

Ethical Religion vs Ritual Religion in Bankim's Philosophy

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Abstract: *I propose a critical philosophical analysis of Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's distinction between ethical and ritual religion, placing his ideas in nineteenth-century India and assessing their relevance today. The paper contends that Bankim's redefinition of dharma shifts from ceremonial formality to an ethically grounded understanding of religion that emphasizes morality, intellectual thought, and social responsibility. Based on his seminal work Dharmatattva and modern scholars' analyses, this study shows how Bankim criticizes mechanical ritual practices without ethical substance and promotes a religion based on truth, self-discipline, and humanity's welfare. The paper also examines Bankim's intellectual foundations, focusing on his synthesis of ancient Indian traditions with Western rationalism and utilitarianism. It also investigates his views' wider ramifications for nationalism and social reform, showing how ethical religion unites and transforms society. Bankim's difference helps address religious fundamentalism, social inequity, and moral regeneration, in my opinion. This study concludes that Bankim's ethical religion is logical, inclusive, and socially relevant, transcending ritualism, adding to modern debates on religion.*

Keywords: *Ethical Religion, Ritual Religion, Dharma, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Religious Reform*

1 | INTRODUCTION

Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's distinction between ethical and ritual religion is a major philosophical contribution in modern Hindu thought. Bankim wrote in nineteenth-century colonial India to critique religious practices and restore religion as a moral and rational discipline. His concern was that religion descended into ritualism, where external observances trumped interior ethical reform. Bankim says "religion does not consist in ceremonies but in the cultivation of moral excellence" (Chattopadhyay, 1888/1992, p. 45). I think this sentence sums up his philosophical aim to redirect religion from ritual to

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ethics. Bankim's critique of ritual religion must be understood in the context of the Bengal Renaissance, when scholars strove to reconcile traditional religion with rationality and ethics. Bankim defines ceremonial religion as mechanical devotion to customs without morality or spiritual insight. Since they emphasize form over substance, such practices can lead to superstition and social stagnation, he claims. Amiya P. Sen says Bankim "was critical of ritualistic Hinduism and sought to redefine religion in terms of ethical action and inner discipline" (2008, p. 112). I think this critique is part of a larger effort to connect religion with reason and morality in a changing world.

By contrast, Bankim's ethical religion promotes truthfulness, self-control, compassion, and concern for others. For him, religion is a moral pursuit of character development and the highest good. He rethinks dharma as a universal moral code rather than ritual requirements. In 1988, Tapan Raychaudhuri wrote that Bankim's religious approach "stressed the ethical and social dimensions of dharma rather than its ritualistic aspects" (p. 67). I believe this ethical reading of dharma underpins Bankim's rational and socially relevant religion. Bankim's philosophy is also influenced by indigenous traditions and Western ethics, particularly utilitarianism and rationalism. This combination lets him express a religion rooted in Indian culture and responsive to modern intellectual currents. True religion must be rational and morally elevating, he says. Krishna Kripalani says Bankim "sought to harmonize religious faith with ethical rationality, thereby giving religion a modern and practical orientation" (1962, p. 94). I think this harmonization is essential to understanding Bankim's lasting importance. The social effects of ceremonial religion are another aspect of Bankim's analysis. He claims that rituals, especially caste-based ones, perpetuate social hierarchies and exclusions. However, ethical religion supports equality and universal morality, promoting social reform and country regeneration. This facet of Bankim's philosophy shows how religion can alter when based on ethics rather than rituals.

2 | CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION: ETHICAL RELIGION AND RITUAL RELIGION

Understanding Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's critical engagement with Hindu thought and religious reform requires a conceptual definition of ethical and ceremonial religion in his philosophical framework. Bankim's differentiation between these two forms of religion is normative, establishing a hierarchy in which ethical religion is the genuine essence of religiosity and ceremonial religion is its degeneration. He stresses that "religion is not a matter of rites and ceremonies, but of moral principles and conduct" (Chattopadhyay, 1888/1992, p. 52). I believe this definition establishes the basis for separating the two, where religion is authenticated by its ethical content rather than its ritual form. Bankim defines ceremonial religion as ceremonies, rites, and customary observances that are often performed without a clear moral or spiritual meaning. Though rooted in religion, such practices become mechanical and unreflective. Bankim considered ritualism "a superficial expression of religion that could obscure its deeper ethical purpose" (Sen, 2008, p. 118). I see this critique as a warning against ritual absolutization, when they are considered as goals rather than means to ethical progress. In contrast, Bankim's ethical religion emphasizes morality and dharma as a universal ethical ideal. It promotes inner transformation, intellectual understanding, and morality like truth, compassion, and self-discipline. Bankim views religion as a moral science whose goal is character development and social benefit. In 1988, Tapan Raychaudhuri wrote that Bankim believed "the essence of religion lay in ethical conduct and the pursuit of the highest good, rather than in ritual observance" (p. 72). I believe this ethical attitude shifts from exterior conformance to internal authenticity, judging religion by its impact on human existence.

Bankim's redefinition of dharma is essential to this conceptual divergence. Bankim widens dharma to encompass universal moral concepts that transcend culture and history, unlike previous interpretations. Thus, ethical religion is based on a reasonable and universal morality that is accessible to all. Krishna Kripalani says Bankim "sought to redefine dharma in ethical and rational terms, making it relevant to the needs of modern society" (1962, p. 101). I think this reading is key to understanding how Bankim blends tradition and modernity. The difference between ethical and ritual religion affects social and political life.

Ritual religion without ethics can entrench societal hierarchy, superstitions, and stagnation. However, ethical religion encourages equality, justice, and social responsibility, moralizing society. Sumit Sarkar says Bankim's ideas "reflects a broader reformist impulse aimed at aligning religion with social ethics and national development" (1983, p. 210). This shows Bankim's perspective of ethical religion's transformational power.

3 | PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS OF BANKIM'S THOUGHT:

A innovative fusion of classical Indian traditions and modern Western intellectual ideas underpins Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's rational and ethical reconstruction of religion. Bankim's philosophy is influenced by Hindu scriptures, especially the Bhagavad Gītā, and Western philosophies like utilitarianism, positivism, and liberal rationalism. He can use his dual inheritance to create a framework that reassesses religion in light of reason and morality rather than rejecting or accepting it. According to Bankim, "true religion must be founded on reason and must conduce to the welfare of humanity" (Chattopadhyay, 1888/1992, p. 60). I believe this sentence summarizes his endeavour to reconcile faith and logical ethics.

Bankim's conception of dharma as a universal ethical principle rather than ritualistic responsibilities is key to his philosophy. He redefines dharma as moral order based on human happiness and ethical behaviour, drawing from classical Indian philosophy. This reinterpretation reflects Vedantic and pragmatic philosophy, which values religious principles based on their ability to achieve the highest good. Amiya P. Sen says Bankim "reconstructed the idea of dharma by emphasizing its ethical and rational dimensions over its ritualistic connotations" (2008, p. 125). I think this reconstruction is essential to understanding how Bankim turns metaphysical ideas into ethical tools. Bankim was also influenced by Western ethical theories like utilitarianism, which prioritizes the happiness of the greatest number. Although Bankim does not follow utilitarianism, he infuses its emphasis on social welfare into religion. He aligns moral philosophy with social ethics by evaluating religious practices based on their impact on human well-being. Raychaudhuri (1988, p. 75) calls Bankim's ideas "a synthesis of Hindu spiritual ideals with Western notions of utility and progress". I believe this synthesis permits Bankim to present a culturally based and socially progressive religion.

Bankim uses rationalism to critique religious beliefs and practices, which shapes his philosophy. He believes religion must be rationally examined and not contradict morals. This rationalist outlook drives him to criticize superstitions and ritual excesses and advocate for ethical religion. According to Krishna Kripalani, Bankim "brought a critical and rational spirit to the study of religion, seeking to purge it of irrational elements" (1962, p. 102). I think this critical approach reflects the Bengal Renaissance intellectual milieu, where reason was used to modify tradition. Moral idealism, which emphasizes character development and the highest good, also shapes Bankim's ideas. Religion teaches self-control, honesty, and loyalty to the common good, he believes. His ethical ideals are tied to his vision of national regeneration, which emphasizes individual morality for social advancement. Sarkar (1983, p. 214) says Bankim's worldview "combined ethical reform with a broader vision of social and national transformation". I think this link between ethics and nationhood shows his philosophical project's practicality.

4 | CRITIQUE OF RITUAL RELIGION:

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5 | ETHICAL RELIGION AS THE TRUE ESSENCE OF DHARMA:

In his theoretically rigorous and socially transformational philosophy, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay reinterprets religion as ethical religion as the ultimate core of dharma. Dharma is a universal moral principle that guides human behaviour and leads to the highest good, according to Bankim. He says "the essence of dharma lies in righteous conduct and the cultivation of virtue" (Chattopadhyay, 1888/1992, p. 74). I believe this phrase elevates ethics over ritual, making morality the foundation of religion. Bankim's ethical reconstruction of dharma comes from his critical engagement with Hinduism and modern philosophy. Bankim aligns dharma with universal morality to reveal its underlying ethical meaning, unlike ancient texts that depict it as social duties and ritual demands. This makes dharma synonymous with ethical religion, which emphasizes moral development above external observance. Sen (2008) states that Bankim "redefined dharma as an ethical ideal rooted in rationality and human welfare" (p. 138). I think this reinterpretation is essential to making religion relevant to current moral and intellectual concerns. Bankim defines ethical religion as fostering values like truthfulness, self-control, compassion, and service to the common good. These attributes are essential to a just and peaceful society. Thus, ethical religion goes beyond individual spirituality to promote social well-being through dharma. In 1988, Tapan Raychaudhuri wrote that Bankim's dharma "places ethical conduct at the center of both individual and social life" (p. 82). I think Bankim's holistic philosophy is reflected in this blending of personal and social ethics.

Bankim's ethical religion is also shaped by rationalism and utilitarianism, which prioritize reason and human flourishing in moral decision-making. He believes religious concepts should be judged by their practical effects and ability to benefit society. According to Krishna Kripalani (1962, p. 110), Bankim "sought to harmonize religious faith with ethical rationality, making dharma a living and practical guide

to conduct". I believe this harmony permits Bankim to create a spiritually meaningful and socially relevant religion. Universality is another crucial aspect of ethical religion for Bankim. Ethical religion is universal, unlike ritual religion, which is sometimes influenced by culture and history. Moral ideals like truth, fairness, and compassion are universal because they are essential to human existence. Sumit Sarkar says Bankim's ethical framework "transcends sectarian boundaries and seeks to establish a common moral foundation for society" (1983, p. 222). This universal aspect of ethical religion suggests it might unite a diverse and pluralistic society. Bankim does not disregard rituals, but places them second to ethics. His idea is that rituals can symbolize moral values, but they should not eclipse ethical progress. Thus, ethical religion prioritizes inner transformation above exterior conformance. I believe this reordering is necessary to restore dharma's fundamental spirit, which is morality rather than rituality.

6 | RELIGION, NATIONALISM, AND SOCIAL REFORM:

Religion, nationalism, and social reform are central to Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's intellectual project, which seeks to reinterpret religion as a dynamic force that can promote national consciousness and social change. Bankim, writing in colonial India, expressed worry for the moral and cultural deterioration of society and believed ethical religion was the only solution. According to Chattopadhyay (1888/1992, p. 81), "religion, rightly understood, is the foundation of both individual character and national strength". This statement emphasizes his belief that religion is a powerful force that affects the nation as a whole, not just a private matter. Reinterpreting religion through the ethical lens of dharma is central to Bankim's nationalism. He sees the nation as a moral community united by shared ideals and a dedication to the common good, not just a political entity. Religion serves as a source of national solidarity and moral inspiration. Sen (2008) states that Bankim "sought to ground Indian nationalism in a reformed and ethical conception of Hindu religion" (p. 145). I think this grounding shows his attempt to construct a culturally rooted, ethically progressive nationalism that transcends sectarianism.

In his literary and philosophical writings, Bankim uses religious symbolism to inspire patriotism. His Vande Mataram hymn shows how religious imagery may promote national pride. Bankim wants to stress national identity's ethical and spiritual aspects, not ritualistic or exclusive nationalism. Sumit Sarkar says Bankim's nationalism "combined religious symbolism with an ethical vision of social and moral regeneration" (1983, p. 225). This combination shows his integrative philosophy, where religion bridges personal morality and collective identity. Meanwhile, Bankim's emphasis on ethical religion affects societal reform. He advocates a rational, moral religion over ritualistic activities and beliefs that promote social inequality and slow progress. He addresses caste inequality, social injustice, and moral education from this ethical perspective. In 1988, Tapan Raychaudhuri said that Bankim "linked religious reform with broader concerns for social change and national development" (p. 88). I think this shows that Bankim views religion and society reform as interdependent. Modern Western values like progress, logic, and utilitarianism influence Bankim's combination of religion and nationalism. He understands the need to adapt traditional beliefs to a changing world while conserving the nation's culture. Krishna Kripalani says Bankim "envisioned a reformed religion that could serve as the moral basis for a modern and progressive nation" (1962, p. 115). I think this perspective is multifaceted and strives to balance tradition and innovation. Bankim also stressed the importance of individuals in achieving religion and nationality. He believes that national strength and unity depend on individual moral upliftment. Thus, ethical religion fosters responsible, socially conscious citizens. This emphasis on individual responsibility shows his nationalist vision's ethical foundation, in my opinion.

7 | CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE:

Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's distinction between ethical and ceremonial religion is relevant because it addresses modern society's moral, social, and intellectual issues. Religion shapes individual identities and collective existence in an age of fast globalization, technological growth, and cultural heterogeneity. However, ritualistic rituals without ethical awareness often cause tensions, conflicts, and

a deterioration in religion's transforming power. Bankim's belief that "religion must be grounded in moral principles and directed toward human welfare" (Chattopadhyay, 1888/1992, p. 89) is still relevant, since it calls for a re-evaluation of religious activities in light of modern ethics. Bankim's emphasis on ethical religion as a unifier in pluralistic societies is crucial to his relevance today. His concept of dharma as a universal moral standard can promote harmony and mutual respect at a time of religious variety and strife. In 2008, Amiya P. Sen wrote that Bankim's reinterpretation of religion "provides a basis for inter-religious dialogue by emphasizing shared ethical values rather than doctrinal differences" (p. 152). This ethical universalism is essential for multicultural harmony, in my view. Bankim's critique of ceremonial religion resonates in current religious fundamentalism and extremist issues. Exclusion and social division can result from prioritizing rituals and dogmas over ethics. Bankim's demand for a rational and ethical approach to religion corrects such tendencies, fostering deliberate and responsible faith. Sumit Sarkar says Bankim's thought "continues to offer valuable insights into the need for reforming religion in response to changing social realities" (1983, p. 229). I think this shows how relevant his critique is to modern issues.

Bankim's combination of religion with social transformation and national growth is also noteworthy. His emphasis on moral responsibility and collective wellbeing guides action on social inequity, environmental degradation, and ethical governance. Bankim's ethical religion fosters selflessness and service to the greater good. Raychaudhuri (1988, p. 91) says Bankim's worldview "links personal morality with broader social and national concerns, making it highly relevant to modern public life". This linkage emphasizes his theories' practicality in solving modern socioeconomic concerns. Bankim's rationalist view of religion matches modern emphasis on critical thinking and science. He advocates a more educated and careful engagement with tradition by rationally scrutinizing religious ideas in an era where education and intellectual engagement are key to social progress. According to Krishna Kripalani (1962, p. 118), Bankim "anticipated the need for a religion that could coexist with modern knowledge and rational inquiry". I think his expectation is important for connecting faith and reason in modern culture. Bankim's emphasis on religion's ethics affects personal development and moral education. His emphasis on self-discipline, compassion, and truthfulness provides a counterpoint to materialism and individuality and can help people develop holistically. Ethical religion guides social behaviour and builds moral strength.

8 | CONCLUSION:

Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's conceptual distinction between ethical and ceremonial religion provides a fundamental and lasting foundation for understanding religion in historical and present circumstances. In this research, Bankim's critique of ritualism is not a rejection of tradition, but a demand to reestablish the ethical heart of dharma, where religion is seen as a dynamic force for moral cultivation and social change. Bankim makes religion an introspective, rational endeavour by emphasizing truth, self-discipline, and the common good. His blend of indigenous philosophy with modern rational and ethical thought shows a subtle attempt to reconcile tradition and modernity. By emphasizing ethical religion, religious life can be reinterpreted as inclusive, contemplative, and socially relevant, eliminating the constraints of ritualistic rituals that perpetuate superstition and inequality. This ethical approach improves moral development and aids social transformation and country regeneration. Overall, Bankim's thought is relevant now because it challenges us to rethink religion's influence on human values and social institutions. Bankim's compelling vision of religion as a transformative and rational force that can promote personal integrity and collective well-being in a complex and pluralistic world is based on ethical action rather than ritual performance.

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