



Cover Page



MAPPING REASON'S REACH: COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES ON FAITH IN HINDUISM AND CHRISTIANITY

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1. Abstract

This article undertakes a critical comparative analysis of reason as a foundation of religious belief, focusing on the rich intellectual heritages of Hinduism and Christianity. Both traditions have cultivated sophisticated arguments defending the compatibility and necessity of reason within faith, as seen in Hinduism's Upanishadic dialogues, the logic of Nyāya, and Advaita Vedānta's discriminative reasoning, and in Christianity's apologetics, Scholastic philosophy, and modern rational theology. At the same time, both traditions articulate clear boundaries where rational thought must give way to revelation, devotion, and mystical experience, as emphasized by the Bhakti movement and Hindu mystics, and by Christian thinkers like Tertullian, Luther, Barth, and the apophatic tradition. The article explores these parallel yet distinct trajectories, examining how each tradition balances the demands of intellectual rigor with the humility and openness required for religious life. In an age of pluralism and interfaith dialogue, this study highlights the enduring relevance of the interplay between reason and faith for the depth, vitality, and credibility of religious belief.

Key Words: Religious Belief, Hinduism, Christianity, Faith, Revelation, Mysticism, Rationality.

2. Introduction

The question of whether religious belief should be grounded in reason, or whether it ultimately rests on faith, revelation, or experience, has been a central concern in the philosophy of religion. Nowhere is this debate more profound or varied than in the traditions of Hinduism and Christianity, both of which have shaped, and been shaped by, robust dialogues between logic, faith, experience, and revelation. In Hinduism, the Upanishads set a precedent for rational dialogue and critical self-inquiry, developing methods like viveka (discrimination) and tarka (logic) as essential tools for spiritual growth. Schools such as Nyāya built rigorous systems of logic and debate, while Advaita Vedānta explored the subtle boundaries between conceptual analysis and direct realization. Yet, Hindu thought has also long recognized the limits of reason, with the Bhakti movement and the teachings of mystics such as Ramakrishna and Kabir affirming that ultimate truth transcends logical discourse and is accessible only through love, devotion, and mystical experience.

Christianity, too, has nurtured a complex relationship between reason and faith. Early apologists and Church Fathers positioned Christianity as compatible with, and even the fulfillment of, philosophical rationality. The Scholastic tradition, exemplified by Thomas Aquinas, integrated Aristotelian logic with Christian doctrine, producing rational proofs for God's existence and exploring the harmony of faith and reason. Yet, Christian history is equally marked by powerful critiques of rationalism, from Tertullian and Luther's defense of faith's primacy to Barth and the apophatic mystics' insistence on the ineffability of the divine.

This article explores these convergences and divergences, tracing the ways in which Hinduism and Christianity each affirm the value of reason while also articulating its boundaries. By examining their respective philosophical, theological, and mystical traditions, the study illuminates how both religions navigate the dynamic tension between intellectual rigor and spiritual humility—a dialogue that remains deeply relevant in our contemporary, pluralistic world.

3. Reason in Hinduism

3.1.1 Upanishadic Rationality: Dialogue, Tarka, and Viveka

The Upanishads, often called the "Vedānta" or culmination of Vedic wisdom, represent some of the earliest and most profound explorations of reason and inquiry in religious philosophy. Composed between roughly 800 and 300 BCE, these



Cover Page



texts are structured around dialogical encounters—between teacher and disciple, king and sage, or seeker and divinity. These dialogues are not merely didactic but deeply philosophical, driven by a relentless questioning spirit that values discrimination (viveka), logical analysis (tarka), and the pursuit of ultimate truth.

In the Katha Upanishad, for example, the young Nachiketa persistently interrogates Yama, the god of death, about the nature of the self (ātman) and the fate that follows death. Yama does not simply issue dogmatic pronouncements; he encourages critical examination and self-inquiry, culminating in the realization that the self is immortal and beyond empirical phenomena: “Arise! Awake! Approach the great and learn. Like the sharp edge of a razor is that path, so the wise say—hard to tread and difficult to cross.” (Katha Upanishad 1.3.14)

The method of *neti neti* (“not this, not this”), found in texts such as the Brihadaranyaka and Chandogya Upanishads, exemplifies a negative dialectic in which inadequate or superficial conceptions of ultimate reality are systematically rejected by reason. This method is not merely skeptical but deeply constructive, designed to guide the seeker through layers of conceptual confusion toward a direct, non-conceptual apprehension of Brahman.

Crucially, the Upanishads do not posit a conflict between reason and spiritual insight. Rather, reason—when exercised in humility and discipline—is seen as an essential instrument for removing ignorance (avidya) and for opening the path to higher knowledge (jnana). This attitude is captured in the Mundaka Upanishad, which urges seekers to test teachings through *vicāra* (critical investigation): “Having examined the worlds won by works, let a Brahmin seek to know that which is not made by work. Let him approach, with sacrificial fuel in hand, a teacher who is learned in the scriptures and steadfast in the realization of Brahman.” (Mundaka Upanishad 1.2.12)

The Upanishadic tradition thus establishes reason as both a path to and a purifier of spiritual insight—though it also acknowledges that the highest realization ultimately transcends all conceptual grasp, as famously stated in the Kena Upanishad: “That which is not known by the mind, but by which the mind is known—that is Brahman.” (Kena Upanishad 1.5)

3.1.2 Systematic Reason in Hinduism: Nyāya, Vedānta, and Vivekachudamani

The spirit of rational inquiry found in the Upanishads was further institutionalized and developed within the classical schools (darśanas) of Indian philosophy, notably the Nyāya and Vedānta traditions. These schools did not merely accept reason as an ancillary tool but elevated it to a central principle of philosophical and religious life.

Nyāya: The Science of Logic and Debate:

The Nyāya school, traditionally attributed to the sage Gautama (circa 2nd century BCE), is explicitly devoted to the cultivation and systematization of logic (tarka), epistemology (pramāṇa-śāstra), and critical debate. The foundational text, the Nyāya Sūtra, analyzes the means by which valid knowledge (pramāṇa) is obtained—perception, inference, comparison, and testimony. Nyāya philosophers held that rational debate (vāda) and careful analysis of arguments were not merely intellectual exercises but essential for the pursuit of liberation (moksha).

The Nyāya tradition’s contribution to religious epistemology is especially evident in the works of Udayana (10th–11th century CE), whose Nyāyakusumāñjali offers sophisticated rational proofs for the existence of God (Īśvara). Udayana draws on principles of causality, order, and contingency, and insists that the existence of a creator can be established by logical inference: “From the production of the world and its order, from the impossibility of infinite regress, and from the existence of conscious agents, the existence of a supreme conscious cause is inferred.” (Nyāyakusumāñjali, Book II)

Nyāya philosophy did not see itself as in opposition to faith or revelation, but as a discipline for purifying thought, correcting error, and establishing doctrinal clarity. Its rigorous methods influenced virtually every subsequent school of Indian philosophy, including Buddhism and Vedānta.



Cover Page



Vedānta: Rational Discrimination and Non-Dual Inquiry:

Among the schools of Vedānta, Advaita (non-dualism) stands out for its sophisticated integration of reason (yukti), scriptural authority (śruti), and direct experience (anubhava). Śaṅkara (8th century CE), the principal systematizer of Advaita, repeatedly emphasized that reason and discrimination (viveka) are indispensable for spiritual progress. While the ultimate truth (Brahman) transcends conceptualization, one must employ reason to distinguish the real from the unreal, the permanent from the impermanent.

In his commentaries and independent works, Śaṅkara insists that scriptural statements are to be interpreted in accordance with reason and not blindly accepted. He writes in the *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya*: “When scriptural passages conflict, that which accords with reason must be taken as authoritative.” (*Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* 2.1.11)

Vivekachudamani: The Crown Jewel of Discriminative Reason:

The *Vivekachudamani* (“Crest-Jewel of Discrimination”), attributed to Śaṅkara, is among the most influential Advaitic texts dedicated to the cultivation of reason in the spiritual path. It opens with the declaration: “Rare indeed is human birth, rarer still is desire for liberation, and rarest of all is discrimination (viveka).” Throughout the text, viveka is extolled as the supreme tool for self-realization. The seeker is urged to scrutinize experience, question assumptions, and persistently inquire into the real nature of the self: “Among all means to liberation, knowledge is supreme, and discrimination (viveka) is its chief. Without discrimination, even a learned scholar is caught in the net of ignorance.” (*Vivekachudamani*, vv. 11–13)

The *Vivekachudamani* thus provides a sustained rationale for the necessity of reason—not as an end in itself, but as the instrument for attaining direct knowledge (*aparoksha anubhuti*) of Brahman. The process of reasoning leads to the negation of false identities and the affirmation of the self’s unity with the Absolute.

Reason and Its Limits:

It is crucial to note, however, that while reason is celebrated, these traditions also recognize its limits. Śaṅkara and the Advaita tradition maintain that rational inquiry must eventually give way to contemplative realization, as the finite mind cannot fully grasp the infinite: “The supreme truth is beyond the range of speech and mind; it can only be realized in direct experience.” (*Vivekachudamani*, v. 56)

Thus, systematic reasoning is not the denial of faith or experience, but a necessary purification and preparation for higher knowledge. In the classical Hindu context, reason and faith are not seen as mutually exclusive, but as complementary—each essential for the full realization of religious truth.

3.1.3 Limits and Critics of Reason in Hinduism: Upanishads, Bhakti, and Mysticism

While Hindu philosophy is celebrated for its rational and analytical traditions, it is equally notable for a profound awareness of the limits of reason in religious inquiry. This critical stance emerges from the Upanishads themselves, is developed in the Bhakti (devotional) movements, and is a recurring theme in Hindu mysticism. These strands insist that reason, though essential for dispelling ignorance and guiding seekers, ultimately encounters boundaries beyond which only direct experience, devotion, or grace can lead to the truth.

Upanishadic Skepticism Toward Reason’s Final Reach:

Many Upanishadic passages explicitly acknowledge the insufficiency of mere intellectual reasoning in the attainment of ultimate knowledge. The *Kena Upanishad* famously addresses the paradox of knowing Brahman: “That which is not known by the mind, but by which the mind is known—that is Brahman, not what people here worship as an object.” (*Kena Upanishad* 1.5)



Cover Page



This text emphasizes that Brahman, the Absolute, is not an object among objects to be grasped by conceptual thought. Instead, it is the very ground of consciousness, eluding all attempts at definition or logical circumscription. Reason, here, is a necessary but not sufficient condition for realization. The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad likewise hints at the “neti neti” method, a process of negation that points beyond every intellectual construct, leaving the seeker in a state of contemplative openness rather than discursive certainty.

The Bhakti Tradition: Faith, Love, and the Critique of Intellectualism:

The Bhakti movement, which arose across India from the early medieval period onwards, brought a powerful critique of philosophical rationalism and ritual formalism. Saints and poets such as Tulsidas, Kabir, Mirabai, and Surdas emphasized loving devotion (bhakti) over intellectual speculation. For them, salvation is not achieved through argument, but through wholehearted surrender to the divine. Tulsidas writes: “Where reasoning ends, devotion begins. Only those who love, truly know God.” (Paraphrase of Tulsidas, Ramcharitmanas)

Kabir, a poet-mystic who challenged both Hindu and Muslim orthodoxies, repeatedly warns against the arrogance of learned pundits and philosophers: “Behold but One in all things; it is the second that leads you astray.” (Kabir, Songs of Kabir, translated by Tagore)

For Bhakti saints, God is attained not by the head, but by the heart; not through disputation, but through humility, love, and grace. Reason is respected as a guide, but it is devotion that transforms and liberates.

Mysticism and the Transcendence of Language:

Hindu mysticism, found in the teachings of sages like Ramakrishna, Ramana Maharshi, and in many Tantric and Yoga traditions, asserts that ultimate reality (paramārtha) is ineffable, beyond words, logic, or categories. Ramakrishna frequently used parables to demonstrate that the experience of God transcends all reasoning: “Can one know God through reasoning? Be restless in your quest, and you will see Him. But reason by itself is dry and barren.” (Ramakrishna, The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna)

The mystics do not reject reason outright; rather, they see it as preparatory. Rational inquiry clears the ground of ignorance and dogma, but the highest knowledge (jñāna, samādhi) is a direct, transformative experience. In Yoga, Patanjali describes viveka khyāti—the discriminative knowledge that leads to liberation—but ultimately points to kaivalya, a state beyond all dualities and mental constructs.

Philosophical Reflections: The Double Edge of Reason:

Indian philosophical traditions, even when affirming reason, are marked by humility before the infinite. Śāṅkara himself, while extolling viveka, insists that realization (moksha) is a matter of direct intuition, not syllogistic proof: “The supreme truth is beyond the range of speech and mind; it can only be realized in direct experience.” (Vivekachudamani, v. 56)

This perspective does not undermine the importance of reason, but situates it within a broader spiritual path where faith, surrender, and mystical experience are essential. As such, the Hindu tradition offers a nuanced model: reason is necessary for the purification of understanding and the critical evaluation of doctrines, but it is ultimately a stepping stone toward an encounter with the Absolute that is beyond all rational construction.

4. Reason in Christianity

Christianity, like Hinduism, exhibits a deep and enduring engagement with the question of reason’s role in religious life. From its earliest centuries, the Christian tradition has cultivated both rational theology and an awareness of faith’s



Cover Page



transcendence of reason. What distinguishes Christian reflection on this theme is the repeated effort to reconcile revelation and faith with philosophical inquiry—an effort that has produced some of the most profound debates in Western thought.

4.1.1 Rationalist Traditions: Apologists, Augustine, Scholastics, and Modern Defenders

The rational defense of Christianity began in the early centuries of the Church. “Apologists” like Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen sought to present Christianity as the fulfillment of both Jewish prophecy and Greek philosophy. Justin Martyr called Christ the Logos—the rational principle of the universe—and claimed Christianity as the true philosophy: “Whatever things were rightly said among all men are the property of us Christians.” (Second Apology, 13)

Faith and reason were further integrated by Augustine of Hippo (354–430 CE), influenced by Plato. Augustine wrote, “I believe in order to understand, and I understand in order to believe” (*credo ut intelligam et intelligo ut credam*). For him, faith initiates deeper understanding, and reason, far from being opposed to faith, is a divine gift for exploring and defending its mysteries.

Rational theology peaked with medieval Scholasticism, notably in Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274). Aquinas aimed to harmonize Aristotelian philosophy with Christian doctrine. In the *Summa Theologiae*, he argued that certain truths about God—like His existence—can be known by reason, while deeper mysteries require revelation. His “Five Ways” are rational proofs for God’s existence, grounded in observation and logic: “Grace does not destroy nature, but perfects it.” (*Summa Theologiae*, I.1.8) Aquinas insisted faith and reason, both from God, can never truly conflict, shaping Catholic theology for centuries.

The Enlightenment continued and transformed rational approaches. Thinkers like John Locke, William Paley, Richard Swinburne, and Alvin Plantinga defended the rationality of faith using empiricism, probability, and analytic philosophy. Paley’s watchmaker analogy and Plantinga’s “reformed epistemology” (belief in God as “properly basic”) are notable examples.

Despite differing methods, these traditions hold that faith and reason are partners. Reason clarifies and defends faith, while faith inspires the rational search for truth—a relationship seen as a reflection of the rationality of creation and humanity’s divine image.

4.1.2 Critics of Reason in Christianity: Tertullian, Luther, Barth, and Mystics

While Christian theology has a long and distinguished tradition of rational argumentation, it also contains powerful critiques of reason’s capacity to serve as the foundation of religious belief. These critical voices, arising at different moments in Christian history, warn against the dangers of rationalism and affirm the primacy of faith, revelation, and direct experience.

Tertullian and the Roots of Fideism:

One of the earliest and most influential critics of religious rationalism was Tertullian (c. 155–220 CE). In his polemics against Greek philosophy, Tertullian famously asked, “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the Academy and the Church?” (*De Praescriptione Haereticorum*, 7). For Tertullian, faith is fundamentally distinct from human reason, which he saw as limited, corrupted, and potentially subversive of true Christian doctrine. Although he did not reject all use of reason, Tertullian insisted that the mysteries of faith must be accepted on the authority of divine revelation, not subjected to rational analysis.



Cover Page



Martin Luther and the Critique of Human Reason:

The Protestant Reformation intensified the critique of reason in religion. Martin Luther (1483–1546), the architect of the Reformation, was especially critical of the “scholastic” attempt to harmonize faith and reason. In his Table Talk, Luther described reason as “the Devil’s whore,” capable of producing pride, error, and rebellion against God. For Luther, the truth of the Gospel is “foolishness” to worldly wisdom (1 Corinthians 1:18–25), and genuine faith consists in trusting God’s promises even when they appear irrational: “Reason is the greatest enemy that faith has: it never comes to the aid of spiritual things. If you do not beat reason down... faith will never stand.” (Luther, Table Talk, no. 2826)

Luther’s critique was not anti-intellectual in the modern sense, but rather a protest against the presumption that finite, fallen human reason could comprehend or judge the infinite wisdom of God.

Karl Barth and the Primacy of Revelation:

In the twentieth century, Swiss theologian Karl Barth (1886–1968) gave powerful voice to the limits of reason in theology. Reacting against both liberal rationalism and natural theology, Barth insisted that God is known only through revelation—specifically, the self-disclosure of God in Jesus Christ and in Scripture. Barth’s magnum opus, Church Dogmatics, repeatedly argues that human attempts to climb to God by way of reason are inevitably idolatrous. God’s Word confronts human beings as wholly other, not as a logical conclusion to be deduced: “The statement that God is known only by God means...that all knowledge of God stands and falls with God’s revelation of Himself.” (Barth, Church Dogmatics I/1)

Christian Mystics: The Apophatic Tradition:

A parallel critique of reason comes from the Christian mystical and apophatic (“negative theology”) tradition. Figures such as Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, Meister Eckhart, and the anonymous author of The Cloud of Unknowing emphasize that the divine essence is utterly beyond human comprehension or conceptual grasp. God is “beyond being” and “beyond knowledge”; the highest form of knowing is a kind of unknowing, a mystical union that transcends all images and concepts.

The apophatic tradition does not deny the value of reason; rather, it insists that rational discourse, however useful, must ultimately give way to silence, awe, and contemplative receptivity. As Pseudo-Dionysius writes: “We pray to enter into that darkness which is beyond intellect, and in which all knowledge is surrendered.” (The Mystical Theology, I.1)

Wittgenstein, Kierkegaard, and Modern Christian Existentialism:

Modern philosophers such as Soren Kierkegaard and Ludwig Wittgenstein have extended the critique of religious rationalism in new directions. Kierkegaard, as discussed previously, emphasizes that faith is a “leap” beyond evidence and rational probability—a “virtue of the absurd.” Wittgenstein, especially in his later work, describes religious belief as a unique “language-game” whose meaning is internal to the life and practice of believers, not something to be justified by external rational criteria.

5 Comparative Analysis: Reason in Hinduism and Christianity

The examination of reason as a foundation of religious belief in Hinduism and Christianity reveals both striking parallels and profound differences. Each tradition has produced a rich heritage of rational theology, argumentation, and philosophical inquiry, while also developing powerful critiques of reason’s limits in spiritual matters. A comparative analysis exposes not only the distinctive trajectories of these traditions, but also enduring philosophical themes and challenges relevant to the global philosophy of religion.



Cover Page



5.1.1 Points of Convergence

Both Hinduism and Christianity have robust traditions that affirm the value and necessity of reason in religious life. In Hinduism, the Upanishadic emphasis on dialogue and viveka, the logical rigor of the Nyāya school, and the Advaita Vedānta focus on discriminative reason (viveka) and systematic inquiry reflect a high estimation of rational analysis. Similarly, Christianity from its earliest apologists to Scholastic thinkers like Aquinas has insisted that faith is compatible with, and even illuminated by, philosophical reasoning.

In both traditions, leading thinkers have maintained that reason is indispensable for clarifying doctrines, defending beliefs against skepticism, and facilitating interreligious dialogue. For example, Udayana's proofs for Īśvara and Aquinas's Five Ways for God's existence both aim to establish the rational credibility of theism in their respective contexts. Both traditions have also drawn clear distinctions between that which can be known by reason and that which must be received through revelation, mystical insight, or grace. Aquinas distinguishes "preambles of faith" from the mysteries of revelation, while Advaita Vedānta and the Upanishads emphasize that direct realization of Brahman goes beyond logical inference.

Furthermore, both Hinduism and Christianity have inspired contemporary thinkers—such as Swinburne and Plantinga for Christianity, and Radhakrishnan or Sarvepalli for Hinduism—who seek to revive and defend the rational plausibility of religious faith in the modern world.

5.2.2 Points of Divergence

Despite these similarities, significant differences shape each tradition's approach to reason and its relationship to faith.

Nature of Reason and Its Role:

Hinduism tends to offer a more integrated model in which reason, intuition, scriptural authority, and experience are seen as interdependent means of knowledge (pramāṇa). The epistemological pluralism of Indian philosophy allows for a dynamic interplay between debate, meditation, and devotion, often seeing no inherent conflict among them. In contrast, Christianity—especially in its Western forms—has frequently conceptualized reason and faith as distinct faculties that must be reconciled or held in tension, leading to sharper debates over "faith versus reason."

Limits of Reason:

Hindu critiques of reason, particularly in the Upanishadic, Bhakti, and mystical strands, emphasize the transcendence of ultimate reality and the necessity of experiential realization, but often do so within a context that still respects reason's purificatory and preparatory functions. In Christianity, critics such as Tertullian, Luther, and Barth have sometimes adopted a more radical opposition, insisting that reason is not merely limited but positively inadequate—or even hostile—to the core of faith, especially when it presumes to judge or replace revelation.

Relationship with Mysticism and Devotion:

Both traditions elevate forms of knowledge or experience beyond reason. However, Hinduism's Bhakti and Advaita traditions see rational inquiry as an indispensable preliminary that leads to the higher path of devotion or direct realization. Christian mysticism, especially in its apophatic forms, tends to contrast sharply the ineffability of God with the limits of intellect, sometimes urging a "cloud of unknowing" or a "leap of faith" that negates rational analysis.

6. Conclusion

Exploring reason as a foundation of religious belief in Hinduism and Christianity reveals both intellectual ambition and spiritual humility. Both traditions defend the compatibility of reason and faith, yet recognize where reason must yield



Cover Page



to revelation, devotion, or mystical experience. Hinduism is notable for its pluralistic synthesis of logic, intuition, and experience, valuing reason as a guide, yet acknowledging that ultimate truth transcends intellect and is reached through devotion and direct realization. Christianity, too, prizes reason for clarifying and justifying faith but maintains a strong tradition—through thinkers like Tertullian, Luther, and Barth—of affirming faith and revelation beyond rational limits. In both, reason and faith are seen as complementary, not opposed, and their ongoing interplay remains central to the depth and vitality of religious life in a complex, modern world.

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