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# The Proof of the Highest Being: An Analysis of John Duns Scotus' Thought in the Context of the Beliefs of the *Lamaholot* People

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**Abstract:** This research focused on proving God through a dialogue from two different perspectives. One discussed God from the perspective of Medieval Theology, specifically that of John Duns Scotus. The other explored God from the perspective of the local beliefs of the Lamaholot people of East Nusa Tenggara (NTT), Indonesia. Both addressed the same Divine Being or God as believed in a religion, though the expressions differed. According to Duns Scotus, God is a God of love, showing His love through the incarnation of the Son. The incarnation was how God manifested Himself and gave His total love to His creation. In the local beliefs of the *Lamaholot* people, God was referred to as the Supreme Being, the highest entity to be revered. The God in question was also a God of love, showing His love by creating the universe, humans, and the highest moral order. The dialogue that emerged between faith and culture in this study suggested that the proof of God within the local beliefs of the Lamaholot people was expressed through the cosmic marriage between Lera Wulan and Tana Ekan. This was evidenced by the new life that appeared on earth, interpreted as an act of salvation for human life. In Duns Scotus' thought, the proof of God was understood within the framework of God's infinite love given to His creation, where God appeared and gave Himself completely to creation through Jesus Christ.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Human life is always marked by experiences of ups and downs, joy and suffering, life and death (Stevanus, 2019). In other words, human life is extremely complicated and complex, filled with various life challenges. The dialogue between faith and culture is a discipline that never ends. Claims of truth or teachings about faith from a religious tradition become the foundation of faith for humanity. Teachings about faith never change from the time of the ancestors to the present. However, the practice of faith or the way faith is lived is interpreted in new ways by people according to the context and spirit of the times (Lina, Dose, & Dhogo, 2023; Borgias, 2020; Firmanto & Setiyaningtiyas, 2017).

The belief traditions of a local culture teach the same principles of living in faith (Barathi, 2024). These teachings are often passed down in the form of wisdom, sometimes conveyed orally. The teachings are limited to the community of the tribe concerned and are not public knowledge for those who seek to know them (Donobakti, 2024).

Experts in religion and culture continuously debate or discuss these two fields. On one hand, religion originates from a cultural tradition lived by the ancestors in the past. On the other hand, religion distances itself from cultural practices that continue to evolve. Both believe in

the existence of a supreme entity that is revered. Religion calls it God, while local cultural traditions refer to it as the Supreme Being or the highest entity respected in daily life.

The concept of God or the Supreme Being as understood by the *Lamaholot* people is an entity that is highly respected. It is both the Father who rules the heavens, represented by the Sun and Moon (*Lera Wulan*), and the Mother who rules the Earth (*Tana Ekan*), who is close to human life (Kohl, 2009; Siri et al., 2024). Additionally, this Supreme Being is understood as the Creator, for everything on earth originates from this entity.

The Supreme Being is called the Creator because of the cosmic marriage between Lera Wulan and Tana Ekan, which gives birth to new life, including humans and the universe. This happens because Tana Ekan is seen as having a womb, or *beliwo* in the *Lamaholot* dialect (Bebe, 2018: 31). From this marriage, humans were born, and they are still known today as the *Lamaholot* people. Additionally, the universe was provided for humans to sustain their daily lives.

This belief originated as mythology in the time of the ancestors but remains a conviction for the *Lamaholot* people today. They believe in a supreme reality that encompasses everything and from which everything originates. This reality is called the Supreme Being or, in religious terms, God (Kebingin & Martasudjita, 2022).

In their daily lives, in addition to believing in God, the *Lamaholot* people practice rituals as a way to honor this supreme reality. One such ritual is the *Tuno Manuk* ritual, which expresses human reverence for the Supreme Being who has given life to humans and blessed them abundantly (Fernandesz, 2020). Beyond rituals, another way to honor this supreme reality is by respecting the universe, caring for it, and not destroying it (Kenoba & Bala, 2021). Moreover, the *Lamaholot* people strictly practice moral teachings passed down by the Supreme Being, such as living truthfully, being honest, loyal, obedient to parents, respectful of elders, and avoiding deceit and lies (Lemba et al., 2021).

These forms of cultural revivalism not only teach people to remember and love their own culture but also impart spiritual values drawn from it (Aileen & Kewuel, 2022). This leads the *Lamaholot* people to a deeper understanding of the Divine or God. While God has long been understood in the form of cosmological relational harmony between humans and nature, a newer relationship has emerged—between humans and God as understood in the Catholic faith.

In *Lamaholot* belief, the concept of God as the Supreme Being is relational and cosmological. For John Duns Scotus, God is full of love, giving His love completely to creation. God's total love for creation is marked by the gift of the Son through the incarnation (Scotus, 2017). There, God gave Himself infinitely and freely to humanity. This divine love is now manifested in human life through acts of mutual love, service motivated by love, generosity, humility, and more.

The revelation of God through these two paradigms will be explored in this research. Both discuss the Divine using the term "love," which is given by the highest entity or God to creation. The dialogue between faith and culture in this study aims to uncover the similarities and differences between the two. Therefore, this research poses two guiding questions: 1) What are the similarities in the concept of God between John Duns Scotus' thought and the *Lamaholot* people's beliefs? 2) How do the two views differ in their understanding of salvation and the Divine for creation?

#### **METHOD**

This research uses a comparative study approach. The study refers to research conducted to explain and gain a better understanding of the cause-and-effect process by analyzing the factors that contribute to a particular phenomenon. Furthermore, the comparative study aims to compare two or more similar variables to identify their similarities and differences (Pickvance, 2005; Ragin, 2014). The first variable to be examined is the concept of God according to John Duns Scotus, and the second variable is the concept of the Supreme Being according to the *Lamaholot* people. This research will engage in a dialogue on the proof of the Divine or God from both Eastern and Western perspectives, identifying their similarities and differences. The researcher will gather data through a literature review of primary and secondary sources discussing the concept of God and the Supreme Being. The collected data will then be analyzed to identify the similarities and differences between the two concepts.

#### **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

John Duns Scotus was a Franciscan priest from the Medieval period. He was born in Scotland, specifically in Maxton, Roxburgh. Some scholars suggest that Scotus was born between 1265 and 1266. In 1278, he entered seminary to become a candidate for the Catholic priesthood. He was ordained in 1291 and began his academic career at various universities, including Paris, Oxford in England, and the Franciscan Monastery in Cologne. He passed away in 1308 in Cologne (Copleston, 1993: 476–477).

One of the characteristics of Medieval philosophy and theology is the question of how humans can know God or how the knowledge of God can be proven. For Medieval thinkers, it was believed that humans could know God, which is equivalent to proving God's existence (Gracia, 2002: 6). According to Scotus, humans naturally possess knowledge of God. The knowledge of God can be proven through the positive way or *via positiva*, by applying the real unity of *esse* and *essentia* in both God and creation. Although they are not formally the same, they imply each other. Concrete individuals can participate and partake as members of a common nature. Essence necessarily exists in these concrete individuals. However, the uniqueness of the individual is made possible by their individual essence, where concrete individuals contain two entities (primary and secondary) that are formally distinct (Cross, 2013: 173–175).

There are five proofs by Scotus that humans naturally possess knowledge of God. First, knowledge of God is something possible for humans. Humans will naturally not cease to understand God incidentally through attributes such as goodness, wisdom, truth, and so on. Second, God can be understood naturally not only through a concept analogous to creation but through a univocal concept (similar or the same without determination) regarding Himself and

creation. Third, while journeying in the world, humans cannot know God in a particular and precise way. This is because the human intellect can naturally only know God through creation, which bears God's resemblance in a univocal or mimetic aspect. Fourth, humans can find a concept that aligns with God's essence. One of the concepts offered is the Infinite. This concept contains both perfection and simplicity, which humans can comprehend. Fifth, all concepts appropriate to God come from knowledge of the species of creation. This means the process of knowing is not sufficient with the mere presence of creation as an object; rather, the intellect requires the species of the created object to be understood (Kurniawan, 2022: 109–121).

In his works, Scotus uses the term *Ens Infinitum* (the Infinite Being) to denote the existence of God. For Scotus, God is an infinite intellect. This means that the infinite intellect exists in the one God, who knows everything in the most perfect way and is dependent on nothing except Himself. God is infinite will. This means that infinite will exists only in God, and the actor of this will is God, with the goal of this will being to love. God is the infinitely good. This means that in things that are good, there is something better, and there is nothing better than the infinitely good, which is God Himself. God is infinite power. Infinite power is the first cause of other effects. It cannot be limited but can control all possibilities.

God is infinite absoluteness. This means that all forms of perfection found in many different beings are more perfect than in one being, and if perfection can exist in several beings, then absolutely, God is the form of that perfection itself—there is no other perfection outside of God. God is necessity. This means that there is only one individual whose essence is necessary and at the same time infinite, and that is God Himself. God is omnipotent. The omnipotence of God can be demonstrated by creating or destroying all things. God's omnipotence exists only in God Himself (Kurniawan, 2022: 183–187).

The proof of God's existence through the use of the term *The Infinite* for Scotus serves as a means to understand God within the framework of revelation. Here, Scotus explains God in the concept of the Trinity and then draws the motif of incarnation as an act of God's perfect love (Rahadian, 2023, p. 110). God is love (*Deus Caritas Est*). As God, full of love, gives His love through His Son, Jesus Christ, who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn, and the most prominent in all creation (cf. Col. 1:15). God sent His Son into the world through the Virgin Mary, who appeared as a human and was like humanity, but different in terms of sin.

God incarnated Himself so that He could be known, understood, and comprehended by creation as the *One Who Is*. God's total love is expressed through the event of the cross endured by Jesus. There, God completely gave Himself so that His love could be revealed. This total act of love brings salvation to creation, where all of creation is saved through the body and blood of Christ crucified. God raised Christ from death on the cross as proof that He saves His creation. Not stopping there, when Christ ascended to heaven, He promised to give the Holy Spirit to creation, specifically, in this context, to the disciples of Jesus (cf. John 14:16-17). This is the form of the Infinite or the God full of love revealing Himself to creation.

The Highest Being, or in the *Lamaholot* dialect called *Lera-Wulan Tana-Ekan*, is another name for a pair of deities. *Lera* means Sun, *Wulan* means Moon, *Tana* means land or

village territory, *Ekan* means earth or surface of the land (Kohl, 2009, p. 107). *Lera-Wulan* literally refers to the rulers of the sky, consisting of the Sun and the Moon or the One who is far away, while *Tana-Ekan* refers to the rulers of the Earth, consisting of land or the surface of the earth, or the One who is close to humans. These two entities are believed by the *Lamaholot* people to be the rulers of everything, and everything that exists comes from them.

The Highest Being is believed by the *Lamaholot* people to be the universe. Bebe states that the Sun-Moon and Earth-Land are symbols of the cosmos, which are identified as the Divine (Bebe, 2018: 30). The Divine, who is far away as the Sun-Moon, comes to the Earth-Land to marry it, for it has a womb or what is called *Beliwo*. The result of this marriage then gives birth to the universe and everything within it, including humans. The cosmic symbols believed and used by the *Lamaholot* people in their customs and traditions are as follows (2018: 30–38):

Table 1. The Lamaholot Cosmic Symbol

Tuble 1: The Lamanotot Cosmic Symbol	
Lera-Wulan Tana-Ekan	Sun Moon Land Earth
Nuba nara	Altar keramat
Nobi rorok	Throne or seat of honor
Ekan matan pito	Seven-pointed pole
Hikun teti wanan lali-lein lai weran rae-uak	The main directions are east, west, north,
tukan wai matan	south, center as the axis
Ile nabe yadi woka nabe dewa	The mountain that gives birth or the hill
	that hatches
Buta mete walan mara tana tawan ekan gere	When the mud dries up, new earth
	emerges
Petun patun tawa lake wae	Colorful rainbow
Lewo ro pirin sina taka ro makok jawa	As Chinese plate t and Javanese bowl

The *Lamaholot* people perceive the immense power of these symbols, which not only provide order but also protect them from calamities. For example, the cardinal directions—east, west, north, south, and center—symbolize that there is a guardian at every corner of the village, ensuring that the center, referred to as the axis (where the people live), is protected from the unexpected. The directions are interpreted as a fortress or fence that plays a role in protecting the village or the community's dwelling place.

The union between *Lera-Wulan* and *Tana-Ekan* marks the beginning of new life for humans, animals, and plants. The universe provides everything humans need to meet their daily needs (Kenoba & Bala, 2021: 294). They can utilize nature for farming, hunting, gathering, and more. In addition to these activities, they balance their actions to avoid exploiting or damaging nature for their own benefit. Instead, they protect, care for, and preserve it, because nature is considered a personification of the Divine Being or the Supreme Entity itself.

The Supreme Entity, besides representing itself as the universe, also serves as the highest moral authority for the *Lamaholot* community (Lemba et al., 2021: 9). It teaches goodness, truth, honesty, love, brotherhood, and cooperation. These values are reflected in the daily life of the community, where they uphold love for one another. Furthermore, the value of cooperation is still upheld, such as in planting crops, harvesting, and performing traditional ceremonies in the ancestral houses. As inheritors of ancestral values, every year they hold

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traditional ceremonies to celebrate the harvest of crops like rice and corn. This ceremony signifies that the *Lamaholot* people highly value goodness, truth, and honesty in life (Bala, 2022: 57).

An example of the honesty they uphold is the prohibition of engaging in any other activities while a traditional ceremony is being performed. If this is violated, the individual will face severe consequences, such as an illness sent by the Supreme Entity. Such illnesses are often difficult to treat, either medically or traditionally. The value of goodness, for example, involves obeying all the commands contained in the *koda* or sacred words spoken by the community leader. This includes respecting *Lera-Wulan*, honoring parents, following the advice of elders and leaders, avoiding theft, refraining from harming others, and more (Ujan, 2012: 22–39).

The value of truth they uphold involves acting truthfully, speaking honestly, avoiding deceit, and living according to the teachings of the *koda*. The Supreme Entity has revealed all moral teachings to humanity through community leaders. Therefore, the people must follow these moral teachings in their daily lives. If these teachings are not adhered to, they will face consequences. These consequences, or curses, come as warnings, such as illness, sent not by the community leader but by *Lera-Wulan* itself. In this context, *Lera-Wulan* is the Highest Morality and also the one who curses those who violate the agreed-upon rules.

The Supreme Entity is believed to be the origin of all creation. It is told that the creation began with the first humans, Adam and Eve, followed by Cain and Abel, all kinds of plants and animals, then mountains, rocks, water, wind, soil, and so on (Kohl, 2009: 89–97). Arndt's research mentions that *Lera-Wulan* is not only referred to as a god but also as the ancestor of humanity, who always watches over humans (Arndt, 2003a: 75–76). Here, *Lera-Wulan* acts as a father, embodying the masculine nature of the Sun and Moon, protecting their children, the *Lamaholot* people, from all dangers.

Lera-Wulan guarantees health and grants long life, as well as prosperity in the form of abundant harvests. Tana-Ekan acts as a mother, embodying a feminine nature, helping to sustain the lives of the Lamaholot people by providing fertility to the land so that the crops planted yield satisfying results. Additionally, Tana-Ekan plays a role in providing water, wind, heat, and rain to irrigate the land, ensuring that they do not face water shortages and supporting their farming activities.

The Supreme Entity is believed to be the creator, as it was through its creation that life on Earth began. It created everything and not only stopped at the act of creation but also granted true life to humanity. With this belief, the *Lamaholot* people do not merely regard the Supreme Entity as a myth but as a real and present force in human life, one that exists even today. The existence and presence of the Supreme Entity are still acknowledged, even though modern religions and teachings have entered the Flores region and surrounding areas. It is still believed to be the Giver of life to all creation—humans, animals, and plants.

From the explanation above, the question that serves as a guide for dialogue in this research is: what are the similarities and differences between the two perspectives that discuss

God? At the conceptual level, the similarities are found in the understanding and meaning of God as the Infinite and as the One Full of Love. This is evidenced in Scotus' thought, where God is Love itself. He gives Himself through the event of the incarnation, becoming like humans, dwelling among creation, and undergoing death on the cross to save creation. Furthermore, He gives the Holy Spirit as a helper for creation, so that all of creation can know and believe in Him.

Creation, in this case, humans, are given the ability to know Him through the intellectual capacity possessed by each individual. Naturally, individuals can understand God through accidents such as attributes of goodness, wisdom, and truth; God is univocal, resembling or similar to creation; understanding God in creation as a reflection of God Himself; understanding God through forms of perfection; and understanding God through the species of creation. This ability is given to creation with the purpose of knowing God. However, this understanding of God based on observation and comprehension is not equivalent to God Himself. Humans are only able to know God in a particular form through the existing creations. This is because creation is limited by space and time, while for God, neither space nor time poses any limitation (Rupa, 2018; Viktoria et al., 2024).

According to the belief of the *Lamaholot* people, the Supreme Being is the personification of God disguised in the form of the cosmos (cf. Bembot & Viktoria, 2024). He reveals Himself through the cosmic marriage between Lera Wulan and Tana Ekan, which then initiates the beginning of life on earth. This act is understood by humans as an act of love bestowed upon creation. He created humans, whose numbers have continued to increase to form the *Lamaholot* community, He provides the universe so that humans may dwell and live their lives, and He is the highest morality who teaches morality to the community so that they live by virtuous values.

Conceptually, the *Lamaholot* people can understand the Supreme Being as God because they have been endowed with intellect. They can use their intellect to reconstruct nature for good use. They utilize nature, in this case, land or fields, only for farming to meet daily needs. They do not exploit it further because nature is believed to be God Himself. The community also practices a good moral life toward other creations, as violations of moral values would result in consequences from God, such as illness, curses, and other forms of punishment. Moreover, the community can understand God in traditional ceremonies performed. In these ceremonies, God is present as an expression of human gratitude and a way to honor God, who in return blesses humans (Soge et al., 2021). However, the manifestation of God in the actions of the community can only be proven in particular aspects of creation. The real God can only be believed in by the *Lamaholot* people to the extent that they trust in His presence in all their activities, decisions, and actions.

In the practical realm, the differences in the proof of God between Scotus and the *Lamaholot* people lie in the concept of salvation or soteriology for creation. For Scotus, the motive for the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ is not solely for the salvation of creation. Without creation or human sinfulness, God would still incarnate. Sinfulness and humanity are

not the reasons for God to incarnate, but it is because of His perfect or total love (Ingham, 2012). He, who is full of love without any limitation, can carry out the incarnation. However, creation is assumed or even required to participate in God's work of salvation so that humans may attain that salvation. Additionally, humans need God's mercy to experience reunion with God in the future.

For the *Lamaholot* people, the cosmic marriage between Lera Wulan and Tana Ekan is an act of the Supreme Being to give life to creation. The evidence of God's act in giving life to creation includes creating humans, the universe, and teaching morality. Some scholars who have conducted research on *Lamaholot* ethnic cultures have not yet confirmed that God's manifestation through the cosmic marriage serves as a means of salvation for creation. In this context, God is only believed to be the creator of His creation. However, if humans accidentally violate the rules or laws established by local customs, they can perform a ritual of atonement for the mistake. For example, by slaughtering a pig or chicken, followed by praying and asking for forgiveness from Lera Wulan, saying: "O *Lera Wulan*, goé belara pine, puken nalan goén, goé leta moé, nalan goén pine goé patéro kaé pi" which means, "O *Lera Wulan*, my illness is caused by my mistakes, heal me, and I have atoned for all my mistakes today" (Arndt, 2003b). This act can help humans to be freed from the illness suffered as a result of their mistakes. What is more certain for the *Lamaholot* people in helping them achieve unity with God is by faithfully practicing all the moral teachings, participating in the annual traditional ceremonies, and always confessing their mistakes before God (Ujan, 2012).

#### **CONCLUSION**

The dialogue of faith and culture that takes place in the thoughts of John Duns Scotus and the *Lamaholot* community regarding the proof of God or the Supreme Being has some elements of similarity on one hand and differences on the other. Both Scotus and the *Lamaholot* community believe that God is the Infinite One; He is the God Who Is Full of Love. He gives His love to creation without limits, without bounds of space and time. There is no creation whatsoever and no one who can limit that love of God.

On the other hand, there are differences between Scotus's thought and the beliefs of the *Lamaholot* community about the proof of God. For Scotus, the giving of God's love through the event of the incarnation can become a means of salvation for creation, whereas for the *Lamaholot* community, it does not. However, the mistakes made by the community can be forgiven by performing ritual ceremonies and returning to practicing good moral teachings in daily life.

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