

**Beyond God(s) & Theisms (“mono-,” “poly-,” “pan-,” & “non-“)**  
 (suggestions for more accurate comparison of Semitic, Indian, & Chinese notions of the divine)

Common Questions	Semitic Views	Indian Views	Chinese Views
<p>1. Who or what is the <b>Ultimate Reality</b>?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• emphasis placed on a <i>single, omnipotent &amp; omnipresent creator (Yahweh, Heavenly Father, Allah)</i>.</li> <li>• must be venerated &amp; trusted above (and often to the exclusion of) all other unseen, spiritual powers</li> <li>• strong <i>resistance to making images</i> of the omnipotent, omnipresent creator</li> <li>• <i>likened to a human personality</i> in many scriptures and stories—primarily male, but in some cases paired with feminine power (e.g, <b>shekhinah, sophia</b>)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• one ultimate matrix or order of reality (<b>rta, dharma, brahman</b>) from which all things arise, in which they thrive, and into which they once again dissolve.</li> <li>• <i>personified</i> (often as a male-female pair) in <i>three distinguishable ways</i> as Brahma, Vishnu, &amp; Shiva.</li> <li>• in three distinct traditions, each member of this triad is venerated &amp; trusted as the whole of the ultimate—but <i>not to the exclusion of venerating other unseen, spiritual powers</i> (see #3).</li> <li>• Buddhists claim that divine powers (including the three personified forms that Hindus venerate &amp; trust) <i>do not necessarily hold ultimate power</i>, which is only attained through the insight taught by Buddhas.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• all of creation is traced back to a <i>state of chaotic wholeness (hundun, dao, qi)</i> that, when divided, yields all the various opposing pairs of phenomena; yet its integrity is never completely lost &amp; can be regained via cultivation of physical &amp; mental balance.</li> <li>• mostly <i>NOT personified</i>, with a <i>few exceptions</i>: in ancient history (as “Lord of Heaven”) &amp; among medieval Daoists (who regard the sage Lao Zi as “body of the Dao,” born from its own womb).</li> <li>• Chinese Buddhists claim that the insight taught by Buddhas restores humans to a state of primordial balance.</li> </ul>
<p>2. Who or what maintains <b>order</b> in the universe?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the omnipotent, omnipresent creator is also <i>judge &amp; king</i>, who <i>observes the actions of all creatures and dispenses consequences</i>—often with angels &amp; demons as intermediaries (see #3).</li> <li>• this function of the ultimate divine power often depicted in terms of <i>recording deeds in a divine logbook</i>, and later <i>weighing them on a scale</i>.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the ultimate order of reality—viewed as an impersonal force—is what <i>insures that each individual will receive the consequences of their actions (karma)</i>; though a whole host of spiritual beings often act as intermediaries.</li> <li>• the three personifications of this ultimate reality (see #1 above) are <i>almost never described as judges</i>; distribution of consequences is generally described as an <i>impersonal force</i> that takes care of itself.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• justice is <i>administered by a celestial administration</i> (which includes an emperor, governors, bureaucrats, courts, judges, guards, tormentors, etc.) which decides each case based on a sense of cosmic order (sometimes linked to the state of primordial wholeness—see #1)</li> <li>• <i>no such judging agent is ever identified with ultimate reality</i>; distribution of consequences appears to some degree automatic, though less impersonal than in the Indian context.</li> </ul>

<p>3. What <b>non-ultimate spiritual powers</b> influence the visible, human world?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>angels &amp; demons</b> of numerous types play important roles in demonstrating &amp; praising their creator's power, administering justice, and providing assistance to humans.</li> <li>• important ancestors &amp; saints who have passed on to the afterlife also play a major role in providing assistance to humans.</li> <li>• dead spirits of ordinary humans, sometimes manifesting as ghosts who plague the living, are also acknowledged as real powers to be dealt with.</li> <li>• justice is primarily administered <i>by angels</i>, but malicious spirits are sometimes involved.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• divine &amp; demonic beings (<b>devas &amp; asuras</b>) of numerous types play important roles in carrying out various functions of the natural world &amp; providing assistance to humans, <i>often independently of any command</i> given by the ultimate power personified in one of three ways (see above).</li> <li>• important ancestors &amp; saints who have passed on to the afterlife also play a major role in providing assistance to humans.</li> <li>• dead spirits of ordinary humans, sometimes manifesting as ghosts who plague the living, are also acknowledged as real powers to be dealt with.</li> <li>• <i>any of these beings</i> may assist in administering justice, as noted in #2.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• divine &amp; demonic beings (<b>shen &amp; gui</b>) of numerous types play important roles in carrying out various functions of the natural world &amp; providing assistance to humans, though often independently of any command given by either abstract or personified forms of dao (see above).</li> <li>• important ancestors &amp; saints who have passed on to the afterlife also play a major role in providing assistance to humans.</li> <li>• dead spirits of ordinary humans, sometimes manifesting as ghosts who plague the living, are also acknowledged as real powers to be dealt with.</li> <li>• <i>many</i> of these beings may assist in administering justice, as noted in #2.</li> </ul>
<p>4. To what extent &amp; in what ways are <b>divine &amp; human beings related</b>?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a clear division is <i>consistently</i> drawn between the creator and all the powers that serve Him, on the one hand, vs. human souls, on the other (although human souls may have considerable influence even after death).</li> <li>• divine powers do <i>occasionally take on human forms</i> (though the creator Himself is directly involved only in the Christian case); human souls, on the other hand, are <i>rarely seen as truly divine</i>, though they are reborn in spiritual realms and may be transfigured by divine power.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a clear division is <i>often</i> drawn between the various personifications of ultimate reality and the independent powers that serve them, on the one hand, vs. human souls, on the other (although human souls may have considerable influence even after death).</li> <li>• divine powers <i>regularly</i> take on human forms (particularly Vishnu); and in some cases <i>human souls evolve into divine powers</i> over the course of many lives (especially in the ancient Vedic period &amp; Mahayana Buddhist traditions, though this is less common in later history); human souls are also <i>commonly reborn in divine realms</i> (but also in human and animal forms).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• divine powers are for the most part <i>closely linked to human souls</i> rather than belonging to a distinct category.</li> <li>• popular deities (whose voices and wills are commonly channeled by shamanic mediums &amp; oracles) are regarded as evolving from human souls, differentiated from ancestors &amp; ghosts only by their spiritual power; and such beings may also be reborn as humans.</li> <li>• Daoist deities are regarded as personifications of mental &amp; physical capacities found in individual humans.</li> <li>• Buddhist bodhisattvas (e.g., Guan Yin) are spiritually advanced souls dwelling in celestial realms &amp; assisting human souls—sometimes reborn as humans.</li> </ul>