



The incarnate *Logos* and *manunggaling kawulo Gusti*: *Theosis* in Javanese Christian spirituality

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Abstract: This study investigates the concept of *Manunggaling Kawulo Gusti* within Javanese spirituality, employing a theological framework centered on the incarnation of the *Logos*, with a focus on the soteriological doctrine of *Theosis* and on intercultural hermeneutics as conceptualized by Paul Ricoeur. Employing a qualitative critical literature review methodology, this research brings primary theological sources, biblical exegesis, and Javanese cultural anthropology into the critical dialogue. The analysis demonstrates that *Manunggaling Kawulo Gusti* articulates a profound Javanese aspiration toward ontological union with the Divine, expressed through ascetic practice (*laku*), contemplative silence (*suwung*), and cosmic harmony (*memayu hayuning bawana*). This research suggests that the idea of the *Logos* incarnate, understood as the union of God and humanity in the person of Christ, provides a standard framework for re-examining Javanese spiritual aspirations. The study proposes *Theosis* as a conceptual link, rather than categorizing *Manunggaling Kawulo Gusti* as syncretism or assimilating it into an evangelical context, suggesting that the movement of the *Logos* towards humanity (incarnation) facilitates the possibility of humanity's transformation and participation in the divine life. The role of the Holy Spirit as the agent of both the incarnation and the ongoing process of Christification is foregrounded throughout.

Keywords: incarnate *Logos*, Javanese Christian spirituality, *manunggaling kawulo Gusti*, *Theosis*

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1. Introduction

The encounter between Christian theology and Javanese spirituality represents one of the most complex and theologically generative spaces within Indonesian Christianity. As Christianity continues its engagement with the diverse cultural worlds of the Indonesian archipelago, spirituality can no longer be understood as a universal, culture-transcendent religious experience. Rather, it is a lived, embodied, and historically situated expression of faith that must consider the particular cultural horizons within which believers inhabit the world. In the Javanese context, Christian spirituality emerges within a cultural landscape deeply shaped by the mystical

traditions of *Kejawen*, which carries centuries of philosophical and spiritual elaboration.

Among the most profound and contested concepts within *Kejawen* is *Manunggaling Kawulo Gusti*, a teaching concerning the ontological union of the human being (*kawulo*) with the Divine (*Gusti*). A rich cultural heritage in Javanese literature, mysticism, and ritual practice is deeply embedded and documented in historical accounts, including scholarly works by Clifford Geertz and indigenous intellectuals, as well as in texts such as the *Serat Centhini* and *Serat Wulangreh*, and in the teachings associated with *Sheikh Siti Jenar*.¹ This has led to a complex and prolonged history of theological discussion across Islamic mysticism, normative Islam, and various forms of Javanese Christianity, resulting in diverse interpretations.

The problem this study addresses is the persistent gap between two inadequate responses to this encounter. A purely exclusivist theological approach views *Manunggaling Kawulo Gusti* as syncretistic and doctrinally perilous, thus neglecting the authentic spiritual richness inherent in Javanese culture. On the other hand, an uncritical cultural assimilation approach adopts Javanese symbols without adequate theological evaluation, risking the erosion of the normative claims of Christian faith. Both approaches fail to honor the complexity of the encounter. A hermeneutical framework is required that is both theologically rigorous and culturally sensitive, able to reconcile the specific nature of Javanese experience with the universal claims of Christian doctrine.

The urgency of this research lies in two dimensions. A pressing pastoral concern exists: a substantial number of Javanese Christians inhabit a spiritual realm influenced by *Kejawen* values, and the lack of sufficient theological examination of this encounter leaves congregations susceptible to either cultural disconnection or unconsidered syncretism. Existing scholarship on Javanese Christian spirituality has predominantly centered on descriptive phenomenology and case studies, rather than on developing a comprehensive and theologically robust framework that integrates both doctrinal insight and cultural interpretation. The Athanasian tradition, mediated by intercultural hermeneutics, proposes *Theosis* as the soteriological bridge concept to fill that gap, enabling genuine theological dialogue with *Manunggaling Kawulo Gusti*.

Previous scholarship has made valuable but partial contributions to this field. Kristiantoro has examined the practice of contemplative prayer as a form of Christian spirituality that resonates with Javanese inwardness, though without developing a

¹ Clifford Geertz, *The Religion of Java* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 5–8; Supriyono Purwosaputro, Agus Sutono, and Fuad Noorzeha, “Manunggaling Kawulo Gusti Concept of Divinity and Human Identity Syeikh Siti Jenar,” *Global Journal for Research Analysis* 12, no. 09 (September 15, 2023): 179–81, <https://doi.org/10.36106/gjra/0809820>.

systematic christological grounding for this resonance.² Researchers such as Chakim and colleagues have examined the mystical aspects of *Kejawen*, including laku as an ethical-spiritual practice.³ Studies by Suseno, Sugito, and Suryaningsih have investigated the connections between Christian baptismal theology and *Manunggaling Kawulo Gusti*.⁴ Primawati has applied a liberation theology framework to evaluate communal spiritual practices in Yogyakarta, though her analysis does not explicitly explore the link between incarnation and local mystical concepts.⁵ Andersen and Purmanasari have highlighted the missional aspects of Christian spirituality but have not addressed the specific hermeneutical challenges presented by Javanese cosmology.⁶ This study builds on previous research by proposing a constructive theological model based on the doctrine of *Theosis*, the theology of the Holy Spirit, and Paul Ricoeur's intercultural hermeneutics.⁷

The theoretical framework of this study rests on three interconnected pillars. The Nicene-Chalcedonian tradition's doctrine of incarnation, with particularly focusing on the hypostatic union, the role of the *Logos*, and the soteriological significance of the incarnation as expressed in the patristic doctrine of *Theosis*. The concept of *Manunggaling Kawulo Gusti* is explored as a complex Javanese philosophical and spiritual tradition through its core texts and its anthropological manifestations in Javanese ritual and artistic culture. Cultural hermeneutics offers a methodological framework for the dialogue between two cultural-theological perspectives, facilitating a "fusion of horizons" as described by Ricoeur, which neither absorbs one tradition into the other nor simply equates them.

The article proposes that the movement of the incarnate *Logos* towards humanity, viewed through the concept of *Theosis*, offers a normative theological framework for reevaluating the Javanese ideal of *Manunggaling Kawulo Gusti* in a more

² Sony Kristiantoro, "Spiritualitas Doa Kontemplatif: Lebih Banyak Diseminarkan Daripada Dipraktikkan (Belajar Dari Praktik Spiritualitas Doa Kontemplatif Model Taize Di Gereja Kristen Indonesia Soka Salatiga)," *Veritas Lux Mea (Jurnal Teologi Dan Pendidikan Kristen)* 2, no. 2 (June 2, 2021): 121–34, <https://doi.org/10.59177/veritas.v2i2.87>.

³ Sulkhan Chakim, "Dakwah Islam Dan Spiritualitas Kejawen," *KOMUNIKA: Jurnal Dakwah Dan Komunikasi* 1, no. 2 (November 23, 2016): 257–66, <https://doi.org/10.24090/komunika.v1i2.794>.

⁴ Aji Suseno, Yehudha Andrew Sugito, and Eko Wahyu Suryaningsih, "Titik Temu Makna Baptisan Menurut Roma 6:3-6 Dan Konsep Manunggaling Kawulo Gusti Bagi Pemuridan Kontekstual Masyarakat Jawa," *Manna Rafflesia* 11, no. 1 (October 29, 2024): 155–67, https://doi.org/10.38091/man_raf.v11i1.498.

⁵ Natalia Heni Primawati, "Spiritualitas Komunitas Tritunggal Mahakudus Yogyakarta Dalam Perspektif Teologi Pembebasan Gustavo Gutierrez," *WASKITA: Jurnal Pendidikan Nilai Dan Pembangunan Karakter* 2, no. 2 (July 1, 2017): 49–60, <https://doi.org/10.21776/ub.waskita:jurnalpendidikannilaidanpembangunankarakter.2018.002.02.5>.

⁶ James Andersen and Nira Olyvia Purmanasari, "Spiritualitas Orang Kristen Dalam Kaitannya Dengan Semangat Misi," *Kharisma: Jurnal Ilmiah Teologi* 3, no. 1 (June 30, 2022): 54–67, <https://doi.org/10.54553/kharisma.v3i1.92>.

⁷ Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), 45–69; Paul Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, ed. Don Ihde (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1969), 3–24.

critical and nuanced manner. The study's objectives are to: (1) examine the theological, anthropological, and epistemological aspects of *Manunggaling Kawulo Gusti* within its Javanese cultural and historical context; (2) explore the doctrine of the *Logos'* incarnation, specifically the hypostatic union, the role of the Holy Spirit, and the *Theosis* soteriological framework; (3) conduct a critical theological comparison between the two traditions through the lens of Ricoeur's intercultural hermeneutics; and (4) develop a constructive model of Javanese Christian incarnative spirituality that balances Javanese spiritual wisdom and Christological doctrine.

2. Research Methods

This research employs a qualitative approach with a critical literature review as its primary strategy. The methodological foundation is based on Paul Ricoeur's theory of intercultural hermeneutics, as outlined in his key works.⁸ Ricoeur's hermeneutics is a sophisticated and transformative theory of interpretation that highlights the excess of meaning inherent in all symbolic and narrative discourse.⁹ For Ricoeur, interpretation is never an impartial act: the interpreter brings a pre-existing understanding (a horizon) that is itself altered through the encounter with the text or cultural symbol being interpreted. This "conflict of interpretations" is not a problem to be resolved but the very site of hermeneutical productivity.

The hermeneutical stance adopted in this study is explicitly constructive and self-critical. The researcher, a dedicated theologian, engages with the convergence of Christian doctrine and *Manunggaling Kawulo Gusti*, upholding its core tenets of the doctrine while remaining open to the transformative possibilities of the hermeneutical exchange. The doctrine of incarnation is seen as a dynamic concept that interacts with Javanese culture in a more profound way, rather than being regarded as an unchanging truth that views it from a superior standpoint, and this encounter with *Manunggaling Kawulo Gusti* results in a more complex exploration of the doctrine, including examinations of *Theosis*, cosmic Christology, and the universal extent of the *Logos*.

This research is based on Ricoeur's idea of the "fusion of horizons," which he developed in conversation with Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics.¹⁰ It demands an in-depth examination of the cultural, historical, and linguistic background of Javanese thought, covering a substantial period from the classical Javanese literary tradition through the colonial and postcolonial periods up to the present. This

⁸ Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*; Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning*; Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

⁹ Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning*, 45–69.

¹⁰ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 52–87.

engagement is not the projection of a Western evangelical framework onto Javanese culture; it is a genuine encounter in which both horizons are challenged and enriched.

This research draws on a variety of sources, including: (1) primary theological texts, such as patristic works on the incarnation and *Theosis*, and the creedal statements from Nicaea (325 AD) and Chalcedon (451 AD);¹¹ (2) primary Javanese literary and philosophical texts, like the *Serat Centhini*, *Serat Wulangreh*, and *Wirit Hidayat Jati*, as well as Clifford Geertz's anthropological study of Javanese religion;¹² (3) secondary theological and missiological literature on contextual theology, intercultural hermeneutics, and Javanese Christian spirituality; and (4) biblical texts, examined through a narrative-theological exegetical approach that aligns with Ricoeur's theory of biblical interpretation. The analysis proceeds thematically, developing a constructive theological argument through the critical dialogue between these sources.

In the process of refining this manuscript, the authors used TRINKA AI as a non-generative language tool, specifically for paraphrasing and correcting English grammar. The use of this tool was limited to linguistic aspects and did not affect the substance, arguments, or originality of this research. All scientific content is entirely the intellectual work of the authors.

3. Results and Discussion

The Concept of *Manunggaling Kawulo Gusti*

The teaching of *Manunggaling Kawulo Gusti* stands at the center of *Kejawen* spirituality, but its meaning is neither simple nor uniform. Clifford Geertz's seminal anthropological study, *The Religion of Java*, highlights a remarkable blend of Hindu-Buddhist, Islamic mystical, and indigenous animistic traditions in Javanese religious life, resulting in a unique cultural-religious formation that cannot be confined to a single tradition.¹³ *Manunggaling Kawulo Gusti* exemplifies this blend by outlining the pursuit of a profound unity between the human being (*kawulo*) and the Divine (*Gusti*).¹⁴ It is crucial to acknowledge, however, that this concept is subject to diverse and sometimes opposing interpretations across different streams of Javanese thought,

¹¹ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation (De Incarnatione Verbi Dei)*, trans. John Behr (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2011); Council of Chalcedon, "Definition of the Faith (Chalcedonian Definition)," in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils, Volume 1*, ed. Norman P. Tanner (London: Sheed and Ward, 1990), 84–87; Maximus, *On the Cosmic Mystery of Jesus Christ: Selected Writings from St. Maximus the Confessor*, trans. Paul M. Blowers and Robert Louis Wilken (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2003).

¹² Geertz, *The Religion of Java*, 5–36.

¹³ Geertz, 5–36.

¹⁴ Kholid Karomi and Dyah Ayu Rejekiingtyas, "Manunggaling Kawulo Gusti 'Inda Raden Ngabehi Ranggawarsita Fi Risalati Wirit Hidayat Jati," *Journal of Comparative Study of Religions* 1, no. 1 (November 1, 2020): 1–18, <https://doi.org/10.21111/jcsr.v1i1.4979>.

and any theological engagement with it must first consider these interpretive complexities rather than overlook them.

The concept is most notably linked to the contentious figure of *Sheikh Siti Jenar*, a mystic from the fifteenth or sixteenth-century Java, whose teachings reflect the Sufi tradition of *Al-Hallaj* and embody the most extreme expression of unitive yearning within Javanese Islamic mysticism. This teaching was denounced by the *Wali Songo* (Nine Saints) as deviating from accepted Islam, as recorded in the *Serat Centhini* and several *Babad* texts.¹⁵ The reaction to *Manunggaling Kawulo Gusti* within Islam has shifted between the endorsement of Sufi traditions, which have been influenced by Ibn Arabi's *wahdat al-wujud*, and the rejection of orthodoxy, resulting in extensive theological debate within Javanese Islamic scholarship. Throughout the colonial and nationalist periods, the concept was reinterpreted by Javanese intellectual and spiritual movements, including *Paguyuban Ngesti Tunggal (Pangestu)* and *Subud*, which adapted it within a more universalist and less explicitly Islamic framework.

The central question of how *Manunggaling Kawulo Gusti* is understood within Javanese tradition is of crucial importance for theological engagement. This concept is not derived through doctrinal instruction or propositional revelation in the conventional sense; it is discovered through a rigorous process of experiential spiritual discipline. The main epistemological route is *laku*, a term which covers all ascetic and contemplative practices, through which the Javanese practitioner gradually purifies the self in preparation for a unitive experience. These practices include fasting (*pasa*), vigil (*tapa*), and crucially, *semedi* (a form of deep meditative absorption involving the stilling of mental and bodily activity). Through sustained *semedi*, the practitioner enters the state of *suwung*, a term denoting the radical emptiness or void of the self, in which the ordinary boundaries of the individual ego are dissolved. It is within this state of *suwung* that Javanese tradition locates the possibility of *wahyu*, divine revelation received through the *swara ing asepi* (voice in the stillness). Geertz states that *ngelmu* spiritual knowledge is fully realized in a receptive, introspective silence, where reality is understood from an internal perspective rather than an external one, thus representing the culmination of Javanese spiritual devotion.¹⁶

A crucial distinction needs to be made between *Manunggaling Kawulo Gusti* as a philosophical concept and as a lived spiritual practice. This philosophical principle posits a metaphysical claim regarding the ontological connection between humanity and the Divine, stating that the human being (microcosm) is fundamentally inseparable from the Divine order of the universe (macrocosm). The philosophical dimension of *Manunggaling Kawulo Gusti* is elaborated in the *Serat Wulangreh* of Pakubuwono IV,

¹⁵ Mohammad Lukman Chakim and Muhammad Habib Adi Putra, "Studi Perjumpaan Aliran Mistik Kejawa Dan Mistik Islam," *Spiritualita* 7, no. 2 (December 1, 2023): 112–24, <https://doi.org/10.30762/spiritualita.v7i2.1356>.

¹⁶ Geertz, *The Religion of Java*, 232–60.

which presents union with God as both the origin and the ultimate goal of human existence.¹⁷ As a lived spiritual orientation, it gives rise to specific ethical dispositions and social practices. Among these, *nrimo ing pandum* (acceptance of one's God-given portion) requires careful contextual analysis. The concept of *nrimo ing pandum* is not equally applicable to all members of Javanese society—primarily serving as a spiritual resource for ordinary people who face social injustice, economic hardship, and marginalization, including oppression.¹⁸ In colonial Javanese society, it gave spiritual strength and dignity to the oppressed, whereas for the nobility, who adhered to a different moral code based on dharma, it promoted action rather than inaction. The conflation of these distinct social registers leads to a distorted understanding of the concept.

The ethical and cosmological dimension of *Manunggaling Kawulo Gusti* is further expressed in the principle of *memayu hayuning bawana*, which represents the ethical manifestation of the mystical union in the community's life and in relation to the natural order. This principle establishes a profound ecological and social ethic based on the understanding that all things are interconnected, as human beings bear a responsibility to preserve and improve the harmony of creation. The ethical orientation bears striking similarities to Christian teachings on stewardship and the universal scope of redemption as described in Romans 8:19–22, and merits thorough theological examination in any meaningful exploration of Javanese Christian spirituality.

The aesthetic and ritual dimensions of *Manunggaling Kawulo Gusti* are expressed through a diverse range of cultural forms that go far beyond the *wayang* performance, with the latter being a key medium. The seven stages of soul purification in the Dewa Ruci story from the *wayang* tradition signify a narrative theology of the soul's journey towards divine union.¹⁹ Similarly, a unitive aspiration is also embodied in *tembang macapat*, a Javanese poetic-musical tradition in which various meters (*Dhandhanggula*, *Kinanthi*, *Asmaradana*, and others) are encoded to represent different aspects of the soul's spiritual journey. The symbolism of *Manunggaling Kawulo Gusti* is also reflected in various cultural expressions, including the circular motif in *batik kawung*, which represents the cosmic unity of all existence, the *slametan* ritual, which enacts harmony between the human community and the spiritual order, and the *Nyadran* and *Petik Pari* ceremonies, which embody the relational ethic of

¹⁷ Fatimah Mutia, Nabila Putri Andari, and Nasywa Salsabila Khairunnisa, "Pemaknaan Konsep Nrimo Ing Pandum Pada Pedagang Tradisional Di Pasar Legi Surakarta," *Jurnal Ilmu Budaya* 10, no. 1 (2023): 75–81, <https://doi.org/10.34050/jib.v11i1.24410>.

¹⁸ Firda Mutia Widayanti and Tri Handayani, "Nilai Spiritual Manunggaling Kawulo Gusti Dalam Motif Batik Kawung," *HUMANIKA* 31, no. 2 (December 10, 2024): 200–209, <https://doi.org/10.14710/humanika.v31i2.66404>.

¹⁹ Sunardi, "Manunggaling Kawulo Gusti in Dewa Ruci Story of Cinema Wayang Performance," *Arts and Design Studies* 83 (July 2020): 36–42, <https://doi.org/10.7176/ADS/83-05>.

gratitude and interdependence between the human community, its ancestors, and the natural world.²⁰ A theologically serious engagement with *Manunggaling Kawulo Gusti* must consider this full range of cultural expressions rather than reducing it to a single narrative medium.

The response of Javanese Christianity to *Manunggaling Kawulo Gusti* across its history reflects the same tensions that characterize the broader encounter between Christianity and Javanese culture. In the nineteenth century, the early Javanese Christian movement associated with Kiai Ibrahim Tunggul Wulung represented a significant experiment in creatively integrating Christian faith with Javanese spiritual categories.²¹ The establishment of the *Gereja Kristen Jawa* (GKJ) in the twentieth century brought greater institutional and liturgical stability, but also a degree of assimilation to Western Protestant norms, which sometimes marginalized the Javanese cultural heritage of its members. Contemporary Javanese Christianity continues to navigate this tension by developing contextual liturgies that incorporate gamelan, macapat, and the Javanese language in worship. The primary objective of this study is to establish a constructive framework that can facilitate a balanced negotiation between theological doctrine and cultural context.

Logos, Trinity, and Theosis

The central event of Christian theology is the doctrine of the incarnation, which specifically refers to the incarnation of the *Logos* (the Word), rather than the incarnation of God in a generic or undifferentiated sense. This distinction is not merely a technical refinement, but rather a theologically decisive one. The Nicene Creed, dating back to 325 AD, and the Chalcedonian Definition, dating back to 451 AD, are precise on this point: it is the second Person of the Trinity, the eternal Son and Word of God, who “Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14). The divine essence (*ousia*) remains unchanged in the incarnation, with the *Logos* assuming a complete human nature while retaining full divinity, thus forming the hypostatic union of two natures within one Person. Expressing “God became human” without qualification is theologically imprecise, as it may imply either that the entire Trinity was incarnated, which is the Patripassian heresy, or that the divine essence was diminished in the incarnation. The precise Chalcedonian formulation is as follows: the eternal Word, who

²⁰ Maria Dolorosa and Roni Alim Ba'diya Kusufa, “The Implementation of the ‘Selamatan Petik Padi’ Tradition Carried out by the People of Petungsewu Village, Wagir District, Malang Regency,” *Journal of Socio-Cultural Sustainability and Resilience* 2, no. 1 (July 31, 2024): 47–60, <https://doi.org/10.61511/jscsr.v2i1.2024.824>; Reni Dikawati, Sariyatun Sariyatun, and Warto Warto, “Implikasi Diskursus Kristianitas Dalam Serat Dharmogandhul Dan Pemikiran Kiai Ibrahim Tunggul Wulung Terhadap Komunitas Kristen Tegalombo Pati,” *Religio: Jurnal Studi Agama-Agama* 7, no. 2 (September 10, 2017): 237–66, <https://doi.org/10.15642/religio.v7i2.748>.

²¹ Ayub Widhi Rumecko, “Evaluasi Terhadap Tata Ibadah Kontekstual Gereja Kristen Jawa,” *Kurios* 5, no. 1 (May 1, 2019): 74–93, <https://doi.org/10.30995/kur.v5i1.91>.

is truly and fully God, became truly and fully human, without mixture, confusion, division, or separation of the two natures.²²

The Gospel of John's prologue (1:1–18) provides the primary scriptural foundation for understanding the incarnation of the *Logos*. The opening verse, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1), contains three key theological statements: the pre-existence of the *Logos* (*en arche*), the relationship within the Godhead ("the Word was with God" – *pros ton theon*), and the *Logos* ontological identity with God (*theos en ho Logos*). The prologue further solidifies the *Logos* as the creator agent (John 1:3), stating, "All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made." This cosmic Christology underscores that the *Logos* who became flesh is the same *Logos* through whom all creation exists, a point of profound significance for the dialogue with Javanese cosmological thought.²³

The scope of the incarnation, whether it is limited to the historical life of Jesus of Nazareth or is more extensive, is a major point of theological discussion that has a direct bearing on the dialogue with *Manunggaling Kawulo Gusti*. Classical Reformed and Lutheran traditions have generally focused on the incarnation, on the historical event of the *Logos* taking on human nature in Mary's womb, achieved through the power of the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:35), whereas Alexandrian and Eastern Orthodox traditions have developed a more comprehensive understanding of the incarnation, encompassing the *Logos'* entire interaction with creation from its inception. Introducing the concept of supralapsarian theology's question of whether the incarnation would have taken place even without humanity's fall brings a significant component to incarnational theology.²⁴ If the incarnation is not only a correction for human sinfulness but also a component of God's eternal plan to unite the divine and the human in the person of the *Logos*, then it encompasses a broad purpose extending to both cosmic and redemptive aspects. This concept serves as a significant theological resource for dialogue between Western theology and Javanese cosmological thought, particularly in its connections to Duns Scotus and broader Eastern Orthodox cosmic Christology, where the union of the human and divine is seen as an integral part of reality rather than a response to moral failure.

The role of the Holy Spirit in the incarnation is a dimension of Trinitarian theology that must not be overlooked in any adequate account of the doctrine. The

²² Lilly S.J. Nortjé-Meyer, "The Logos as 'Flesh' in John 1:14 and 6:51-57: Formulating a Christology for the Liberation of Animals from Humanarchy," *Neotestamentica* 53, no. 3 (2019): 535–55, <https://doi.org/10.1353/NEO.2019.0026>.

²³ Elaine H. Pagels, "Exegesis of Genesis 1 in the Gospels of Thomas and John," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 118, no. 3 (1999): 477–96, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.2307/3268185>.

²⁴ Patrick T. R. Gray, "The Legacy of Chalcedon," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Justinian* (England: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 215–38, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521817463.009>.

angel's announcement to Mary confirms that "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God" (Luke 1:35). This establishes the incarnation as a Trinitarian event, where the Father initiates, the Son assumes human nature, and the Holy Spirit brings about the union of the divine and the human in the person of Christ. This pneumatological dimension of the incarnation establishes the pattern for the ongoing work of the Spirit in drawing human beings into participation in the life of Christ, which is precisely the doctrine of *Theosis*. The Spirit who hovered over the waters of creation (Gen 1:2) and who effected the incarnation is the same Spirit who mediates the union of believers with Christ (Rom 8:9–11; 2Cor 3:17–18).²⁵

The soteriological importance of the incarnation is most fully expressed in the patristic teaching of *Theosis* (deification), which serves as one of the most profound and constructive resources for the theological discussion with *Manunggaling Kawulo Gusti*. Athanasius of Alexandria formulated the classic statement of *Theosis*: "For he was incarnate that we might be made god".²⁶ This formulation is not a claim that human beings become identical with God in the way that the *Logos* is God; rather, it expresses the soteriological vision that through union with Christ by the Spirit, human beings are progressively transformed into divine likeness (2Pet 1:4 "participants in the divine nature"), without losing their creaturely distinction from God. Maximus the Confessor developed this doctrine through the concept of Christification, which describes the process by which human beings, by the indwelling of the Spirit, are transformed into Christs and participate in the divine life, not by nature but by grace.²⁷

The Christological tradition also addresses the messianic identity of Christ in ways that extend beyond the narrow redemptive category. The Hebrew concept of the *Messiah* (*mashiach*) is primarily that of the anointed king who rules, liberates, and restores Israel, thereby establishing God's justice and peace (*shalom*) in the world. The New Testament portrays Jesus as *Messiah*, incorporating a royal-liberative dimension, where he is the one who brings the kingdom of God into history, announces good news to the poor, releases the captives, and declares the year of the Lord's favor, as stated in Luke 4:18-19, referencing Isaiah 61. The redemptive work accomplished on the cross is the climax of this messianic mission, but it does not exhaust it: the resurrection, the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost, and the ongoing mission of the church in the power of the Spirit are equally constitutive of the messianic work of Christ.

²⁵ Peniel C.D. Maiaweng, "Inkarnasi: Realitas Kemanusiaan Yesus," *Jurnal Jaffray* 13, no. 1 (March 20, 2015): 97, <https://doi.org/10.25278/jj71.v13i1.114>.

²⁶ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation (De Incarnatione Verbi Dei)*, 54.

²⁷ Maximus, *On the Cosmic Mystery of Jesus Christ: Selected Writings from St. Maximus the Confessor*, 105–17.

Justin Martyr's concept of the *Logos spermatikos*, developed in the second century, serves as a further reference point for this discussion,²⁸ and posits that seeds of the *Logos* had been embedded in all human cultures and philosophical traditions beforehand, thereby allowing all individuals who lived according to reason and virtue to be considered, in essence, Christian before Christ's historical incarnation. Applying this framework to the Javanese spiritual tradition prompts the question: Is the Javanese aspiration for *Manunggaling Kawulo Gusti* a cultural-spiritual preparation brought about by the universal *Logos*, a seed of the Word already embedded within Javanese culture, awaiting its christological revelation?

Intercultural Hermeneutical Dialogue

A rigorous theological comparison between *Manunggaling Kawulo Gusti* and the Christian doctrine of *Theosis* reveals both profound resonances and irreducible differences, and this complex combination of convergence and divergence renders the hermeneutical encounter theologically productive. This study's proposal is not to equate or reduce the two traditions to one, but rather to facilitate a sustained, self-critical dialogue between them, as envisioned by Ricoeur's hermeneutics, in which both traditions are enriched and challenged by their encounter.²⁹

The fundamental structural difference between the two traditions is rooted in the direction and agency of the unitive movement. *Manunggaling Kawulo Gusti* is primarily a movement from below, since it is the human being (*kawulo*) who undertakes the disciplines of *laku*, *semedi*, and *suwung* to ascend toward union with the Divine. In this framework, the initiative lies with the human practitioner; the Divine is the goal of human striving. The Christian doctrine of *Theosis* is founded on a movement from above, which begins with the *Logos* descending into human history through the incarnation, and the Holy Spirit bringing about the transformation of the believer into Christ's likeness. Human receptivity and cooperation are required, but the initiative and the power of unitive transformation are divine, not human. In the Christian context, the union of the human with the divine is viewed as a gift of divine benevolence and affection, rather than a consequence of human spiritual endeavor, which has significant implications for the understanding of grace.

However, this difference does not entail a simple opposition between the two traditions. The Christian doctrine of *Theosis* fully acknowledges the necessity of human participation and cooperation in the process of spiritual transformation. Maximus the Confessor's theology of synergy (Greek: *synergia*) posits that *Theosis* is a collaborative process in which divine transformation necessitates the human being's voluntary

²⁸ Justin Martyr, *The First and Second Apologies*, trans. Leslie William Barnard (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), 46.

²⁹ Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 140–68.

cooperation.³⁰ Christian ascetic practices, contemplative prayer, and fasting are characterized by receptivity and openness through which the Spirit brings about the transformation of the human person. The Javanese practices of *laku* and *semedi* share a genuine point of resonance with the Christian ascetic tradition, as both require the progressive purification and emptying of the self as a condition for divine union. The Javanese concept of *suwung*, which signifies the radical emptiness of the self, has a particular resonance with the apophatic tradition in Christian mysticism, where the emptying of the self before God is a prerequisite for divine indwelling.

A second important point of resonance lies in the relational and personal character of the divine-human union in both traditions. In its more orthodox Javanese expressions, *Manunggaling Kawulo Gusti* does not propose the annihilation of the human person in the divine, as the term *kawulo* (servant) maintains its relational significance even in the moment of *manunggal* (union). The union is not an absorption that abolishes the distinction between Creator and creature, but a relational union that fulfills the deepest aspiration of human existence. This understanding resonates with the Christian doctrine of *Theosis*, in which the human person, precisely in being drawn into union with God, is not dissolved but transformed and fulfilled. Athanasius and Maximus are clear that *Theosis* does not involve a confusion of the divine and human natures; rather, it is a participation in the divine life by grace which perfects rather than abolishes the human creature.

The critical theological distinction must be preserved with equal clarity. The Christian doctrine of *Theosis* is specifically tied to Christology: the transformation of the human person into the divine likeness is facilitated and rooted in the union of the divine *Logos* with human nature in the person of Jesus Christ. The path of *Theosis* is a spiritual ascent that involves participation in the specific historical life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, facilitated by the Holy Spirit. In contrast to *Manunggaling Kawulo Gusti*, this christological specificity is not required, as its path of union is open to any disciplined practitioner, regardless of their religious affiliation. From a Christian theological perspective, this universality raises the question of whether the Javanese aspiration of *Manunggaling Kawulo Gusti* might, within a *Logos spermatikos* framework, be seen as a genuine but incomplete foreshadowing of the christological fullness of *Theosis* that the Gospel brings.

Christification is the process by which the human being, through the indwelling of the Spirit, is progressively conformed to the pattern of Christ: dying and rising with Christ (Rom 6:3–11), bearing the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22–23), and being transformed from one degree of glory to another (2Cor 3:18). This Christification is simultaneously a *Theosis*: to be Christified is to be drawn into the divine life because

³⁰ Maximus, *On the Cosmic Mystery of Jesus Christ: Selected Writings from St. Maximus the Confessor*, 63.

Christ is the image of the invisible God (Col 1:15) and the fullness of the Godhead dwells in him bodily (Col 2:9). If the Javanese aspiration of *Manunggaling Kawulo Gusti* is understood as a cultural expression of the universal human longing for divine union, then the Gospel's proclamation of Christification by the Spirit offers not the abolition of this aspiration but its christological fulfillment: the union with God that Javanese spirituality seeks through *laku* is made available definitively and personally through faith in and union with the *Logos* made flesh.

This proposal should not be misconstrued as a straightforward triumphalist supersessionism, in which Christianity "completes" Javanese spirituality by simply supplanting it. The hermeneutical encounter is genuinely dialogical: the profound depth of the Javanese aspiration for divine union prompts Christian theology to elaborate its doctrine of *Theosis* more comprehensively, to take the cosmic scope of the *Logos* work in creation and culture more seriously, and to acknowledge the pneumatological dimensions of spiritual transformation which have sometimes been underdeveloped in evangelical Protestant theology. An encounter with the concept of *Manunggaling Kawulo Gusti* suggests a more developed Trinitarian theology, a more comprehensive pneumatology, and a broader understanding of the extent of Christ's redemptive and transformative influence.

Christian Devotion in the Javanese Context

In the Javanese Christian tradition, devotional practices embody the complex interplay of faith and require a nuanced theological approach that avoids two pitfalls: imposing a Western evangelical model on Javanese devotional forms and unthinkingly embracing Javanese spiritual practices without sufficient grounding in Christ and the Holy Spirit. This study proposes that Javanese Christian devotion, at its best, represents an incarnational spiritual practice that integrates the unique aspects of Javanese culture with the fundamental principles of Christian theology.

In the Javanese Christian context, a thorough theological examination of *semedi* is essential. In the *Kejawen* tradition, *semedi* is the primary means by which the practitioner enters the state of *suwung* and becomes receptive to *wahyu*. The Christian tradition boasts a lengthy and profound history of contemplative prayer, which exhibits certain structural similarities with *semedi*, such as the practice of interior silence, the calming of mental activity, and the posture of receptive openness towards God. Christian contemplative prayer is not achieved through human effort, but rather is a form of attentive receptivity to the prior movement of the Spirit, who is already present and active within the believer (Rom 8:26–27). *Semedi* incorporated into Javanese Christian devotional practice must be reinterpreted within a pneumatological and christological framework: the silence of *suwung* is transformed into the silence of kenotic receptivity, through which the Spirit conveys the word of Christ (Col 3:16). This reinterpretation is rather due to a hermeneutical transformation facilitated by

Ricoeur's concept of creative interpretation, which releases and redirects the surplus of meaning within Javanese cultural symbols through the encounter with the Gospel.³¹

In Javanese Christian congregations, such as the *Gereja Kristen Jawa* and related Protestant communities, various forms of Christian worship have been practiced, incorporating gamelan music, *tembang macapat*, and the Javanese language. Research by Rumekso has examined the GKJ's contextual worship practices, highlighting both the benefits for pastoral care and the theological challenges of this integration.³² A notable example of incarnational devotional practice is the recitation of Psalms and Gospel passages in *macapat* meter (*Dhandhanggula*, *Kinanthi*) during evening devotional services, where the formal structure of Javanese poetic music, imbued with coded spiritual meanings and associated with contemplative introspection, serves as a way of proclaiming and internalizing the Gospel. The phenomenon is not a form of folklorizing faith, but rather an expression of a key principle grounded in the theology of the incarnation, where the Word enters and sanctifies rather than eradicating human cultural uniqueness.³³

The communal rituals of Javanese life, including the *slametan*, *Nyadran*, and *Petik Pari* ceremonies, present a distinct set of hermeneutical challenges and opportunities. These rituals encapsulate the Javanese ethical and cosmological vision of *memayu hayuning bawana*, which encompasses the community's duty to preserve harmony with the spiritual order, the ancestors, and the natural world.³⁴ From a Christian viewpoint, these rituals cannot be adopted without theological consideration, as their original cosmological and religious connotations include elements at odds with Christian monotheism. Values such as the relational ethic of gratitude, the recognition of human dependence on the divine order, and the communal orientation of spiritual life have a profound resonance with Christian liturgical and sacramental practice. Reinterpreting these practices involves acknowledging their cultural significance while redirecting their spiritual meaning towards the God revealed in Jesus Christ.

The concept of *suwung* warrants specific theological exploration within the context of Javanese Christian worship. The experience of radical self-emptying that precedes the reception of *wahyu*, *suwung*, resonates with the Pauline concept of kenosis, as described in Philippians 2:7, where the *Logos* is said to have "emptied himself", and is both a christological description and a spiritual paradigm in the Christian tradition. In prayer, the believer who surrenders ego and self-will

³¹ Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning*, 45–69.

³² Rumekso, "Evaluasi Terhadap Tata Ibadah Kontekstual Gereja Kristen Jawa," 74–93.

³³ Soleman Kawangmani and Lavandya Permata Kusuma Wardhani, "Implementasi Pengalaman Realistis-Mistis Gereja Perdana Di Jemaat Untuk Memberitakan Kabar Baik Dalam Konteks Mistik Jawa Kontemporer," *Jurnal Gamaliel: Teologi Praktika* 4, no. 2 (September 27, 2022): 138–51, <https://doi.org/10.38052/gamaliel.v4i2.163>.

³⁴ Dolorosa and Kusufa, "The Implementation of the 'Selamatan Petik Pari' Tradition Carried out by the People of Petungsewu Village, Wagir District, Malang Regency," 47–60.

structurally participates in the kenotic movement of the *Logos*, becoming receptive to the indwelling of the Spirit. The development of this resonance theologically enables *suwung* to serve as a significant and powerful concept within Javanese Christian devotion, where the practice of contemplative emptiness is not in conflict with Christian faith, but rather a cultural expression of the kenotic receptivity through which the Spirit brings about Christification in the hearts of Javanese believers.

Toward a Javanese Christian Incarnative Spirituality

This study's constructive proposal is a model of Javanese Christian incarnative spirituality, rooted in the theological integration of three key elements: the doctrine of the *Logos* incarnation, the *Theosis* framework mediated by the Holy Spirit, and the cultural wisdom of *Manunggaling Kawulo Gusti*, interpreted through Ricoeur's intercultural hermeneutics. This model is based on the premise that God in Christ, through the eternal *Logos*, has already engaged the Javanese cultural world through the universal work of the Spirit. The incarnation of the *Logos* in Jesus of Nazareth is the definitive and normative christological form of this engagement, as stated in Acts 17:26–28. Christian spirituality in the Javanese context must therefore be grounded in the local cultural realities and spiritual aspirations, yet remain directed towards the unique historical and salvific event of the Incarnation.

The model is based on four key theological principles. The first aspect is Trinitarian comprehensiveness, which is characterized by spirituality explicitly shaped by the full Trinitarian economy, involving the Father as the source and goal of all existence, the Son as the *Logos* who incarnates and mediates the divine-human union, and the Spirit as the agent of the incarnation, the mediator of Christification, and the presence of God within the Javanese cultural world. A Trinitarian framework safeguards Christian spirituality from being solely a human accomplishment or a cultural phenomenon, while also acknowledging the actual spiritual presence of God within Javanese culture and spiritual pursuits.³⁵

The second principle is christological normativity with a hermeneutically open approach. The person and work of Jesus Christ, as the incarnate *Logos* who died, rose, and sent the Spirit, forms the normative core of Javanese Christian spirituality. The christological normativity is not a form of christological imperialism that disregards Javanese culture's voice; instead, it serves as the fixed point that fosters true hermeneutical openness, as the incarnate *Logos* affirms the goodness and redeemability of human cultural uniqueness. The Chalcedonian formula, with its insistence that the two natures remain distinct yet united, provides a structural model for the relationship between the Gospel and Javanese culture: the two are brought into

³⁵ Yara González-Justiniano and Christopher P. Ney, "Contextual Theology," in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Theology and Qualitative Research* (Wiley, 2022), 185–94, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119756927.ch19>.

genuine and transformative union without either the dissolution of cultural particularity into a generic Christian universal or the absorption of the Gospel into a Javanese cultural framework.³⁶

The third principle is theotic transformation. The objective of Javanese Christian spirituality is not the preservation of cultural identity or the individual's mere moral improvement, but rather the transformative process of the person and the community through progressive spiritual transformation by the Holy Spirit. The transformation is not a departure from Javanese cultural identity but its ultimate realization: the aspiration of *Manunggaling Kawulo Gusti*, interpreted christologically, is fulfilled rather than abolished in the Gospel's promise of participation in the divine life through union with the incarnate *Logos*. Reinterpreted within a pneumatological framework, *laku* and *semedi* practices become forms of receptive cooperation with the Spirit's transforming work, serving as cultural vessels for the grace of *Theosis*.³⁷

The fourth principle is about communal and ecological responsibility. Javanese Christian spirituality, in accordance with the Javanese ethical principle of *memayu hayuning bawana*, encompasses a responsibility for the community's harmony and the flourishing of the natural world, extending beyond individualistic or interioristic concerns. The ecological and communal aspect resonates with Christian theology's concept of the kingdom of God and the universal scope of redemption as described in Colossians 1:20. In Javanese Christian life, communal rituals such as contextual liturgies that incorporate *gamelan*, *macapat*, and shared meals are practical expressions of a communal-ecological spirituality, representing the presence of the kingdom of God within Javanese cultural life.

The precise distinction between this model and syncretism must be stated. The fusion of incompatible belief systems in theology, without sufficient evaluative criteria, can obscure the unique claims of the Christian faith. The incarnative spirituality proposed here is non-syncretistic, as it retains the christological and Trinitarian principles of Christian theology as the evaluative framework for incorporating Javanese cultural elements, which are received, reinterpreted, and transformed within this framework.³⁸ The distinction between this model and the imposition of Western Christianity on Javanese culture must be equally clear: this model does not assert that Javanese culture must be abandoned or overcome for genuine Christian faith to exist; it asserts that Javanese cultural forms can be genuine vehicles of the Gospel precisely

³⁶ Reuben Luka and Danjuma Byang, "Contextual Theology and the Challenge of Globalization," *Humanities and Social Sciences* 12, no. 6 (December 12, 2024): 229–35, <https://doi.org/10.11648/j.hss.20241206.17>.

³⁷ Christanto Sema Rappan Paledung and Alfa Kristian Hia, "Mengaku Allah, Merupa Dalam Konteks: Tinjauan Historis Terhadap Pengakuan Iman Gereja-Gereja Di Indonesia," *KENOSIS: Jurnal Kajian Teologi* 1, no. 1 (June 21, 2021): 1–28, <https://doi.org/10.37196/kenosis.v1i1.279>.

³⁸ Maximus, *On the Cosmic Mystery of Jesus Christ: Selected Writings from St. Maximus the Confessor*, 59–77.

because the *Logos* who became flesh is the same *Logos* who has been present in the Javanese cultural world through the universal work of the Spirit.

The paradoxes and complexities of this encounter are acknowledged to be too great to be fully resolved within the scope of a single study. Ongoing empirical and pastoral investigation is required to understand how the model is received and practiced within specific Javanese Christian communities. Determining the distinction between authentic cultural expression and subtle cultural blending necessitates ongoing theological discernment. This study provides a constructive framework for this ongoing work, rather than a definitive resolution to the questions it poses. A bridge between Javanese Christian incarnative spirituality and the depth of *Manunggaling Kawulo Gusti* must be constructed not only symbolically, but also conceptually and doctrinally, through sustained and rigorous theological dialogue.

4. Conclusion

The research has shown that the interaction between the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation and the Javanese concept of *Manunggaling Kawulo Gusti* is a theologically enriching exchange that cannot be effectively handled by either dismissing it as exclusive or by uncritically adopting it as part of local culture. The central discovery of this research is that *Theosis*, the ancient Christian teaching of human participation in the divine life through union with the embodied Word, facilitated by the Holy Spirit, offers the most theologically sound and interpretively fruitful context for this encounter. The framework acknowledges the christological normativity of Christian faith and the profound spiritual aspirations of Javanese unitive thought by understanding *Manunggaling Kawulo Gusti* as a cultural reflection of the universal *Logos* presence and the Christian Gospel as its christological completion. This framework's Trinitarian dimension, especially the role of the Holy Spirit as an agent of incarnation, a mediator of Christification, and the presence of God within Javanese culture, fills a substantial gap in previous contextual theological studies on Javanese Christianity. The application of Ricoeur's intercultural hermeneutics as a methodological framework for theological dialogue results in a genuine fusion of horizons, where neither Javanese culture is subordinated to a Western theological framework nor is Christian doctrine dissolved into cultural relativism, but rather a deepened and mutually illuminating understanding of both traditions is achieved.

Research in the future should expand this framework in at least three areas: first, empirical studies of the everyday practices of Javanese Christian communities striving to embody incarnate spirituality; second, a more in-depth examination of primary Javanese texts and philosophical works, such as the *Serat Centhini* and the *Wirit Hidayat Jati*, in an ongoing dialogue with patristic sources on *Theosis*; and third, a prolonged investigation into the Spirit's preparatory role within Javanese culture,

seeking to discern and theologically interpret it. This study aims to initiate a constructive theological discussion that will be completed through continued, collaborative involvement by theologians, anthropologists, clergy, and the Javanese Christian communities themselves.

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Author Contributions

Tri Astuti: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal Analysis, Writing (Original Draft), Writing (Review and Editing). Joko Priyono: Investigation, Data Curation, Writing (Review and Editing), Supervision.

Ethical Approval and Consent

This research is entirely based on textual and historical analysis, including a review of theological literature, biblical exegesis, and an examination of relevant primary and secondary sources. Therefore, formal ethical approval from a research ethics committee and consent from human subjects are not required for this study.

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