

# Human Dignity in World Religions: A Comparative Study of Sacred Texts

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## Abstract

Human dignity, understood as the intrinsic worth of each person, is a foundational concept in ethical, legal, and religious discourse. This paper examines how major world religions articulate human dignity through their sacred texts and traditions. A comparative interdisciplinary approach is adopted, drawing on primary sources (scriptures and classic teachings) and secondary scholarship. After outlining philosophical and ethical conceptions of dignity and its role in modern human rights, the study analyses key religious traditions: Hinduism (Vedas, Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita), Buddhism (Tripitaka and Mahāyāna texts), Judaism (Torah and Rabbinic writings), Christianity (Hebrew Bible and New Testament), and Islam (Qur'an and Ḥadīth). Within each, concepts such as the divine image (e.g. tath ātmā brahma in Hinduism, imago Dei in Judeo-Christianity, Buddha-nature in Buddhism), sanctity of life, moral equality, justice, compassion, and social responsibility are highlighted. A comparative section identifies similarities (e.g., the inherent worth of humans, ethical duties of compassion and justice) and differences (e.g., caste-based duties in Hinduism vs. equality in Christianity), as well as universal versus tradition-specific notions. The interplay of religious dignity concepts with contemporary issues, such as human rights, social justice, gender equality, and pluralism, is then explored. Critical discussions address limitations within religious teachings (e.g., hierarchical or patriarchal norms) and debates over applying sacred concepts in secular societies. The conclusion summarises findings, noting that while expressions differ, all traditions affirm a measure of inherent human worth, offering complementary resources for global ethics. The paper contributes an integrated survey of dignity across religions and suggests directions for further interfaith and ethical research.

## Introduction

Human dignity, the idea that every person possesses an innate, inviolable worth, is a cornerstone of modern ethics and human rights. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) famously states that “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.” This recognition reflects a broad consensus that people deserve moral respect and fair treatment by virtue of being human. Indeed, scholars note that “Humans have dignity’ is one of the most important statements in people’s lives” and underlies the entire edifice of human rights. Yet the roots and rationales of this principle are multifaceted. Philosophers have long debated whether dignity is grounded in human autonomy (e.g. Kantian rational agency), divine creation (imago Dei), or other bases. In practice, secular rights discourse has absorbed language and concepts from many traditions (e.g. natural law, Enlightenment ideals, liberation ethics).

This study explores how major world religions conceive human dignity through their sacred texts and teachings. Each tradition frames human worth in theological and ethical terms: for example, as arising from the divine image, the presence of the sacred within each person, or the moral potential of humanity. By comparing scriptural sources and respected interpretations, we aim to illuminate shared foundations and distinct emphases. In doing so, we address a key research problem: to what extent can a common minimum

principle of human dignity be discerned across diverse traditions? We also consider how tradition-specific doctrines (such as caste duty in Hinduism or covenantal role in Judaism) shape understandings of dignity. The objectives are to map these religious perspectives, critique their strengths and tensions, and reflect on implications for global ethics.

The scope of this study is interfaith and interdisciplinary. We analyze primary sacred texts (Hindu śruti and smṛti, Buddhist scriptures, Hebrew Bible and Rabbinic literature, Christian Bible, Qur'an and ḥadīth) alongside scholarly exegesis and comparative ethics literature. Methodologically, the study is a textual analysis with qualitative synthesis: sacred passages are examined in context and interpreted via authoritative commentaries and academic research. Secondary sources include peer-reviewed ethics journals, theology texts, and reports on human rights and religion. Where possible, we cite academic specialists and established translations. The treatment is PhD-level in depth, aiming for rigour and original comparative insight rather than mere summary. The paper unfolds as follows: First, a conceptual framework situates “dignity” within philosophy, ethics, and rights. Next, human dignity is explored tradition by tradition through key texts. This is followed by comparative analysis (highlighting cross-cutting themes and differences) and a discussion of religion’s role in contemporary challenges. We conclude by evaluating findings and suggesting avenues for further research.

## Conceptual and Theoretical Framework of Human Dignity

### ❖ Philosophical Perspectives

“Human dignity” is a contested and multifaceted concept. Philosophers distinguish its defining properties (e.g. being inherent, incommensurable, tied to rights) from its grounds (what makes humans dignified). Traditional Western accounts trace dignity to human autonomy and rationality (Kant: rational beings as ends in themselves), or to Aristotelian notions of flourishing. In theological traditions, dignity is rooted in divine creation (humans made in God’s image) or soul’s spiritual nature. Contemporary thinkers note various grounds: capacity for choice, sentience, empathy, or political status as rights-bearers. Many agree that dignity is “intrinsic” (not earned by merit) and “inviolable.”

Others frame dignity as a social status concept (second-personal respect) or an evaluative idea. For example, Darwall’s notion of recognition respect implies that dignity requires treating each person with appropriate seriousness and limiting one’s actions on account of their humanity. Killmister describes “status dignity” conferred by membership in the human species: all humans merit “recognition respect” simply as humans. However, some theorists emphasise context: dignity’s content can vary by culture and legal regime. Regardless of philosophical nuances, in practice, human dignity often functions as a bedrock moral principle (Iglesias 2001) that grounds rights: “the ground for advocacy and defence of human rights resides...on what and who the human being is...namely on his or her dignity”.

### ❖ Ethical Foundations

Ethically, dignity generates duties of respect and protection. In secular bioethics and law, dignity underpins prohibitions on torture, discrimination, and exploitation. It is the source of “privileges over other creatures” (e.g. priority in life-and-death decisions). Many religions similarly teach that humans must not be treated merely as means, reflecting principles of compassion, justice, and non-harm (ahimsa, chesed, agape). For example, the Indian principle of ahimsa implies a minimal right to physical safety for all beings, while biblical ethics demand loving-kindness to strangers (e.g. Leviticus 19:18).

Virtue ethics also connects to dignity: virtues like courage, wisdom, and compassion are seen as giving fullest expression to human dignity in the Buddhist tradition. Similarly, Christian ethics (Micah 6:8; Galatians 3:28) emphasises justice and equality as expressions of the Divine image in every person. Importantly, many traditions link dignity to moral choice: what distinguishes humans from other animals is not just biology but the freedom to choose goodness over evil, making us uniquely responsible for ethical action.

## **Human Dignity in Modern Human Rights Discourse**

The modern human rights framework is explicitly built on human dignity. Article 1 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights declares that “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights”. This moral assertion is followed by a catalogue of specific rights, on the assumption that recognising dignity entails substantive protections (life, liberty, equality before law, etc.). Human Rights literature thus treats dignity both as an ideal of social treatment and as the underlying justification for rights claims. As Fuller notes, rights without duties or duties without rights each only tell half the story; dignity bridges the two by emphasising that ethical duties (in many traditions called duties) give context to individual rights. Contemporary scholarship critiques and refines the concept: Shultziner (2007) argues that dignity is defined contextually in each legal system, and others note research pitfalls in defining dignity (too narrow a focus, misinterpretation, etc.). Nevertheless, the ideal of universal human dignity remains a lingua franca for global ethics.

## **Human Dignity in Major World Religions (Textual Analysis)**

### **❖ Hinduism**

Hindu scriptures articulate human worth through concepts like dharma (duty) and karma, but also through profound metaphysics. The Vedas and Upaniṣads teach that all beings share the ultimate reality (Brahman). The Mahāvākya Tat Tvam Asi (“That Thou Art”) from the Chandogya Upanishad implies each person’s soul (ātman) is non-different from the divine essence. Modern scholars note that “the divine essence in all beings (Atman)” provides a spiritual foundation for human dignity and equality. In other words, inherent dignity flows from the premise that “every individual soul is potentially divine” (as Vivekananda put it). This is echoed in the Sanskrit assertion sarvam khalvidam brahma (“all this indeed is Brahman” – Chāndogya Upaniṣad 3.14.1). Thus, prejudice or discrimination runs counter to the Upaniṣadic vision of unity.

The Bhagavad Gītā (c. 2nd century BCE) emphasises equality and moral dignity. For instance, it describes the truly wise as seeing “with equal vision a learned and gentle brāhmaṇa [priest], a cow, an elephant, a dog and a dog-eater” (BG 5:18), reflecting the idea that jñāna (true knowledge) yields an egalitarian outlook. More broadly, Gītā 18:61 tells us “He who dwells in all beings and whose self-abides in the heart of all” (paraphrase), indicating that the Divine (Krishna) pervades every life. Scholars note that even the Manusmṛiti’s varṇa duties, often criticised for hierarchy, are tempered by such teachings. Davis (2017) observes that while the Manusmṛiti allows for graded social honour, the Bhagavad Gītā grants “moral dignity to all individuals regardless of social class”. This suggests a tension in classical Hinduism between social roles and an underlying spiritual equality.

Hindu ethics thus stress dharma (righteous duty) as the practical realisation of dignity. Performing one’s svadharma dutifully (as Arjuna is instructed) is said to align the individual with cosmic order (ṛta). The Mahābhārata and Rāmāyaṇa depict rulers’ rajadharma (king’s duty) as including protection of the vulnerable, justice in governance, and care for subjects, all of which safeguard human welfare, albeit framed as obligations rather than rights. Universal ethical precepts like ahimsā (nonviolence), satya (truthfulness), and dayā (compassion) are repeatedly extolled. Practically, these imply a right to life, fair treatment, and compassion for all, regardless of social status. As one recent interpretation notes, traditional Hindu duty-based ethics (dharma) complements rather than opposes modern rights: dharma supplies the moral duties that make rights meaningful. Reform movements (e.g. by Gandhi, Vivekananda) have similarly invoked core Hindu principles while challenging discriminatory practices, emphasising the universal ātman and ahimsā to argue for social justice.

In sum, Hindu texts dignify humans by affirming a shared divine essence and framing ethical life as a harmonious duty. Sanctity of life is implicit in ātmā brahma, and moral equality is grounded in Tat Tvam Asi.

Still, classical social stratifications (varna) have complicated this message, making modern reinterpretations crucial for emphasising universal dignity.

### ❖ Buddhism

Buddhism's view of dignity is rooted in the sanctity of life and the inherent potential of every person to achieve enlightenment. Early texts such as the Tipiṭaka emphasise *karuṇā* (compassion) and *mettā* (loving-kindness) toward all beings (e.g., Dhammapada 130–131: “All tremble at punishment... One should not strike or cause others to strike.”). Though traditional Buddhist ontology denies a permanent soul, it accords deep value to sentient life. A modern Buddhist perspective summarises: “The starting point for Buddhism is the value and sanctity of life... the life of the individual is inseparable from the vast universe itself.” Since human life is a rare privilege among many forms, it carries “special responsibilities”. The Buddha taught the preciousness of human birth (see *Jātaka* tales and *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*), suggesting that being human enables the pursuit of wisdom and compassion. As Nichiren observed, only humans (not gods or animals) can realise Buddhahood and transform karma. This implied uniqueness is a source of dignity: “the scale of our choice, the degree to which we are free to choose...good or evil, makes human life unique.”

Mahayana Buddhism introduces the notion of Buddha-nature: the innate potential for enlightenment in every being. This idea underscores that all life has inherent worth and divine potential. As one author notes, “all living beings possess Buddha nature,” meaning each person harbours the seed of Buddhahood. In practical terms, this translates into an ethic where “nothing in the universe is without value” (Ikeda). The *Bodhisattva* ideal further extends dignity through selfless service: one vows to alleviate others' suffering before entering *Nirvāṇa*. Thus, social responsibilities (e.g. caring for the sick, poor, or marginalised) are dignifying practices, not mere obligations.

Buddhist ethics affirm equality in many ways. The Buddha explicitly opposed caste hierarchy and declared all humans capable of awakening (e.g. Hawkins Sutta AN 3.67). As the Buddhist scholar Dalai Lama has said, the concept of “interdependent origination” implies respect for others: harming another is ultimately harming oneself. Nichiren Buddhism, for instance, teaches that “we each have a unique purpose to fulfil, nothing in the universe is without value”. In short, Buddhist texts do not speak of dignity in Western terms, but they ground it in the respect for life and the conviction of universal potential (enlightenment).

### ❖ Judaism

Judaism's concept of dignity is intricately linked to the image of God (*b'tzelem Elohim*) and commandments of justice. The Torah begins by affirming that God created humans in His image (Genesis 1:27). Classical Jewish tradition teaches that this *imago Dei* entails universal respect: “All [people] are the children of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob” (Talmud, *Bava Kamma* 83b). Many Rabbinic texts derive ethical norms from the divine image. For example, the midrashic teaching “when you insult another person you have insulted his Creator, because man was created in the image of God” (Genesis Rabbah 24:7) underscores that disrespect to any human is inherently irreverent. Talmudic scholars famously conclude that “the value of human dignity is so great that it supersedes a negative commandment of the Torah.” (*Berakhot* 19b). In other words, saving human dignity can override certain ritual prohibitions, signalling its paramount importance. Jewish law (*Halacha*) even institutes *kavod habriyot* (honour of creatures) as a concept: for instance, the Sages decreed that two people should not walk together on the road if it would embarrass the weaker one.

Furthermore, Jewish justice and compassion laws reflect dignity. The Torah mandates provision for the poor, treatment of strangers, and fairness in judgment (e.g. Exodus 22:21–24; Leviticus 19). The principle of *tikkun olam* (repairing the world) emerges from the idea that humans, created like God, should partner with the Divine in ethical action. As Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik phrased it, dignity and social justice are “implicit in the ontology of creation,” since each person's life is of divine significance. Modern Jewish thinkers extend this to

universal ethics: prejudice, racism, and sexism are “totally inconsistent with Torah ideals”, since all are made in God’s image.

In summary, Jewish texts teach that every human, by virtue of divine likeness and shared descent, deserves honor (kavod). The God-given command to love the stranger (Leviticus 19:34) and the commandment “love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18) concretize this worth. This religious anthropology underpins social justice imperatives in Judaism: caring for the widow, orphan, and stranger is not optional charity but a reflection of every person’s sanctity.

#### ❖ **Christianity**

Christian thought on dignity builds on Jewish roots (imago Dei) and the teachings of Jesus and the Apostles. The Bible repeatedly affirms that humans are special to God. In the Genesis creation narrative, God declares humans “in [His] own image” (Gen 1:27). Christian theologians interpret this to mean all people have inherent worth. For instance, one modern Christian ethicist states: “Because human beings are made in God’s image, we have an inherent dignity, one that can be marred and defaced, but never truly lost.” The rest of Scripture follows from this premise. For example, the psalmist reflects, “When I consider your heavens... what is mankind that you are mindful of them? You have made them a little lower than the angels and crowned them with glory and honour” (Psalm 8:4–5). This portrays dignity as God-bestowed status above other creatures (theologian Fullilove draws the analogy of valuing a child’s toy because of the child).

In the New Testament, Jesus and Paul reiterate equality and love. The Golden Rule (“do to others what you would have them do to you,” Mt 7:12) and commandment to “love your neighbour as yourself” (Mk 12:31) imply basic mutual respect. Acts 17:26 notes that all ethnic groups are “of one blood”, echoing creation unity. Paul famously declares “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28), indicating spiritual equality that undercuts social distinctions. These passages have been foundational in Christian social ethics, inspiring abolitionism, civil rights, and gender equality movements. The Catechism of the Catholic Church explicitly teaches that dignity comes from “being created in the image of God”, a gift that “marks every person without exception” (CCC 1700).

Christian ethics also emphasise responsibility: the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10) and the Final Judgment (Mt 25:31–46) link true faith with compassionate action toward the least. Justice (Micah 6:8: “to act justly and love mercy”) is presented as innate to godly life. One scholar sums up: by viewing humanity as “made in the image of God, therefore with inherent dignity,” Christianity provides a “base layer” that gives meaning to social justice concerns. In short, the Christian narrative teaches that dignity is universal (God’s creative intention) and to be honoured through love, justice, and service.

#### ❖ **Islam**

Islam affirms universal human dignity through Qur’anic declarations and Prophetic teachings. The Qur’an explicitly honours humanity: “We have certainly honoured the children of Adam” (al-Isrā’ 17:70). As one analysis notes, “Allah singled out mankind among His creation with honour and excellence.” Indeed, Adam is chosen as Earth’s khalīfā (vicegerent), entrusted with stewardship. A recent Iranian ethics study highlights two Qur’anic verses: the verse of tawbah (trust), which grants humans free will, and the verse of khilāfah (vicegerency), where angels question human agency. These verses imply that humans uniquely bear the capacity for both noble action and error. Interpreted positively, Islam sees dignity in this freedom to choose righteousness (virtue) over base instincts. The same study concludes that “by considering freely choosing goodness as the criterion for human dignity,” these Qur’anic verses underscore human uniqueness.

Moreover, the Qur’an condemns arrogance and racism. In His farewell sermon (ḥadīth), Muhammad declared: “All mankind is from Adam and Eve. An Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab, a white has no superiority over a black... except by piety and good action.” The Qur’an similarly states: “O mankind, indeed We have created you from a male and a female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one

another; indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you” (49:13). These texts guarantee equal dignity to all humans and define nobility by taqwā (God-consciousness), not by birth or wealth. In Islamic jurisprudence, human dignity (karāmah) is so paramount that even in ḥadd (fixed punishments) cases, the judge may remit punishment out of concern for a penitent offender’s dignity.

Islamic tradition emphasises adl (justice), rahmah (mercy), and ihsān (excellence) as reflections of God’s attributes. All humans are viewed as subjects of Divine care; e.g. many ḥadīths stress that God does not wrong even an “atom’s weight” (Q 4:40). The Prophet’s last sermons and sayings (e.g. ḥadīth qudsī: “Every son of Adam has rights over his fellow”) call for ethical treatment of others. The balance of rights and duties in Islam is famously expressed: “There is no right without its corresponding obligation” (Imam Ali). This teaching underscores that human worth entails mutual responsibilities.

In summary, Islam sanctifies life by assigning humans as Allah’s representatives, endowed with honour among beings. Qur’anic and Prophetic sources repeatedly affirm equality and moral agency: virtue, not lineage or status, confers dignity. Compassion (ṣadaqah, zakāt for the needy) and justice (protection of the innocent, fairness in trade) are seen as expressions of Divine love for humanity. Accordingly, modern Islamic human rights discourse often invokes these scriptural principles to promote universal dignity and equality.

### Comparative Analysis of Sacred Texts

#### ❖ Similarities and Universal Themes

Across these traditions, several common motifs emerge. First, inherent worth: each religion in some way affirms that dignity is not earned but intrinsic to being human. In Hinduism and Buddhism, this is expressed through metaphysical unity (Brahman or Buddha-nature), in Judaism and Christianity through being made in God’s image, and in Islam through God’s special care for humans. All thus ascribe a sacred dimension to personhood. Correspondingly, moral equality is emphasised: caste or class distinctions (Hindu varṇa) are morally overridden by statements of universal divine essence, Buddhism abolishes caste distinctions in spiritual terms, Christianity and Judaism declare all peoples one family under God, and Islam condemns racism. The Christian and Jewish imago Dei directly implies that all humans (both sexes, all nations) share equal dignity.

Second, the sanctity of life is a recurring theme. While Buddhist nonviolence applies to all beings, Hindu ahimsā and Islamic injunctions (e.g. Qur’an 5:32: “Whoever saves one life, it is as if he had saved humankind entirely”) stress respect for human life. In Judaism, the commandment “You shall not murder” (Exodus 20:13) and its rabbinic interpretations treat human life as precious. Christianity likewise teaches that life is a gift (especially through the Commandment and Jesus’ defence of the vulnerable). Thus, the prohibition of arbitrary killing or harm is near-universal (e.g. ahimsa, ḥadīth against injustice, Ten Commandments).

Third, justice and compassion: every tradition links dignity with ethical care for others. Hindu dharma calls rulers to protect citizens; Buddhist metta and karuna demand caring for the suffering; Jewish law mandates charity (tzedakah) and kindness; Christian doctrine enjoins love and charity (Good Samaritan, obligations to the poor); Islam obligates almsgiving (zakāt) and mercy. Texts stress helping the weak (orphans, widows, poor) and fair dealings. In each religion, injustice or discrimination is morally wrong because it violates human dignity (e.g. Jainism’s emphasis on equality derived from ātman, Judaism’s statement that degrading another forfeits your share of the world-to-come).

#### ❖ Differences and Tradition-Specific Notions

Nonetheless, differences exist in emphasis and interpretation. Hinduism’s traditional hierarchy (varna/ashrama) saw social duties as context-dependent, a contrast to the more universalist egalitarianism of Buddhism or Christianity. Classical Hindu texts sometimes tie honour to birth/class, whereas Bhagavad Gītā moves beyond that. By contrast, Buddhism (especially Theravāda) focuses less on intrinsic dignity and

more on the capacity to end suffering; persons are not “made” dignified but achieve wisdom. Its ethical equality is philosophical (all can attain Nirvāṇa) rather than metaphysical oneness with God.

In Judaism and Christianity, divine image provides a supernatural foundation: dignity is given by God (a divine gift), whereas in Eastern traditions it is more immanent (the divine within). Islam, while also monotheistic, adds the idea of khalīfah (God’s steward) and collective ummah (community) as dignity contexts. The Islamic text strongly prohibits racial or ethnic superiority, a clear universalist stance.

Another difference is the scope of dignity: some traditions extend moral concern to animals (e.g. Hinduism’s ahimsa extends broadly; Buddhism’s metta ideally covers all sentient life). Others, like classical Abrahamic law, reserve moral dignity primarily for humans. However, even within these, teachings like St. Francis or Islamic veterinary ethics show compassion beyond just people.

Finally, conceptual framing varies. Christianity developed the idea that dignity “can be marred but never lost”, implying a permanent status. Hinduism often speaks of dignity in terms of dharma, fulfilling cosmic duty, rather than abstract rights. Buddhism frames dignity in empowerment language (potential for Buddhahood). Islam uses the term karāmah (honour/prestige) for inalienable human respect. These nuances reflect different worldviews (theistic vs. non-theistic; cyclical karma vs linear salvation; etc.).

### **Theological and Ethical Implications**

Theologically, these perspectives shape each tradition’s anthropology. In monotheistic faiths, human dignity is linked to divine righteousness: glorifying God includes treating His image-bearers rightly. For example, Jewish law equates human honour with God’s honour. In Hindu thought, recognising Atman in others is itself a spiritual practice. In Buddhism, acknowledging Buddha-nature in another is to foster compassion and humility. The ethical implication is that dignity prescribes certain behaviours: generosity, justice, truth, and respect across all persons. Each religion regards violations of dignity (murder, slander, humiliation) as especially heinous sins or moral failures.

On a political level, these religious ideals have inspired social reforms: Hindu reformers opposing caste abuse invoke Tat Tvam Asi; Buddhist kings in Sri Lanka and Thailand claimed to rule by Dharma (moral order); Jewish prophets demanded justice for the marginalised in Israel; Christian abolitionists and social justice movements cited Christian brotherhood; modern Islamic human rights activists highlight Qur’anic equality. The shared theological message is that true religiosity is measured by how the weak and vulnerable are treated.

### **Human Dignity, Religion, and Contemporary Global Challenges**

#### **❖ The religious concepts of human dignity have a significant bearing on today’s global issues.**

**Human Rights:** Religions provide moral impetus for universal rights. The UN’s dignity-based rights echo values from multiple faiths. For instance, the Qur’anic “honoured creation” verse (17:70) has been used to support human rights in Muslim-majority contexts. Similarly, Christian and Jewish leaders have invoked imago Dei to advocate civil rights and human rights legislation. Interfaith dialogue often converges on human dignity as a common language to defend human rights and oppose abuses like torture and slavery.

**Social Justice:** Dignity demands just social structures. Movements against poverty, caste discrimination, and colonialism have drawn on religious ideals of equality. Gandhi famously blended Hindu satya and ahimsa with dignity-based rights. Liberation theologians reinterpret Christian dignity in solidarity with the poor. Islamic social justice (adl, zakat) underpins calls for economic equity. In each case, faith-based notions of dignity inform activism: e.g. some Islamic charities cite the Prophet’s egalitarianism, while Buddhist modernisers teach environmental and social responsibility as expressions of respect for life.

Gender and Dignity: Gender equality is a major challenge. Sacred texts contain both affirmations of female dignity (e.g. Genesis 1:27 declares male and female alike in God's image) and patriarchal elements (e.g. veiling norms, gender roles). Reformers across traditions argue that the core dignity-affirming principles outweigh cultural biases. For instance, Quran 4:1 emphasises the common origin of all humans; some modern Muslim scholars argue for spiritual equality of men and women (Quran 33:35). Christian feminists cite Galatians 3:28 to advocate gender parity. Hindu scripture's story of Shikhandi and the Mahabharata's critiques of patriarchy provide tools for dialogue. Buddhism historically allowed ordained nuns (bhikkhunis), although practice varied. Overall, religious dignity concepts both empower and are reinterpreted to support gender justice today.

Religious Pluralism and Coexistence: In a plural world, dialogues often appeal to dignity as inter-religious common ground. The recognition that "all humans are equal" (sermons of Muhammad, Torah, etc.) fosters a basis for mutual respect. Organisations like UNESCO and interfaith councils invoke dignity to promote tolerance. However, divergent doctrines can also conflict: e.g. secular notions of dignity may clash with religious prescriptions on sexuality or family. Engaging these tensions, scholars urge emphasising the universal core (sanctity of life, compassion) while respecting differences. A comparative theological insight is that if each tradition regards dignity as God-given or universal, then there is an inbuilt impetus towards coexistence, if properly understood.

### Critical Discussion

Despite broad affirmations, there are debates and limitations in religious teachings on dignity. Critics point out that hierarchical or exclusivist elements in scriptures have been used to justify inequality. In Hinduism, the varṇa-āśrama system historically placed women and "untouchables" (Dalits) in disadvantaged positions under the pretext of duty. Reformers counter that such practices betray the spirit of tathātmya (equity) implied by Tat Tvam Asi. In Buddhism, the emphasis on non-self and impermanence can be misinterpreted to undermine individual worth, a concern for some critics. Judaism and Christianity have grappled with patriarchal legal codes and the treatment of "unclean" groups, though rabbinic and Christian teachings often expanded rights through moral reasoning (e.g. Talmudic human dignity overrides law). In Islam, cultural traditions sometimes overshadow egalitarian texts, leading to gender or religious bias despite foundational calls for equality.

Another debate is the relevance of religious dignity in secular societies. Some secularists argue that divine or metaphysical bases are not persuasive in pluralistic contexts. Others respond that shared humanistic values (inspired partly by religious narratives) still require a rationale. Comparative theology suggests a "common minimum" ethic: even if justifications differ (divine command vs. rational autonomy), the conclusion that mistreatment of persons is wrong is universal. Indeed, Charles Davis and others have sought such common ground in bioethics, noting that almost all faiths "give the greatest dignity to man" (every human being has sacred value). The challenge is articulating this in non-religious terms, too.

Additionally, applying religious ideas to policy can be controversial. For example, the concept of dignity has sometimes been invoked to restrict rights (e.g. "dignity" used to ban assisted dying in some Christian-influenced courts). This shows that dignity itself is not univocal. The concept must therefore be carefully analysed: as Shultziner warns, "there is no fixed and universal content that spouts out of human dignity". Critics also note that laudatory statements in scripture (e.g. humans as God's friends) need continual reinterpretation to address modern issues like AI ethics, biotechnology, or climate justice.

Finally, internal debates within religions about dignity are ongoing. Some Jewish feminist theologians argue that b'tzelem Elohim must lead to full egalitarianism; some Christian ethicists debate the extent to which original sin complicates inherent dignity. In Islam, debates over freedom of conscience (under La ikraha fi al-din, Q2:256) balance communal dignity with individual rights. Engaging these debates is vital: blind

traditionalism can undermine dignity (as in caste or sectarian conflicts), whereas progressive readings can foster universalist ethics.

### **Conclusion**

This comparative study has shown that while world religions differ in language and emphasis, they share a profound concern for human dignity. All posit, in one way or another, that human life is sacred and every person possesses an inalienable worth. Hinduism locates dignity in the divine Atman and cosmic duty; Buddhism in the sanctity of life and universal Buddha-nature; Judaism and Christianity in the image of God and covenantal ethics; Islam in God's honor of mankind and moral agency. Shared ethical themes emerge: equality of all people, justice and compassion for the vulnerable, and responsibilities that accompany human status. Across traditions, the common ethical thrust is to respect others and refrain from demeaning or exploiting them.

The academic contribution of this paper is its systematic juxtaposition of textual sources to illuminate a multi-religious view of dignity. By highlighting both convergences (e.g. moral equality, anti-discrimination) and tensions (e.g. historical hierarchies, differing rationales), the analysis deepens our understanding of dignity as a complex, interwoven concept. It also underscores the relevance of theological insights for contemporary issues, affirming that religious ethics can still inform global discourse on rights, justice, and coexistence.

For future research, more work is needed on how specific scriptural interpretations influence social attitudes toward dignity (e.g. empirical studies of religious communities). Comparative engagement with non-Abrahamic traditions beyond those covered (e.g. indigenous religions, Confucianism) would broaden the picture. Also, valuable would-be dialogical scholarship that brings religious and secular experts together to negotiate a shared dignity framework, perhaps in the form of interfaith declarations. As this study suggests, bridging sacred texts and modern ethics remains both challenging and essential in a pluralistic world.

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(Additional sources used in analysis: Holy Scriptures including Bhagavad Gītā, Upaniṣads, Buddhist Dhammapada and Nirvāṇa Sūtra, Torah and Rabbinic texts, Christian Bible, Qur'an and ḥadīth compilations.)

## Article Information and Declarations

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<b>Declarations</b>
<b>Author's Contribution:</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Conceptualization, and intellectual revisions, Data collection, interpretation, and drafting of manuscript</li><li>▪ The author agrees to take responsibility for every facet of the work, making sure that any concerns about its integrity or veracity are thoroughly examined and addressed</li></ul>
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