralism. A further line of inquiry, would trace how the Advaita–Viśiṣṭādvaita–Dvaita dispute over the coherence of an impersonal absolute has itself evolved since the classical period, and whether contemporary constructive projects such as Rambachan's (2015) Hindu theology of liberation represent a genuine third way between the two positions or a restatement of Advaita's side of an argument that Rāmānuja and Madhva would still regard as unresolved.

What can be said with confidence is that Hindu philosophy offers not only a different answer to the question of God, but a different, and internally contested, way of posing the question in the first place—and that taking the internal contest as seriously as either side of it is itself the more defensible way to represent Hindu theology to a wider philosophy of religion.

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