

UNIVERSAL RELIGION OF VIVEKANANDA: A WAY OUT OF RELIGIOUS DISSENSION

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Abstract: Religion is an important constituent of human culture and values. But it plays an ambivalent role in our lives and society. Though its core business is to build, sustain and promote peace and love throughout the globe, it can by deviation be a powerful source of violence. According to Vivekananda, the attitude of 'exclusive right to live' of different world religions gives birth to violence. He believes that though religions are divergent in various aspects, they are not contradictory, rather supplementary to each other. He defines religion as the realization of divinity within us and asserts that the main goal of all religions is to realize such divinity and this realization is the one universal religion. So, the key concept of universal religion is to love man is to love God. Hence, universal religion propounded by him deserves great importance and may be an ideal way out of religious dissension as it accepts all cultures, all views, all ways through which man quests the ultimate truth which is one without second.

Religion is one of the most important urges of human beings, because it addresses our existential issues such as salvation, death, fear, sacred, profane, etc., hence it cannot be banished or ignored. Moreover, many renowned scientists even Nobel Laureates also who consider that some religious or metaphysical explanation is necessary for the addressing of our existential issues.¹ Vivekananda says, "Religious thought is in man's very constitution, so much so that it is impossible for him to give up religion until he can give up his mind and body, until he can stop thought and life. As long as a man thinks, this struggle must go on, and so long man must have some form of religion. Thus we see various forms of religion in the world."² But religion plays an ambivalent role in our life and society. On the one hand its core business is to build, sustain and promote peace and love throughout the globe; on the other, it can be a powerful source of violence. According to Johan Galtung, religion contains, in varying degrees, elements that contribute to both war and peace.³ Moreover, it has been found that after the end of the Cold War, religious conflicts have increased more

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¹Townes, Charles H. 1995. *Making Waves*. New York: American Institute of Physics Press).web. <http://nobelists.net> &Marconi, Guglielmo. 1934. A scientific address to the International Congress of Electro-Radio Biology. September 10. Venice, Italy.] <http://nobelists.net>.

²The Complete Works of Vivekananda, Vol. IV, Advaita Ashram (publication Department), 5 Delhi Entally Road. Kolkata 700014, pp. 203-04.

³Johan Galtung, "Religions Hard and Soft", *Cross Currents*, Winter 1997-98 (1997).

than nonreligious conflicts.⁴ Empirical research shows that “about two thirds of contemporary wars turn on issues of religious, ethnic, or national identity”.⁵ The Crusades, the French Wars of Religion, the Muslim conquests are frequently cited historical instances. The question then arises: why is it that men kill each other in the name of religion whereas religion demands that we ought to love each other if we are truly religious in spirit. In this paper, I like to address this question following Vivekananda and attempt to show that his Universal Religion can be a potential way out of religious dissension.

Vivekananda thinks that man has been searching the spiritual entities such as destiny, soul, God, etc., and this searching is being represented by different world religions competing and quarrelling to each other by declaring the absolute empire in the arena of religion and consequently by claiming the ‘exclusive right to live’. It is this kind of attitude that gives birth to hatred, war, conflict, tension and so on. Vivekananda believes in the diversity of life and calls it the law of life without which variations in thought is not possible. Keeping this in mind, he says that though throughout the ages, people of different religions have been trying to prove their “exclusive right to live”, though they have been claiming that one’s own religion is absolutely true, but none of them has been able to make success in this matter. He firmly asserts that, it is a serious mistake and quite impossible to make all people think in a single mode about spiritual things. In his own words, “...any attempt to bring all humanity to one method of thinking in spiritual things has been a failure and always will be a failure”.⁶ He emphasizes that though religions are divergent in various aspects, they are not contradictory, rather supplementary to each other. The differences amongst religions are external parts only which are due to our birth, education, surroundings and so on; but internally each religion bears the ideal which is its unique feature and soul; the soul of one may differ from that of other religion, nevertheless, they are not contradictory, both are parts of the same universal truth. He says: “Each religion, as it were, takes up one part of the great universal truth, and spends its whole force in embodying and typifying that part of the great truth. It is, therefore, addition, not exclusion. That is the idea. System after system arises, each one embodying a great idea, and ideals must be added to ideals. And this is the march of humanity”.⁷ In this way Vivekananda gives equal importance to all religions and thinks that each religion manifests a unique essence –something which is its soul and which is essential for the good of the world. For example, according to him, the soul

⁴Jonathan Fox, “Religion and State Failure: An Examination of the Extent and Magnitude of Religious Conflict from 1950 to 1996,” *International Political Science Review*. Vol. 25, No. 1, 2004, pp. 55 and 64.

⁵R. Scott Appleby, *Ambivalence of the Sacred* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000), p. 17.

⁶The Complete Works of Vivekananda, Advaita Ashram (publication Department), 5 Delhi Entally Road. Kolkata 700014. Vol. 2, p. 363.

⁷Ibid vol. 2, p. 365.

of Islam is brotherhood among its followers which is excellent and needed for social harmony. He observes, "Islam makes its followers all equal-so, that, you see, is the peculiar excellence of Mohammedanism...and all the other ideas about heaven and of life etc. are not Mohammedanism. They are accretions."⁸

The excellence of Hinduism is spirituality which is its ideal. Christianity also has its own ideal. All these ideals are very much needed for the existence and well-being of humanity. Under this circumstances, Vivekananda feels the need of universal religion which cannot be formed out of any of the world religions by converting all people of other religions into one, because, all religions bear ideals which are important and necessary for us. Hence, he suggests that universal religion should be broad enough so that it can be suitable to all religions, it should provide food to all types of minds. In this context, he observes that "our watchword, then, will be acceptance and not exclusion. Not only toleration....but acceptance....I accept all religions that were in the past, and worship with them all; I worship God with every one of them, in whatever form they worship Him. I shall go to the mosque of the Mohammedan; I shall enter the Christian's church and kneel before the crucifix; I shall enter the Buddhistic temple, where I shall take refuge in Buddha and in his Law. I shall go into the forest and sit down in meditation with the Hindu, who is trying to see the Light which enlightens the heart of every one."⁹ After establishing the need of Universal Religion, he defines religion as the realization of divinity within us. He thinks religion does not consist of doctrines, dogmas, rituals, practices etc., it does not reside in temple, mosque, church and other religious places; these are non-essential and external parts of religion. The essential and inner core of religion is the divinity, the absolute truth, the oneness, lies in all religions. The main goal of all religions is to realize such divinity and this realization is the one universal religion. He expresses his view in this way: "The end of all religions is the realizing of God in the soul. That is the one universal religion."¹⁰ He stresses upon the fact that differences amongst religions are unavoidable, and not only that, in every religion, there are two forces working, namely, good and bad which he explains in the following way: "No other human motive has deluged the world with blood so much as religion, at the same time, nothing has brought into existence so many hospitals and asylums for the poor; no other human influence has taken such care, not only of humanity, but also of the lowest of animals, as religion has done. Nothing makes us so cruel as religion, and nothing makes us so tender as religion."¹¹ Moreover, several attempts have been made to make religion universal for centuries, but all efforts have been failed, because, every time, religion became 'my father's religion', 'our nation's religion', 'our country's religion' and so on in the hands of unscrupulous men. In this way, instead

⁸ Ibid vol. 2, p.371-372.

⁹ Ibid. vol. 2, p. 373-374.

¹⁰ Ibid, vol. I, p. 324.

¹¹ Ibid. vol. 2, pp.-375-376.

of loving to each other, the followers of one religion started to hate, criticize and even persecute the followers of other religions. This practice has been the main impediment in the way of bringing religious harmony.

To show the differences amongst religions, Vivekananda recognizes three aspects of all 'great' and 'recognized' religions which are very divergent. These three parts are- philosophy, mythology and rituals. Philosophy deals with the whole subject matter of religion, i.e. its basic principles, aim and means to achieve it. The second part is mythology that makes philosophy concrete through the legendary lives of men or supernatural beings. Ritual, the third part of religion, consists of worships, ceremonies, flowers, incense etc. and makes religion more concrete. All these three aspects differ from religion to religion and there is no universal philosophy, or universal mythology, or universal ritual accepted by religions. Each religion claims the superiority of its philosophy, mythology and rituals and sometimes compels the followers of other religions to accept them. Vivekananda sees this practice as fanaticism and compares it with the most dreaded disease of all diseases. In this way, he shows that it is very difficult to find out any unity amongst religions nevertheless, he assures that it exists. In order to show the unity in different religions he compares it with the 'humanity' which is an abstract in nature but which is common to all human beings irrespective of their differences in all fields of life. Likewise, there is a common element running through all religions and this common core is the idea of God, the ultimate reality the unity lies in all religions. He observes: "So it is with this universal religion, which runs through all the various religions of the world in the form of God; it must and does exist through eternity."¹²

Vivekananda mentions that apparently there is diversity in the universe, but ultimately we all are the manifestations of the same great truth. He points out that there are differences amongst man, animal, plants and so on, but as existence, we all are one with the God as God is the universal existence; this is the one universal religion. But in manifestations, all these differences must exist. Hence, by universal religion he does not mean any universal philosophy, or any universal mythology, or any universal rituals. He observes: "Such a state of things can never come into existence; if it even did, the world would be destroyed, because variety is the first principle of life."¹⁴ Vivekananda emphasizes on the matter that variety is as true as unity, because the same truth can be known in different ways. Both unity and variety are the obvious fact of the universe in his view. In this way he accepts all religions as the true paths leading to the same goal which is realization of the divinity already in us. He adopts a practical plan for bringing religious harmony which makes man realize the unity in diversity keeping his individuality intact. His maxim is instead destroying of anything man should build and the different religions are the different radii of the same centre where God exists and when all the radii will meet at the centre, all the differences will vanish. This state is called by him the realization of the

¹²Ibid. vol. 2, p. 382.

divinity existing in all religions. He classifies human minds into four types according to their nature. 1. The active type who wants to do good works, 2. The mystic type who remains busy to analyze his own self, 3. The philosophic type who is busy to use his intellect even beyond the possibilities of all human philosophies and 4. The devotional type, who loves and enjoys the aesthetic side of the nature. All these four kinds of people think they are opposite and even exclusive to each other. They want to judge others through their own ideas and standards. For example, he says that a philosopher whose main goal is knowledge, thinks devotees as weak and sentimental beings, while a devotee whose main domain is love and devotion, considers philosophers as merely hair splitting talker; on the other hand, a worker sees both of them as very much impractical. All these persons think one's own thinking is absolutely true and others are false; all these views are one-sided. In this way, they are always quarrelling with each other and this is the present scenario in the field of religion. Vivekananda proposes a religion which must satisfy all these sorts of minds and hence he asserts: "What I want to propagate is a religion that will be equally acceptable to all minds; it must be equally philosophic, equally emotional, equally mystic, and equally conducive to action."¹³ He considers a man as perfect who possesses all these four elements and to be balanced in all these four elements is his ideal of religion which can be attained by Yoga (communion). He regards: "To become harmoniously balanced in all these four directions is my ideal of religion."¹⁴ He clearly mentions that though the aim of all religions is, but one-reunion with God, there are different methods suitable for different types of temperaments for attaining such goal. These methods are called yoga by which one can realize and manifest his/her divinity through selfless works, devotion, control of mind and knowledge respectively. Vivekananda emphasizes on the practice of these four yogas through hearing, (śravaṇa) reasoning (manana) and meditating (nidhidhyāsana) so that one can realize that religion does not consist of doctrines or dogmas, but it is pure realization. As he observes: "Religion is realization; not talk, nor doctrine, nor theories, however beautiful they may be. It is being and becoming, not hearing or acknowledging. It is the whole soul's becoming changed into what it believes. That is religion."¹⁵

Religious communities have suggested various models for religious harmony and Alan Race's threefold typology is one of them which consists of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism.¹⁶ Exclusivism holds that one's own religion alone is true and all other religions are false. This view necessarily fuels religious violence and cannot bring harmony among religions. According to Vivekananda, the view that only one religion is true and all others are false, is abnormal. Inclusivism belongs to the middle position in the threefold typology, too asserts that one's own religion is true

¹³Ibid. vol. 2, p. 387.

¹⁴Ibid. vol. 2, p. 388.

¹⁵Ibid. vol. 2, p.396.

¹⁶Race A., 1983, *Christian and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions*, London: SCM Press.

and other religions are included into it. Inclusivism cannot be a suitable means to bring religious harmony as it involves the feeling of superiority. Gavin D'Costa claims inclusivism as a concealed form of exclusivism, because it does not consider other religions as they understand themselves and does not affirm them to be on the same level as the truth of their own religion.¹⁷ Pluralism, which stands in direct opposition to exclusivism, advocates all religions are true and equally valid paths to salvation. Apparently, it seems that pluralism has potential for bringing religious harmony as it shows tolerance and does not affirm any religion as the center. But toleration involves the sense of superiority. In his own words ".....toleration is often blasphemy.....Toleration means that I think that you are wrong and I am just allowing you to live. It is not a blasphemy to think that you and I are allowing others to live?"¹⁸ So only toleration is not sufficient for bringing religious peace. Moreover, like inclusivism, pluralism too is a covert form of exclusivism argues D'Costa. He claims that the affirmation of other religions always operates on the basis of one's own tradition-specific viewpoint and "does not succeed in affirming the other in their own terms, always cutting across their own self-understanding and claims"¹⁹ He cites examples of Dalai Lama and Dr. Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan. Dalai Lama, thinks to get liberation one has to become a De Lug Buddhist monk and Radhakrishnan, a pluralist advocates without non-dual Advaitin experience of mokṣa, final release from the cycle of birth and death is not possible.²⁰ These examples clearly show that though pluralism claims neutrality and equality, every pluralist has a tradition-specific viewpoint and hence is a concealed form of exclusivism. Moreover, as the three-fold model proposed by Alan Race towards interfaith relations is tradition specific and contains the best feeling attitude, or 'frog-in-the-well' mentality, there is no room for interreligious dialogue within the frame work of the said typology. But without such dialogue, religious harmony is not possible. So, as the said three-fold typology cannot be regarded as a proper way for inter-religious relations, his Universal Religion is a suitable attitude towards interreligious relations.

There are two important elements in Vivekananda's view, namely, respect for all religions and acceptance of religious diversity which are essential for our balanced and peaceful society. It may be said that he considers religious pluralism as natural forces which provides the essential ideals for the survival of the people of diverse temperaments and hence cannot be negated. Universal religion does not suggest anyone to change his/her faith for other, rather advocates accepting and assimilating

¹⁷Reconsidering the possibility of pluralism, Journal of Ecumenical Studies, accessed on 21-07-2012.

¹⁸All the Truths about TRUTH-D, accessed on 20-07-2012 & The Complete Works of Vivekananda, Advaita Ashram (publication Department), 5 Delhi Entally Road. Kolkata, 700014. , Vol. II, pp. 373-74.

¹⁹D'Costa, G., in a roundtable review in reviews in Religion and Theology, vol. 8, no.3, p. 247.

²⁰The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity, Orbis, NY, (2000) – Web.: Gavin D'Costa-Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia.

the best elements of other faiths while remaining true to one's own religion. He says, "The Christian is not to become a Hindu or a Buddhist, nor a Hindu or Buddhist to become a Christian. But each must assimilate the spirit of the others and yet preserve his individuality and grow according to his own law of growth."²¹ Again, as the core of all religions is one and same, there is no scope for the feeling of superiority, inferiority and intolerance among different religions. So, the universal religion is free from the faults of threefold typology of Alan Race.

We also find in the idea of universal religion that God is within us and we all are born to rediscover our own God-nature. So, it is crystal clear that universal religion of Vivekananda already exists and needs to be realized only. It is very much true that he brings a revolutionary change in the idea of religion by saying that there is no difference among religion, God and soul as all of these are divine in nature and whose realization only can remove all sorts of sufferings, be it religious or other kinds. We also find that universal religion is something which is beyond of all religions, but at the same time is underlying in all of them and endorses them as the valid path for attaining it. So, it transcends all religions as well as pervades all of them. If we understand, appreciate and promote the true essence of his Universal religion, we will definitely make a strong, prosperous and peaceful society and world.

Summing up, we may say that universal religion may be a potential way out of religious dissension. It does not have any particular scripture, prophet, institution and superiority feeling; it is beyond of all these phenomena which every organized religion possesses and which give birth to religious tensions. In universal religion there is no room for hatred, jealousy, intolerance, conversion, bloodshed, persecution, hell and heaven which generate dissensions. It does not destroy any religion rather endorses the diversity of religions and appreciates the uniqueness of each religion; but at the same time shows them the unity that binds them together. Its foundation is unselfish love and that love is love for humanity which is nothing but the expression of oneness, it is the feeling of oneness. But as long as we will emphasize the external or non-essential part of religion, religious conflict will persist and when the spiritual or essential part of each religion will be realized, only then there will remain no room for conflicts. Again, his concept of potential divinity of the soul helps to prevent degradation of man on the one hand, and on the other, it divinizes human relationships, and makes life meaningful and worth living. Universal religion sees man in his/her true nature that is divine. And that's why man is inseparable from God. So, its key concept is to love man is to love God. So, universal religion deserves great importance and may be an ideal approach for bringing peace and harmony as it accepts all cultures, all views, all ways through which man quests the ultimate truth. It teaches that truth is one without second and can be attained by different ways.

²¹The Complete Works of Vivekananda, Advaita Ashram (publication Department), 5 Delhi Entally Road. Kolkata, 700014. , vol. 1, p. 24.