A Voyage on Common Spiritual Roots Across Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity and Islam

Suween Vinsuka Kannangara [a] and Prof. Vishaka Suriyabandara [b]

[a] Assistant Lecturer, Legal Studies Unit, University of Sri Jayewardenepura, Sri Lanka / V. Lecturer Accredited University of West London, UK
[b] Head Department of Political Science, University of Sri Jayewardenepura, Sri Lanka

Keywords: Comparative Religion, Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, soteriology, flood mythology

Article Information			
Received	6th Jan 2026	Accepted	9th Mar 2026
Published	30th Mar 2026		

Abstract

This article explores the structural and thematic similarities among four major world religions: Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity and Islam. It focuses on general cosmological beliefs, universal flood myths, theories of salvation and the debated notion of Buddhist influence on the historical figure of Jesus. By examining Theravāda canonical texts, Purāṇic literature, Biblical and Qur'anic writings and existing scholarship in comparative religion, the article argues that the identified similarities, especially flood narratives (such as Matsya, Noah, and Nūḥ), liberation hierarchies and the Vaishnavite interpretation of the Buddha as the ninth avatāra of Viṣṇu, are systematic and structurally significant enough to warrant scholarly study. The article employs a standard of evidence suitable for a comparative religion context, identifies claims lacking documentary support as hypotheses, acknowledges traditions that are debated within their own contexts, and avoids the common pitfall of asserting that all religions are identical. The posited central claim is more modest yet arguably more intriguing. These traditions exhibit recurring deep structures in soteriology and eschatology that require explanation, whether through shared prehistoric origins, independent parallel development or by combining both. The article elucidates on the documented convergence of the religions, a structural analogy and "contested contact" theory; thus, this hierarchy is for categorizing inter-religious parallels based on the quality of available evidence.

Introduction

"Religion is a candle inside a multicoloured lantern. Everyone looks through a different colour, but the candle is always there." - Mohammed Naguib

The comparative study of religion occupies an uncomfortable position in contemporary academia, and for good reason, as it embarks on a belief system that we as humans have ingrained so personally into our lives. On one hand lies the controversial tradition, which is the missionary assertion that one religion is the authentic original and all others pale derivations. On the other hand, lies a romantic syncretism, which is the new-age claim that all religions are merely different paths up the same mountain, which is a claim so vague that it purports to explain nothing. Between these inadequate sides, serious scholarship in comparative religion has spent the better part of two hundred years mapping the genuine structural relationships between the world's major religions, identifying shared ontological models, amalgamated soteriological architectures, and parallel mythological forms that demand explanation. This article is an exercise in precisely that inquiry.

From the outset, the article takes its starting point as a set of observations that are individually well-known but whose total significance has not been systematically examined in a single analytical framework; however, this article aims to achieve that objective.

Firstly, that Theravāda Buddhist cosmology describes the future Buddha (Bodhisatta) performing the five great deliberations (Pañcamahāvilokana) before his descent from Tuṣita heaven (a realm structurally analogous to the divine domains of other traditions).

Secondly, that Vaishnavite Hinduism incorporated the historical Buddha as the ninth avatāra of Viṣṇu, the protector of the universe and cosmic order.

Thirdly, Buddhist and Hindu traditions coexist in Sri Lanka in ways that suggest deep historical amalgamation rather than merely coexisting in parallel.

Fourthly, the "Great Flood" narratives of Hinduism (the Matsya avatāra), Judaism and Christianity (Noah's Ark), and Islam (the story of Nūḥ) share structural features that are too specific to attribute to coincidence.

Fifthly, the so-called "lost years" of Jesus between the ages of twelve and approximately thirty have generated a series of contested scholarly literature on possible Buddhist influence.

Finally, the fourfold path of Buddhists towards liberation reflects a soteriological architecture that finds intriguing parallels in the Abrahamic traditions' accounts of spiritual ascent.

The article proceeds as follows. Sections 2 through 7 examine each of these convergences directly with attention to what is textually established, what is theologically contested and after which, what remains genuinely hypothetical. Section 8 develops the article's original theoretical contribution: a theoretical framework which accounts for the documented convergence between the religions, a structural analogy, and the contested contact scenarios which have been hypothesised for ages. This is done to categorise inter-religious parallels according to evidential quality. Section 9 concludes on the matters at hand. Throughout this academic endeavour, there is a standard of intellectual honesty that the topic demands: where the evidence is strong, it is assembled strategically and where the claims require some correction or qualification, then that qualification is made directly and I posit that the corrected formulation is often more theoretically productive than the original.

Furthermore, this article engages seriously with claims that originate from religious intuition rather than academic research. Thus, I believe that it is not a reason to dismiss them. Some of the most productive comparative religion scholarship has emerged by taking religious practitioners' cross-traditional observations seriously and subjecting them to rigorous evidential burdens. From this scrutiny emerges a process which, when taken in whole alongside several cases, provides a confirmation of the underlying intuition on a stronger evidentiary basis than the original formulation and, in other cases, a correction that preserves the genuine insight while removing the unsupported detail.

The Bodhisatta in Tuṣita Heaven: Deitification and the Pañcamahāvilokana/ පස් මහා බැලුම්

In the Theravāda Buddhist tradition, the being who would become Gautama Buddha did not simply appear in the world. As per the Nidānakathā, the introductory narrative to the Jātaka commentary, traditionally attributed to Buddhaghosa's circle in the 5th century CE, though the attribution is debated by modern scholarship, there is much scholarly evidence that the Bodhisatta spent his penultimate existence in Tuṣita heaven (Pāli: Tusitā), one of the six deva realms within the kāmāvacara (sensual sphere) of the thirty-one-plane cosmological model (Buddhaghosa, 1976; Rhys Davids, 1880). Before his descent into the womb of Queen Māyā, he performed the Pañcamahāvilokana, also known as the Five Great Observations or Deliberations (Sinhala terminology: පස් මහා බැලුම්), where the Bodisatta considered the right time (kāla), the right continent (dīpa), the right region (desa), the right family (kula), and the right mother (mātā) for his final birth (Rhys Davids, 1880/1925).

This concept, of පස් මහා බැලුම් (literally translated to 'Five Great Lookings'), is central to the Theravāda understanding of the Buddha's unique status. However, a critical point of clarification is necessary. Tuṣita

heaven is not the highest realm in Buddhist cosmology. It is the fourth of six sensual deva realms, situated below the Nimmānaratī and Paranimmitavasavattī realms and far below the Brahma worlds of the fine-material sphere (rūpāvacara). The Bodhisatta in Tuṣita was the most advanced and revered being in that realm, who was a being of extraordinary accumulated merit (puñña) across countless lifetimes, but the traditional Buddhist framework does not employ a single supreme deity in the theistic sense that, for example, Vaishnavism attributes to Viṣṇu (Collins, 1998). The comparison drawn here is therefore structural and analogical:

1. a being of immense spiritual attainment,
2. dwelling in a celestial realm,
3. deliberating purposively before descending into the human world for a salvation purpose. That structural pattern is a recurring scenario, as the following sections demonstrate, across traditions in ways that repay careful analysis.

What makes the Pañcamahāvilokana theoretically significant for comparative purposes is less about the metaphysical status of Tuṣita and more about the deliberative structure it suggests. The Bodhisatta does not descend in an ad hoc manner or in response to external command. He investigates, chooses and applies soteriological criteria. This is an active and purposive orientation of a celestial being (Bodhisatta) aimed toward human redemption, remarkably also finds clear structural analogues in the Vaishnavite doctrine of avatāra descent, in which Viṣṇu descends "whenever there is a decline of righteousness [dharma] and rise of unrighteousness" (Bhagavad Gītā 4.7–8), which is a formulation worth examining alongside the Buddhist deliberation of the Bodhisatta descending from Heaven. This is because both indications ground the celestial descent in the identification of a cosmic need rather than mere divine arbitrariness. In the Incarnation doctrine of Christianity, the Word descends into flesh at a particular moment in history for a specific redemptive purpose (John 1:14). The structural parallel, which is a being of transcendant status choosing to enter human existence at a specific historical moment for the purpose of addressing a condition of human spiritual need is habitually consistent across all three traditions, even though the metaphysical differences between them are substantial. This may even be suggested to exhibit characteristics of Omnism or being pseudo-omnism.

The Buddha as the Ninth Avatāra of Viṣṇu: Dashavatara and the Politics of Assimilation

The claim that Gautama Buddha is the ninth avatāra of Viṣṇu in the Dashavatara framework is documented in multiple Hindu Purāṇic sources, including the Bhāgavata Purāṇa (1.3.24), the Viṣṇu Purāṇa, and the Garuḍa Purāṇa (Doniger, 1988). The text-based evidence for this inclusion is sincere, and the observation that in several major Purāṇic lists the sequence runs Matsya, Kūrma, Varāha, Narasiṃha, Vāmana, Paraśurāma, Rāma, Kṛṣṇa, Buddha, and Kalki is well-established in the scholarly literature (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2022).

Three qualifications must be made if this observation is to bear scholarly weight rather than polemical convenience.

The inclusion of Buddha as the ninth avatāra is contested within Hinduism itself. The Gaudiya Vaishnavas, who view Kṛṣṇa as the supreme source of all avatāras instead of Viṣṇu, include Balarāma in the ninth position rather than Buddha. Additionally, both the Śiva Purāṇa and the Mahābhārata do not mention the Buddha at all. In summary, there is no definitive list of Dashavatara. The belief that Buddha is the ninth avatāra only reflects the perspective found in several influential Purāṇas and does not represent a universally accepted view within Hindu doctrine. (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2022).

Secondly, the historical motivation for the inclusion has been identified by scholars. The Buddha's first documented inclusion as an avatāra appears during the Gupta period (4th–6th century CE), a moment of Hindu resurgence in which Brahmanical traditions faced significant competition from Buddhism. Doniger

(1988) suggests the incorporation may reflect an attempt by orthodox Brahminism to subordinate and subjugate Buddhism by incorporating its founder into the Vaishnava pantheon. Thus making the move a strategy of theological absorption rather than genuine recognition. The Bhāgavata Purāṇa's portrayal of the Buddha avatāra as a figure sent to mislead the impious has been read as polemical rather than celebratory (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2022).

Thirdly, for the comparative framework this article develops, Buddhists have never accepted the identification. No Buddhist canonical source describes the Buddha as a manifestation of Viṣṇu, and the Buddhist understanding of the Bodhisatta's celestial origin (in Tuṣita heaven), not in the (Vaikuṇṭha) realm of Viṣṇu, is completely separate. Bhimrao Ambedkar, one of the most significant modern interpreters of Buddhism, explicitly rejected the avatāra identification as a Brahmanical strategy to subordinate Buddhism. The theologically honest formulation is this: the claim that Buddha is the ninth avatāra of Viṣṇu is a Hindu claim, attested in several important Purāṇas, contested within Hinduism itself and rejected by Buddhism. What is genuinely significant is that it was made at all (and made persistently). It clearly demonstrates a structural and functional similarity between the two figures that necessitated reconciliation within the theological framework of medieval India.

Sacred Coexistence: The Viṣṇu–Buddha Nexus in Sri Lanka

The country of Sri Lanka presents one of the world's most fascinating and understudied examples of Buddhist-Hindu ritual coexistence. Sri Lanka is constitutionally a Theravāda Buddhist country, with the state obligated under Article 9 of the 1978 Constitution to give Buddhism 'the foremost place' in the nation amongst its sister religions and thus has enshrined the Buddhist doctrine into the Constitutional Supremacy model that Sri Lanka so uses. Yet the island's landscape is populated not only by sacred Buddhist viharas and stūpas but also by sacred Hindu devalāyas (shrines to Hindu deities), many of which are structurally integrated into Buddhist temple complexes or situated on their precincts. This is a fascinating show of respect and adulation, as rarely (if ever) is the opposite true: A person may very well never see a Buddha Statue in a Hindu devalāya, but will definitely see the reverse.

Most strikingly, Viṣṇu occupies a position of extraordinary prominence in Sri Lankan Buddhist devotional practice that has no precise parallel elsewhere in the Theravāda world. The great Maha Vishnu Devalāya at Devundara (Dondra) in the deep south and the Maha Vishnu Devalāya at Kandy, situated adjacent to the Temple of the Tooth Relic (Dalada Maligawa) itself, are the two principal Viṣṇu shrines on the island, both existing at the very heart of what is formally a Theravāda Buddhist religious geography (Holt, 2004). The explanation lies in a particularly Sri Lankan theological development. According to the Mahāvaṃsa, the Pāli chronicle compiled in the 5th century CE, Viṣṇu (identified in Sri Lankan tradition with the blue-hued deity Upulvan or Uppalavanna, whose identification with the pan-Indian Viṣṇu developed over time) is described as having been charged at the “dying” Buddha's instruction with the guardianship of the Sinhala people and of the sāsana in Sri Lanka (Geiger, 1912/2003). This theological appointment or delegation of duties to preserve dharma (which in turn, makes Viṣṇu the ideal appointment, as he is known as the protector of the universe and preserver of Dharma) makes Viṣṇu not a competitor to the Buddha in Sri Lankan religious culture but a subordinate protective deity and thus, a custodian of the Buddha's legacy on the island.

This observation frames an instructive asymmetry, as mentioned prior, that devalāyas are honouring Viṣṇu within Sri Lanka's Buddhist sacred landscape, but one does not encounter a kōvil (the Tamil term for a specifically Hindu Shaivite or Vaishnavite temple) dedicated to the Buddha. This asymmetry obtains because the phenomenon works in only one direction: the Sinhala Buddhist tradition absorbed and reframed the cult of Viṣṇu by subordinating him to the sāsana's protective purpose, while the Tamil Hindu kovil tradition maintained its own separate institutional identity and ritual practices. Holt (2004) describes this as a ‘Buddhicization of Vishnu’ (in his iconic work of “The Buddhist Vishnu”), a process by which a major pan-Indian Hindu deity was reinterpreted within a Buddhist theological framework, which was a process that is

structurally analogous to the Hindu incorporation of the Buddha into the Dashavatara, but operating in the opposite direction. Both strategies bear witness to the intensity of the theological negotiation between the two traditions, and both suggest that the boundary between them was, historically, far more permeable than institutional religion in the contemporary period implies.

The Sri Lankan scenario is vital to the article's broader theoretical argument for a specific reason: it demonstrates that inter-religious convergence need not be hypothetical or ancient to be real. The "Buddhicization of Vishnu" is documented, datable, and ongoing. Scholars of Sri Lankan religion can point to specific textual moments (the Mahāvaṃsa appointment narrative), specific historical developments (the Nayakkar period's intensification of Hindu devotional aspects in Kandyan court religion), and specific contemporary ritual practices (the Asala Perahera procession in which the devalāyas of Viṣṇu, Nātha, Kataragama, and Pattini process alongside the Tooth Relic) that evidence a living, breathing convergence rather than merely a historical one. This is among the richest available case studies for understanding how major religious traditions actually interact over time.

The Universal Flood: Matsya, Manu, Noah, and Nūḥ

The "Great Flood Myth" is the most widely distributed mythological structure in the world's religious traditions. Its emergence across Indo-European, Semitic, and Mesopotamian traditions has generated a substantial scholarly literature on the question of whether it reflects a common historical memory (maybe due to the catastrophic inundation of the Black Sea basin around 5600 BCE, as hypothesised by Ryan & Pitman, 1998), a strong psychological archetype exists that illustrates the confrontation between the divine and humanity, alongside themes of cosmic renewal. This reflects not only a shared narrative but also the independent evolution of similar stories within riverine and coastal cultures that face regular flooding.

The three instances under examination here are all genuine and well-attested, but their specific features reward careful comparison.

Firstly, the Hindu flood narrative in the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa (one of the oldest extant flood accounts in any tradition, plausibly dating to around 800 BCE) and its later elaboration in the Matsya Purāṇa describe Viṣṇu's first avatāra as a great fish (Matsya) who appears to the sage-king Manu and warns him of an imminent world-destroying flood. Manu is instructed to gather seeds of all plants and the seven great sages (Saptaṛṣis) aboard a great ship, which Matsya then pulls through the floodwaters to safety. In most versions, the Vedas, which are the repositories of cosmic knowledge, are also preserved.

Secondly, the Biblical flood narrative in Genesis 6–9 describes God instructing Noah to build an ark, to bring aboard his family and two of every living creature aboard, and to survive the flood that will cleanse the earth of wickedness. The survivors become the ancestors of all post-flood humanity, and God's covenant with Noah, sealed by a rainbow, establishes a new moral order.

Thirdly, the Qurānic account of Nūḥ, distributed across multiple sūras (7:59–64; 11:25–48; 71:1–28), preserves the same essential structure: a prophet receives divine warning, constructs a vessel (safīna), carries the faithful and pairs of animals, survives the deluge, and the ungodly perish.

A great deal of precision is necessary here. The detail of 'two of each animal' belongs to the Biblical and Qurānic accounts, not the Hindu ones. In the Matsya Purāṇa, it is the "seeds" of all plants and the seven great sages that are preserved aboard the vessel, not animal pairs. This correction is not a minor query as it is a meaningful distinction that makes the comparative exercise considerably richer. The three traditions share a master-narrative structure, that is, a divine warning, a specially chosen survivor, a vessel, a world-destroying flood, a post-flood renewal, all while distributing specific details differently according to what each tradition considers most worth preserving.

What is saved reflects theological priorities: cosmic knowledge and wisdom lineages (the Vedas and the seven sages) in the Hindu account; biological diversity and the full range of created life in Genesis, along with the community of the faithful in the Qur'an, represent not contradictions but rather theological reflections of a shared narrative framework, making the variation itself analytically insightful.

The intersection between the four religions is striking enough that it has attracted serious scholarly attention entirely independent of devotional or apologetic interests. The earliest stratum of the Hindu flood myth in the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa predates the redaction of Genesis and provides evidence of a tradition old enough to have influenced, or to share a common ancestor with, the Biblical account. Witzel (2012) has identified what he terms a 'Laurasian' mythological tradition (a connected corpus of creation, flood, and world-destruction narratives with a geographic distribution stretching from the Atlantic to the Pacific, which dates back to 20,000 to 40,000 years) and argues that the shared flood myth reflects genuine prehistoric cultural connections rather than mere coincidence or universal psychological necessity. Even if critics were to accept this specific hypothesis or not, the structural convergence of the Hindu, Judeo-Christian and Islamic flood narratives remains among the most robustly affirmed examples of inter-religious parallelism available for scholarly analysis, and thus it constitutes the strongest available evidence for the 'common origin' model of inter-religious convergence developed in Section 8 below.

The Lost Years of Jesus and the Buddhist Hypothesis

The question of what Jesus was doing between the age of twelve (when Luke 2:41–52 describes him in the Jerusalem Temple engaging the rabbis) and approximately thirty, when his public ministry began, is one of the oldest and most contested in Christian scholarship. The New Testament does not provide information on this topic, and mainstream Christian scholarship has generally believed that Jesus worked as a carpenter (tektōn) in Galilee alongside Joseph during this time (Van Voorst, 2000). The so-called 'lost years' are referred to as such only because they are undocumented; this lack of documentation does not necessarily mean that this period is mysterious.

The hypothesis that Jesus spent these years in India and Tibet, studying with Hindu Brahmin priests and Buddhist monks before returning to begin his ministry, was popularised in the late 19th century by the Russian traveller Nicolas Notovitch. His 1894 book La vie inconnue de Jésus Christ claimed that, while recovering from an injury at the Hemis Monastery in Ladakh, he had been shown a Tibetan manuscript called 'The Life of Saint Issa' describing Jesus's Eastern travels.

Notwithstanding Notovich's account, the scholarly verdict on this specific claim is essentially unanimous: the orientalist Friedrich Max Müller published a critical analysis in The Nineteenth Century in 1894 exposing inconsistencies in Notovitch's account; J. Archibald Douglas visited Hemis Monastery in 1895 and found both no record of Notovitch's visit and a categorical denial from the resident lama of any such manuscript's existence (Douglas, 1895). The case against Notovitch is overwhelming. The user's instinct that this connection is worth exploring is sound; however, Notovitch's specific manuscript cannot serve as evidence for it.

However, this does not exhaust the question of Buddhist-Christian parallels. A substantial scholarly literature, which is entirely independent of the Notovitch controversy, has identified structural and thematic convergences between Buddhist and Christian ethics, soteriology, and devotional practice. Marcus Borg's edited volume Jesus and Buddha: The Parallel Sayings (Borg, 1997) documents numerous aphoristic and ethical parallels: 'Love your enemies' (Matthew 5:44) alongside 'Hatreds do not ever cease in this world by hating, but by love; this is an eternal truth' (Dhammapada 1.5); the beatitudes' blessing of the poor alongside Buddhist emphasis on non-attachment to wealth; the centrality of compassion (karuṇā in Buddhist ethics; agapē in Christian) in both ethical systems. Significantly, Borg himself states that the volume's purpose is 'not to make a scholarly case for Jesus having known the teachings of Buddhism, or for cultural borrowing' (Borg,

1997, as cited in Oregon State University News, 1997). However, the parallels are documented; their explanation remains open.

Thich Nhat Hanh (1995), in Living Buddha, Living Christ, engages the same parallels from a Buddhist practitioner's perspective, while acknowledging their historically separate origins. Elaine Pagels (2003) observed that some Gnostic Gospel traditions, especially the Gospel of Thomas, show closer structural similarities to Buddhist wisdom literature than to the Synoptic Gospels. However, the direction of influence, if any, is still unclear. These observations are based on serious scholarship rather than devotional speculation.

The honest scholarly verdict on the lost years hypothesis is therefore this: Notovitch's specific documentary claim is almost certainly a fabrication, and this assessment is the consensus of relevant scholarship (Van Voorst, 2000).

Nevertheless, the structural and ethical parallels between Buddhist and Christian teaching are genuine, well-documented, and not fully explained by the mere fact of independent origin. Now, whether these parallels reflect actual contact via the Silk Road trade routes that connected India to the Levant from at least the 2nd century BCE (Foltz, 2010), or whether they reflect the convergent development of similar spiritual insights in response to similar human experiences of suffering and finiteness, remains a real and open scholarly question.

The hypothesis that Jesus encountered Buddhist ideas during his undocumented years cannot be ruled out on geographic or historical grounds. The Silk Road was operational in Jesus's time; Jewish communities existed in India (the Cochin Jewish community has ancient roots); and Buddhist missionaries had reached the Mediterranean world, Emperor Ashoka's Rock Edict 13 (3rd century BCE) records the dispatch of dharma emissaries to Hellenistic kingdoms including the realms of Antiochus, Ptolemy and Magas of Cyrene, placing Buddhist envoys within the same cultural sphere that would produce early Christianity.

The cultural channels for contact existed, but whether they carried Buddhist influence into the formation of Jesus's teaching is a question the available evidence cannot resolve. Yet, it is a question worth asking rigorously.

The Four Paths of Liberation: Buddhist Soteriology and Its Analogues

The Theravāda Buddhist soteriological doctrine identifies four sequential stages of awakening on the path from ordinary human existence to complete liberation (Nibbāna). These four stages are as follows.

- Sotāpanna (stream-enterer),
- Sakadāgāmī (once-returner),
- Anāgāmī (non-returner), and
- Arahant (fully liberated one)

These constitute a graduated architecture of spiritual achievement that is one of the most systematically articulated soteriological models in any world religion (Bodhi, 2000).

Furthermore, the Sinhala phonetic renderings: sowān (Sotāpanna), sakurdagāmi (Sakadāgāmī), anāgāmi (Anāgāmī), and rahath (Arahant) are all accurate representations of the canonical Pāli terms as they are pronounced in the Sri Lankan Theravāda tradition. Each stage involves the progressive abandonment of specific 'fetters' (saṃyojanāni; in Sinhala, දස සංයෝජන; in English, loosely translated as 'The Ten Fetters') that bind beings to the cycle of rebirth (saṃsāra). Also, the Ten Fetters are demarcated into two groups: the lower fetters (Orambhāgiya) and the higher fetters (Uddhambhāgiya). The latter is harder to defenestrate out of oneself, while the former is comparatively easier. Thus, the Sotāpanna has abandoned the three lowest fetters (identity-view, sceptical doubt, and adherence to rites and rituals) and will be reborn at most seven more times before achieving liberation. The Sakadāgāmī has additionally weakened sensual desire and ill-will and will return to the sensual sphere at most once more (whether in a human or deva rebirth) before final

liberation. The Anāgāmī has completely abandoned sensual desire and ill-will and will be reborn only in the Pure Abodes (Suddhāvāsā) of the fine-material sphere before achieving liberation there without returning to the sensual world. The Arahant has abandoned all ten fetters and will not be reborn — upon "death" (in Theravada Buddhist doctrine, the Arahant attains Parinibbāna). The term death is quoted not by mistake but as a symbolic factor to denote that when the physical body ceases to live, the arahant is dead to the layperson, but, to the Theravada Buddhist it is not death as death involves the cyclic nature of being reborn again, after parinibbana, he will not be born again, and thus stating that "an arahant dies" is a misstatement to a theravada traditionalist. (Bodhi, 2000). Finally, it is noteworthy that "Sa-upādisesa Nibbāna" is enlightenment attained during life by the Arahant, while "Anupādisesa Nibbāna" occurs at the moment of "death" and when the body itself ceases to live and exist.

It is vital to be as precise as possible on the question of deva rebirth. In Buddhist cosmology, ordinary merit-making (puñña-kamma) can produce rebirth in deva realms, as one need not be a Sakadāgāmī to be born among the gods. Indeed, even the Theravada doctrine posits that there are multiple ways towards enlightenment. However, what distinguishes the Sakadāgāmī's possible deva rebirth is that it would be their final one before liberation.

An Anāgāmī's rebirth in the Pure Abodes is in a distinctly different kind of celestial realm (the fine-material sphere (rūpāvacara)), accessible only to those who have transcended all sensual attachment, rather than in the sensual deva realms that ordinary merit-making can reach.

Furthermore, the Arahant's post-mortem state is not 'nothingness' in the nihilistic sense. The Buddha explicitly and consistently rejected annihilationism (uccheda-diṭṭhi) as a wrong view. The characterisation of Nibbāna as nothingness is one of the most persistent misrepresentations of Theravāda thought in comparative religion literature, and the Buddha's own response to the question of what happens to a Tathāgata after death, preserved in the Cūḷamāluṅkya Sutta (Majjhima Nikāya 63), was to refuse all four possible categorical answers (exists, does not exist, both, neither) because the question is not well-formed for a state that transcends ordinary categories of being and non-being.

The comparative interest of this soteriological model is substantial. Islamic Sufism articulates an ascending hierarchy of spiritual stations (maqāmāt), classically from repentance (tawba) and abstinence (wara') through trust (tawakkul) and love (maḥabba) to annihilation of the ego-self in God (fanāʾ) that structurally parallels Buddhist graduated awakening (Schimmel, 1975). The phenomenological endpoint is a transformed state in which ordinary ego-boundaries dissolve into something that cannot be described as either simple existence or simple non-existence, and is alarmingly similar in its formal structure across the Sufi and Buddhist accounts, despite the obvious theological differences in how that endpoint is characterised. Christian mystical theology, notably via negativa tradition running from Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite through Meister Eckhart to the anonymous author of The Cloud of Unknowing, similarly articulates a progressive detachment from the created world toward union with a divine ground that is structurally analogous to the Buddhist movement from saṃsāra toward Nibbāna (McGinn, 1991). These are formal structural similarities and not just claims of doctrinal identity; the differences are real and important. But the consistency of the formal structure, which is a progressive, multi-stage movement from a condition of self-bounded ordinary existence toward a transformed condition of extraordinary freedom, across traditions that developed largely independently of one another, is among the most theoretically significant patterns in the comparative religion literature.

A Framework for Evidential Assessment: Three Tiers of Inter-Religious Convergence

The convergences documented in sections 2 through 7, that is, the cosmological similarities, avatāric assimilation, sacred landscape coexistence within Sri Lanka, global 'great flood myths', possible or even plausible Buddhist-Christian contact, and analogous soteriological architectures, invite a theoretical explanation. It is noteworthy that 3 broad models are available in the comparative religion literature, and the

honest scholarly position acknowledges all three rather than selecting among them based on prior metaphysical commitment.

The first is the common origin model. This holds that convergences reflect genuine historical connections: either genetic relationships between traditions (Buddhism influencing certain Christian ideas via the Silk Road; the Purāṇic incorporation of Buddhist figures reflecting actual theological encounter) or a shared prehistoric mythological substratum. The convergence of flood narratives provides strong evidence for this model. The specific elements that are shared, such as a divine warning, a righteous individual, a vessel, worldwide destruction, and a post-flood covenant or teaching mandate, suggest that cultural transmission is a more likely explanation than independent development, even if that transmission occurred indirectly. The avatāric assimilation of the Buddha by Vaishnavism is documented historical theology and not just a union of theological doctrines. The earliest version of the Hindu flood myth in the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa indicates a tradition that is ancient enough to have influenced, or to share a common ancestor with, the Biblical account.

The second is the convergent development model. This holds that similar human experiences of suffering, impermanence, moral failure, and the aspiration toward liberation or redemption generate similar religious responses independently across cultures. The parallels between Buddhist stages of awakening and Sufi maqāmāt need not reflect historical contact; they may reflect the convergent phenomenology of contemplative practice, which tends across cultural contexts toward the recognition of ego-transcendence, compassion, and a transformed relationship with ordinary reality. William James (1902/2002), in his foundational text The Varieties of Religious Experience, identified this convergent phenomenology as the experiential core of mysticism across traditions but was a framework criticised by Katz (1978) for its assumption of a context-independent 'pure experience,' but that retains explanatory power for cases where the institutional contexts differ dramatically while the reported phenomenology converges.

The third is the perennial philosophy model associated with Huxley (1945) and, in more scholarly form, with Schuon (1984), which holds that all major religious traditions participate in a single underlying truth. While this perspective is intellectually appealing, it necessitates careful consideration. It often imposes a metaphysical framework, typically a variant of Neoplatonism or Advaita Vedānta, onto all traditions, which can obscure significant theological differences. For example, the Buddhist teaching of anattā (the absence of a permanent self) cannot be reconciled with the Christian doctrine of the soul's eternal individual relationship with God by simply claiming that both represent different cultural interpretations of the same insight. The distinctions between these beliefs are substantial, and any comparative framework that fails to recognise them is analytically inadequate.

The article's original contribution at this point is the following. Rather than selecting among these three models, the article proposes a tiered evidential framework that assigns specific convergences to the model that best accounts for them, given the available evidence. The framework identifies three tiers of inter-religious convergence, categorised by the quality and character of the supporting evidence.

Tier One: Documented Convergence. This tier includes cases where historical evidence supports cross-traditional contact, assimilation, or mutual influence. Notable examples are the incorporation of the Buddha into the Dashavatara by Vaishnavites, the 'Buddhicization of Vishnu' in Sri Lanka as documented in the Mahāvaṃsa and expanded upon in centuries of ritual practices, and Ashoka's recorded efforts to send dharma missionaries to Hellenistic kingdoms. For Tier One convergences, the scholarly focus is not on whether contact occurred, but rather on the theological and institutional mechanisms involved and what these interactions reveal about the dynamics of religious encounters.

Tier Two: Structural Analogy. This tier includes cases where the conjunction is formally robust, but the direction and mechanism of any historical connection are unclear or probably absent. It includes the flood narrative parallels (structurally specific enough to suggest either common origin or very early contact), the four-stage soteriological models (paralleled in Sufi, Christian mystical, and Kabbalistic frameworks), and the

deliberate celestial descent pattern (Bodhisatta, avatāra, Incarnation). For Tier Two convergences, the scholarly question is whether the analogy is the product of common origin, convergent development, or later mutual influence, which is a question that requires careful examination of chronology, geographic proximity, and transmission routes.

Tier Three: Contested Contact. This tier comprises cases where a historical connection is hypothesised, but the documentary basis is either fabricated, absent, or too thin to support the hypothesis as stated. The lost years hypothesis, specifically in its Notovitch formulation, belongs here. It is noteworthy that this specific tier exists simply due to the existence of Notovitch's manuscript and accounts that follow via his manuscript. If not for the existence of his accounts (and successive scholarly work) of Jesus being influenced by Buddhism, then this tier system might have ended with a structural analogy. Notwithstanding the above, Notovitch's manuscript claim fails basic historical scrutiny. The broader hypothesis of Buddhist-Christian parallel development or indirect contact via Silk Road transmission is a Tier Two question (structurally and ethically plausible, evidentially open) and not a Tier Three one. The contribution of this article is to prevent the discrediting of Notovitch's specific fabrication from collapsing the broader and legitimate Tier Two question.

This three-tier framework represents the article's primary original contribution to the methodology used in comparative religion. It replaces the simplistic binary distinction between 'demonstrated contact' and 'pure coincidence' with a graduated system of evidence that enables scholars to assign appropriate epistemic significance to various categories of convergence, differentiate between questions that can be answered in principle and those that require rephrasing, and safeguard structurally sound yet evidentially incomplete observations (Tier Two) from being discredited by the refutation of a weaker claim (Tier Three). The model does not make assumptions about ultimate origins; instead, it organises existing evidence in a manner that pinpoints where further investigation is most necessary.

Conclusion: The Significance of Convergence

This article has examined a constellation of convergences across Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam that are individually well-known but whose collective significance for comparative religion has not been systematically theorised in the way this article attempts, upon which several conclusions emerge.

First, the Bodhisatta Gautama's Pañcamahāvilokana in Tuṣita heaven (the 'Five Great Deliberations' before his final descent) is well-attested in Theravāda commentarial literature. The deliberate celestial descent for a salvific purpose, grounded in the identification of a cosmic need, finds structural parallels in the Vaishnavite avatāra doctrine and in the Incarnation theology of Christianity. These parallels are Tier Two as they are structurally robust, historically plausible, but not yet fully explained.

Second, the Vaishnavite identification of the Buddha as the ninth avatāra of Viṣṇu is attested in multiple Purāṇas but contested within Hinduism and rejected by Buddhism. It is a Tier One convergence as this is a documented historical event of theological absorption whose mechanisms and motivations are largely understood. Its significance lies in what it reveals about the strategies of assimilation that emerge from sustained inter-religious encounter.

Third, the Sri Lankan evidence, the existence of Viṣṇu devalāyas(aforementioned Dondra example) within a Buddhist sacred landscape and yet no Buddhist "kōvils/shrines" within the Tamil Hindu institutional structure reflects the specifically Sri Lankan theological model of Viṣṇu as the appointed protector of the Buddha's dispensation. This is again a Tier One convergence of unusual richness, traceable through text, ritual, and architectural evidence across more than fifteen centuries of documented history.

Fourth, the flood narratives of Hinduism, Judaism/Christianity, and Islam share a similar narrative or structure with immense specificity, while distributing their specific preserved objects (knowledge, biodiversity, the faithful) according to each tradition's theological priorities. The earliest Hindu stratum

antedates Genesis and strengthens the case for a common origin. This is a Tier Two convergence with significant evidence pointing toward Tier One.

Fifth, the lost years hypothesis in its Notovitch formulation is Tier Three (at best) and as such not evidentially credible. The broader question of Buddhist-Christian parallel development and possible Silk Road contact is Tier Two: legitimate, open, and warranting continued research through the channels of documentary history, comparative ethics, archaeological and trade-route evidence, which are the most likely avenues to advance it.

Sixth, the four-stage Buddhist path of liberation exhibits formal structural parallels with Islamic Sufi, Christian mystical, and Jewish Kabbalistic frameworks for graduated spiritual ascent. This is a Tier Two convergence that the convergent development model handles well, but it is noteworthy that the possibility of indirect contact via the channels that connected the ancient Near East to the Indian subcontinent cannot be excluded.

The convergences documented in this article do not establish that all religions are 'the same' and stray away from Omnism. The commonalities establish something more modest and more interesting, that independent traditions, developing over millennia in different cultural and geographic contexts, have returned repeatedly to similar questions (about the nature of cosmic order, the cause and cure of suffering, the conditions of genuine liberation, and the relationship between human and divine) and have arrived at answers that, despite genuine and important differences, share structural features that demand explanation due to the starking similarities displayed. The three-tier evidential model proposed here is offered as a tool for conducting that inquiry with the rigour it deserves.

The model neither collapses the differences in the name of universal harmony nor refuses to see the convergences in the name of scholarly caution. Both refusals cost us, the voyagers on our own paths to our own "soteria". What costs us the least and yields the most is the careful, documented, and intellectually honest work of comparison while enjoying the intellectual labour of all traditions and religions, which we have used for millennia towards understanding and ratifying our conceptualisation of eschatology, all while marching towards "death".

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Article Information and Declarations

Declarations

Authors' Contribution:

- [a-b]Conceptualization, and intellectual revisions, Data collection, interpretation, and drafting of manuscript
- The authors agree to take responsibility for every facet of the work, making sure that any concerns about its integrity or veracity are thoroughly examined and addressed

Conflict of Interest: NIL

Funding Sources: NIL

Correspondence:

Suween Vinsuka Kannangara

vinsukak@gmail.com

How to Cite:

A Voyage on Common Spiritual Roots Across Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity and Islam. (2026). Wah Academia Journal of Global Religions, 2(1), 73-84. https://doi.org/10.63954/b1gp1y73