

## “Essence of Christianity”

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The magnum opus of the great German humanist philosopher and anthropologist, **Ludwig Feuerbach** (1804-1872) is “The Essence of Christianity” (German: *Das Wesen des Christentums*; 1841). In this classic of humanism, he explains his philosophy and critique of religion.

### Alienation of goodness

It was actually Friedrich Engels (who, with Karl Marx, wrote *Das Kapital*) who made Feuerbach famous in their own times. Engels famously wrote: “Then came Feuerbach’s *Essence of Christianity* ... One must himself have experienced the liberating effect of this book to get an idea of it. Enthusiasm was general; we all became at once Feuerbachians.”

Like the radical rationalist Bruno Bauer, a student of Hegel’s, Feuerbach in *The Essence of Christianity* characterized religion as a form of **alienation**. God, he wrote, is to be understood as the essence of the human species, externalized and projected into an alien reality.

Qualities such as wisdom, love, benevolence are really attributes of the human species, but we attribute them, in a purified form, to God. The more we enrich our concept of God in this way, however, the more we impoverish ourselves. The solution, Feuerbach proposes, is to understand that theology is an anthropology wrongly described. What good we believe of God is really true of ourselves. Thus, humanity can regain its essence that it has lost in religion.

### Alienation by priesthood

In the Buddha’s time, even before him, the brahmins, members of the priest class, claim that they were born from “God’s mouth,” and were, as such, entitled to monopolize religion and goodness. Members of the other classes – the nobles (politicians), the merchants (business class), and the workers (working class), have to look up to the brahmins (the priests and pastors) to please God (through rituals of life) and reach God by respecting and giving wealth to these entitled priests and priestlike monastics.

The Buddha completely rejects such a contrived system that exploits society. He teaches that we are not **born** pure or impure (by class), but our **deeds** (karma) make us so: when our actions are rooted in greed, hate or delusion, we are **bad**. When our actions are rooted in charity, love and wisdom, we are **good**. By our own actions—only so—we create our own heaven or hell right here and now.

### Self-reliance

In simple terms, the Buddha teaches **self-accountability** in doing good, and **self-reliance** in working for our salvation, and be kind to others. Religion invented the idea of **sin** to separate man from God, to alienate us from our inner goodness (remember Feuerbach?). Then, these God-believers tell us we cannot help ourselves, meaning, only **they** can “save”

us! Notice how words can easily be twisted and made to sound bigger than reality, and to intoxicate and delude us into wrong views and ways.

The Buddha’s message is simple. Only we can save ourself: we are our own master (who else can be our master if not us?) (Dh160, 380). Even when there is a life-saver on a swimming beach, it is still safer when everyone knows how to swim and to stay clear of dangerous waters. The Buddha reminds us to learn to swim, and to learn to discern where the dangers are in the waters of life, and to avoid them; and to teach others about these good ways, too.

### **Divine virtues**

God or gods may be in heaven. If we believe them, then we should understand that their heavenly state comes from their own acts of good: love, ruth (compassion), joy and peace. These are the true qualities of **godliness**.

There are really neither God nor gods, only godliness. It is with these **4 divine virtues**—love, ruth, joy and peace—that they are divine beings. In that case, when **we** ourselves cultivate these divine virtues, the Buddha teaches, we, too, can become **godly** even in our human form. Our body may be human, but our mind and heart are Godly or godly (choose your word).

### **Words, words, words**

Notice how almost all religions are nothing more than a lot of noise clamouring for power: sermons, rituals, lessons, talks and volumes (in sound and in books). Early Buddhism points at these **noises** and calls them **views**. The proper way of being human and happy, to begin with, is to learn to silently **see** rightly—not at the surfaces of things or loudness and glitter of externals.

We should look, with the mind’s eye, deeper into the true reality of things. What do we see? Everywhere we see **impermanence**. We can deny God, but we cannot deny impermanence. All things in heaven and earth will pass away: to exist is to change, to live, to die.

### **Impermanence**

In other words, nothing here or there (in heaven) remains forever or eternal (powerful but unhelpful words). Since things and people do not last, we should treasure them, especially our loved ones. Even then, we do not and cannot live alone. We are interconnected with everything around us, our environment and ecology. We have to respect nature.

In this sense, **life** (not God or some external thing) is the starting value in Buddhism. To begin with, we have life; it is impermanent. This is the **meaning** of life: *impermanence*. We must treasure this passing life: this is the **purpose** of life. To live, then, is to be happy: to work to support our life and of those we care about; indeed, we should care about all other lives, too, since we are all interconnected.

We are truly happy only when we are **free**, bodily and mentally. To be free, we must live with real truth, not religious fictions and fantasies (notice how much of religion is just fiction and fantasy!). Above all, we have to keep our minds calm and clear so that our hearts are filled with love, ruth, joy and peace here and now.

Then, comes **the inner peace**, which allows our mind and heart to rise above our frail human bodies. Our mind becomes godly; our heart becomes spiritual, that is, able to free itself from things, from this impermanent world. As we understand what this means, our mind and heart become more free and awakened. The highest of this understanding and freedom, the Buddha calls **nirvana**.

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[an occasional re-look at the Buddha's Example and Teachings]

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