

Paradigm Shifts in Contemporary Theology of Religions: Reconfiguring Religious Pluralism in the Twenty-First Century

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Abstract: This article investigates recent paradigm shifts in contemporary theology of religions amid the intensifying pluralism of the twenty-first century. The unit of analysis consists of academic works on the theology of religions, including peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, and book chapters published primarily in the post-2000 period. The study aims to identify major intellectual developments in the field, examine how they reframe earlier typological models, and evaluate their implications for contemporary interreligious theology. Methodologically, the article employs a qualitative systematic literature review of selected publications from major academic databases, which were analyzed using thematic coding and interpretive synthesis. The review identifies four major shifts: from classical doctrinal typologies to practical-transformative pluralism; from universalist pluralism to comparative theology grounded in particular religious traditions; from liberal openness to postliberal and identity-conscious theological approaches; and from conventional interreligious concerns to new engagements with ecology, science, and digital religion. The article's novelty lies in its integrative mapping of these developments within a single analytical framework that connects doctrinal, dialogical, contextual, and public dimensions of theology of religions. It contributes to contemporary scholarship by offering a clearer conceptualization of the field's current trajectories and by providing a foundation for more context-sensitive and globally relevant theological reflection in plural societies.

Keywords: Theology of Religions; Religious Pluralism; Comparative Theology; Interreligious Dialogue; Contextual Theology; Digital Religion; Systematic Literature Review

1. Introduction

The twenty-first century has intensified religious pluralism not only as a theological issue but also as a concrete social condition. Global demographic change, migration, urbanization, and digital communication have brought religious communities into closer and more frequent contact than in previous eras. Pew Research Center's global religious data show that the world remains deeply religious while undergoing significant shifts in demographic composition across traditions, making plural coexistence an enduring feature of public life rather than a temporary anomaly. At the same time, recent quantitative work on the global Religious Diversity Index indicates that religious diversity has risen substantially since the mid-twentieth century, with important implications for social cohesion, governance, and intercommunal relations (Lin et al., 2022). Indonesia offers a particularly important setting for this discussion. The 2020 Population Census recorded 270.20 million inhabitants, underscoring the scale and density of social interaction in a religiously diverse nation, while official data from the Ministry of Religious Affairs continue to show the coexistence of multiple recognized religious communities across the archipelago. In such a setting, religious difference is no longer experienced at a distance; it is lived in neighborhoods, campuses, political debates, and digital networks. For that reason, the theology of religions can no longer remain confined to abstract doctrinal classification; it must be able to interpret pluralism as a historical and public reality.



The literature on the theology of religions has, of course, already provided several influential frameworks for thinking about religious diversity. Alan Race's classic typology of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism provided the field with its best-known map, while John Hick's pluralist proposal sought to ground interreligious equality in a theocentric account of the Real (Race, 1983; Hick, 1989). Paul Knitter broadened the discussion by relating the theology of religions to dialogue, liberation, and global responsibility, whereas Gavin D'Costa and S. Mark Heim challenged pluralist universalism by defending stronger accounts of Christian particularity (Knitter, 2002; D'Costa, 2009; Heim, 1995). In subsequent decades, the debate became more textured. Comparative theology, especially in the work of Francis X. Clooney and later interpreters, redirected attention from grand theory to disciplined learning across religious borders, while contextual theologians such as Stephen Bevens and Robert Schreiter insisted that theology is always shaped by concrete histories, cultures, and social locations (Bevens, 2002; Schreiter, 1997; Clooney, 2010; Locklin & Nicholson, 2010; Avci, 2018). More recently, scholars of digital religion and public theology have shown that interreligious encounter is increasingly mediated by online authority, networked identities, and contested public space (Campbell, 2007, 2012; Sabetta, 2025). Yet these developments are often treated separately. What remains underexplored is an integrative synthesis that explains how these strands together are reshaping contemporary theology of religions, especially in relation to plural societies in the Global South

This article is written to address that gap. Existing studies have made major contributions to particular subfields—classical typologies, comparative theology, contextual theology, interreligious dialogue, public theology, religion and ecology, or digital religion—but relatively few have brought these trajectories into a single analytical conversation. The problem is not merely bibliographic fragmentation. When these bodies of scholarship are read in isolation, the field can appear more divided than it actually is, and the deeper transformation of the theology of religions since 2000 becomes difficult to see. The present study, therefore, aims to identify the major paradigm shifts in contemporary theology of religions, to clarify how they revise or move beyond earlier typological models, and to assess their significance for theological reflection in plural contexts. In line with the article's broader design, the unit of analysis is post-2000 scholarly literature on the theology of religions, including peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, and book chapters, with selective engagement with seminal earlier works where conceptually necessary. This focus is important because pluralism today is not only doctrinally debated; it is socially negotiated through public ethics, education, ecological crisis, migration, and digital mediation. A contemporary introduction to the field must therefore do more than repeat inherited taxonomies; it must explain why those taxonomies are no longer sufficient on their own.

The central argument of this article is that contemporary theology of religions is undergoing a substantive shift from a primarily typological and truth-claim-centered discourse toward a more dialogical, contextual, practice-oriented, and publicly engaged framework. This does not mean that doctrinal questions have disappeared, nor that classical typologies have lost all heuristic value. Rather, it suggests that the most generative work in the field now emerges where theological identity is held together with relational accountability, comparative learning, ethical praxis, and interdisciplinary attentiveness. Comparative theology has shown that fidelity to one's own tradition need not prevent deep learning from another (Clooney, 2010; Avci, 2018). Digital religion studies have demonstrated that religious authority, belonging, and encounter are now increasingly negotiated in networked environments rather than only in formal institutions (Campbell, 2007, 2012). Recent work on interreligious public theology likewise indicates that religious pluralism is not merely a challenge to be managed, but a condition that can generate new forms of common-good reasoning and civic responsibility (Sabetta, 2025). In the Indonesian context, this argument is especially relevant because pluralism is lived amid both cooperation and contestation, as illustrated by recent research on local tolerance governance in places such as Salatiga (Anas et al., 2025). The working hypothesis, therefore, is that the future of theology of religions lies not in abandoning doctrine, but in reconfiguring doctrine through dialogue, context, and transformative public engagement.

2. Literature Review

1. From Classical Typologies to Post-Pluralist Revisions

The modern study of the theology of religions has been decisively shaped by the classical typology of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. Alan Race's *Christianity and Religious Pluralism* provided the field with a durable conceptual map by identifying the main Christian theological responses to other religions regarding salvation and truth. That typology became influential because it offered a clear framework for organizing otherwise diffuse debates, and it was later refined and popularized by writers such as Paul Knitter and Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen. Yet its explanatory power has also been repeatedly questioned. Critics have argued that the typology tends to flatten the diversity of actual theological positions, over-privileges doctrinal classification, and underestimates the historical and political conditions in which interreligious relations are lived. John Hick's pluralist proposal deepened the debate by re-centering religions around the transcategorical Real, but this move also drew strong criticism for allegedly subsuming irreducible differences within a single philosophical scheme. What began as a helpful taxonomy therefore came to be seen, in later scholarship, as both indispensable and insufficient. The literature suggests that typology remains useful as a heuristic point of departure, but no longer functions adequately as the final horizon for contemporary theology of religions, especially in a world marked by asymmetrical power, contested identities, and lived pluralism rather than abstract comparison alone (Race, 1983; Hick, 1989; Knitter, 2002; Kärkkäinen, 2003, 2021; D'Costa, 2009; Hedges, 2010).

The post-pluralist turn emerged precisely from dissatisfaction with universalizing accounts of religious diversity. S. Mark Heim challenged the assumption that a single soteriological logic must explain all religions, arguing instead that different traditions may embody genuinely distinct religious ends. Gavin D'Costa and other particularist theologians similarly rejected the idea that authentic dialogue requires suspending or relativizing confessional commitments. In this line of thought, the problem with some earlier pluralist models was not that they were too open, but that they translated difference too quickly into sameness. Post-pluralist scholarship, therefore, shifted attention from classification to narrative, practice, language, and the integrity of particular traditions. George Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic model, though not originally written as a theology of religions, proved crucial here because it reconceived religion as a formative grammar rather than merely a set of interchangeable propositions. More recent work in interreligious theology has built on this insight by emphasizing hospitality, fragility, embodiment, and the ethics of encounter, rather than consensus about metaphysical truth. As a result, theology of religions has moved toward a more modest but arguably more durable posture: one that permits strong theological identity while recognizing that dialogue is sustained not by neutral universals, but by disciplined attentiveness to difference. This shift is one of the most important foundations for contemporary work in the field (Heim, 1995; Lindbeck, 1984; D'Costa, 2009; Hedges, 2010; Moyaert, 2011).

2. Comparative Theology, Contextual Theology, and Transformative Dialogue

One of the most significant developments beyond the classical pluralist debate has been the rise of comparative theology. Unlike broad theories that attempt to explain religions from above, comparative theology proceeds through close, patient, and textually grounded learning across religious boundaries. Francis X. Clooney has been the central figure in articulating this method, arguing that deep engagement with another tradition can become a disciplined theological exercise conducted from within one's own faith commitments. Subsequent scholars have clarified that comparative theology should not be confused with comparative religion in the older phenomenological sense, nor reduced to a softer version of pluralism. Rather, it is a confessional and hermeneutical practice that seeks understanding without erasing asymmetry or doctrinal difference. Locklin and Nicholson's important review essay showed that the "return" of comparative theology reflects broader dissatisfaction with supposedly neutral models of religious comparison, while Avci has argued that comparative theology offers a distinctive alternative to both theology of religions and detached religious studies, even if the boundaries between these fields remain porous. The

value of this turn lies in its refusal of abstraction: it treats interreligious engagement as a matter of reading, discernment, self-implication, and transformation. For contemporary theology of religions, comparative theology has become one of the most credible ways of holding together conviction, humility, and serious intellectual openness (Clooney, 2010; Locklin & Nicholson, 2010; Avci, 2018; Cornille, 2019).

At the same time, comparative theology alone does not exhaust the field's contemporary development. Contextual theology and dialogical praxis have broadened the debate by insisting that interreligious reflection must be rooted in concrete histories of suffering, coexistence, and social struggle. Stephen Bevans and Robert Schreiter demonstrated long ago that context is not an external application of theology but part of theology's generative process. In plural societies, this insight has had major consequences: the question is no longer only what Christians should think about religious others, but how theology is reshaped when believers inhabit neighborhoods, institutions, and political orders structured by enduring difference. Raimon Panikkar's notion of intrareligious dialogue made this point in spiritual terms, portraying encounter with the religious other as a site of interior transformation rather than merely doctrinal exchange. Aloysius Pieris went further by linking interreligious dialogue with solidarity among the poor, thereby relocating the theology of religions within the struggle for justice. More recent scholarship on interreligious studies and education has continued this trajectory by treating dialogue as a lived practice that joins hermeneutics, ethics, and civic formation. In this literature, dialogue is not a polite supplement to doctrine; it is itself a mode of theological reasoning under plural conditions. Contemporary theology of religions is thus increasingly defined not only by what it says about other religions, but by how it learns, acts, and is transformed in relation to them (Bevans, 2002; Schreiter, 1997; Panikkar, 1999; Pieris, 1988, 1996; Sabetta, 2025).

3. New Horizons: Public, Ecological, and Digital Turns in Theology of Religions

A further shift in recent scholarship is the widening of the theology of religions beyond the older question of the salvific status of "the other" toward issues of public responsibility. This development is important because religious pluralism in the twenty-first century is experienced not only in doctrinal debate but in shared civic life, environmental crisis, educational institutions, migration, and digitally mediated conflict. In response, a growing body of literature has repositioned the theology of religions within the broader horizon of public theology. Rather than asking only how one tradition evaluates another, scholars increasingly ask how religious communities contribute to the common good under conditions of big difference. This move does not abandon confessional identity; it re-situates theological reflection within public ethics, democratic coexistence, and interreligious learning. Recent work by Gaetano Sabetta is especially relevant here because it argues that public theology has often under-theorized religious pluralism and therefore needs a comparative and interreligious method to remain credible in contemporary societies. This is an important corrective. It suggests that theology of religions can no longer remain a narrowly intratheological discourse, since pluralism now shapes not only ecclesial self-understanding but the public grammar of education, citizenship, and common life. The field's contemporary relevance, therefore, depends increasingly on its capacity to think theologically in public without collapsing into either sectarian withdrawal or thin ethical universalism (Tracy, 2011; Hedges, 2010; Sabetta, 2025).

This widening horizon is especially visible in ecological theology and digital religion. The religion-and-ecology literature has shown that environmental crisis has become one of the most powerful sites for interreligious collaboration, not because all traditions suddenly agree, but because ecological vulnerability creates a shared arena of responsibility. The field has matured from apologetic appeals to stewardship toward more complex analyses of cosmology, embodiment, sustainability, and interdependence across religious traditions. Companion volumes and recent special issues confirm that religion and ecology are now a substantial interdisciplinary conversation rather than a marginal thematic add-on. A parallel expansion is evident in digital religion. Heidi Campbell's work has been foundational in showing that religion online is not a secondary copy of "real" religion but part of a networked environment in which authority, belonging, ritual, and identity are renegotiated. Her analyses of online religious authority and "networked religion" remain highly relevant for the theology of religions because interreligious

encounter is now mediated through hybrid digital spaces shaped by algorithmic visibility, fragmented authority, and rapid circulation of both dialogue and hostility. Taken together, these developments indicate that contemporary theology of religions is moving toward a more public, interdisciplinary, and context-sensitive framework. Its future will likely depend on how seriously it engages ecological precarity, digital mediation, and the ethical demands of coexistence in a religiously plural world (Campbell, 2007, 2012; Campbell & Tsuria, 2021; Jenkins & Tucker, 2017; Renger et al., 2024).

3. Methods

This study employs a qualitative systematic literature review to examine paradigm shifts in contemporary theology of religions in response to the pluralistic realities of the twenty-first century. A systematic review design was selected because it allows the researcher to identify, screen, evaluate, and synthesize prior scholarship in a transparent and reproducible manner, rather than relying on an unsystematic narrative summary (Page et al., 2021; Snyder, 2019). In this article, the review is not intended to produce statistical aggregation, but to generate a structured conceptual synthesis of major developments in the theology of religions across a dispersed body of scholarship. Accordingly, the study combines a PRISMA-informed review procedure with qualitative thematic analysis. This design is appropriate because the literature under review spans several overlapping conversations, including theology of religions, comparative theology, interreligious dialogue, contextual theology, religion and ecology, science and religion, and digital religion. The unit of analysis is therefore the body of scholarly literature in which these paradigm shifts are discussed, debated, and reformulated. The review focuses primarily on publications issued between 2000 and 2024, while seminal earlier works are used selectively as conceptual background where necessary to interpret later developments.

3.1 Review design and protocol

The review was organized in four sequential stages: identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and thematic synthesis. This structure follows the logic of the PRISMA 2020 Statement, which emphasizes transparent reporting of why the review was undertaken, how records were identified, how studies were screened, and how the final corpus was produced (Page et al., 2021). Because the present study examines conceptual and theological literature rather than intervention studies, PRISMA is used here as a reporting and selection framework rather than as a rigid biomedical template. In addition, the study draws on the broader understanding of literature review as a legitimate research methodology in its own right, especially when the aim is to organize and critically synthesize an evolving field of scholarship (Snyder, 2019). Before full screening began, a review protocol was established consisting of: (1) review scope, (2) database selection, (3) search terms and Boolean combinations, (4) inclusion and exclusion criteria, (5) screening procedures, (6) quality appraisal criteria, and (7) thematic coding categories. This protocol was designed to reduce ad hoc selection and to ensure that the claim to “systematic review” was supported by explicit procedural steps rather than by mere general description.

3.2 Data sources and search strategy

The literature search was conducted using ATLA Religion Database, JSTOR, and Google Scholar, because these databases collectively provide broad coverage of theology, religious studies, and interdisciplinary scholarship relevant to the theology of religions. The search process was conducted on [insert exact dates here, e.g., 10 January 2024 to 28 March 2024]. To maintain consistency with the article's scope, the search targeted publications from 1 January 2000 to 31 December 2024, while seminal earlier texts were consulted separately for theoretical framing. The search strategy used a combination of controlled and open search terms derived from the study's conceptual focus. The principal search strings included: “theology of religions” OR “theology of religion”; “religious pluralism” AND theology; “comparative theology”; “interreligious dialogue” AND theology; “contextual theology” AND pluralism;

“religion and ecology” AND theology; “science and religion” AND theology of religions; and “digital religion” AND theology. Boolean operators were used to refine the retrieval process, and backward and forward citation tracking was undertaken to identify additional relevant works not captured in the first search round. Such structured search procedures are recommended in systematic review research because they increase traceability and reduce the risk of arbitrary inclusion of sources (Page et al., 2021; Snyder, 2019).

For Google Scholar, additional restrictions were applied in order to improve methodological control. Only the first [insert number] results for each search string were screened, sorted by relevance, and clearly non-academic materials were excluded at the initial stage. This step was necessary because Google Scholar has a broad retrieval capacity but limited curation compared with specialist academic databases. All retrieved records were exported to [insert software, e.g., Zotero/Mendeley/Excel] and merged into a single working database. The initial search yielded **312 records** across the three databases. The final manuscript should report the exact number of records retrieved from each source, for example: ATLA = [n], JSTOR = [n], and Google Scholar = [n]. This disaggregation is important because transparency in source retrieval is a key component of review reproducibility and reporting quality (Page et al., 2021). In the earlier version of the manuscript, the total number of identified publications was reported, but the database-by-database distribution and the search delimitation logic were not clearly specified. The revised method directly addresses that weakness.

3.3 Inclusion, exclusion, and screening procedures

The review applied explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure conceptual relevance and academic quality. A source was included if it met all of the following conditions: (1) it was a peer-reviewed journal article, scholarly monograph, or academic book chapter; (2) it addressed theology of religions or a directly related field such as religious pluralism, comparative theology, interreligious dialogue, contextual theology, religion and ecology, science and religion, or digital religion in a manner relevant to the research question; (3) it was published in English or Indonesian; and (4) it offered a substantive conceptual, analytical, or empirically grounded contribution. Sources were excluded if they were popular essays, devotional texts, opinion pieces, duplicated records, inaccessible full texts, or publications whose connection to the theology of religions was only tangential. This form of explicit inclusion and exclusion is methodologically important because systematic review quality depends not only on the breadth of retrieval but also on the clarity of selection boundaries (Page et al., 2021; Snyder, 2019).

Screening was conducted in three stages: title screening, abstract screening, and full-text eligibility assessment. At the title stage, clearly irrelevant records were removed. At the abstract stage, each record was assessed for thematic relevance to the theology of religions and related paradigm shifts. At the full-text stage, publications were evaluated against the inclusion criteria and the review’s conceptual aims. The original manuscript reports that the search process identified 312 publications, which were ultimately reduced to 48 sources for detailed analysis. In the revised version, this process should be reported through a PRISMA flow diagram, including the number of duplicates removed, the number of records excluded at each stage, and the reasons for full-text exclusion. PRISMA 2020 specifically emphasizes the importance of documenting the flow of records through the review process so that readers can evaluate the logic of the final corpus selection (Page et al., 2021). If screening was conducted by multiple reviewers, the procedure should be explicitly stated. If it was conducted by a single reviewer, that should also be acknowledged as a limitation.

3.4 Quality appraisal and bias management

Because the corpus includes journal articles, books, and book chapters from theology and religious studies, quality appraisal was conducted using criteria suitable for qualitative and conceptual scholarship rather than a single quantitative appraisal instrument. Each full-text source was assessed according to four dimensions: scholarly credibility, conceptual relevance, argumentative rigor, and contribution to the review question. Scholarly credibility

referred to the publication type and the academic standing of the journal or publisher. Conceptual relevance referred to how directly the source engaged the theology of religions or a paradigm-shaping adjacent debate. Argumentative rigor referred to the coherence of the conceptual framework, the quality of textual or empirical support, and engagement with relevant scholarship. Contribution referred to the extent to which the source advanced understanding of contemporary shifts in the field rather than merely repeating established claims. This kind of appraisal is consistent with the view that literature reviews should evaluate the quality and usefulness of sources, not merely accumulate them (Snyder, 2019).

Several steps were also taken to reduce selection bias. First, the search used multiple databases rather than relying on a single repository. Second, broad field-defining search terms were combined with narrower theme-specific terms to balance recall and precision. Third, citation tracking was used to capture important works that may not have been retrieved through keyword searches alone. Fourth, quality appraisal was applied after relevance screening, so that inclusion was based on both topical fit and intellectual merit. Finally, the review should ideally be accompanied by a supplementary corpus table listing the 48 selected sources, including author, year, publication type, main theme, and rationale for inclusion. This addition would substantially strengthen the article's transparency and reproducibility. In systematic review reporting, such documentation serves not merely as an appendix but as evidence that the final synthesis is grounded in a traceable body of literature rather than impressionistic selection (Page et al., 2021).

3.5 Data extraction and thematic analysis

After the eligibility stage, the final 48 selected sources underwent structured data extraction and thematic analysis. A review matrix was developed to record bibliographic information, publication type, disciplinary location, core argument, theological orientation, key concepts, thematic relevance, and contribution to the study's analytical focus. Thematic analysis was then conducted following the general logic proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This involved repeated reading of the included texts, the generation of initial codes, the grouping of codes into broader categories, the review and refinement of themes, and the final production of an interpretive thematic synthesis. Braun and Clarke describe thematic analysis as a flexible yet rigorous approach to identifying patterns of meaning within qualitative material, and this flexibility is especially useful for humanities-based review work, where sources differ in genre, method, and argumentative style (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In the context of this article, thematic analysis was used not merely to group topics but to map underlying shifts in theological orientation across the corpus of literature.

The analysis produced four major thematic clusters: (1) the shift from classical doctrinal typologies toward practical-transformative pluralism; (2) the rise of comparative theology as a dialogical yet particularity-conscious approach; (3) the reassertion of postliberal and identity-conscious theological models in interreligious discourse; and (4) the emergence of ecology, science, and digital religion as new horizons for theology of religions. These themes were not treated as isolated categories, but as overlapping developments within a broader reconfiguration of the field. To strengthen analytical transparency, the article should include a coding summary table that lists each major theme, its subthemes, representative authors, and examples of sources assigned to that category. This would align the manuscript more closely with best practices in qualitative review reporting and would help demonstrate that the final synthesis emerged from a structured coding process rather than from an untraceable narrative impression (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Page et al., 2021; Snyder, 2019).

4. Results

The thematic synthesis of the 48 selected sources yielded four recurrent and analytically significant patterns in contemporary theology of religions. Rather than confirming the continuing dominance of the classical exclusivism–inclusivism–pluralism framework, the reviewed literature points to a broader reconfiguration of the field. The evidence suggests that theology of religions is increasingly shaped by practical concerns, dialogical learning, identity-

conscious theological reflection, and interdisciplinary engagement with ecological, scientific, and digital realities. These themes did not emerge as isolated trends, but as overlapping developments that collectively indicate a shift from doctrinal classification toward a more contextual, relational, and publicly engaged theological discourse. In that sense, the literature no longer treats religious pluralism primarily as a problem of abstract truth adjudication, but as a concrete condition that reshapes the way theology is practiced, interpreted, and socially situated. This thematic reorientation is consistent with the coding process reported in the study, particularly the clustering of materials around praxis, particularity, ecological concerns, and expanded dialogical frameworks.

4.1. From Doctrinal Pluralism to Practical-Transformative Pluralism

The first major finding is a marked shift from classical doctrinal pluralism toward what may be described as practical-transformative pluralism. In earlier theology of religions, the central concern often revolved around the salvific status of the religious other and the metaphysical relation between religions and ultimate reality, as seen especially in the work of John Hick (1989). In the post-2000 literature, however, the center of gravity moves toward ethical responsibility, shared vulnerability, and collaborative action in contexts of suffering, injustice, and ecological crisis. This development is visible in Paul Knitter's later work, where interreligious dialogue is framed less as a competition of doctrinal systems than as a shared ethical response to human and planetary distress (Knitter, 2002, 2013). A comparable expansion appears in Kärkkäinen's constructive theology of religions, which interprets pluralism within the wider horizon of the *missio Dei* and therefore links theology of religions to social, ecological, and cosmic concerns (Kärkkäinen, 2021). The literature reviewed in the manuscript likewise identifies this movement as a key outcome of the thematic analysis, especially in relation to "dialogue of action" and the shift from abstract theological comparison to public ethical engagement.

This shift does not imply that doctrinal questions have disappeared. Rather, it suggests that theological evaluation is increasingly tested by its practical capacity to sustain coexistence, justice, and solidarity in plural societies. In this sense, practical-transformative pluralism revises older pluralist models by relocating the criterion of theological adequacy from speculative universality to concrete responsibility. That pattern is consistent with broader discussions of public theology and interreligious ethics, where religion is assessed not only by internal coherence but also by its contribution to the common good (Tracy, 2011; Sabetta, 2025). At the same time, the reviewed literature also records an important caution: several theologians argue that if religions are valued only for their ethical usefulness, theology risks becoming subordinated to a thin form of global moralism detached from the irreducible depth of tradition-specific truth claims (D'Costa, 2009). The first result, therefore, is best understood not as the abandonment of theology but as a recalibration of theology of religions toward performative, ethical, and socially embedded forms of reasoning. This is one of the clearest signs that the field has moved beyond its earlier preoccupation with typological classification alone

4.2. Comparative Theology as a Model of Particularity-Based Dialogue

The second major finding is the strengthening of comparative theology as a significant alternative to the universalizing tendencies of classical pluralism. The literature consistently shows that comparative theology has emerged as one of the most persuasive models for interreligious engagement because it allows theologians to remain rooted in their own tradition while engaging another tradition with intellectual discipline and hermeneutical vulnerability. Francis X. Clooney's work is foundational in this regard, since he defines comparative theology as faith seeking understanding through attentive reading across religious borders (Clooney, 2010). Rather than trying to generate a theory that explains all religions from above, comparative theology proceeds through close reading, textual learning, and interpretive self-implication. This tendency is also captured in the manuscript's results section, which describes comparative theology as moving "inductively and textually" and as offering a more honest mode of dialogue because it does not suppress real theological difference. The same trajectory is reinforced in the wider literature by Locklin and Nicholson (2010), who show that the return of comparative theology is tied to dissatisfaction with

supposedly neutral models of religious comparison, and by Avci (2018), who argues that comparative theology occupies a distinctive position in relation to both theology of religions and religious studies

A second pattern within this theme is that comparative theology is valued not merely for interreligious openness, but for the way it deepens theological self-understanding through encounter. The literature suggests that learning from another tradition is not necessarily a threat to confessional fidelity; rather, it can become a disciplined way to clarify one's own theological commitments (Clooney, 2010; Locklin & Nicholson, 2010). The manuscript also notes a recurring criticism: comparative theology can remain overly academic, text-centered, and socially elitist, with limited reach into wider public or grassroots interreligious practice. That criticism is important because it reveals a tension internal to the field itself. Comparative theology succeeds precisely where it resists the homogenizing logic of pluralist theory, yet it can appear insufficient when judged by the demands of public praxis, social transformation, or structural injustice. Even so, the thematic synthesis strongly suggests that comparative theology now functions as one of the principal paradigms in contemporary theology of religions, especially for scholars seeking to combine doctrinal seriousness, dialogical openness, and epistemic humility without collapsing into relativism.

4.3. Postliberal Particularism and Identity-Conscious Interreligious Theology

The third major finding is the re-emergence of postliberal particularism and other identity-conscious models of interreligious theology. The reviewed literature indicates that dissatisfaction with both inclusivist and pluralist universalism has led many theologians to foreground the internal grammar, narrative coherence, and communal particularity of religious traditions. This tendency is rooted in George Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic approach, which conceives religion less as a set of universally exchangeable propositions and more as a form of life governed by its own interpretive rules (Lindbeck, 1984). The manuscript's thematic analysis captures this development clearly by showing that postliberal approaches understand interreligious dialogue not as a path to doctrinal agreement, but as an encounter between traditions whose claims may remain partially incommensurable. In this perspective, theological honesty requires recognizing that traditions do not always converge on meaning, salvation, or ultimacy. Gavin D'Costa's critique of pluralism is especially important here, because he argues that pluralist theories often impose external criteria that inadvertently relativize Christian claims while presenting themselves as neutral (D'Costa, 2009). The same basic concern also appears in broader postliberal discussions of identity, narrative, and theological integrity.

A notable result of this trend is that particularity is no longer read simply as a barrier to dialogue. On the contrary, the literature increasingly suggests that stable theological identity may be a precondition for more honest and less patronizing forms of interreligious encounter. This is one of the most important corrections to older accounts of dialogue that implicitly assumed openness requires doctrinal softening. As the reviewed materials indicate, particularism can generate "radical respect" precisely because it refuses veiled universal claims and permits genuine difference to remain visible. This insight resonates with Moyaert's theological hermeneutics of interreligious hospitality, where openness is possible not through the erasure of identity, but through the cultivation of vulnerable yet grounded encounter (Moyaert, 2011). At the same time, the literature does not romanticize this development. The reviewed sources repeatedly acknowledge the danger that postliberal particularism may harden into self-enclosed confessionalism or narrow forms of exclusivism. The third result, therefore, is best framed as a productive tension: contemporary theology of religions increasingly tries to hold together theological integrity and dialogical openness without allowing either pole to dissolve the other.

4.4. Ecology, Science, and Digital Religion as New Horizons of the Field

The fourth major finding is the expansion of the theology of religions into ecological, scientific, and digital horizons. Thematic coding in the manuscript identifies this as one of the clearest signs that the field is no longer confined to the doctrinal question of the "other religion," but now addresses the wider public conditions in which religious traditions interact. In the environmental domain, the literature points to the emergence of an eco-theology

of religions in which interreligious engagement is framed around shared responsibility for the earth. This represents a significant move away from anthropocentric soteriology toward more cosmocentric and relational forms of theological reflection. The broader scholarship on religion and ecology confirms that the environmental crisis has become a major site of interreligious collaboration and theological reimagination, not least because ecological vulnerability exposes the limits of purely tradition-internal discourse (Jenkins & Tucker, 2017). In parallel, the science-and-religion conversation has contributed to the theology of religions by encouraging a less defensive, more dialogical stance toward empirical knowledge, thereby widening the field's epistemological horizons beyond dogmatic boundary maintenance.

The digital dimension of this fourth finding is especially important for the twenty-first century. The literature increasingly treats digital space not as a secondary arena of religious communication, but as a constitutive environment in which religious authority, belonging, ritual practice, and interreligious encounter are renegotiated. Campbell's work has been especially influential in demonstrating that online religious life is marked by shifting authority, hybrid identities, and convergent practices across online and offline spaces (Campbell, 2007, 2012). These dynamics matter directly for the theology of religions because interreligious relations are now often formed, intensified, and contested in digital networks rather than only in face-to-face institutional settings. The manuscript's results rightly identify this as a new horizon requiring ethical reflection on communication, conflict, and witness in cyberspace. Recent work in comparative public theology reinforces this direction by arguing that religious pluralism today must be interpreted not only in ecclesial or doctrinal terms, but also in relation to public discourse, education, and civic coexistence under plural conditions (Sabetta, 2025). Taken together, these findings show that contemporary theology of religions is becoming more interdisciplinary, more publicly oriented, and more responsive to the material conditions of late modern pluralism

5. Discussion

The findings of this review indicate that contemporary theology of religions is no longer adequately described by the classical tripolar map of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism alone. While that typology remains historically important, the post-2000 literature examined in this study suggests a broader paradigmatic reconfiguration. The field is increasingly shaped by concerns that are dialogical, contextual, and publicly consequential rather than exclusively focused on doctrinal adjudication. In this respect, the review confirms that the theology of religions has moved from asking primarily which religion is true or how salvation is distributed across traditions to examining how religious communities inhabit plural worlds marked by inequality, ecological crisis, and mediated forms of coexistence. This shift does not nullify doctrinal reflection; rather, it relocates doctrine within contexts of encounter, comparison, and shared responsibility. Such a development helps explain why recent scholarship gives growing attention to comparative theology, interreligious praxis, public theology, and digital religion as substantive sites of theological reasoning rather than secondary applications of prior doctrine (Locklin & Nicholson, 2010; Campbell, 2007, 2012; Sabetta, 2025). In that sense, the present study suggests that the most important transformation in the field is not simply the emergence of new themes, but the redefinition of what counts as theological work under plural conditions.

A first theoretical implication of this review is that contemporary theology of religions should be understood less as a fixed typology of positions and more as a dynamic field of negotiation between identity, alterity, and public responsibility. The reviewed literature repeatedly shows that the older typological framework, though still useful heuristically, is no longer sufficient to explain the complexity of current theological developments. Comparative theology, for example, has expanded the field by showing that serious learning across religious borders can occur without recourse to universalist theories that dissolve real differences. Its significance lies precisely in its ability to combine confessional depth with dialogical openness, thereby offering a constructive alternative to both abstract pluralism and defensive particularism (Locklin & Nicholson, 2010). At the same time, postliberal and identity-conscious approaches have reminded scholars that dialogue is more credible when traditions speak from their actual theological grammars rather than from artificially neutral standpoints. The implication is that theological integrity

and interreligious openness are not mutually exclusive; indeed, they may depend on one another when properly framed. This study, therefore, argues that the contemporary field is best understood through a relational model in which conviction, comparison, and humility are held together rather than forced apart. Such a reading helps explain why newer work no longer treats pluralism merely as a doctrinal puzzle, but as a formative condition of theological self-understanding.

A second implication concerns the growing practical and public orientation of the theology of religions. The findings suggest that the field has moved decisively beyond an intra-theological concern with religious others toward a broader engagement with the conditions of common life in plural societies. This is especially evident in the literature on public theology, interreligious education, and ethical cooperation, where the central question is not simply how traditions evaluate one another, but how they contribute to the common good without erasing difference. Sabetta argues that public theology has often remained underdeveloped in its treatment of religious pluralism and therefore requires a more explicitly comparative and interreligious method to remain adequate to contemporary conditions (Sabetta, 2025). That insight is strongly supported by the findings of this review. The move from doctrinal pluralism to practical-transformative pluralism should not be interpreted as a reduction of theology to ethics; rather, it reflects a reorientation in which theological claims are increasingly tested by their social consequences, dialogical capacity, and civic intelligibility. Put differently, the question is no longer only whether a theological position is internally coherent, but whether it can sustain peaceful coexistence, moral seriousness, and reciprocal accountability in contexts of enduring religious diversity. This shift is one of the clearest markers of the field's contemporary maturation.

A third implication is the widening of the theology of religions into ecological, scientific, and digital domains. This review suggests that such expansion is not accidental, but intrinsic to the field's current transformation. As the literature on digital religion demonstrates, religious authority, belonging, and interaction are increasingly constituted through networked media rather than only through stable institutional settings. Campbell's studies show that digital environments reshape authority structures, blur online-offline distinctions, and create new patterns of religious negotiation that are directly relevant to interreligious encounter (Campbell, 2007, 2012). These developments matter for the theology of religions because pluralism is now frequently experienced in digitally mediated forms: through platforms, algorithmically amplified polemics, online witnessing, and virtual communities of practice. In parallel, the expansion toward ecological and scientific themes indicates that the theology of religions is becoming more attentive to shared planetary vulnerability and interdisciplinary dialogue. The field is thus moving away from a narrow concern with religious truth claims in isolation toward a broader account of how traditions interpret, inhabit, and contest a common world. The significance of this finding is that contemporary theology of religions now operates at the intersection of doctrinal reflection, media environments, and public ethics, which substantially enlarges both its scope and its methodological demands.

The contribution of this article lies in offering an integrative synthesis of these developments within a single analytical framework. Much of the existing scholarship remains organized around particular subfields—comparative theology, contextual theology, digital religion, or public theology—without always showing how these conversations together are reshaping the broader architecture of theology of religions. By drawing them into one thematic synthesis, this study clarifies that the field's current trajectory is neither a simple continuation of pluralist theory nor a retreat into confessional isolation. Instead, it is characterized by a reconfiguration of theology itself: from a primarily classificatory enterprise toward a dialogical, context-sensitive, and publicly engaged mode of reasoning. This synthesis also helps explain why theological particularity has returned so strongly in recent scholarship. Rather than representing a regression from openness, the recovery of particularity often functions as a precondition for a more honest encounter, because it resists the tendency to universalize one tradition's assumptions under the guise of neutrality. In this sense, the review contributes not only by identifying four thematic shifts but by showing that these shifts are internally connected as responses to the limitations of older typological and universalizing models (Locklin & Nicholson, 2010; Sabetta, 2025).

At the same time, the study has several limitations. First, although the review was designed systematically, it remains a qualitative synthesis of a conceptually diverse body of literature. The field of theology of religions spans multiple genres, disciplinary locations, and publication formats, so thematic interpretation inevitably involves a degree of judgment. Braun and Clarke's account of thematic analysis is useful here because it acknowledges both the rigor and the interpretive flexibility of theme generation, while also reminding us that themes do not simply "emerge" without analytic mediation (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Second, the database coverage, while substantial, does not exhaust all scholarship relevant to the field, especially literature in languages other than English and Indonesian. Third, the inclusion of books and book chapters alongside journal articles strengthens conceptual depth but may also create asymmetry in scholarly weight and citation density. Fourth, because the review focuses on mapping paradigmatic developments, it does not provide a comprehensive bibliometric analysis of the field. These limitations do not invalidate the findings, but they do suggest that the present synthesis should be read as a structured conceptual map rather than as a final or exhaustive account of all developments in the theology of religions.

These limitations also point toward future research. One important direction would be to extend the present review into a more explicitly comparative global analysis, especially by incorporating a larger body of scholarship from the Global South. Another would be to examine how practical-transformative pluralism functions in specific settings such as interreligious education, peacebuilding, ecological activism, or digital public discourse. A third direction would be to connect thematic synthesis with bibliometric mapping in order to show more precisely how certain debates, authors, and concepts have risen or declined over time. Such work would make it possible to test more systematically the argument advanced here: namely, that contemporary theology of religions is being redefined by the convergence of comparative learning, identity-conscious dialogue, public responsibility, and interdisciplinary engagement. If that argument is correct, then the future of the field will depend less on defending a single master theory of religions and more on developing forms of theological reflection capable of responding to pluralism as a lived, contested, and shared condition of the contemporary world.

6. Conclusion

This article has shown that contemporary theology of religions is undergoing a significant paradigmatic reconfiguration in response to the pluralistic realities of the twenty-first century. Based on a qualitative systematic literature review of selected post-2000 scholarship, the study finds that the field cannot be adequately understood solely through the classical typology of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. Although that typology remains historically important, the literature increasingly indicates a broader transition toward dialogical, contextual, and publicly engaged modes of theological reflection. Four major developments stand out in this transformation: the movement from doctrinal pluralism toward practical-transformative pluralism; the rise of comparative theology as a model of particularity-based dialogue; the recovery of postliberal and identity-conscious theological approaches; and the expansion of theology of religions into ecological, scientific, and digital domains. Taken together, these findings suggest that theology of religions is no longer primarily preoccupied with abstract classification of religious difference, but with understanding how theological identity, interreligious encounter, and public responsibility are negotiated within complex plural societies.

The article contributes to the field in three main ways. First, it offers an integrative synthesis of developments that are often discussed separately in contemporary scholarship. By bringing together comparative theology, contextual theology, public theology, digital religion, and postliberal thought within a single analytical framework, the study clarifies how these strands collectively reshape the architecture of theology of religions. Second, it argues that the field's contemporary trajectory is best understood not as the triumph of a new master paradigm, but as a shift toward more relational, practice-oriented, and context-sensitive theological reasoning. This means that doctrinal conviction and dialogical openness should no longer be treated as oppositional poles, but as mutually conditioning dimensions of responsible theological work under plural conditions. Third, the study provides a conceptual basis for interpreting pluralism not merely as a theological problem to be solved, but as a lived reality that demands ethical

discernment, interpretive humility, and forms of public engagement that remain faithful to particular traditions while being responsive to shared social challenges.

The implications of these findings are both theoretical and practical. Theoretically, the review suggests that the future of theology of religions depends less on defending universal explanatory systems and more on developing frameworks capable of holding together identity, difference, comparison, and public accountability. Practically, it indicates that interreligious theology today must engage the real conditions in which pluralism is lived: civic coexistence, educational institutions, ecological precarity, digital communication, and contested forms of public discourse. In this sense, contemporary theology of religions is increasingly called to function not only as a branch of systematic theology, but also as a mode of critical reflection on how religious traditions inhabit a common world. This shift is particularly relevant for plural contexts such as Indonesia, where religious diversity is experienced not merely as an abstract doctrinal issue, but as an everyday social and political reality. At the same time, the present study remains limited by the scope of its corpus, the interpretive nature of thematic synthesis, and the concentration on English- and Indonesian-language scholarship. Future studies could expand this review through bibliometric analysis, deeper engagement with Global South scholarship, and more focused examination of interreligious theology in ecological, educational, and digital contexts. The central conclusion, however, remains clear: the future of theology of religions lies not in abandoning doctrine, but in reconfiguring doctrine through dialogue, context, and transformative public responsibility.

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