Conceptions of Supreme Deity

Abstract: This paper attempts to provide a high-level comparison of Eastern and Western conceptions of deity. It finds some significant similarities—involving worshipworthiness and the ideal shape of human lives—and some important differences—concerning the ultimate nature of reality, the relation of supreme deity to the rest of reality, and the relative frequency of divine incarnation.

Keywords: Angel; Avatar; Deity; Eastern Religion; God; Idealism; Reincarnation; Superstition; Theism; Western Religion; Worshipworthiness

There are commonalities and differences between Eastern and Western conceptions of supreme deity. Perhaps most obviously, there are different Eastern conceptions of supreme deity, and there are different Western conceptions of supreme deity. But there are commonalities that unite all of these different conceptions of supreme deity. And there are also commonalities between particular Eastern conceptions of supreme deity and particular Western conceptions of supreme deity. (For other discussions of the topics that come up in this paper, see, for example: Buckareff and Nagasawa (2016), Diller and Kasher (2013), Gocke (2017), Kvanvig (2021), Morris (1987), Theodor and Yao (2013), and Ward (1998).)

1. Commonalities

Maybe the clearest example of a commonality that unites conceptions of supreme deity is worshipworthiness: it is very widely maintained, in both Eastern and Western traditions, that supreme deity merits and requires worship. Attitudes taken to characterise worship may include, for example, awe, respect, gratitude, and love. Of course, traditions differ in their accounts of which attitudes are proper to, or required for, worship of supreme deity. And traditions differ in their accounts of why supreme deity merits and requires worship. (For more about worshipworthiness, see, for example: Sobel (2003) and Kvanvig (2021).)

Worshipworthiness belongs to a distinctive class of attributes of supreme deity. While worshipworthiness is an intrinsic attribute of supreme deity—an attribute that it would have if it alone existed—the *characterisation* of worshipworthiness cannot itself be given solely in terms of attributes that are intrinsic to supreme deity. What it is to be worshipworthy is to be such as to merit and require worship *from appropriate others*. The distinctive class of attributes of supreme deity to which worshipworthiness belongs is the class of attributes of supreme deity that do not have *intrinsic characterisations*.

Another—controversial—example of an attribute of supreme deity that does not have an intrinsic characterisation is the attribute of being the ultimate cause or ultimate source of all else. There are, of course, conceptions of supreme deity on which it is denied that supreme deity is the ultimate cause or ultimate source of all else. But those theists who suppose that supreme deity is the ultimate cause or ultimate source of all else should accept that this attribute shares with worshipworthiness the distinction of being an attribute of supreme deity that does not have an intrinsic characterisation. (For more about ultimate realities, see, for example: Neville (2001) and Diller (2021).)

With the distinction—between attributes of supreme deity that do have intrinsic characterisation and attributes of supreme deity that do not have intrinsic characterisation—in hand, we can observe that there is variation within Western traditions, and variation within

Eastern traditions, about our capacity to identify and talk about attributes of supreme deity that *do* have intrinsic characterisations.

Some theists suppose that the attributes of supreme deity that have intrinsic characterisation evade us entirely: there is simply no conception that we can form of the attributes of supreme deity that have intrinsic characterisation, and no sense that we can give to attempts to talk about such attributes. On this kind of approach, while we can affirm that supreme deity is worthy of worship— and, perhaps, that supreme deity is the ultimate cause or ultimate source of all else—we cannot meaningfully affirm, for example, that supreme deity is a person, or has a mind, or the like. One instance of this kind of approach is apophaticism: according to certain traditions in both the East and the West, while we can say what supreme deity is not, we cannot say what supreme deity is. (For more on apophaticism and negative theology, see, for example: Lebens (2014), Scott and Citron (2016), White (2010), and Wildman (2017).)

Some theists suppose that the attributes of supreme deity that have intrinsic characterisation are only accessible to us through analogy, or metaphor, or the like. On this approach, we can only form analogical or metaphorical conceptions of the attributes of deity that have intrinsic characterisation, and we can only give analogical or metaphorical sense to attempts to talk about such attributes. While—on this kind of approach—we can give literal affirmation to the claim that supreme deity is worthy of worship, we can only give analogical or metaphorical affirmation to the claim that supreme deity is a person, or a mind, or the like. Perhaps the best-known instantiation of this kind of approach is found in Thomistic Christianity; but there are other traditions in both the East and the West that are clearly committed to something like this. (For more on analogical and metaphorical talk of deity, see, for example: White (2010).)

Some theists suppose that the attributes of supreme deity that have intrinsic characterisation are only accessible to us as 'conventional' truths or 'useful fictions'. On this approach, while we can affirm claims about the attributes of deity that have intrinsic characterisation, those claims are, in some sense, not really true. If we are to choose between saying that supreme deity is good, supreme deity is indifferent, and supreme deity is evil, then, of course, we shall say that supreme deity is good. Nonetheless, it is no more than a useful fiction or a mere truth by convention to claim that supreme deity is good. This approach has some affinity to the approach that would have it that it is only in an analogical or metaphorical sense that supreme deity is good. (For more on fictionalist approaches to deity and religion, see, for example, Harrison (2010), Jones (2010), Le Poidevin (2019), and Scott and Malcolm (2018).)

Some theists suppose that at least some attributes of supreme deity that have intrinsic characterisation are readily accessible to us, and admit of discussion in straightforwardly literal terms. On this kind of approach, there is no important difference between our ability to affirm that supreme deity is worthy of worship and our ability to affirm that supreme deity is a person, or a mind, or the like. Of course, it is open to someone who takes this kind of approach to suppose that there are other attributes of supreme deity that have intrinsic characterisation that are utterly inaccessible to us and/or accessible to us only through analogy or metaphor. (For more about realist approaches and their competitors, see, for example, Moore and Scott (2007).)

Variation within traditions about our capacity to identify and talk about attributes of supreme deity that do have intrinsic characterisations plausibly bears some connection to variation within traditions in willingness to embrace contradiction and/or apparent departures from intelligibility in thought and talk about attributes of supreme deity.

Some theists embrace explicitly contradictory talk about attributes of supreme deity that have intrinsic characterisation. Explanations for this embrace vary. Some theists endorse *dialetheism*: in their view, there are true contradictions, and the attributes of supreme deity that have intrinsic characterisation are among the things that are truly contradictory. Other theists suppose that, while it is not literally true that the attributes of supreme deity that have intrinsic characterisation are contradictory, the best analogical or metaphorical expressions that we can give to those attributes are explicitly contradictory. (For more on dialethic theologies, see, for example: Beall (2020), Chowdhury (2020) and Maharaj (2018).)

Some theists embrace talk about attributes of supreme deity that have intrinsic characterisation that, while perhaps not explicitly contradictory, is not obviously intelligible or coherent. Often enough, the attributes of supreme deity that have intrinsic characterisation are numbered among the 'mysteries' of particular traditions. For example, there are both Eastern and Western traditions in which supreme deity is taken to have *incarnations*, or *avatars*, or the like. Since, in these traditions, it is claimed that the relation that holds between supreme deity and its incarnations or avatars is *identity*, it seems that it should follow that the intrinsic attributes of supreme deity and the intrinsic attributes of its incarnations or avatars are one and the same. And yet it is commonly maintained in these traditions that the intrinsic attributes of the incarnations or avatars differ from the intrinsic attributes of supreme deity. For example, in some traditions of this kind, it is maintained both that, when considered just as supreme deity, supreme deity is intrinsically immaterial, and that, when considered as incarnation or avatar, supreme deity is intrinsically material. (For more about incarnations and avatars, see, for example: Hasker (2017) and Pawl (2020).)

There are both Western and Eastern traditions which claim that there are no real distinctions in supreme deity. So, for example, Thomists claim that supreme deity is simple: supreme deity has no parts of any kind; and followers of Advaita Vedanta claim that supreme deity is simple: supreme deity (Nirguna Brahman) is without either attributes or parts. In both traditions, we find the claim that supreme deity is 'Existence Itself'. In both traditions, supreme deity is said to be self-existent, infinite, eternal, immutable, perfect, one, transcendent and immanent, free, and so forth. Of course, there are also both Western and Eastern theological traditions that profess to find unintelligible the claim that there are no real distinctions in supreme deity. (For more about divine simplicity, see, for example: Saeedimehr (2007), Sijuwade (2022), and Vee (2021).)

There are some high level commonalities between Eastern and Western traditions that are committed to the existence of supreme deity. Perhaps the most important of these high-level commonalities concerns values and the ideal shape of human lives.

In many Eastern and Western traditions, all value is grounded in supreme deity. Accounts of this grounding vary, both in general, and for particular values. Some traditions talk about emanation; some appeal to commands and decrees. Where appeal is made to commands and decrees, it is maintained that these commands and decrees are recorded in works that themselves emanate from supreme deity, and sometimes maintained that these commands and decrees are impressed in individual conscience by supreme deity. The content of commands and decrees is also variable. All traditions prescribe rules of conduct and rules of religious observance. But traditions also prescribe virtues and auspicious qualities, and provide non-rule-based guidance concerning righteousness, morality, religiosity, and the like. (For more about morality and the divine, see, for example, Quinn (1978) and Wainwright (2005).)

Traditions in which value is grounded in supreme deity are typically committed to detailed accounts of what makes for an ideal human life. While there are important differences between Eastern and Western accounts of what makes for an ideal human life, these differences are not due to differences in conceptions of supreme deity, but rather to differences in views about the typical trajectory of human life. Abstracting from those differences, we see that it is common to many Eastern and Western traditions to suppose that humans who live well fulfil their moral and religious duties, experience peace and happiness, and (ultimately) arrive at the proper final destination for human beings: salvation, enlightenment, liberation, union with supreme deity, annihilation, or whatever.

2. Differences

Differences in Eastern and Western conceptions of supreme deity divide into differences of *degree* and differences of *kind*.

Perhaps the most significant difference in *degree* between Eastern and Western approaches to supreme deity is the relative popularity of idealism and dualism as fundamental metaphysical systems.

In the East, many—though by no means all—of the major philosophical and theological traditions are *idealistic*, in the following sense: they take minds and/or mental contents to be metaphysically fundamental, and they take the universe in which we live to be, at best, a construction from minds and/or mental contents, and, at worst, nothing more than an illusion. Moreover, among those philosophical and theological traditions that are not idealistic in this first sense, many are *idealistic* in the following sense: they take minds to be present everywhere in the universe in which we live. Idealists in this second sense are pantheists, or panentheists, or panpsychists, or the like. Some traditions combine both of these kinds of idealism: such traditions take the universe in which we live to be a construction from minds and/or mental contents and suppose that minds are present everywhere in the universe in which we live. And, of course, some Eastern traditions—e.g. Jainism and Sāṃkhya—are dualistic rather than idealistic. (For more about eastern idealism, see, for example: Finnegan (2017); Flood (2021); and Raju (1955).)

In the West, most of the major philosophical and theological traditions are *dualistic*, in the following sense: they take human beings to be composites of mind and body that traverse spatiotemporal trajectories through the universe in which we live, and, in consequence, those traditions take minds and bodies to be equally fundamental constituents of that universe. While it is arguably orthodoxy that there is a sense in which mind is more fundamental to human beings than body, there is disagreement between Western traditions on the question whether minds could or do go on existing in the absence of bodies. Some Western theists are materialists; some Western theists think that mind reduces to body (and so could not exist in its absence). Some Western theists are attribute dualists; some Western theists think that mind is something like a form of body (and so could not exist in its absence). Many Western theists are substance dualists; most of these Western theists suppose that minds can (and do) go on existing in the absence of bodies. (For more about western dualism, see, for example: Hawthorne (2007); Loose et al. (2018); and Taliaferro (1996).)

The difference that we have observed in the relative popularity of idealism and dualism as fundamental metaphysical systems may be paired with a difference in the relative popularity

of competing views about the relationship between supreme deity and human beings. In the West, many of the major philosophical and theological traditions insist on the *otherness* of supreme deity: there is no question of identity between supreme deity and human beings, and there is also no question of subsumption or incorporation of human beings into supreme deity. On the other hand, in the East, there are philosophical and theological traditions (e.g. Advaita Vedanta) that allow that supreme deity and the individual self are one: Brahman is Atman; and there are also philosophical and theological traditions that allow that individual selves can be subsumed or incorporated into supreme deity.

Perhaps the most significant difference in *kind* between Eastern and Western approaches to supreme deity lies in the relationship between supreme deity and the universe in which we live.

It has been orthodoxy in Western approaches to suppose that supreme deity is the ultimate *cause* of the universe in which we live. Moreover, and consequently, it has been orthodoxy in Western approaches to suppose that the history of the universe in which we live is finite. 'In the beginning', there is just supreme deity; and then supreme deity brings everything else into existence. There is less consensus in Western approaches about whether the future of the universe in which we live is finite, though perhaps there is more consensus that the future of humanity in the universe in which we live is finite. Some think that the universe in which we live will be destroyed in a final apocalypse. Some think that, although the universe in which we live will go on existing forever, humanity will be wiped from the face of the earth in a final apocalypse. But there are others who suppose that the universe itself will be transformed into 'the world to come' at some momentous point in the future: in this case, at least loosely speaking, the future of humanity and the future of our universe are infinite. (For more about God as first cause, see, for example: Kvanvig (2021); O'Connor (2013); Rasmussen and Pruss (2018); and Sobel (2004).)

It is something close to orthodoxy in Eastern approaches that the history of the universe in which we live is cyclical. There is sometimes reason to suppose that particular Eastern approaches take the history of the universe in which we live to be infinite. And, where particular Eastern approaches do take the history of the universe in which we live to be infinite, it is often the case that supreme deity and the universe in which we live are taken to be co-eternal. What seems ruled out, if the history in which we live is infinite, is a 'beginning' in which there is just supreme deity. And, if there is no 'beginning' in which there is just supreme deity, then the claim that supreme deity brings everything else into existence does not look attractive. But, even if the claim that supreme deity brings everything else into existence goes by the board, it is still possible to maintain that we have more than mere co-eternity. For example, even if we suppose that the universe in which we live has an infinite past, we might maintain that supreme deity is the *ground* of the existence of everything else. (For more about cyclical histories, see, for example: Billington (1997); Csaki (2015); Frazier (2013); Harrison (2022); and Theodor and Yao (2013).)

In combination, the difference in the relative popularity of idealism and dualism, and the difference in views about the relationship between supreme deity and the universe in which we live, undergird further differences between Eastern and Western views about the extent and ultimate purpose of human lives.

In the West, it is orthodoxy that a human being has one chance at life in our universe. On most Western philosophical and theological approaches which deny that there is life after

death, what happens to that human being during their one chance at life in our universe has a big say in what happens to them after that life in our universe comes to an end. There are universalists who suppose that everyone who ever lives is ultimately destined for eternal heavenly bliss. There are annihilationists who suppose that, while not everyone who ever lives is ultimately destined for eternal heavenly bliss, those who are not ultimately destined for eternal heavenly bliss are ultimately destined for annihilation. But, arguably, the majority view is that everyone is ultimately destined for either eternal heavenly bliss or eternal hellish damnation, consequent upon the final sorting of the sheep from the goats. No matter which alternative we adopt, the result, for each human being, is a non-cyclical, single-shot trajectory. Of course, those who believe in purgatory, limbo, and the like will want to add further wrinkles to this abbreviated sketch. However, those details are irrelevant to the conclusion that each human being has a non-cyclical, single-shot trajectory. (For more on western views about the ultimate purpose of life, see, for example: Fischer (2019); Goetz (2012); and Le Bihan (2019).)

In the East, it is commonly believed that human beings are enmeshed in a cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. On many Eastern philosophical and theological approaches, what happens to a human being during their current life in our universe has a say in determining whether they have future lives in our universe and in determining what happens to them in whatever future lives they do have in our universe. On some Eastern philosophical and theological approaches, everyone eventually escapes from the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth; however, in principle, it seems that one could suppose that there are some who are trapped forever on the wheel of suffering. If we do suppose that everyone eventually escapes from the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth, then the result, for each human being is an initially cyclical but then terminating trajectory. On these Eastern philosophical and theological approaches, views about the terminal state also vary: in some traditions, it is annihilation; on some traditions, it is heavenly bliss; and, on some (not necessarily distinct) traditions, it is subsumption or incorporation into supreme deity. There are other Eastern philosophical and theological traditions on which enlightenment, and the achievement of heavenly bliss, is a this-worldly achievement: ‘union’ with the supreme deity is something that happens in the course of life in our universe. In principle, at least, this view can be combined with the view that you remain enmeshed in the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth, perhaps forever. (For more about eastern views about the ultimate purpose of life, see, for example: King (1986).)

In the West, it is orthodoxy that the paramount goal for any human being is to go to heaven after they die. According to some Western traditions, leading a good life can play some role in determining whether you go to heaven. According to other Western traditions, while leading a good life plays no role in determining whether you go to heaven, leading a good life can provide you with evidence about whether you will go to heaven. Either way, human beings are strongly motivated to lead a good life. According to some Western traditions, if you lead a sufficiently bad life, you will very likely be subject to some kind of punishment in the afterlife. Of course, there is disagreement between Western traditions about what heaven is like, what alternative destinations (if any) are like, and so on. Just as there is disagreement about the nature of eternal felicity with supreme deity, so, too, there is disagreement about the nature of the punishment that is meted out to those who do not end up in eternal felicity with supreme deity. Some say: [eternal] torture. Some say: [eternal] separation from supreme deity. Some say: annihilation. Etc. (For more about heaven and hell in western traditions, see, for example: Buenting (2010); Byerly and Silverman (2017); and Walls (1992) (2002).)

In the East, it is widely maintained that the paramount gaol for any human being is to achieve a certain kind of ideal state for human beings: enlightenment, or liberation, or the like. As we noted earlier, there is disagreement between Eastern traditions about the nature and consequences of this achievement. Many take the view that achieving enlightenment triggers release from the cycle of birth, death and rebirth, and hence release from the wheel of suffering. Among those who take this view, opinion varies about what follows the release: for some, union with supreme deity; for others, annihilation. However, some take the view that achieving enlightenment is a this-worldly achievement that allows you to flourish in your current cycle, without necessarily leading to ongoing release from the wheel of suffering. (For more about eastern views of enlightenment, see, for example: Angel (1994).)

3. **Devas, Asuras, Angels, Demons, Etc.**

Most traditions in the East and in the West commit themselves to more than supreme deity and entities amenable to scientific investigation. So, for example, in the West, we find commitment to angels, demons, shaitin, jinn, golem, dybbuks, ghosts, and so forth. And, in the East, we find commitment to devas, asuras, rakshasa, pitri, preta, kimmidin, yaksha, daayans, hell-beings, and so on. Moreover, most traditions in the East and the West commit themselves to special human intermediaries between some of these kinds of entities and other human beings: prophets, seers, rishis, bodhisattvas, saints, pujaris, imams, priests, kaahen, bhikkus, purohits, daoshis, lisheng (礼生; 禮生), witches, wizards, mantriks, weizzas, and the like.

Many traditions, both Western and Eastern, maintain that worshipworthiness belongs solely to supreme deity. However, many of these traditions maintain that supreme deity has various manifestations. Some of those traditions maintain that some closely related attribute—e.g. venerability—belongs to supreme deity under these various manifestations. Some other traditions insist that, while it is only supreme deity as they conceive it that is worshipworthy, supreme deity as it is conceived in alternative traditions is at least venerable. Yet other traditions insist that supreme deity, as it is conceived in alternative traditions, is demonic; at least in principle, there is no reason why it could not be insisted that supreme deity, as it is conceived in alternative traditions, is angelic.

It is more common in the East than in the West to suppose that there are manifestations—incarnations, avatars—of supreme deity. Judaism and Islam are sparse: there is just one supreme deity, and it has no manifestations, incarnations, or avatars. Christianity is less sparse: supreme deity is triune, and incarnate in the person of Jesus. By contrast, Hinduism is profuse: supreme deity is diversely manifest in a wide range of deities and their incarnations and avatars. However, as noted above, there is little difference between East and West in the profusion of non-naturalistic entities that are not taken to be deities: angels, demons, rakshasa, pretas, and the like.

While this may be contestable, it seems to me that there are Eastern traditions in which it is allowed that supreme deity has manifestations that are anti-deities (asuras) rather than deities (devas). (Others might prefer to talk about ‘evil-deities’ rather than ‘anti-deities’.) It is not clear how well this claim sits with the claim that worshipworthiness belongs solely to supreme deity. However—as often happens with views that have a (fundamentally) monistic tenor—we might expect it to be said that, while supreme deity is worshipworthy under the (fundamental) aspect of supreme deity, it at most merits some lesser attitude under other (less fundamental) aspects (as particular devas or asuras). Alternatively, at least for some

traditions, perhaps what we see, instead, is that it is denied that supreme deity is (fundamentally) worthy of worship: (fundamental) worshipworthiness extends at least to manifestations of supreme deity properly classified as devas, and perhaps even to manifestations of supreme deity properly classified as asuras.

The distinction between worshipworthiness and venerability is not clear. In part, the difficulties arise because there can be discrepancy between 'official' theological traditions and 'folk' practice. In the West, there are 'official' Christian traditions in which saints and their relics are venerated; in practice, some 'folk' who belong to these traditions have attitudes towards saints and their relics that are hard to distinguish from worship. In the East, there are 'official' traditions on which icons, statues and amulets of deities are venerated; in practice, some 'folk' who belong to these traditions have attitudes towards icons, statues, and amulets that are hard to distinguish from worship. There may be a bright theoretical line between worshipping X and worshipping Y by venerating X even though, in practice, the difference is very hard to discern.

There are further question about attitudes towards superstition. It is widely recognised that one person's 'superstition' is another person's 'religious belief'. Nonetheless, there seems to be more contemporary anxiety about superstition in the East than in the West. (See, for example, Sethi and Saini (2019).) And this despite the fact that there is abundant evidence of widespread non-naturalistic belief in the West. About one in four Americans believes that four leaf clovers are lucky but breaking a mirror is unlucky. About one in five Americans believes knocking on wood is lucky, but walking under a ladder or opening an umbrella indoors is unlucky. (https://www.statista.com/statistics/959295/belief-in-superstitions-in-the-us/.) It seems to me to be highly implausible to suppose that Eastern religions are intrinsically more superstitious than Western religions: there is non-naturalistic belief in more or less equal measure in all of the major religions of the world.

4. **Concluding Remarks**

In this paper, I have painted with a very broad brush. As I emphasised in my opening remarks, there is a great deal of diversity within Western traditions and a great deal of diversity within Eastern traditions when it comes to questions about supreme deity. In consequence, attempts to make general comparisons between 'Eastern' and 'Western' conceptions of supreme deity must be taken with a liberal dose of salt. Even the terms that are used to frame the comparison are open to question: for example, it might be better to use 'Abrahamic' rather than 'Western'.

Despite these misgivings, it seems to me to be right to think that there is a common set of questions to which traditions across 'the East' and 'the West' can be taken to provide answers. What is supreme deity? How can we think about supreme deity? How should we respond to supreme deity? How is supreme deity linked to the world in which we live? What does supreme deity have to do with the ways in which we should conduct our lives? And so on. It is not unreasonable to think that, when we ask questions at this level of generality, we should see similarities and differences in the kinds of answers to them that are provided in 'the East' and 'the West'.

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