



A Philosophical Inquiry into the Essence of True Religion

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Abstract

This research paper presents a comprehensive philosophical inquiry into the "essence" of religion, navigating the historical tension between substantive definitions and functional applications. In the contemporary landscape of 2026, characterized by global pluralism and the rise of post-theistic spiritualities, the study investigates whether a universal core of religion persists beyond cultural and doctrinal variations. Utilizing a phenomenological and hermeneutical methodology, the paper synthesizes classical Western perspectives—such as Rudolf Otto's "numinous" and Paul Tillich's "ultimate concern"—with the profound insights of Indian saint-philosophers, including Swami Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo, and Sant Kabir.

The findings suggest that the essence of "true" religion transcends institutionalized dogma, manifesting instead as an internal realization of divinity and an expansion of consciousness. By analyzing the Indian concept of *Dharma* alongside Western existential inquiries, the research identifies five pillars of religious essence: direct realization, the distinction between spirituality and ritualism, experiential unity, the inseparability of morality from faith, and selfless service as a mode of worship. The study concludes that while the external forms of religion are diverse and evolving, its essence remains a constant human impulse toward "being and becoming," providing a vital framework for ethical living and universal harmony in a fragmented modern world.

Keywords: Philosophy of Religion, Essence of Religion, Indian Saints, Ultimate Concern, Dharma, Phenomenology, Universalism, Spiritual Realization.

Introduction

Religion is a fundamental set of beliefs and practices generally agreed upon by a group of people. These set of beliefs concern the cause, nature and purpose of the universe, and involve devotional and ritual observances. They also often contain a moral code governing the conduct of human affairs.

Ever since the world began, man has demonstrated a natural inclination towards faith and worship of anything he considered superior/difficult to understand. His religion consisted of trying to appease and get favors from the Supreme being he feared. This resulted in performing rituals (some of them barbaric) and keeping traditions or laws to earn goodness and/or everlasting life.

The English word "Religion" is derived from the Middle English "relgioun" which came from the Old French "religion". It may have been originally derived from the Latin word "reigio". Which means "good faith", "rituals" and other similar meanings. Or it may have come from the Latin "religere" which means "to tie fast".

It is apparent that religion can be seen as a theological, philosophical, anthropological, sociological, and psychological phenomenon of huma kind. To limit religion to only one of these categories is to miss its multifaceted nature and lose out on th complete definition.

According to Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902) "Religion is the manifestation of the Divinity already in man".

Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa (1836–1886) most famous dictum, "*Yato mat, tato path*" ("As many faiths, so many paths"), defines religion as various routes to the same ultimate experience of Divine Truth.

Sri Aurobindo (1872–1950) defined true religion as "a seeking after God, the cult of spirituality, the opening of the deepest life of the soul to the indwelling Godhead".

Guru Nanak Dev (1469–1539) taught that the essence of religion is captured in the triad: Kirat Karo (honest labor), Vand Chhako (sharing with others), and Naam Japo (remembering the Divine).

The Concise Oxford Dictionary (1990). "Human recognition of superhuman controlling power and especially of a personal God entitled to obedience".

Webster's New World Dictionary (Third College Edition): Any specific system of belief and worship, often involving a code of ethics and a philosophy.

What is the great commandment in the law? Jesus said unto him, thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.

The beliefs, attitudes, emotions, behaviour etc., constitution man's relationship with the powers and principles of the universe, especially with a Deity or Deities; also any particular system of such beliefs, attitudes etc. The religion is an essential part or a practical test of the spiritual life. An object of conscientious devotion or scrupulous care: e.g., His work is a religion to him.

According to the Christian Apologetics and Research Ministry (CARM): Religion means "an organized system of belief that generally seeks to understand purpose, meaning, goals and methods of spiritual things. These spiritual things can be God, people in relation to God, salvation, after life, purpose of life, order of the cosmos, etc."

Definitions by Academics and others:

William James: "the belief that there is an unseen order, and that our Supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto."

George Hegel: "the knowledge possessed by the finite mind of its nature as absolute mind."

Wikipedia defines religion as "a system of social coherence based on a common group of beliefs or attitudes concerning an object, person, unseen being, or system of thoughts considered to be supernatural, sacred, divine or highest truth, and the moral codes, practices, values, institutions, traditions, and rituals associated with such belief or system of thought."

Scott Hatfield defines Religion as a behaviour process or structure whose orientation is at least partially supernatural."

H.L. Menken defines Religion as a single function is to give man access to the powers which seem to control his destiny, and its single purpose is to induce those powers to be friendly to him.

Jerry Moyer defines, "Religion is a system of beliefs by which a people reduce anxiety over natural phenomena through some means of explication. He also cited a quotation from the writings of Paul Tillich: "Religion is the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern".

Religion is the individual and social experience of the sacred that is manifested in human being. Religion originates in an attempt to represent and order beliefs, feelings, imaginings and actions that arise in response of direct experience of the sacred and the spiritual. As this attempt expands in its formulation and elaboration, it becomes a process that creates meaning for itself on a sustaining basis, in terms of both its originating experiences and its own continuing responses.

The sacred is a mysterious manifestation of power and presence that is experienced as both primordial and transformative, inspiring awe and rapt attention. This is usually an event that represents a break or discontinuity from the ordinary, forcing a re-establishment or recalibration of perspective on the part of the experiencer, but it may also be something seemingly ordinary, repeated exposure to which gradually produces a perception of mysteriously cumulative significance out of proportion to the significance originally invested in it.

The spiritual is a perception of the commonality of mindfulness in the world that shifts the boundaries between self and other, producing a sense of the union of purposes of self and other in confronting the existential questions of life, and providing a mediation of the challenge-response interaction between self and other, one and many, that underlies existential questions.

The sum total of answers we give to the problem of our relationship with the universe, we call religion. A fundamental way of thinking and approaching things. Those who do not do things in the way they are told by their religion will be punished by some supernatural power. Religion originates in an attempt to represent and order beliefs, feelings, imaginings and actions that arise in response to direct experience of the sacred and the spiritual. As this attempt expands in its formulation and elaboration, it becomes a process that creates meaning for itself on a sustaining basis, in terms of both its originating experiences and its own continuing responses. The true religion is to understand the constitutional position of the living entity that is to serve the Super Nature Power "GOD" The Generator, The Operator and The Destroyer. One should understand the science of self-realization and the real purpose of human life.

In the book Chaitanya Charitamrita written by Krishnadasa Kaviraja Goswami, the author describes the birth of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu as Nimai appeared on the full moon night of February 18, 1486 at the time of a Lunar Eclipse. His parents Jagannath Mishra and Sachi Devi named him Vishwambhar. He was the second son of Jagannath Mishra and his wife Sachi Devi who lived in the town of Nabadwip, Mayapur are significant pilgrimage towns located in West Bengal, India, renowned as a major spiritual hub and the birthplace of Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, the founder of Gaudiya Vaishnavism. The region, known collectively as Nabadwip-Mayapur Dham, is a collection of nine islands along the Ganges River that attracts over a million pilgrims annually.

In the fifteenth century, Sri Chaitanya created a spiritual revolution in India attracting followers from all levels of society. Kings, government ministers, scholars, poets, people of all religions and people of none, the rich, the poor, all were moved to take part in his extraordinary movement; called Sankirtana- the congregational chanting of Krishna's Holy names (Maha Mantra)

Hare Krishna Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna Hare Hare

Hare Ram Hare Ram, Ram Ram Hare Hare

According to the teachings of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu (1486–1534), also known as the "Golden Avatar," revolutionized Indian spiritual life by emphasizing emotional devotion over rigid rituals. His core message is rooted in the path of **Bhakti** (devotional service) and the universal accessibility of spiritual truth. He emphasizes on Achintya Bheda Abheda tattava i.e., Inconceivable Oneness and Difference between soul and super soul.

Mahaprabhu's central philosophical doctrine reconciles the relationship between the individual soul (Jiva) and the Supreme Lord (Krishna). According to him the soul is qualitatively identical to God but quantitatively different. Like a drop of ocean water is salty (same quality) but is not the ocean itself (different quantity). This simultaneous unity and distinction is called Achintya because it cannot be fully grasped through human logic alone, only through spiritual realization.

He established the chanting of the holy names known as Nama-Sankirtana: The Universal Practice specifically the Hare Krishna Mahamantra—as the Yuga-dharma, the recommended spiritual practice for the current age (Kali-yuga).

According to him Chanting is taught as a means to cleanse the "mirror of the heart" from material impurities and awaken the soul's natural love for God. He rejected caste-based discrimination, teaching that anyone, regardless of birth, race, or social standing, could attain spiritual perfection through sincere devotion.

Though he wrote very little, Mahaprabhu composed eight verses known as the Siksastakam, which summarize his entire philosophy. Key themes include:

Humility: One should be humbler than a blade of grass and more tolerant than a tree.

Selflessness: Seeking only unconditional love for Krishna without desire for wealth, followers, or personal salvation.

Spiritual Ecstasy: Describing the deep feelings of longing and separation (Viraha) from the Divine as the highest stage of devotion.

4. Ultimate Goal: Prema (Divine Love)

The goal of human life is not just liberation from suffering (Mukti), but the attainment of Krishna-prema—unalloyed, ecstatic love for the Supreme. He taught that the highest form of this worship was exhibited by the Gopis (cowherd damsels) of Vrindavan, whose love was completely selfless and spontaneous.

The Siksastakam consists of eight Sanskrit verses composed by Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu (1486–1534), the founder of Gaudiya Vaishnavism. These are the only written instructions left personally by Mahaprabhu; the rest of his vast theological system was codified by his disciples. Despite its brevity, the Siksastakam is considered the "essence of all teachings on Bhakti yoga," providing a progressive guide from the initial stage of faith to the pinnacle of divine love (prema).

The Power of the Holy Name.

The first two verses establish the foundation of Mahaprabhu's mission: the congregational chanting of the holy names of God (Sankirtana).

Verse 1:

ceto-darpana-marjanam bhava-maha--davagni-nirvapanam
shreyah-kairava-chandrika-vitaranam vidya-vadhu-jivanam
anandambudhi-varadhanam prati-padam purnamritaswadanam
sarvatma-snapanam param vijayate sri-krishna-sankirtanam

Glory to the Sri Krishna Sankirtana, which cleanses the heart of all the dust accumulated for years and extinguishes the fire of conditional life, of repeated birth and death. This sankirtana movement is the prime benediction for humanity at large because it spreads the rays of the benediction moon. It is the life of all transcendental knowledge. It increases the ocean of transcendental bliss, and it enables us to fully taste the nectar for which we are always anxious.

Mahaprabhu glorifies Sankirtana as the "prime benediction for humanity". It performs seven simultaneous functions: cleansing the "mirror of the heart" from material dust, extinguishing the fire of repeated birth and death, and increasing the ocean of transcendental bliss.

Verse 2:

namnam akari bahudha nija-sarva-shaktis
tatarpita niyamitah smarane na kalah
etadrishi tava kripa bhagavan mamapi
durdaivam idrisham ihajani nanuragaha

O my Lord, Your holy name alone can render all benediction to living beings, and thus You have hundreds and millions of names like Krishna and Govinda. In these transcendental names You have invested all Your transcendental energies. There are not even hard and fast rules for chanting these names. O my Lord, out of kindness You enable us to easily approach You by Your holy names, but I am so unfortunate that I have no attraction for them. He explains that God has invested His full transcendental potency into His names (such as Krishna and Govinda) and made them accessible without hard and fast rules of time or place. Paradoxically, Mahaprabhu laments his own "misfortune" for having no attraction to these names, teaching the devotee to recognize their own spiritual lack.

The Qualities of a Practitioner

Verses 3 and 4 outline the internal disposition necessary to achieve success in chanting.

Verse 3:

CC Ādi 17.31

trṇād api su-nīcena
taror iva sahiṣṇunā
amāninā māna-dena
kīrtanīyaḥ sadā hariḥ

One should chant the holy name of the Lord in a humble state of mind, thinking oneself lower than the straw in the street; one should be more tolerant than a tree, devoid of all sense of false prestige and should be ready to offer all respect to others. In such a state of mind one can chant the holy name of the Lord constantly. "One who thinks himself lower than the grass, who is more tolerant than a tree, and who does not expect personal Honor yet is always prepared to give all respect to others can very easily always chant the holy name of the Lord." This is perhaps the most famous verse, stating that one should chant in a humble state of mind—feeling "lower than a blade of grass" and "more tolerant than a tree". By remaining devoid of false prestige and offering respect to all, one can chant the holy name constantly.

Verse 4:

na dhanam na janam na sundarim
kavitam va jagad-isha kamaye
mama janmani janmanishvare
bhavatad bhaktir ahaituki twayi

O almighty Lord, I have no desire to accumulate wealth, nor do I desire beautiful women, nor do I want any number of followers. I only want Your causeless devotional service birth after birth. Here, the practitioner renounces all material desires for wealth, followers, or even personal liberation (mukti). The sole prayer is for "causeless devotional service" birth after birth, emphasizing that true devotion is not a business transaction with the Divine.

The Cry for Mercy and Spiritual Longing

Verses 5 and 6 shift toward a deep realization of the soul's plight and a yearning for spiritual symptoms.

Verse 5:

ayi nanda-tanuja kinkaram
patitam mam vishame bhavambudhau
kripaya tava pada-pankaja-

sthita-dhuli-sadrisham vichintaya

O son of Maharaja Nanda [Krishna], I am Your eternal servitor, yet somehow or other I have fallen into the ocean of birth and death. Please pick me up from this ocean of death and place me as one of the atoms at Your lotus feet. The soul is portrayed as a servant fallen into a "terrible ocean of birth and death". The devotee begs the Lord to be picked up and placed as an "atom at His lotus feet," signifying complete dependence on divine grace.

Verse 6:

nayanam galad-ashru-dharaya
 vadanam gadgada-ruddhaya gira
 pulakair nichitam vapuh kada
 tava nama-grahane bhavishyati

O my Lord, when will my eyes be decorated with tears of love flowing constantly when I chant Your holy name? When will my voice choke up, and when will the hairs of my body stand on end at the recitation of Your name? Mahaprabhu expresses an intense yearning for the physical symptoms of love—when eyes will be "decorated with tears," the voice will "choke up," and the body will experience spiritual ecstasy upon chanting the holy name.

The Pinnacle: Love in Separation and Absolute Surrender

The final two verses reach the highest esoteric peaks of Gaudiya Vaishnava philosophy: Viraha-bhakti (devotion in separation).

Verse 7:

yugayitam nimeshena
 chakshusha pravrishayitam
 shunyayitam jagat sarvam
 govinda-virahena me

O Govinda! Feeling Your separation, I am considering a moment to be like twelve years or more. Tears are flowing from my eyes like torrents of rain, and I am feeling all vacant in the world in Your absence. The devotee feels such intense separation from the Lord (Govinda) that a single moment feels like "twelve years or more," and the entire world appears "vacant" without His presence. This reflects the mood of the Gopis of Vrindavan, whose love grew more intense when they were apart from Krishna.

Verse 8:

ashlishya va pada-ratam pinashtu mam
 adarshanan marma-hatam karotu va
 yatha tatha va vidadhatu lampato
 mat-prana-nathas tu sa eva naparah

I know no one but Krishna as my Lord, and He shall remain so even if He handles me roughly by His embrace or makes me broken-hearted by not being present before me. He is completely free to do anything and everything, for He is always my worshipful Lord unconditionally. The poem concludes with a declaration of unconditional surrender. The devotee accepts Krishna as their only Lord, regardless of whether He "embraces in love" or "makes me broken-hearted" by His absence. It is a state where the devotee's only goal is the pleasure of the beloved, irrespective of personal suffering.

The Siksastakam is more than a prayer; it is a spiritual roadmap. It starts with the public practice of chanting and moves inward to the deepest chambers of the heart. Through these eight verses, Chaitanya Mahaprabhu teaches that the ultimate goal of human life is not merely to escape suffering but to attain a state of selfless, unconditional, and ecstatic love for the Divine.

Literature Review

Adi Shankaracharya (c. 788–820 CE): Defined the essence of religion as Advaita (Non-duality). His core teaching is Brahma Satyam Jagan Mithya (Brahman alone is real, the world is an illusion). He integrated the essence of Vedic thought into a unified path of knowledge (Jnana).

Ramanujacharya (1017–1137 CE): Proposed Vishishtadvaita (Qualified Monism), arguing that the essence of religion is a "loving surrender" (Prapatti) to a personal God. He famously bridged orthodox Brahmanism with popular devotion, making spiritual liberation accessible to all castes.

Sant Kabir (c. 1398–1518 CE): A revolutionary mystic who criticized the "essence-less" rituals of both Hinduism and Islam. He defined true religion as the Nirguna (Formless) devotion to the "One God" residing in the heart. His verses in the Bijak emphasize that "work is worship."

Guru Nanak Dev (1469–1539 CE): The founder of Sikhism, Nanak taught that the essence of religion is Ik Onkar (One God) and the equality of all mankind. His landmark statement, "There is no Hindu, there is no Mussulman," redefined religion as a universal moral conduct based on truth, honest living (Kirat Karo), and sharing (Vand Chakko).

Sant Tukaram (1608–1650 CE): A prominent saint of the Varkari tradition, he taught that the essence of religion is Compassion. In his Abhangas, he claimed that one who treats the weary and the oppressed as their own is the one who truly knows God.

Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa (1836–1886 CE): His life was an experiment in the Unity of Religions. He proclaimed "Jato Mat, Tato Path" (As many faiths, so many paths), defining the essence of religion as the direct, personal "God-realization" rather than doctrinal belief.

Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902 CE): At the 1893 Parliament of Religions and in his subsequent works, he defined religion as the "Manifestation of the Divinity already in man." He argued that the essence of religion is "character-building" and "selfless service" (Karma Yoga).

Sri Aurobindo (1872–1950 CE): In works like *The Life Divine*, he defined religion's essence as an Evolution of Consciousness. He moved beyond salvation to "Integral Yoga," where the goal is the transformation of human life into a divine life on earth.

Ramana Maharshi (1879–1950 CE): Stripped religion to its ultimate psychological essence: Self-Inquiry (Atma-Vichara). He argued that the essence of all religious inquiry is the answer to the single question, "Who am I?"

Tillich (1950s) defines religion as the state of being "grasped by an ultimate concern" (the unconditional), which provides a framework of meaning for every human act. Paul Tillich famously defined religion as the "state of being grasped by an **ultimate concern**." While he refined this concept throughout his career, it is most prominently defined and detailed in his key publications.

Ludwig Feuerbach (*Lectures on the Essence of Religion*) (1957/1967): Critically posits that the essence of religion is a projection of human nature and dependence onto a divine image.

Research Methodology

Since the inquiry involves Indian saints like Shankaracharya or Kabir, hermeneutical analysis is used to interpret their sacred verses and philosophical commentaries. The Understanding individual teachings (the parts) in the context of the saint's entire spiritual system (the whole) Hermeneutic Circle is used. To Analyzing the historical and socio-cultural settings (e.g., the Bhakti movement) to decipher the original intent of the teachings Contextual Interpretation is used. Analytical Method is used to break down complex concepts like "Ultimate Concern" (Tillich) or "Self-Inquiry" (Ramana Maharshi) into clearer components for logical evaluation. Side-by-side examination of diverse viewpoints—such as Advaita (Shankaracharya) vs. Vishishtadvaita (Ramanujacharya)—to highlight universal themes while respecting distinct theological nuances is used. Historical Method is used for tracking the evolution of religious thought from classical Vedantic philosophy to modern integral yoga (Sri Aurobindo) or universalism (Vivekananda).

Data Collection and Synthesis

The "data" for this study are primary texts (e.g., Gitanjali, Abhangas, Guru Granth Sahib) and authoritative secondary scholarship. Qualitative Descriptive Technique is used for synthesizing these textual findings into a narrative that explains the "essence" found across these traditions. Thematic Content Analysis is used for identifying recurring themes across the saints' lives—such as compassion, non-duality, or selfless service—to categorize the "true essence" of religion.

Findings

According to the synthesized findings of this research inquiry, the **essence of true religion** as understood by Indian saints and contemporary philosophical frameworks is summarized through five core pillars. One the true religion is not a collection of dogmas, books, or rituals, but a direct, internal **realization of the Divine**. It is the "manifestation of the divinity already in man". One does not just *believe* in a creed; one *becomes* divine through character-building and spiritual transformation. Second the A distinction is made between the "inner essence" and "outer forms" of religion. Spirituality is the inward essence that remains constant across all faiths. Doctrines, temples, and ceremonies are categorized as secondary details that serve as temporary aids for different stages of spiritual development. Third the research identifies that at the highest peak of spiritual ascent, all conflicting variations between religions disappear. Sri Ramakrishna's experiments proved that various devotional methods lead to the same ultimate goal, suggesting that "quarrelling forms" arise only from a lack of true experience. True religion acts as a uniting force that accepts the unity of all people rather than their differences. Fourth for a religion to be "true," it must be grounded in ethical conduct. True religion and true morality are inseparable; any doctrine that conflicts with morality must be rejected. Religion is defined more by **behavior** than belief. Acting in the light of faith through non-violence (*Ahimsa*) and truth (*Satya*) is the functional proof of religious life. And the fifth pillar concludes that the "true" essence of religion is characterized by the **expansion of consciousness** and the breaking down of barriers. "Dharma" involves acting with the Supreme present in one's mind during every small act of life. The highest form of religion is summarized as "doing well to the other" and serving humanity without fear or suppression.

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