

Reinterpreting Religion in the Modern World: Ethical Consciousness and Spirituality in Radhakrishnan's Thought

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Abstract:

In the modern world, religion faces a profound crisis arising from the twin pressures of secular rationalism and dogmatic absolutism. Scientific advancement, material progress, and institutionalized belief systems have often displaced the ethical and spiritual core of religion, reducing it either to a private sentiment or a rigid social structure. Against this backdrop, S. Radhakrishnan offers a philosophical reinterpretation of religion that restores its relevance by grounding it in ethical consciousness and spiritual experience. Rejecting the identification of religion with dogma, ritualism, or sectarian allegiance, Radhakrishnan conceives religion as an inward, transformative realization of ultimate reality that finds expression in moral responsibility and human values. Drawing upon Advaitic metaphysics, Upaniṣadic spirituality, and Western idealist philosophy, he articulates a vision of universal spirituality that affirms religious plurality while maintaining the unity of spiritual truth. This paper critically examines Radhakrishnan's reinterpretation of religion in the context of the modern world, focusing on its ethical foundations, its emphasis on spiritual experience, and its engagement with comparative religion. It argues that Radhakrishnan's synthesis of ethical idealism and spirituality provides a philosophically coherent response to contemporary religious fragmentation and moral disorientation, reaffirming religion as a vital force for individual self-realization and social harmony.

Keywords: Ethical Consciousness, Spirituality, Advaita-Vedānta, Universal Religion, Comparative Philosophy.

Introduction

The modern world is characterized by unprecedented scientific progress, technological expansion, and material prosperity, yet it simultaneously witnesses deep moral uncertainty and religious conflict. Traditional forms of religion increasingly appear inadequate to address contemporary human concerns, either because they retreat into rigid dogmatism or because they are dismissed as irrelevant in a secular and rationalized social order. As a result, religion today confronts a fundamental challenge: how to remain meaningful in an age shaped by scientific rationality, cultural pluralism, and ethical crises. This situation necessitates a philosophical reinterpretation of religion that moves beyond inherited dogmas and institutional authority toward a deeper understanding of its ethical and spiritual significance. S. Radhakrishnan emerges as one of the most significant modern philosophers to address this challenge. Rooted in the Indian philosophical tradition yet deeply engaged with Western idealism, Radhakrishnan sought to reinterpret religion in a manner that would preserve its spiritual depth while making it intellectually credible and ethically relevant for the modern world. He consistently rejected the view that religion is merely a collection of beliefs, rituals, or ecclesiastical structures. Instead, he understood religion as an inward spiritual experience grounded in ethical consciousness, through which individuals realize ultimate reality and translate that realization into moral action. For Radhakrishnan, the crisis of religion in

the modern age is not caused by science or rational inquiry but by the moral inefficiency and spiritual superficiality of institutionalized religion. When religion becomes confined to external observances or sectarian claims, it loses its universal character and becomes a source of division rather than unity. In contrast, genuine religion, as he conceives it, transcends doctrinal boundaries and expresses itself through ethical idealism, compassion, tolerance, and service to humanity. His reinterpretation emphasizes spirituality as lived experience and ethical consciousness as its practical manifestation in human life. Furthermore, Radhakrishnan's engagement with comparative religion strengthens his conviction that no single religious tradition can claim absolute finality. While religious forms vary according to historical and cultural contexts, their spiritual essence remains fundamentally the same. This universal spirituality, grounded in ethical values, provides a philosophical basis for interreligious understanding and global harmony in an increasingly pluralistic world. The present paper undertakes a critical examination of Radhakrishnan's reinterpretation of religion in the modern world, focusing on the interrelation between ethical consciousness and spirituality in his thought. It seeks to demonstrate that his philosophy of religion offers a coherent and enduring response to contemporary moral crises and religious fragmentation, reaffirming the relevance of religion as a transformative force for both individual self-realization and collective human welfare.

Objectives of the Study

The present study aims to achieve the following objectives:

- To critically examine S. Radhakrishnan's reinterpretation of religion in the context of the modern world, with particular emphasis on his rejection of dogmatism, ritualism, and institutional absolutism.
- To analyze the concept of ethical consciousness in Radhakrishnan's philosophy of religion, and to demonstrate how ethical idealism functions as the practical expression of spiritual realization.
- To explore the role of spirituality as inward experience in Radhakrishnan's thought, highlighting its epistemological foundations in intuition and its metaphysical grounding in Advaitic idealism.
- To assess Radhakrishnan's engagement with comparative religion, and to show how his vision of universal spirituality contributes to interreligious understanding and global harmony in a pluralistic modern society.
- To evaluate the contemporary relevance of Radhakrishnan's religious philosophy, particularly in addressing moral disorientation, religious conflict, and the crisis of meaning in the modern age

Methodology

The study adopts a descriptive, analytical, and interpretative methodology, appropriate to philosophical inquiry. The research is primarily theoretical in nature and is based on a critical examination of both primary and secondary sources. The primary sources consist of S. Radhakrishnan's major philosophical writings, including *An Idealist View of Life*, *Eastern Religions and Western Thought*, *Religion and Society*, *The Hindu View of Life*, and related works, which articulate his views on religion, spirituality, ethics, and universalism. These texts are subjected to close textual analysis in order to elucidate his reinterpretation of religion as ethical consciousness and spiritual experience. Secondary sources include scholarly books, journal articles, and critical studies that examine Radhakrishnan's philosophy within the broader context of Indian philosophy, Western idealism, and philosophy of religion. Comparative and conceptual analysis is employed to situate his thought in relation to both traditional religious doctrines and modern philosophical challenges. The methodological framework integrates conceptual clarification, critical interpretation, and comparative analysis, enabling an examination of how Radhakrishnan's synthesis of ethical idealism and spirituality provides a coherent philosophical response to the religious and moral challenges of the modern world

Religious Experience and Its Ethical Significance

S. Radhakrishnan's philosophy of religion is grounded in the conviction that religion is fundamentally a matter of inward experience rather than external conformity. While acknowledging the cognitive, emotional, moral, and ritual dimensions of religion, he consistently emphasizes religious experience as its core. Religion, for him, is not a mere belief in ultimate reality but a way of life through which that reality is realized and ethically expressed. Salvation, in this context, signifies inner fulfillment achieved through the realization of eternal truth. According to S. Radhakrishnan, "There is no conflict between religion and reasonable humanism. The truly religious act in this world, the inner feeling of the relation between God and man is bound to issue in the service of humanity." (Radhakrishnan S. , 2012, p. 66) Radhakrishnan critiques definitions of religion that reduce it to sentiment, ritual, or institutional authority. While such accounts capture certain aspects of religious life, they fail to grasp its deeper significance. Religious consciousness, he argues, includes feeling, but religious feeling is distinct from ordinary emotions. Religion cannot be adequately described as a form of knowledge or as mere moral awareness. Religion, therefore, functions as an integrating force that unifies values and organizes experience through ethical consciousness.

Radhakrishnan's engagement with comparative religion plays a central role in his reinterpretation of religion for the modern world. Educated in both Indian and Western traditions, he sought to demonstrate that religious diversity does not negate spiritual unity. Comparative religion, in his view, enables individuals to study faiths other than their own without prejudice and to appreciate the historical development of religious ideas. As he observes: "Comparative religion enables us to study faiths other than our own without condescension or contempt. It traces the history of our ideas of God from the simple conceptions of our remote ancestors who first formulated the experience of the great environing mystery down to the living faiths. Every mortal thing seems to have been deified. Power of nature, sun, stars, fire, water and earth, generative energies were all made into gods. Hero-worship and human apotheosis added to the number. Our mental pictures of God are as varied as we are." (Radhakrishnan S. , 2012, p. 26) Comparative religion does not aim to establish the superiority of one faith over another but seeks to cultivate understanding and respect. In the Eastern perspective, religion is closely tied to spiritual life and the realization of unity with the universal spirit of truth, love, and beauty. Intellectual formulations, though valuable, remain provisional expressions of an ultimately ineffable reality.

Religion and the Synthesis of East and West

S. Radhakrishnan is widely recognized for his attempt to harmonize Indian spiritual traditions with Western philosophical inquiry. His distinctive contribution lies in demonstrating how the insights of Eastern spirituality and Western rationalism can be interpreted as complementary rather than contradictory. He sought to distill the essential spirit common to all religions and articulate a form of spiritual religion that is inclusive and integrative. While Western religious thought often emphasizes epistemological analysis, Radhakrishnan argued that genuine religion arises from a synthesis of intellect and intuition. Neither reason nor intuition alone is sufficient; authentic religion emerges from their harmonious integration. Beyond his role as a philosopher, Radhakrishnan was an educationist, statesman, and a key figure in the Indian Renaissance. His contributions to the philosophy of religion are particularly significant. He consistently maintained that religion is fundamentally a way of life rather than a mere assent to doctrinal propositions. It involves cognitive understanding, emotional depth, moral commitment, and ritual expression, yet its core lies in religious experience. According to Radhakrishnan, salvation is attained through such experience, understood as an inner fulfillment rooted in the realization of eternal truth. This emphasis led him to stress the importance of understanding and appreciating other religious traditions. Through his comparative studies, he explored both the diversity of religious expressions and the unity underlying them.

Religion, in general, has often been defined as belief in a supernatural power accompanied by emotions of reverence and acts of devotion. While many thinkers associate religion primarily with sentiment, ritual, or faith, Radhakrishnan regarded such accounts as partial. In his view, they are correct in what they affirm but mistaken in what they exclude. Religious consciousness involves feeling, yet religious feeling is distinct from ordinary emotions. Religion cannot be reduced to mere knowledge or moral awareness, though it includes both. Drawing on Whitehead's reflections, Radhakrishnan endorses the view that religion is not merely a social institution but a deeply personal quest. As he observes: "When Professor Whitehead define religion as 'what the individual does with his own solitariness', he is urging that it is not a mere social phenomenon. It is not an apologetic for the existing social order; nor is it a mere instrument for social salvation. It is an attempt to discover the ideal possibilities of human life, a quest for emancipation from the immediate compulsions of vain and petty moods. It is not true religion unless it ceases to be a traditional view and becomes personal experience. It is an independent functioning of the human mind, something unique possessing an autonomous character. It is something inward and personal which unifies all values and organizes all experiences." (Radhakrishnan S. , 2012, pp. 83-84) Religion, therefore, is an inward and personal force that integrates experience and unifies values.

Spiritual Practice and Inner Transformation

Radhakrishnan maintains that authentic religious life is grounded in love and human solidarity rather than in external observances alone. Practices such as pilgrimages, rituals, chanting, or image worship may have cultural value, but they do not by themselves constitute true religion. Religion received solely through scriptures, teachers, or social habit remains incomplete unless it is inwardly realized. Individuals differ in their religious needs and modes of worship, and Radhakrishnan acknowledges this diversity. Nevertheless, he regards silent meditation as the central spiritual discipline, often describing it through concepts such as yoga, dhyana, realization, and intuitive apprehension. At the heart of Radhakrishnan's religious philosophy lies the conviction that religion is fundamentally an inward and personal spiritual experience, rather than mere adherence to rituals or textual prescriptions. He places greater emphasis on intuition than on formal logical reasoning, drawing inspiration from the Upanishadic tradition, which asserts that ultimate reality must be directly experienced. From this standpoint, Radhakrishnan advocates a vision of universal spirituality that honors religious diversity while seeking underlying unity, recognizing that different religions represent distinct paths that converge toward the same ultimate truth. According to S. Radhakrishnan, "For it proves beyond doubt that while there are innumerable changes in religious forms, religion itself is found to be a universal phenomenon. Right round the world, distributed more or less uniformly, we find a mass of faith and ritual which, in spite of apparent variations and individual forms, seem to cohere with respect to certain essential features. Religion is native to the human mind, integral to human nature itself. Everything else may dissolve; but belief in God, which is the ultimate confession of all the faiths of the world, remains. Though religion may take many forms, it will continue as long as man remains what he is, a blend of power and weakness." (Radhakrishnan S. , 1933, p. 18) According to Radhakrishnan, religion constitutes a discipline, a heritage, or a way of life that enables individuals to transform their own nature and unveil the divinity inherent within them. Through religion, one cultivates faith in the absoluteness of spiritual values and adopts a mode of living conducive to their realization. This faith fosters the conviction that it is possible to attain a consciousness of transcendental reality. Consequently, great religious figures have often assumed a prophetic role, guiding humanity beyond conventional dogmas and materialistic outlooks. Radhakrishnan, as a spiritualist philosopher, maintained that the spirit represents both the ultimate reality and the ideal of human existence. The initial step toward realizing this ultimate ideal is faith, particularly faith grounded in religious experience. Religious experience is unique and distinctive, irreducible to any other form of human experience, and its purpose is to uncover the mystical, latent qualities and ideal potentialities of the individual. Unlike ordinary experiences, which are characterized by a subject-object duality, religious experience transcends this duality, enabling a direct apprehension of the ultimate reality.

The path to spiritual realization, according to Radhakrishnan, is not free from struggle. It involves an inner conflict with passion, ego, and desire. He distinguishes two stages in religious development: an initial stage characterized by doctrine, devotion, and worship, followed by a higher stage marked by meditation, contemplation, and love. Religious conflict arises when undue emphasis is placed on one aspect of religion at the expense of others. At its core, religion remains unified, while conflicts stem from partial understanding and external differences in form. For Radhakrishnan, the essence of religious life lies in love and human solidarity. External practices such as pilgrimages, ritual bathing, chanting, and image worship, though culturally significant, do not by themselves constitute genuine religiosity. Religion acquired solely through scriptures, teachers, or social habit lacks authenticity unless it is inwardly realized. Individuals differ in their religious needs and modes of worship, and Radhakrishnan acknowledged this diversity. Nevertheless, he regarded silent meditation as the fundamental spiritual discipline, describing it through terms such as ‘yoga,’ ‘dhyana,’ ‘realization,’ and ‘intuitive apprehension.’

The path to salvation, he argued, is neither easy nor free from struggle. It involves an inner conflict with passion and ego. Radhakrishnan identified two stages in this spiritual journey: the preliminary stage of doctrine, devotion, and worship, followed by the deeper stage of meditation, contemplation, and love. Religious conflicts arise, he believed, when disproportionate emphasis is placed on one aspect of religion at the expense of others. At its core, religion remains unaffected by such conflicts, which are largely the result of misunderstanding and partial perspectives. While religious forms may differ, their fundamental essence remains the same.

Critical Evaluation and Contemporary Implications

While S. Radhakrishnan’s reinterpretation of religion as ethical consciousness and spiritual experience offers a compelling philosophical alternative to both religious dogmatism and secular reductionism, it also invites critical reflection. One of the major strengths of his approach lies in its ability to preserve the spiritual depth of religion without compromising intellectual rigor or ethical relevance. By grounding religion in inward realization and moral responsibility, Radhakrishnan successfully avoids the extremes of ritualism and materialism. However, this very emphasis on spiritual experience raises questions concerning accessibility and practical applicability in pluralistic societies. According to S. Radhakrishnan, “True humanism tells us that there is something more in man than is apparent in his ordinary consciousness, something which frames ideals and thoughts, a finer spiritual presence, which makes him dissatisfied with mere earthly pursuits. The one doctrine that has the longest intellectual ancestry is the belief that the ordinary condition of man is not his ultimate being, that he has in him a deeper self, call it breath or ghost, soul or spirit. In each being dwells a light which no power can extinguish, an immortal spirit, benign and tolerant, the silent witness in his heart.” (Radhakrishnan S. , 1959, p. 25) Radhakrishnan’s privileging of intuitive spiritual experience, rooted in Advaitic metaphysics, may appear philosophically demanding for those traditions that emphasize historical revelation, communal worship, or doctrinal authority. Critics may argue that his universalist framework risks subsuming distinctive religious identities under a generalized spiritual ideal. Nevertheless, Radhakrishnan does not deny religious plurality; rather, he reinterprets it as symbolic diversity grounded in a shared ethical and spiritual core. His position thus resists homogenization while advocating deeper interreligious understanding. He says “Those who are assailed by religious doubts are devising several ways to escape from the present confusion. In the absence of any definite direction from the leaders, they are taking to crude and amazing cults. They are finding substitutes for religions in Theosophy, Anthroposophy, Christian Science, New Thought and such other adventures of the human mind. But the more thoughtful are not satisfied with these sentimental substitutes and their constructive proposal range from dogmatic denial to dogmatic affirmation.” (Radhakrishnan S. , 2012, p. 44) From a contemporary perspective, Radhakrishnan’s philosophy acquires renewed significance in the context of global religious conflict, ethical relativism, and the erosion of shared moral values. The modern world, marked by rapid technological change and ideological polarization, increasingly demands an ethical framework capable of transcending cultural and

religious boundaries. Radhakrishnan's concept of ethical consciousness, rooted in spirituality yet expressed through human values such as compassion, tolerance, and service, provides a viable philosophical basis for such a framework. Moreover, his engagement with comparative religion anticipates current discussions on interfaith dialogue and global ethics. By rejecting claims of absolute finality and emphasizing moral convergence across traditions, Radhakrishnan contributes to a form of religious pluralism that is neither skeptical nor relativistic. His approach encourages religions to rediscover their ethical and spiritual foundations rather than compete for doctrinal supremacy. In the modern age, where religion is often politicized or marginalized, Radhakrishnan's reinterpretation serves as a reminder that the enduring relevance of religion depends upon its capacity to nurture moral character and spiritual awareness. His philosophy challenges contemporary societies to rethink religion not as a source of division, but as a unifying moral force capable of guiding humanity toward greater self-understanding and collective responsibility.

Radhakrishnan's Reinterpretation of Religion and Modern Philosophical Discourse

S. Radhakrishnan's reinterpretation of religion occupies a distinctive position within modern philosophical discourse, particularly in relation to debates on secularism, moral philosophy, and the philosophy of religion. Unlike purely secular critiques that dismiss religion as irrational or obsolete, Radhakrishnan acknowledges the intellectual challenges posed by modern science while insisting that religion addresses dimensions of human existence that lie beyond empirical explanation. His philosophy thus resists the reduction of religion to either psychological illusion or social instrument and instead affirms its metaphysical and ethical significance.

In engaging with Western philosophy, Radhakrishnan draws upon idealist traditions that emphasize the primacy of spirit over matter. His dialogue with thinkers such as Plato, Kant, and Hegel allows him to articulate a conception of ethical consciousness that is both rationally defensible and spiritually grounded. At the same time, his grounding in Advaita Vedānta enables him to move beyond dualistic frameworks and to conceive ultimate reality as a unity that transcends subject-object distinctions. This synthesis allows Radhakrishnan to reinterpret religion not as a set of historical propositions but as a mode of consciousness oriented toward truth, goodness, and unity. As Harris (New Essays in the Philosophy of Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan) notes, "For Radhakrishnan this has two different meanings. Internally, religion as a binding force can perform a psychological function, bringing integration, wholeness, and togetherness to a broken life. Spiritually it means to find unity within, to united with the God-head as suggested in Vedanta Humanism. Externally, it means that "religion" functions as a binding force socially bringing people together for the betterment of humankind." (Harris, 1995, p. 18) Radhakrishnan's philosophy also engages implicitly with modern existential concerns. While he does not adopt existentialism's emphasis on anxiety and absurdity, he shares its concern with authenticity and inward realization. Religion, in his view, provides a response to existential fragmentation by offering a framework for integrating moral purpose with spiritual meaning. Ethical consciousness becomes the medium through which individuals overcome alienation and recover a sense of wholeness in an increasingly disjointed modern world. Furthermore, Radhakrishnan's reinterpretation challenges dominant secular models of ethics that seek to ground morality solely in social consensus or pragmatic utility. By locating ethical values within spiritual reality, he affirms their objectivity without resorting to authoritarian moral codes. This approach offers a middle path between moral relativism and rigid absolutism, making his ethical idealism particularly relevant to contemporary debates on global ethics and human rights. In this sense, Radhakrishnan's philosophy anticipates later developments in intercultural philosophy and post-secular thought. His insistence that religion must be reinterpreted rather than rejected resonates with contemporary efforts to rethink the role of religion in public life. By presenting religion as ethical consciousness informed by spiritual experience, Radhakrishnan provides a framework through which religion can contribute constructively to modern philosophical discourse without compromising intellectual autonomy or pluralism

CONCLUSION

The reinterpretation of religion in the modern world, as articulated through ethical consciousness and spirituality, offers a philosophically rigorous response to the moral and spiritual challenges of contemporary society. S. Radhakrishnan's reinterpretation of religion in the modern world presents a profound philosophical response to the ethical, spiritual, and social challenges confronting contemporary society. In an era when religion is frequently criticized as obsolete under the dominance of scientific rationalism or is misrepresented through rigid dogmatism and sectarian divisions, Radhakrishnan offers a vision that transcends these limitations. By redefining religion as a manifestation of ethical consciousness grounded in genuine spiritual experience, he restores its relevance not merely as a system of beliefs or rituals but as a living and transformative force that informs human thought, conduct, and social life. Central to Radhakrishnan's thought is the inseparable connection between spirituality and morality. Unlike approaches that separate ethical conduct from spiritual insight or reduce ethical values to social utility, he situates morality within the deeper framework of spiritual awareness. Ethical consciousness, in his view, is not a set of externally imposed norms but a natural expression of the inner realization of ultimate reality. This perspective enables religion to move beyond doctrinal rigidity and institutional authority, presenting it instead as an inward journey of self-realization that inevitably radiates outward in the form of compassion, tolerance, and commitment to the welfare of others. In this way, Radhakrishnan challenges the prevailing notion that religion and modernity are incompatible, demonstrating that spiritual depth and ethical responsibility are essential components of a morally coherent and enlightened modern life. Radhakrishnan's engagement with comparative religion further enriches his reinterpretation, highlighting that the plurality of religious traditions need not lead to conflict or relativism. By identifying the underlying unity in diverse spiritual experiences and ethical aspirations, he articulates a vision of universal spirituality capable of fostering interreligious dialogue, mutual respect, and social cohesion. In a modern world marked by religious polarization, moral ambiguity, and cultural fragmentation, his philosophy offers a timely reminder that spiritual insight and ethical practice are mutually reinforcing and foundational to a harmonious society. Moreover, Radhakrishnan's philosophy underscores the dynamic and evolving nature of religion. He envisions religion not as a static repository of rituals, dogmas, or institutional authority but as an adaptive and living force that responds to the moral and spiritual needs of the time. Ethical idealism, for him, provides a philosophical grounding that bridges individual self-realization with broader social responsibility, illustrating that personal spiritual growth and societal welfare are interconnected. In this context, religion attains authenticity only when it cultivates both inner transformation and outward moral action, thereby integrating spirituality and ethics into a cohesive worldview that addresses contemporary existential concerns. The present study has shown that Radhakrishnan's reinterpretation of religion is neither an uncritical defense of tradition nor a retreat into abstract metaphysics. Instead, it represents a deliberate effort to articulate a vision of religion that is intellectually rigorous, ethically sound, and spiritually profound. By emphasizing ethical consciousness, universal spirituality, and the comparative understanding of religious traditions, Radhakrishnan provides a framework through which religion can retain its relevance and transformative power in the modern world. His thought affirms that religion, when grounded in lived spirituality and ethical awareness, has the capacity to guide humanity toward higher moral and spiritual horizons, offering both individual self-realization and collective social harmony. In conclusion, Radhakrishnan's philosophical vision of religion exemplifies a reinterpretation that is deeply resonant with the concerns of the modern world. By positioning ethical consciousness at the heart of spiritual experience and emphasizing the universality of spiritual values across diverse religious traditions, he offers a model of religion that is simultaneously intellectually credible, morally compelling, and spiritually inspiring. His thought continues to illuminate the potential of religion as a unifying and humanizing force, capable of fostering ethical awareness, cultivating spiritual depth, and addressing the moral and spiritual crises of contemporary society. In an age of rapid social change, moral uncertainty, and religious fragmentation, Radhakrishnan's insights remain a vital source of guidance, reaffirming that

the synthesis of spirituality and ethics is indispensable for both personal fulfillment and the advancement of humanity.

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