

THE FUNDAMENTAL HUMAN NEED FOR RELIGION: A PHILOSOPHICAL, PSYCHOLOGICAL, SOCIOLOGICAL, AND TRANSCENDENTAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract

This article explores religion as a fundamental human need that transcends formal belief systems, encompassing philosophical, psychological, sociological, and transcendental dimensions. Employing a qualitative and analytical literature-based approach, the study examines primary and secondary sources relevant to the nature and role of religion in human life. The findings reveal that philosophically, religion provides meaning and moral direction beyond rational comprehension; psychologically, it fosters emotional balance and inner peace; sociologically, it strengthens social solidarity and interpersonal harmony; and transcendentally, it connects human beings to God as the ultimate source of value and purpose. In the modern era, characterized by secularism and moral uncertainty, religion remains profoundly relevant as an ethical and spiritual compass guiding humanity toward existential balance and sustainable human flourishing.

Keywords: fundamental human need, religion, transcendental dimension

Abstrak

Artikel ini membahas agama sebagai kebutuhan fundamental manusia yang melampaui aspek kepercayaan formal, mencakup dimensi filosofis, psikologis, sosiologis, dan transendental. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan metode kajian literatur analitis untuk menelaah berbagai sumber primer dan sekunder yang relevan dengan hakikat dan fungsi agama dalam kehidupan manusia. Hasil analisis menunjukkan bahwa secara filosofis, agama memberikan makna dan arah hidup yang tidak dapat dijelaskan oleh rasionalitas semata; secara psikologis, agama berperan dalam menjaga keseimbangan batin dan ketenangan jiwa; secara sosiologis, agama memperkuat solidaritas sosial dan harmoni antarindividu; sedangkan secara transendental, agama menghubungkan manusia dengan Tuhan sebagai sumber nilai tertinggi. Di era modern yang ditandai oleh sekularisme dan krisis moral, agama tetap relevan sebagai pedoman etis dan spiritual yang menuntun manusia menuju keseimbangan eksistensial dan kemanusiaan yang berkelanjutan.

Kata kunci: kebutuhan fundamental manusia, agama, dimensi transendental

INTRODUCTION

Human beings are multidimensional creatures whose existence cannot be sustained solely by physical needs. Beyond the pursuit of material satisfaction, humans require the fulfillment of psychological, social, and spiritual needs that give life a sense of wholeness and meaning. Since the dawn of civilization, humankind has continuously sought answers

to profound existential questions concerning the origin of life, the purpose of existence, and the reality beyond death (Shihab, 2020). This search for ultimate truth has fostered the realization that humans depend on something higher than themselves—religion. Far from being a mere system of rituals, religion constitutes a comprehensive framework of values that provides direction, identity, and purpose for human life (Hasan, 2025). In this sense, religion stands as a fundamental human necessity, equal in importance to biological, psychological, and social needs.

Religion functions as a guiding compass that shapes human morality, consciousness, and harmony within both personal and collective dimensions. Through religion, individuals learn to distinguish between right and wrong, good and evil, and are encouraged to build meaningful relationships with God, with others, and with the environment (Gani et al., 2024). Spiritually, religion fosters a transcendent bond between human beings and the Divine, cultivating inner peace and offering profound meaning in life. In this respect, religion is not only a system of belief but a transformative force that sustains mental stability and strengthens ethical awareness.

Beyond its spiritual influence, religion operates as a sociocultural adhesive that promotes solidarity and cooperation within communities. It serves as a social institution that nurtures fraternity, justice, and compassion, reflected in collective practices such as mutual aid, social empathy, and interfaith tolerance. Moreover, religion plays a crucial moral role by acting as a compass of values that directs human behavior toward integrity, responsibility, and honesty. Culturally, it has inspired artistic expression, architecture, literature, and legal systems that shape the identity and civilization of societies throughout history (Prasetyo, 2023). Religion, therefore, transcends private spirituality and becomes a civilizational force influencing every dimension of human life.

In contemporary contexts marked by globalization, technological advancement, and moral uncertainty, religion remains profoundly relevant. Modern society faces a range of issues—social conflict, moral degradation, and psychological anxiety—that indicate a persistent human longing for spiritual grounding. As the speed of material progress surpasses moral development, individuals experience a crisis of meaning and disorientation that underscores the need for transcendent values. Religion, in this light, functions as a stabilizing source of inner peace, social unity, and existential orientation. Hence, understanding humanity's fundamental need for religion is essential to fostering a meaningful, ethical, and harmonious civilization.

Philosophically, religion fulfills humanity's quest for meaning and moral certainty. It provides a metaphysical foundation that anchors human thought, ethics, and purpose. Philosophers such as Kant and Kierkegaard argue that religion bridges rational inquiry with moral obligation, shaping the human capacity for self-reflection and responsibility (Mursalin, 2024; Sunardin, 2021). Psychologically, religion contributes to emotional balance and mental well-being. Empirical studies demonstrate that prayer, meditation, and other religious practices alleviate anxiety and reduce stress, offering both individual

resilience and collective comfort (Chamara, 2025; Nouman & Mubashira, 2022). Religion, therefore, not only satisfies the intellect but also sustains the emotional and spiritual dimensions of human existence.

From a sociological perspective, religion plays a vital role in maintaining social cohesion. It establishes shared values that govern human relationships and societal norms. In pluralistic nations such as Indonesia, religion becomes a unifying force that nurtures harmony amidst diversity (Prasetyani & Novina, 2020; Sani & Shaid, 2022). The existence of interfaith institutions like the Forum Kerukunan Umat Beragama (FKUB) illustrates how religious dialogue promotes tolerance and prevents sectarian conflict (Prasetyani, 2020). On the transcendental plane, religion bridges the finite and the infinite, connecting human beings with the Divine as the ultimate source of truth and meaning (Azizurrochim & Al Khanafi, 2023; Utang, 2023). Through this relationship, humans attain a sense of self-transcendence that integrates personal identity with cosmic purpose.

Nevertheless, the forces of modernity and globalization continue to challenge the role of religion in contemporary life. The rise of secularism, individualism, and materialism often undermines spiritual values, producing cultural dislocation and ethical relativism (Andrew, 2023; Ramli, 2024). Yet, paradoxically, these very crises reveal humanity's enduring need for transcendence. Scholars have noted that in moments of collective trauma—such as the COVID-19 pandemic—individuals tend to rediscover spiritual and communal values as coping mechanisms for psychological distress (Casali et al., 2020; Hirschi et al., 2024). Thus, the modern crisis of meaning, characterized by existential anxiety and spiritual disorientation, signifies not the decline of religion but its indispensable role in restoring human balance.

In summary, the intricate interplay between philosophical reflection, psychological stability, social cohesion, and transcendental experience underscores the indispensability of religion as a fundamental human need. Far from being an obsolete institution, religion remains an essential force that shapes identity, morality, and collective consciousness in an increasingly fragmented world. By exploring the philosophical, psychological, sociological, and transcendental dimensions of this need, this study aims to demonstrate that religion is not merely a matter of belief but a multidimensional necessity intrinsic to the essence of being human.

METHOD

The research employed a qualitative, literature-based approach with an analytical–conceptual orientation. Rather than relying on empirical data collection through surveys or experiments, this study focused on an in-depth critical examination of primary and secondary sources relevant to the discourse on religion as a fundamental human need. These sources included works on philosophy of religion, psychology of religion, sociology of religion, and contemporary studies on spirituality, moral crises, and religious life in modern society. The materials analyzed encompassed academic books, peer-

reviewed journal articles, dissertations, and institutional publications that discuss the multidimensional nature of religion—philosophical, psychological, sociological, and transcendental. The analytical process involved reading, classifying, and interpreting theoretical arguments to identify recurring themes such as the search for existential meaning, moral guidance, social cohesion, and transcendental experience.

Technically, this study integrated hermeneutic analysis and thematic synthesis across disciplines. The hermeneutic method was applied to interpret conceptual meanings of religion within their historical, cultural, and intellectual contexts—examining how various thinkers positioned religion as a source of purpose, inner peace, moral order, and connection with the Divine. Thematic synthesis was then employed to interrelate findings from philosophical, psychological, sociological, and religious perspectives, producing a comprehensive understanding of religion as a fundamental human necessity. Through this process, the research did not merely describe the role of religion but sought to construct an integrative conceptual framework that explains how these four dimensions—philosophical, psychological, sociological, and transcendental—interact to sustain human existence in the modern world.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Nature of the Human Need for Religion

Religion may be understood as a comprehensive system of belief that structures the relationship between human beings and God, as well as among human beings themselves. In its broadest sense, religion encompasses transcendental teachings, moral prescriptions, and ritual practices that guide human life. It is therefore not merely a set of doctrines or ceremonial acts, but a normative framework that offers direction, purpose, and meaning to human existence (Abitolkha & Muvid, 2020). Classical and modern thinkers offer different emphases in defining religion. Emile Durkheim, from a sociological lens, describes religion as a system of beliefs and practices related to the sacred which unites adherents into a single moral community (Fadel, 2024). William James, from a psychological standpoint, describes religion primarily as an intimate and affective experience of dependence on a power greater than oneself (Sofia et al., 2025). These definitions highlight that religion is simultaneously social and deeply personal.

Philosophically, religion represents humanity's effort to understand the nature of existence and its relation to a transcendent reality. For Kant, religion is inseparable from morality; it gives concrete form to the universal moral law and situates ethical obligation within a horizon of ultimate accountability (Meilani & Yusup, 2025). This view implies that religion is not reducible to external ritual but is intrinsically connected to ethical consciousness. The theological perspective further deepens this point: religion is not merely a human construct, but divine guidance revealed through prophets and messengers to serve as a comprehensive way of life. In this framework, religion is considered to originate from ultimate truth, not from human invention, and therefore occupies a higher normative status than ideology, culture, or social convention.

Understanding why religion emerges as a fundamental human need requires attention to the broader structure of human needs. Human beings require not only biological fulfillment—food, shelter, health—but also psychological, social, and spiritual fulfillment (Nasution et al., 2025; Yuliani, 2022). Biological needs provide the basic conditions of survival, but they do not suffice to make life meaningful. Psychological needs such as security, affection, recognition, and self-worth allow individuals to develop stable identity and emotional balance. Social needs arise from the fact that humans are intrinsically relational creatures who depend on solidarity, cooperation, and belonging (Fajriah et al., 2024). These needs help sustain communal life, shared responsibility, and mutual protection. Yet even these dimensions do not fully exhaust what it means to be human.

The spiritual dimension is distinct. Spiritual need refers to the quest for ultimate meaning, existential purpose, and relationship with the Divine (Anitasari, 2021). Unlike material needs, spiritual need cannot be measured empirically, but it exerts a powerful internal demand. Religion responds to this need by answering questions that science and instrumental reason cannot finally address: Where do we come from? Why do we exist? What lies beyond death? (Muhajarah & Bariklana, 2021). By articulating a coherent narrative of origin, purpose, and destiny, religion provides an existential map that orients the self within the cosmos. This orientation generates a sense of security, direction, and vocation that cannot be easily replaced by secular frameworks.

Religion also sustains human beings in moments of fragility. In situations of loss, suffering, injustice, or uncertainty, individuals often turn to religious belief and practice for strength, consolation, and endurance (Ibrahim, 2024). Religion functions here as an inner resource, anchoring the self in something greater than immediate circumstances. It also shapes moral disposition: values such as honesty, justice, compassion, responsibility, and care for others are not taught merely as social expectations, but as religious imperatives grounded in accountability before God (Riadi, 2024). Ultimately, religion situates the human person within a transcendent order, cultivating humility, gratitude, and ethical awareness. In this sense, religion is not an optional addition to human life but an essential aspect of what it means to be human as a moral, social, and spiritual being (Febriansyah & Hariy, 2025; Kholid, 2023).

The Functions and Roles of Religion in Human Life

Religion performs multiple essential functions—personal, social, moral, cultural, and civilizational. First, at the personal level, religion acts as a moral compass and existential guide. It shapes how individuals interpret their experiences, make ethical decisions, and orient their lives toward coherent goals (Irawan, 2022). Religious teachings provide principles governing how one should relate to oneself (self-discipline, sincerity, humility), to others (justice, kindness, solidarity), and to the world more broadly

(responsibility, stewardship). In this sense, religion not only instructs individuals on how to act, but also offers a telos: a vision of what it means to live well.

Second, religion functions as a mechanism of social regulation. Every society requires norms, limits, prohibitions, and obligations to maintain order and prevent moral collapse. Religion articulates and enforces such norms through internalized moral commitments rather than through force alone. Azisi (2020) argues that religious ethics provide a form of social control that reduces deviance and promotes accountability. Religious injunctions against lying, oppression, exploitation, and injustice serve not only to protect individuals but to secure the moral fabric of society. Importantly, this regulation operates at both social and spiritual levels: individuals comply not merely out of fear of legal punishment but out of awareness that their actions are subject to divine evaluation.

Third, religion is a generative source of moral and normative order. Values such as honesty, responsibility, fairness, compassion, and dignity are not arbitrary within a religious worldview; they are grounded in sacred command and oriented toward the common good (Siregar et al., 2025). Because these values are anchored in revelation, they possess a form of durability that positive law and social convention often lack. While legal systems and cultural customs can shift in response to political forces, religious moral imperatives tend to maintain continuity. Religion thus supplies a stable ethical foundation in times of rapid social change and moral relativization.

Fourth, religion has historically served as a source of cultural creativity, intellectual development, and aesthetic expression. Religious commitment has inspired monumental architecture (mosques, cathedrals, temples), devotional literature, sacred music, calligraphy, and visual art that transmit theological meaning through beauty (Muslimah, 2025). In the classical Islamic world, religious imperatives to “seek knowledge” supported the development of astronomy, medicine, philosophy, mathematics, and jurisprudence. This makes evident that religion is not anti-intellectual; on the contrary, it has often been the animating force behind the pursuit of knowledge, artistic refinement, and civilizational formation (Prasetyo, 2023).

Finally, religion harmonizes three fundamental relationships: the relationship of the human being to God, to other human beings, and to the natural world (Irawan, 2022; Ningsih, 2020). Through worship, prayer, and remembrance, religion cultivates consciousness of God and gratitude for life. Through social ethics—justice, mercy, mutual respect—religion structures social harmony and nurtures solidarity. Through teachings on stewardship, responsibility, and balance, religion frames humanity’s duty toward nature as a trust, not a license for exploitation. This holistic orientation shows that religion is not limited to private spirituality; it is an integrative force that sustains personal integrity, social cohesion, and ecological responsibility.

Implications of the Absence of Religion

The absence of religion in a person's life, or in a society more broadly, has profound implications at the existential, moral, psychological, and social levels. At the existential level, individuals may experience a crisis of meaning. Religion offers a coherent narrative concerning where humans come from, why they live, and what awaits them beyond death. Without such a narrative, individuals may feel that life is directionless, arbitrary, or empty (Sofia et al., 2025). This loss of teleological orientation can result in nihilism—an outlook in which life is perceived as devoid of inherent significance. Nihilism is not merely an abstract philosophical position; it can erode motivation, undermine hope, and weaken the will to act responsibly in the world.

At the moral level, the absence of religion can lead to ethical fragility. Religious moral systems typically provide clear distinctions between right and wrong, justice and injustice, virtue and vice. When such transcendent grounding is removed, morality risks becoming purely situational or interest-based. [Febriyanti et al \(2025\)](#) observe that in the absence of a transcendent ethical reference point, moral claims can be reduced to personal preference or social negotiation. This creates vulnerability to ethical relativism, where actions are justified not because they are intrinsically good, but because they serve immediate interests. Such relativism threatens collective trust, weakens accountability, and ultimately destabilizes social order.

Psychologically, the removal of religion may intensify emotional vulnerability. For many individuals, religious prayer, surrender, and remembrance function as coping mechanisms in the face of suffering, injustice, or loss. These practices cultivate inner resilience, hope, and acceptance (Ibrahim, 2024). Without them, individuals may become more susceptible to anxiety, despair, or existential restlessness. Religion also offers a framework for reconciliation with one's limitations: it affirms that suffering can carry meaning, that justice transcends the present moment, and that ultimate accountability exists. Without such a framework, unresolved anger, guilt, and fear can accumulate.

Socially, the marginalization of religion can weaken communal bonds. Religion does not only orient individuals toward God; it also links individuals to one another through shared rituals, shared norms, and shared moral expectations. It creates a sense of "we," a moral community with obligations of care, generosity, and solidarity (Simarmata, 2024). When religion is absent, social ties risk becoming transactional and instrumental. The weakening of shared sacred commitments can, over time, translate into heightened social fragmentation, mistrust, and conflict.

It is important, however, to acknowledge the presence of secular alternatives such as secular humanism. Secular humanism argues that human beings can live ethically and meaningfully without reference to religion, grounding morality instead in human dignity, rational deliberation, and social consensus (Aminullah, 2022). Such an approach demonstrates that morality can, to an extent, be constructed and maintained outside explicitly religious frameworks. Nevertheless, even strong forms of secular ethics often struggle to replicate the transcendental dimension offered by religion—the sense of

ultimate accountability, the promise of eschatological justice, and the lived experience of connection to a reality greater than the self. For this reason, the absence of religion cannot be considered merely an intellectual shift, but a profound transformation of the existential, moral, and social structure of human life.

Religion in the Context of Modernity

In the modern era, globalization, technological acceleration, cultural pluralism, and moral uncertainty have reshaped the place of religion in public and private life. On the one hand, modernity has generated unprecedented mobility of ideas, identities, and values; on the other hand, it has also amplified materialism, individualism, and ethical relativism (Ramli, 2024). Within this landscape, religion functions as a moral filter and identity anchor. It offers an alternative to purely consumerist and hedonistic life-patterns by articulating a conception of human dignity and responsibility that transcends economic utility. In this sense, religion resists the reduction of human beings to economic actors and reasserts their status as moral and spiritual agents.

Modernity also forces religious institutions to adapt. Religious education, leadership, and community structures are increasingly expected to address new social realities such as digital culture, pluralism, and social inequality. In Indonesia, for example, Islamic educational institutions such as pesantren are required to modernize their curricula and engagement strategies while still preserving their spiritual core (Halimah et al., 2024; Muthoifin & Surawan, 2023; Suhada et al., 2022). The contemporary discourse on religious moderation (*moderasi beragama*) seeks to sustain social harmony in a religiously diverse society by cultivating tolerance, discouraging extremism, and shaping religion as a constructive public force rather than a source of polarization (Hakim, 2022; Salim & Rosada, 2023; Suparta, 2024). This illustrates that religion, far from retreating, is actively negotiating its role in shaping civic life.

The rise of digital media adds another layer of complexity. Digital platforms allow religious messages to circulate rapidly and widely, expanding access to religious learning beyond traditional institutions. At the same time, this environment encourages individualization of belief, personalized spirituality, and fragmented religious authority (Constantin et al., 2024). The result is ambivalent: on one side, democratization of religious knowledge; on the other, the risk of superficial religiosity, performative piety, and doctrinal confusion. In this context, religious identity becomes both increasingly visible and increasingly contested.

In addition, religion faces explicit philosophical challenges from secularism, materialism, and relativism. Secularism often confines religion to the private sphere and marginalizes its voice in ethical, political, and policy debates. Materialism, by prioritizing economic gain and pleasure, tends to erode commitments to spiritual accountability and collective responsibility. Relativism challenges the very idea of universal moral truth, suggesting that all values are equally valid, and thus undermining religion's claim to moral universality. If left unchecked, these pressures can lead to moral exhaustion and social

atomization—conditions in which individuals struggle to locate binding meaning beyond themselves.

Despite these pressures, religion remains indispensable to contemporary civilization. Science can describe how reality functions, but it cannot, by itself, determine why reality should be oriented toward justice, compassion, or human dignity. Religion provides the ethical grammar through which technological power can be morally directed. In debates on artificial intelligence, biotechnology, environmental degradation, and social inequality, religious ethics contributes categories such as stewardship, accountability, sanctity of life, and intergenerational responsibility (Sari et al., 2025). In this way, religion complements rational-technical discourse by insisting that progress must remain accountable to higher moral ends. Thus, rather than being obsolete, religion continues to operate as a moral and spiritual force that safeguards human dignity, social cohesion, and ecological responsibility in an age of accelerating change.

CONCLUSION

The analysis confirms that religion is a fundamental and multidimensional necessity in human life philosophically, psychologically, sociologically, and transcendentally. Philosophically, religion offers a coherent framework of meaning that orients human existence within a broader metaphysical order, answering questions that reason alone cannot resolve. Psychologically, it sustains emotional balance and resilience, providing a sense of peace, security, and hope amid suffering and uncertainty. Sociologically, religion fosters solidarity, ethical order, and communal integration, functioning as a cohesive moral force that unites individuals into a shared moral community. Transcendentally, religion bridges the finite and the infinite, enabling human beings to experience divine connection and spiritual depth that transcends material limitations. Collectively, these dimensions demonstrate that religion is not an optional cultural artifact, but an essential structure of human existence that gives coherence, morality, and direction to life.

In the context of modernity and globalization, the need for religion becomes even more evident. The dominance of secular rationality, materialism, and individualism has created crises of meaning, ethical relativism, and spiritual disorientation that technological progress alone cannot remedy. Religion, therefore, remains vital as both a moral compass and a source of transcendence—ensuring that human development remains aligned with ethical and spiritual values. By integrating philosophical insight, psychological well-being, social harmony, and transcendental awareness, religion continues to provide an irreplaceable foundation for a humane and sustainable civilization. In this light, rediscovering the role of religion is not a retreat from modernity, but a necessary step toward restoring the moral and existential balance of the human condition.

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