





# Union with God in Psalm 63:8 and *Manunggaling Kawula Gusti*: A contextual study in Javanese culture, Indonesia



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This article proposes the development of a contextual theological framework relevant to the Javanese Church, focusing primarily on building a dialogical bridge between Christian spirituality and local wisdom. Specifically, this research explores the concept of 'union' found in Psalm 63:9, bringing it into conversation with the profound Javanese mystical concept of *Manunggaling Kawula Gusti*, which reflects a deep longing for union with the Divine. The study employs a rigorous methodology of inculturative contextualisation, proceeding through three key stages: analysis of the biblical text, understanding Javanese culture and engaging both elements in dialogue to identify a theologically meaningful point of convergence. The goal is to identify authentic theological convergences between these two concepts. The findings from this dialogue are then practically applied to reform theological thinking, congregational spirituality and church practices. In conclusion, the resulting missiological model not only affirms the distinctively Javanese spiritual longing for divine communion but also remains faithful to the core of the Gospel. This fosters a Christian witness that is both theologically stronger and more culturally relevant to the Javanese context.

**Contribution:** The study aims to enrich theological reflection on union with God (Ps 63) and its resonance with the Javanese concept of *Manunggaling Kawula Gusti*. It also offers practical insights for living the Christian faith authentically in Indonesia, integrating local cultural expressions while preserving both the Gospel's core message and the distinctiveness of Javanese spirituality.

**Keywords:** *Manunggaling Kawula Gusti*; contextualisation; Javanese culture; Christian theology; spiritual relationship; union with God.

## Introduction

The contextualisation of Christian theology within local cultures is an essential endeavour for rendering the Gospel message relevant and meaningful to specific communities (Bevans 2002:3). A profound theological theme within the Old Testament is the yearning for union with God, poignantly expressed in Psalm 63. The psalmist declares, 'My soul clings [*dāvaq*] to you; your right hand upholds me' (Holy Bible: New International Version. Biblica, Inc., 2011).

The use of the Hebrew term *dāvaq* [דָּבַק], meaning 'to cling, adhere, or hold fast' (Wallis 1978), signifies an intimate, loyal and inseparable spiritual bond with God, reflecting a deep experiential knowledge of His presence. This concept of spiritual union finds a potent resonance in Javanese thought through the principle of *Manunggaling Kawula Gusti*. This philosophy reflects a harmonious unity between the servant [*kawula*] and the Lord [*Gusti*], emphasising the alignment of human will with the divine in everyday life.

Identified by Sartono (1994:23) as the highest form of spiritual realisation in Javanese mysticism, this concept provides a significant cultural point of contact. When juxtaposed with the psalmist's experience in Psalm 63, *Manunggaling Kawula Gusti* offers a meaningful framework for contextualising the Christian message of longing for and communion with God within a Javanese cultural framework (Sururi, Kuswanjono & Utomo 2020:13). However, this contextualisation process necessitates careful theological discernment to avoid syncretism—the blending of Christian truth with cultural beliefs in a manner that distorts the essence of the Gospel. As Talan (2019) cautions, syncretism can undermine faith in the absolute truth of Christ and impede genuine spiritual formation.

Consequently, any contextual approach to Psalm 63 through the lens of *Manunggaling Kawula Gusti* must remain firmly grounded in theological integrity while thoughtfully engaging with cultural insights (Hiebert 2008:122).

Accordingly, this article examines the relationship between the concept of 'clinging to God' [*dāvaq*] in Psalm 63 and the Javanese spiritual principle of *Manunggaling Kawula Gusti*, with a focus on elucidating their points of convergence and divergence. Building on this comparative analysis, the study aims to construct a meaningful dialogue between these concepts and explore their potential application for fostering spiritual formation within Christian communities in Indonesia, particularly those embedded in Javanese cultural contexts. Furthermore, it discusses the attendant theological challenges and opportunities that emerge from this integrative process, with the ultimate goal of contributing to a biblically faithful and culturally resonant expression of Christian faith.

This study is situated within the framework of contextual theology, as articulated by scholars such as Goheen (2014) and De Vries (2021). Kabongo's (2021:31–55) analysis of faithful contextualisation emphasises the necessity of balancing cultural relevance with theological integrity. Recent contextualisation efforts in Indonesian theology (Chia 2024:76–98) emphasise the integration of indigenous spiritual concepts with Christian truth in ways that are both faithful to the gospel and responsive to local cultural realities.

## Methodology

Goheen (2014:264–265) identifies the core question for mission and evangelism as how the Gospel relates to new cultural contexts and what constitutes faithful contextualisation. Although contextualisation is key to making the Gospel message relevant in fulfilling the Great Commission, Goheen (2014:264–265) argues that the fundamental challenge is not simply the act of contextualisation itself but rather how to assess the fidelity (faithfulness) of that process. To address this challenge, this article uses Goheen's model of faithful contextualisation, which is based on three core principles. Firstly, the church operates at the intersection of the universally applicable Gospel message and the local culture, which demands that the Gospel be embodied tangibly within those cultural nuances. Secondly, the church's primary commitment must remain to the Gospel and its narrative as an eternal truth that transcends any specific culture. Thirdly, communicating the Gospel requires an ongoing process of adaptation (contextualisation) through cross-confessional, cultural and historical dialogue, ultimately seeking a critical balance between maintaining biblical fidelity and ensuring local cultural relevance (Goheen 2014:288–293). However, Goheen (2014:268–269) warns that contextualisation has two dangerous pitfalls that can 'imprison' the Gospel. The first danger is ethnocentrism: imposing one culture's interpretation as a universal authority for all others. The second danger is its opposite, relativism: the belief that all

cultural interpretations are equally valid, thereby removing any basis for biblical critique. Goheen (2014:268–269) asserts that this relativism inevitably leads to syncretism, where the Gospel becomes diluted by local beliefs in an overzealous attempt to be culturally relevant.

To operationalise Goheen's framework of achieving contextual relevance without falling into ethnocentrism or syncretism, this research employs a Gospel-centred, dialogical-critical inculturation method. The process begins with Biblical Analysis, establishing an authoritative standard by extracting the transcultural principle of *dāvaq* (Ps 63:9) – a dependent intimacy that maintains the Creator-creature distinction. This is paired with a Cultural Analysis that critically appraises the Javanese mystical concept of *Manunggaling Kawula Gusti* as a 'locus' of spiritual desire. In the pivotal inculturation stage, the *dāvaq* principle acts as a hermeneutical filter in a non-syncretic dialogue, serving to affirm the quest for unity in *Manunggaling* while correcting and transforming its biblically incongruent elements (e.g. pantheistic fusion). The Application and Transformation stage concludes the process, synthesising the findings to formulate an authentic theological perspective that is both faithful to biblical truth and empowering to Javanese local wisdom. Finally, the Application and Transformation stage synthesises the findings with the ultimate goal of formulating an authentic theological perspective that, on one hand, maintains fidelity to biblical truth and, on the other hand, respectfully affirms and empowers the intrinsic values of local Javanese wisdom.

## Discussion and result

### *Manunggaling Kawula Gusti* in Javanese culture

In the broader philosophical tradition tracing from Plotinus through later Neoplatonism (Armstrong 1967:202–230), the idea of union with the Divine through mystical experience emerged as a central preoccupation. This philosophical background provides an illuminating point of comparison for understanding the Javanese conception of *manunggal* as a mode of mystical unity that integrates metaphysical insight with ethical praxis.

*Manunggaling Kawula Gusti* constitutes a foundational tenet of Javanese spiritual and philosophical thought, articulating a paradigm for understanding the relationship between humanity and the Divine. This concept emphasises the necessity of aligning human life with divinely ordained values inherited from ancestral tradition (Simuh 2016:300). A departure from these values is believed to result in spiritual and social disharmony, observable in the neglect of ritual practices and the violation of communal norms. Etymologically, the phrase derives from three Javanese terms: *manunggal* [to unite], *kawula* [the servant or human being] and *gusti* [the Lord or Supreme Being] (Endraswara 2018:30–50). In the broader philosophical tradition tracing from Plotinus through later Neoplatonism (Armstrong 1967:202–230), the idea of

union with the Divine through mystical experience emerged as a central preoccupation. This philosophical background provides an illuminating point of comparison for understanding the Javanese conception of *manunggal* as a mode of mystical unity that integrates metaphysical insight with ethical praxis. It thus articulates a doctrine of mystical union, wherein the individual achieves spiritual equilibrium through a life characterised by reverence and moral responsibility. This pursuit of balance is not an end in itself but is intrinsically directed towards the cultivation of social harmony. The philosophy insists that all human action must be virtuous, predicated on the fundamental ontological principle that all existence emanates from and returns to God (Suwito 2010). Critically, an interpretation of *Manunggaling Kawula Gusti* as a solely individualistic mystical experience is reductive. The concept encompasses a robust socio-cultural dimension, functioning as a vital mechanism for preserving communal ethics and identity (Mulder 2005: esp. pp. 23–45, 78–96). The philosophy insists that all human action must be virtuous, predicated on the fundamental ontological principle that all existence emanates from and returns to God (Suwito 2010). As Suwito (2010:48–76) notes, this conviction shapes a comprehensive moral vision in which every aspect of life is ordered toward harmony with the divine source of being, so that ethics, ritual and social relations are all grounded in this ontological orientation.

Through its internalisation and practice, Javanese society collectively reinforces principles of harmony, justice and equilibrium within its social structures, thereby strengthening communal solidarity. Yusuf (2015:22–48) examination of Javanese spiritual practice reveals how communal ceremonies reinforce both individual spiritual aspiration and social cohesion, demonstrating that *Manunggaling Kawula Gusti* functions not merely as private mysticism but as a collective spiritual framework that sustains community identity and ethical order. The actualisation of this principle is often mediated through traditional rituals. Led by spiritual elders, these ceremonies are designed to fortify the spiritual connection between the individual and the Divine, as well as the bonds within the community itself. Practices such as customary ceremonies [*upacara adat*], ritual offerings [*sesaji*] and communal prayers are not merely symbolic; they are imbued with deep spiritual significance, with divine harmony at their core (Beatty 1999:78). As with analogous concepts across the Indonesian archipelago, *Manunggaling Kawula Gusti* serves a dual purpose: it fosters spiritual proximity to the Divine while simultaneously reinforcing social cohesion. It provides an ethical framework that encourages a life of wisdom, mutual respect and harmonious relations with both the human and natural worlds (Koentjaraningrat 1985:178).

Consequently, it represents a collective, value-driven response to existence aimed at establishing a harmonious social order. In the contemporary era, *Manunggaling Kawula Gusti* demonstrates the resilience of Javanese culture in the face of modernisation and globalisation. While certain expressions

have undergone adaptation, the core essence of the concept – as a principle that underpins both spiritual and social relationships – endures (Woodward 2011). It remains an integral component of Javanese cultural identity, illustrating a dynamic integration of tradition and modernity in addressing present-day challenges.

### The meaning of *dāvaq* in Psalm 63:9

The profound meaning of Psalm 63:8 hinges on the first of two key verbs, *dāvaq* [דָּבַק]. Rendered in the perfect tense, this verb emphasises the psalmist's active volition. Its meaning 'to cling', 'to hold fast' or 'to be joined inseparably' (Brown et al. 1907:179) is theologically significant, as it is firmly rooted in covenantal discourse. The second key verb, *tāmakh* [תָּמַךְ], 'to uphold', 'to sustain', or 'to support', appears in parallel construction when the psalmist declares: "My soul clings to You; Your right hand upholds me." This dual-verb structure creates a dynamic theological statement where in the human act of persistent devotion [*dāvaq*] is met and sustained by God's protective power [*tāmakh*], expressing the reciprocal nature of the covenantal relationship and the mutual engagement between worshipper and God. This terminology directly corresponds to the oaths of allegiance characteristic of suzerain–vassal treaties in the Ancient Near East (Weinfeld 1972:2–44). Consequently, *dāvaq* connotes both fidelity to the covenant and a deep personal attachment to God. Mowinckel's (2004:43–68) seminal analysis of Psalm 63 further demonstrates how the psalm functions as a liturgical expression of Israel's covenant relationship with Yahweh, so that the psalmist's 'clinging' is best understood as an act of loyal worship within the gathered community rather than as solitary mystical absorption.

This is the same verb used to articulate the inseparable marriage bond (Gn 2:24), Israel's required absolute loyalty to God (e.g. Dt 10:20; 13:4) and Ruth's steadfast devotion to Naomi (Rt 1:14). This usage reflects the promissory language of oaths found in Ancient Near Eastern suzerain–vassal treaties.

Rooted in covenantal theology, this term articulates a commitment that is both absolute and inseparable. Its theological weight is demonstrated in its application to the marriage union (Gn 2:24), Israel's required fealty to God (Dt 10:20; 13:4) and Ruth's unyielding loyalty to Naomi (Rt 1:14). This terminology directly corresponds to the oaths of allegiance characteristic of suzerain–vassal treaties in the Ancient Near East (Weinfeld 1972:2–44). Consequently, *dāvaq* connotes both fidelity to the covenant and a deep personal attachment to God.

Yet, this active human initiative is immediately qualified as being dependent upon and made possible by a divine action, which is captured by the second verb, *tāmakh* [תָּמַךְ], signifying 'to uphold', 'to sustain' or 'to hold fast'. (Brown et al. 1907:1079). This establishes a synergistic dynamic: the psalmist's soul is enabled to actively 'cling' [*dāvaq*] only by

virtue of God's mighty right hand, which itself symbolises divine intervention and sustenance. This interaction illustrates that the human will to obey is itself sustained and upheld by divine grace.

### Theological dynamics: Covenant faithfulness and sustained union

The theology of Psalm 63:9 defines a relational dynamic centred on covenantal fidelity rather than ontological fusion. The psalmist's active 'clinging' [*dāvaq*] – an ongoing pursuit (Dt 11:22) motivated by longing (v. 1) and God's chesed (v. 3) – is theologically enabled by God's sustaining power. The 'right hand' (Ex 15:6) affirms that the human capacity for faith is a divine gift, not a human achievement. Therefore, this 'Sustained Union' is a dynamic in which God's faithfulness actively precedes and enables the human response of faithfulness. This framework crucially rejects any interpretation of works-based righteousness, as the believer's faith is perpetually a dependent response to God's sustaining grace.

### Origin and physical meaning in the Ancient Near Eastern

Lexically, the root *dāvaq* originated with a strongly concrete, physical meaning in Semitic languages, primarily denoting 'to cling, stick to, or adhere' (Holladay 1988:65). This is evident in mundane contexts, such as one object being glued to another. This fundamental, tangible sense forms the basis for its later metaphorical and theological applications. The concept's semantic development is further illuminated by its use in ancient Mesopotamian literature, where a similar term described a subordinate's loyalty to a king or deity, providing a broader cultural context for its usage in biblical Hebrew (Koehler, Baumgartner & Stamm 1994:206).

### *Dāvaq* in social and covenantal relationships

The root undergoes a critical semantic shift from denoting physical adhesion to defining exclusive covenant bonds, as paradigmatically established in the marital union of Genesis 2:24, which constitutes a 'unitive covenant' (David 2021:45). This relational sense, also evident in Ruth's loyal clinging to Naomi (Rt 1:14), finds its theological apex in Deuteronomy, where 'clinging to the LORD' emerges as the central response required of Israel, integrating 'love, fear, service, and obedience' into a single command of exclusive loyalty (Hubbard 1988:102–104; McConville 2002:189–195). This commitment is fundamentally exclusive, demanding a rejection of all other gods and representing a whole-personed orientation towards Yahweh that Deuteronomy frames as the very essence of life (Park 2021:156).

### Lived experiences of *Manunggaling Kawula Gusti* in Javanese Christian spirituality

The interview with Mr. Andreas Nyawiji provides a concrete case study for analysing the theological synthesis facilitated

by the Inculturative Approach. His reflections demonstrate a clear hermeneutical synthesis; he asserts that 'union with God means union with Lord Jesus, because He is the perfect embodiment of *Gusti* [the Divine]', thereby interpreting the Javanese concept of the Divine through a definitive Christocentric lens. This foundational move anchors the theology in the local culture while avoiding doctrinal syncretism. Furthermore, the data reveal a significant ontological synthesis. Mr. Nyawiji reframes the traditional Javanese goal of *manunggaling kawula gusti*, shifting it from a metaphysical dissolution of the self to an ethical, relational union, as evidenced by his statements that 'being united with God is not merely a mystical experience, but a way of living in love' and 'God remains God, and we remain human'. This underscores a transformation towards a covenantal model of discipleship. His methodological stance, summarised in the phrase 'I do not mix doctrines indiscriminately; I build bridges', illustrates the conscious, critical engagement that is central to the methodological synthesis of this approach. Finally, his integration of indigenous practices like *nyepi* [silence] and *tapa* [ascetic reflection], while prioritising that 'love in action is most crucial', exemplifies a practical synthesis that sanctifies local spiritual disciplines by orienting them towards the core Christian ethic of agape love. This case study validates the Inculturative Approach as a viable method for generating a contextual theology that is both authentically Javanese and robustly Christian.

### Analysis of Monistic Interpretation in Javanese spirituality: A case study of Mr. Njontdro Wasesa Wanusi

The interview with Mr. Njontdro Wasesa Wanusi presents a classical monistic interpretation of *Manunggaling Kawula Gusti* that serves as a crucial reference point for contextual theological discourse. His explanation reveals three fundamental aspects of traditional Javanese spirituality that require careful theological engagement. Firstly, the concept of ontological dissolution is central to his understanding, as evidenced by his statement that union with God 'means to dissolve – *sirna ing kalbu* – until there is no longer an "I", no longer a "*Gusti*"; only a single, undivided consciousness remains'. This perspective challenges Christian theological frameworks that maintain the eternal distinction between Creator and creature. Secondly, his emphasis on divine immanence, particularly through his reference to Syekh Siti Jenar's teaching that 'God is not external, but dwells within' and the Javanese maxim '*Gusti ana ing sajroning awakmu dhewe*' [God is within your very self], presents a pantheistic leaning that contrasts with Christian teachings about God's transcendence. Thirdly, his description of the spiritual path highlights systematic self-effort through '*laku* – a disciplined path of detachment [*sepi ing pamrih*], through meditation [*samadi*], asceticism [*tapa*]', which stands in tension with the Christian emphasis on divine grace. Mr. Njontdro's assertion that '*Manunggaling Kawula Gusti* is not about becoming God, but about realising that we have always been in God, and God within us – not two, but one'

encapsulates the essential monistic character of this traditional interpretation, providing a clear point of comparison for developing a contextual Christian theology that respects Javanese spiritual aspirations while maintaining theological integrity.

### **Analysis of ethical-theistic interpretation in Javanese spirituality: A case study of Mr. Tri Sanyoto**

The interview with Mr. Tri Sanyoto, a Javanese cultural scholar, presents a distinctly ethical-theistic interpretation of *Manunggaling Kawula Gusti* that offers a crucial mediating perspective between monistic mysticism and Christian theology. His explanation emphasises three key aspects that facilitate meaningful dialogue with Christian thought. Firstly, he clearly delineates the nature of union as non-ontological, stating that ‘this union is not physical or literal in nature’ but rather is ‘expressed through one’s actions, attitudes, and daily conduct that reflect divine attributes’. This ethical interpretation directly contrasts with Mr. Njontdro’s monistic view of dissolution while complementing Mr. Andreas’s emphasis on Christ-like living. Secondly, his conceptualisation of the human–divine relationship maintains both distinction and connection, noting that ‘we are regarded as parts of the Divine’ yet clarifying that union ‘does not imply becoming God, but rather acting in ways that reflect God’s character’.

This preserves the Creator-creature distinction essential to Christian theology while affirming meaningful participation in divine nature. Thirdly, his practical criterion for genuine union – ‘If your life has become a light for others, that is the sign that you have become one with God’ – provides a tangible ethical framework that resonates strongly with Jesus’s teaching in Matthew 5:16 about letting one’s light shine before others. Mr. Tri’s conclusion that *Manunggaling Kawula Gusti* essentially means ‘consciously shaping one’s life conduct to align with God’s character’ provides a robust foundation for developing a contextual Christian spirituality that honours Javanese wisdom while maintaining theological coherence, positioning this interpretation as particularly conducive to the inculturative approach being developed in this study.

### **Manunggaling Kawula Gusti in dialogue with the Biblical concept of *Dāvaq***

This comparison has significant implications for contextualising Christianity in Java. Following De Vries’s (2021:1–8) principle of distinguishing universal truth from cultural form, the biblical concept of *dāvaq* [clinging] resonates with the Javanese longing for divine connection. However, *dāvaq* critically redirects this longing: instead of the ontological fusion of *Manunggaling* where the self dissolves, it posits a covenantal relationship where the self is instead fulfilled and sustained by grace. As Sutarman (2017:32) suggests, *Manunggaling Kawula Gusti* can serve as a cultural bridge, provided this Javanese aspiration for unity is reframed by the psalmist’s posture of active, exclusive devotion. This communion also

demands holiness (Calvin 1960, Inst. III.vi.2:805). The ethical imperative embedded in *dāvaq* – rooted in Deuteronomic commands for exclusive loyalty – requires rejecting competing spiritual allegiances (idolatry) and manifesting in righteous living (cf. Ps. 63:11). Therefore, while linguistic overlaps in the spiritual pursuit exist, the theological content of the psalmist’s experience remains distinctly theocentric, ethically transformative and grace anchored.

### **Theological implications for contextualising Faith in Javanese culture**

Applying Goheen’s (2014:264–265) framework of critical contextualisation, which requires evaluating cultural forms like *Manunggaling Kawula Gusti* through Scripture rather than mere adoption, allows this Javanese ideal to be reframed. The biblical model of Psalm 63:9 redirects the aspiration within *Manunggaling Kawula Gusti* away from a paradigm of ontological absorption (the dissolution of the self) and towards a dynamic of devotional union (the psalmist’s ‘clinging’), which is actively pursued by the believer yet graciously sustained by God. This reframing is crucial because it preserves the Creator-creature distinction and upholds the ethical imperatives of covenant faithfulness. As Sutarman (2017:33–36) argues, this cultural bridge allows the Javanese longing for *manunggal* [union] to find its fulfilment not in self-dissolution, but in the transformative, sustained relationship depicted by the psalmist, thereby anchoring the Javanese spiritual quest in biblically faithful devotion. This reframing is crucial because it preserves the Creator-creature distinction and upholds the ethical imperatives of covenant faithfulness. Sanders (2016:102–125) articulates how trinitarian theology enriches understanding of the divine-human relationship beyond purely mystical categories, grounding union with God in the differentiated yet inseparable work of Father, Son and Spirit rather than in an undifferentiated absorption into the divine.

### **Dialogue between theology and culture**

To build an authentic contextual theology, a balanced integration of theological fidelity and cultural relevance is required – an approach that is both faithful to the Gospel and relevant to the cultural context (Bosch 1991:420).

Within this framework, the Javanese concept of *Manunggaling Kawula Gusti* can be seen as an expression of the Javanese ‘spiritual longing’ for the Divine (Whiteman 1997), a longing that finds its fulfilment in the Gospel.

However, to avoid falling into syncretism, this yearning for mystical union and existential merger must be redirected and transformed by the biblical understanding of communion with Christ, which is dynamic, personal and yields ethical transformation and the fruit of the Spirit within the community (Gl 5:22–23). Thus, through a deep, dialogical approach, the Church can build a constructive bridge that allows it to be deeply rooted in the local culture without losing Gospel integrity (Guder 2000:21) while also enriching the entire body of Christ’s understanding of true communion with God.

## The function of *Manunggaling Kawula Gusti* in Javanese society: A socio-spiritual perspective

*Manunggaling Kawula Gusti*, the Javanese mystical ideal of the union between the servant and the Lord, represents a spiritual peak achieved through ascetic discipline, aiming to dissolve the boundary between human and God – a concept aligned with Sufi and Hindu notions of ontological unity (Mulder 2005:78; Simuh 2016:300). Although often described as a transcendent and transformative consciousness where the self is realised as a divine expression (Magnis-Suseno 2003:56), this pursuit also embodies a profound ethical dimension, advocating self-mastery, detachment and attunement to the divine will through practices like *eling lan waspada* (mindfulness and vigilance) to counter worldly temptations (Soebardi 1975:134; Zoetmulder 1995:201). Rooted in the belief that ‘God is within the human self’ (Sunardi 2004:98), this spirituality affirms divine immanence, framing union not as escapism but as an ethically grounded way of life that harmonises mystical aspiration with moral responsibility. In the contemporary era, *Manunggaling Kawula Gusti* demonstrates the resilience of Javanese culture in the face of modernisation and globalisation. It remains an integral component of Javanese cultural identity, illustrating a dynamic integration of tradition and modernity in addressing present-day challenges (Woodward 2011). Recent Indonesian scholarship (Wibowo 2017:108–138) on Javanese spirituality contextualises this local wisdom within contemporary theological discourse, showing how *Manunggaling Kawula Gusti* can function as a resource for reimagining Christian spirituality in Indonesia without losing its Javanese distinctiveness.

As an integral aspect of the Javanese philosophy of life, *Manunggaling Kawula Gusti* shapes attitudes such as *nrimo* [acceptance], *rukun* [social harmony] and inner-outer balance (Koentjaraningrat 1985:178) while also inspiring art forms and rituals – such as Arjuna’s spiritual journey in *wayang* (Keeler 1987:112) and the recognition of the divine presence in the *slametan* (Woodward 2011:65). In modern theological discourse, this concept has emerged as a fertile point of dialogue with Christian spirituality, with Magnis-Suseno (2003) drawing parallels with the mysticism of St. John of the Cross. The incarnational, contextual theological approach allows *Manunggaling Kawula Gusti* to function as a cultural medium to articulate the divine-human relationship without eroding the uniqueness of Javanese identity (Sutarman 2017:36), an effort that is in line with the Javanese Catholic Church, which incorporates local symbols such as the title *Gusti Allah* into the liturgy (Pamungkas et al., 2023).

## Lexical, historical and theological analysis of *dāvaq* in comparison to *Manunggaling Kawula Gusti*

Lexically, the root *dāvaq* in Semitic languages originally denotes a concrete physical action: ‘to cling, to stick to, to

adhere’ (Holladay 1988:65). This primary sense, as seen in mundane contexts such as two objects bound by glue, serves as the semantic foundation upon which metaphorical and theological meanings developed.

Historically, ancient Mesopotamian texts employed similar concepts to express the loyalty of a vassal to a king or deity (Koehler et al. 1994:206). This background provided fertile ground for the Hebrew Bible’s appropriation of *dāvaq* to signify covenantal fidelity, intimate relational attachment and profound spiritual union with God (Harris, Archer & Waltke 1980).

Theologically, a critical distinction exists between the biblical and Javanese concepts of union with God. The word *dāvaq* in Psalm 63:9 [my soul clings] describes a covenantal and volitional union, grounded in God’s steadfast love (*hesed*) and sustained by divine initiative. This model fundamentally maintains the Creator-creature distinction through a relationship of loyalty and dependence, not a fusion of the self. Conversely, the Javanese mystical concept of *Manunggaling Kawula Gusti* often envisions an ontological or monistic unification, where the individual identity is absorbed or fused into the divine essence (Andrianto 2023:116–126). Although the language of ‘clinging’ [*dāvaq*] may resonate strongly with Javanese spiritual intuition, its inherent covenantal nature functions as a crucial theological safeguard against syncretism. Therefore, faithful contextualisation must affirm the profound intimacy depicted in the psalm while simultaneously drawing a clear distinction between covenantal fidelity (which preserves personal identity) and mystical absorption (which dissolves it).

## A comparative analysis of *Manunggaling Kawula Gusti* and the Christian concept of union with God in Psalm 63:8

The Javanese mystical concept of *Manunggaling Kawula Gusti* (the Union of Servant and Lord) and the Christian expression of communion with God in Psalm 63:8 (‘My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me’) reveal fundamental differences across ontological, epistemological, ethical and theological dimensions, reflecting their distinct foundational worldviews.

### Ontological dimension: The nature of being and union

Ontologically, *Manunggaling Kawula Gusti* represents a monistic framework where the ultimate goal is the dissolution of the self [*kawula*] into the Divine [*Gusti*], obliterating the Creator-creature distinction as the soul realises its essential identity with the Absolute (Simuh 2016:300). In contrast, the biblical concept in Psalm 63:8, expressed through the Hebrew verb *dāvaq* [to cling], preserves the Creator-creature distinction and presents union as relational and covenantal rather than ontological. Here, the self is not dissolved but fulfilled through a dependent relationship with a God who actively ‘upholds’ [*tāmak*] the individual (Brueggemann 1997:49).

## Epistemological dimension: The way of knowing and realising union

Epistemologically, *Manunggaling Kawula Gusti* emphasises mystical experience and meditative absorption attained through introspective contemplation and ascetic practices [*laku*], aiming for self-effacement and enlightenment concerning one's divine nature (Stange 1984:112). Conversely, the biblical concept reflects knowledge of God mediated through His self-revelation in Scripture and covenant history. The psalmist's desire to cling [*dāvaq*] arises as a response to God's prior revelation: 'I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory' (Ps 63:2). Thus, biblical epistemology is covenantal and revelatory rather than introspective (Mays 1994:212).

## Ethical dimension: The moral and social outcome of union

Ethically, *Manunggaling Kawula Gusti* emphasises achieving inner harmony and detachment [*ikhlas*], where realising unity with the Divine leads to transcending worldly dualities and accepting one's place in the cosmic order, with social harmony emerging as a byproduct (Mulder 2005:89). In contrast, *dāvaq* in Psalm 63:8 calls for active loyalty, covenantal obedience and exclusive devotion expressed through engaged worship and moral living (Ps 63:9–11). This aligns with the biblical narrative of responding to God's steadfast love [*hesed*] through ethical action and public trust in God's justice.

## Theological dimension: The agency and mechanism of union

In *Manunggaling Kawula Gusti*, union is primarily human-driven – an attainment through disciplined spiritual practice and esoteric knowledge [*ngelmu*], often directed towards an impersonal absolute (Woodward 2011:76).

Conversely, Psalm 63:8 presents a relationship divinely initiated and sustained, where human clinging is dependent on God's upholding action. The agency is asymmetrically synergistic: divine grace precedes and enables human response, establishing a personal relationship with a transcendent God who actively sustains the believer.

Through these four dimensions, this analysis demonstrates that while both concepts seek profound divine connection, *Manunggaling Kawula Gusti* pursues ontological unity through spiritual attainment, whereas Psalm 63:8 describes a covenantal relationship sustained by divine grace – distinctions essential for authentic theological contextualisation.

## Contextualising *Manunggaling Kawula Gusti* in light of Psalm 63: A theologically faithful bridging approach

A contextual approach that remains faithful to biblical theology requires both an empathetic recognition of local

spiritual aspirations and a careful articulation of the Gospel message without compromising its core. The Javanese mystical concept of *Manunggaling Kawula Gusti* – the 'union of the servant and the Lord' – offers a rich *bridging concept* for communicating the biblical vision of communion with God as expressed in Psalm 63.

## Affirmation: Recognising and honouring deep spiritual longings

The first step is to acknowledge that the longing for *manunggal* [union] with the Divine reflects a profound and noble aspiration – a *preparatio evangelica* or preparation for the Gospel (Bosch 1991:419–20). The psalmist's cry, 'My soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you' (Ps 63:2, NIV), mirrors the Javanese mystical tradition's deep yearning for intimacy, peace and perfect harmony with the Creator. This recognition serves as a bridge rather than a barrier, affirming that such a longing ultimately finds its true fulfilment in God's self-revelation.

## Contrast: Offering a Biblical understanding of union

The Gospel does not dismiss this aspiration but reframes it with a more complete and hopeful vision. *Manunggaling Kawula Gusti* often carries a monistic undertone, suggesting an ontological dissolution of the self into the Divine (Woodward 2011), whereas Psalm 63:8 presents the concept of *dāvaq* – 'my soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me'. Here, union is covenantal, relational and asymmetrical: it is a responsive clinging that is made possible and sustained by divine grace rather than mystical attainment (Mays 1994).

## Fulfilment in Christ: The living way

The relational union described in Psalm 63 reaches its ultimate fulfilment in Jesus Christ. The greatest barrier to union with God is not a lack of spiritual discipline, but sin, which separates humanity from its Creator (Is 59:2).

In the incarnation, 'the Word became flesh' (Jn 1:14), God [*Gusti*] became man [*kawula*], and through his death and resurrection, the dividing wall was broken down (Eph 2:14–16). True union is now granted through faith in Christ, as Paul declares: 'Whoever is united [*kollaō*] with the Lord is one with him in spirit' (1 Cor 6:17). True union is now granted through faith in Christ, as Paul declares: 'Whoever is united [*kollaō*] with the Lord is one with him in spirit' (1 Cor 6:17). This is a union received by grace, not achieved by human striving. In classical Greek lexicography (Liddell & Scott 1996:957–959), *kollaō* fundamentally denotes adhesion and firm attachment, providing the semantic foundation for theological appropriation. The Greek term *kollaō* (κολλάω), as analysed in BDAG (Bauer et al. 2000:485–487), indicates a strong sense of adhesion and union, while the TDNT entry (Kittel & Bromiley 1965:3:821–828) traces its usage from classical Greek through early Christian literature, showing its progressive theological significance as a term for covenantal attachment to Christ rather than ontological absorption.

## Application: A life transformed by communion

Union with Christ entails profound ethical implications. Psalm 63 reveals that the soul that clings to God finds a deeper satisfaction than in worldly pleasures (v. 6), resulting in praise, joy and trust in God's providence (vv. 8–9). Moreover, this union is not merely individual but communal: it forms a new fellowship (the church) in which social harmony [*rukun*] is restored because all members are bound to the same Christ (Mulder 2005). Stott's (1995:63–89) pastoral theology demonstrates how the doctrine of union with God in Christ provides the theological foundation for authentic Christian discipleship, in which believers embody this union through a life of daily obedience, love and cross-shaped service.

## Conclusion

This study elucidates that while *Manunggaling Kawula Gusti* and the Christian doctrine of *Union With God* converge in their aspiration for transformative union with the Divine, their theological trajectories remain fundamentally distinct. The former embodies a monistic and anthropocentric paradigm wherein mystical union often entails the dissolution of personal identity through ascetic praxis, whereas the latter – anchored in Psalm 63:8 – articulates a covenantal and theocentric union sustained by divine grace rather than human attainment. By engaging the Javanese mystical ethos without subsuming it, this framework offers a missiological bridge: affirming the indigenous longing for transcendence while reorienting it towards a Christocentric fellowship that preserves personhood and fosters a life of humility, wisdom and communion with the living God.

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### CRedit authorship contribution

Lilis Setyarini: Conceptualisation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Resources, Writing – original draft. Christian M. Boka: Conceptualisation, Supervision, Writing – review & editing. Rumiya Rumiya: Data curation, Writing – review & editing. Daniel A. Wibowo: Data curation, Writing – review & editing. All authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication and take responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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## Data availability

The authors declare that all data that support this research article and findings are available in the article and its references.

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