

UNIVERSAL RELIGION AND RELIGIONS

N. Nirmala “ Vivekananda's concept of universal religion - an appraisal”
Thesis. Department of Philosophy , University of Calicut, 2001

CHAPTER 5

UNIVERSAL RELIGION AND RELIGIONS

The foundation of the Universal Religion of Vivekananda is the philosophy of Oneness of Existence. All that exist in nature is nothing but the various manifestations of Infinite Reality, the Impersonal God or Brahman. The whole world is Brahman, the fullness of all things. All things are in Him and He in all things. Brahman or Infinite is the underlying principle of everything that exists from lower to higher forms of existence, from stones and plants to human beings and higher spiritual beings. The differences between one form of life or existence and another are a difference of degree rather than of kind. Infinite is hidden in the universe. Yet it is something beyond this universe. The spirit of harmony is evident in his own words: "Behind and beyond is the Infinite in which there is no more evil. Some people call It God, some Allah, some Jehovah, Jove and so on. The Vedantin calls It Brahman." ¹ The essence of Universal Religion lies in the realization of this Infinite, the real God behind the divine manifestations. It transcends all particular religions which are only a step towards the realization of this Infinite, yet it harmonizes them and gives them reality. Vivekananda declares that the realization of this Infinite requires a very

radical transformation of the individual; he must be changed morally, religiously and spiritually.

5.1. Religion and Spirituality

Spirituality is the core of the Universal Religion of Vivekananda. For him, everything in the universe including man is essentially spiritual. The realization of the spirit in its true nature is spirituality and the practical manifestation of this spirituality is Religion. The more spiritual a man, the more universal he is. The test of spirituality is the ability to experience the Unity of Existence. It is the same spirit that is residing in the Christian, Hindu, Mohammedan and all others. His religion stands for the spiritualization of the whole mankind, which ultimately leads to the peace, and unity of all religions. The backbone of progress- social, political, scientific and technological- is religion, the manifestation of the divine spirit within man. Religion is spirituality and it is complementary and contributory to the human development. It seeks to realize God in the soul of all human beings. Temples, Synagogues, Churches and Mosques are symbols possessing the spiritual significance. God is, Vivekananda says, "the Soul of our souls, the Reality in us." ² In the beautiful words of Romain Rolland it is "to see Shiva represented in living men, and especially in the poor." ³ The role of true religion, that is spirituality, is to awaken this awareness in man.

Religions like Hinduism and Christianity admit a spirit element within man and its inseparable relation with God. Hinduism emphasizes the ultimacy of Spirit more intensively than other religions. In the words of Radhakrishnan: "True religion is born of its spirit, not of flesh and blood, not of codes and customs, not of races and nations." ⁴ The statement 'Tat Tvam Asi' signifies the truth that this Supreme Spirit is in the Soul of man. The statement of Jesus Christ " Kingdom of God is within you" ⁵ expresses the realization of the Spirit of God in Soul. God is present with us through the Holy Spirit, a living reality in the experience of people. To quote St. John " God is Spirit, and only by the power of his Spirit can people worship him as he really is." ⁶ The word 'Islam' itself means the surrender of the Soul or Spirit within man to the will of the Omniscient, the Omnipotent and the Merciful God. Religions are serviceable only in so far as they are spiritual in nature. Spirituality is the *raison d'être* of different religions of the world.

5.2. Religion and Universality

The Religion of Vivekananda is universal in its scope. It is catholic rather than critical. It seeks to see the universal and all pervading spirit of Truth in all the human beings. It eliminates every type of discrimination between man and man, man and nature, man and God, between one form of manifestation and the other form of manifestation. It has no geographical

barriers. This is evident in his own words: " If there is ever to be a universal religion, it must be one which will have no location in place or time; which will be infinite like the God it will preach, and whose sun will shine upon the followers of Krishna and of Christ, on saints and sinners alike; which will not be Brahminic or Buddhistic, Christian or Mohammedan, but the sum total of all these, and still have infinite space for development; . . . It will be a religion which will have no place for persecution or intolerance in its polity, which will recognize divinity in every man and woman, and whose whole scope, whose whole force, will be created in aiding humanity to realize its own true, divine nature." ⁷ A Universal Religion, if it is really universal, must satisfy at least two conditions. Firstly, it must open its gates to every individual, it must admit that nobody is born with this or that religion; whether he takes to one religion or the other must ultimately be left to his inner likes and choice. In this sense by individualizing religion we can universalize it. Secondly, it must be able to give satisfaction and comfort to every religious sect. The most important fact is that it has to supersede the conflicts of these different sects, and therefore, must appear reasonable to them all.

The gospel of Universal Religion is based on the realization of the essential truth underlying the teachings of the saints and prophets of different religions. The sense of fundamental unity is provided by the

universal acceptance and religious tolerance of all other religions. Religious harmony means tolerance and acceptance, not exclusion. The fact is that the essence of Vedas, the Bible and the Quran is one and the same. Religious unity and mutual goodwill in the context of religious plurality would be a reality only when all religions are accepted in a spirit of give and take. In the words of Vivekananda " The Christian is not to become a Hindu or a Buddhist, nor a Hindu or a 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." ⁸ He further states that he has no difficulty to enter and offer his prayers to anywhere, in a temple, or a church, or a mosque, or any other place. The believer in Universal Religion must be broad-minded and open-hearted, he must be ready to learn from the scriptures of all religions, and keep his soul open for what may come in the future. It is evident when he declares: " 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 his law. I shall go into the forest and sit down in meditation with the Hindu Not only shall I do all these, but I shall keep my heart open for all that may come in the future." ⁹

The ideal of Universal Religion is moral and spiritual rather than material. It is not an unattainable otherworldly one. Vivekananda advocates

practical methods to experience oneness in every form of life. In his own words, "Take up one idea - make that one idea your life; think of it, dream of it, live of that idea. Let the brain, muscles, nerves, every part of your body, be full of that idea, and just leave every other idea alone." ¹⁰ He states that one can choose the method he likes. If one follows it with sincerity and earnestness, he will be able to reach the goal. This is the only way to success, peace and perfection.

The greatness of the Universal Religion of Vivekananda depends on the realization of the fact that the religions of the world preach the same truth, but through different religious practices. Religions are different in beliefs, attitudes and practices, but they are one in essence. It indicates the unity in diversity of the universe. The different religions are the various expressions of the One Eternal Religion and are merely the different stages of the spiritual growth. They are only different pathways meeting to the same point. Though the different rivers originate from different sources but merge in the same ocean, losing their names and forms, so the various religious paths that human beings take, will lead them to the same goal. To quote Vivekananda: "As so many rivers, having their source in different mountains, roll down, crooked or straight, and at last come into the ocean - so, all these various creeds and religions, taking their start from different standpoints and running through crooked or straight courses, at last come

unto THEE." ¹¹ His attitude to all forms of worship is sympathetic and tolerant. Tolerance does not mean indifference to one's own religion; it is clear and deeper understanding of one's own religion by having a clear understanding of other religions.

Mahatma Gandhi expresses a similar viewpoint in his concept of *Sarva-dharma Samānatva*, which means toleration of faiths or reverence for all religions. Theoretically it is possible to find that there is only one God and there must be one religion in this world. But in the practical world, it is very difficult to find a common agreement among the followers of different religions. He observes as follows: "I do not foresee a time when there would be only one religion on earth in practice... Therefore, there will, perhaps, always be different religions answering to different temperaments and climatic conditions." ¹² The different religions of the world are different paths converging on the same ultimate goal. They are nothing but "beautiful flowers from the same garden, or they are branches of the same majestic tree." ¹³ Man of one faith should respect the followers of other faiths. He should remember the fact that all religions have some errors in them, and that all great religions are equal. To put in his own words: "My position is that all the great religions are fundamentally equal. We must have innate respect for other religions as we have for our own." ¹⁴ Like Vivekananda, he also admits that there is Truth in every religion. It is the duty of every

follower of Truth to treat all religions as equal, to overcome the defects of his own faith, and to unite all good traits of other faiths into his own faith. He argues as follows: " Looking at all religions with an equal eye, we would not only hesitate, but would think it our duty to blend into our faith every acceptable feature of other faiths." ¹⁵ Human beings are imperfect to attain the perfect state of Truth or God. All man-made religions are also imperfect and hence the question of superiority and inferiority does not arise at all. The religion, which compels man to follow a particular practice by claiming itself to be perfect, cannot be regarded as a religion in the true sense of the term. Religion, if it is to be true, must create fellowship among people. The true knowledge of religion teaches man how to tolerate other religious faiths by acknowledging them as equal to our own. The cultivation of tolerance imparts not only the knowledge of one's own religion but also the understanding of the truth of other religions. In short, the equality and unity of all religions depend on the attitude of toleration and acceptance of all other faiths as equal and true.

Like Gandhiji, Radhakrishnan also shares Vivekananda's belief in the unchanging essence of religion, the essential unity of religions and the oneness of existence. He tries to convey his insight into the meaning and purpose of earthly life in order to promote his concept of religion of the spirit. Earthly life is the gradual revelation of the divine in man. The inner

self of man is akin to the supreme one; it mirrors the divine. He is at one with Vivekananda in maintaining that there is no discontinuity between animal life and human life, or between human life and spiritual life, since all forms of life are expressions of the divine spirit. Spiritual life means the fulfillment of human life and the ultimate goal of the cosmic process is the establishment of the spiritual kingdom of free spirits.

5.3. Religion and Truth

Truth is summum bonum of all religions. It is variously described in the Upanishads as Brahman (The sub-stratum of existence), Ātman (Self), Ekamevadvītyam (One without a second) and Neti Neti (Not this, not this). The word equivalent to Truth is 'Satya'. 'Satya' is a Sanskrit word derived from the root 'sat' which means 'existence' or 'being'. Thus the word 'Truth' means 'that which exists.' Hinduism is a relentless pursuit after Truth, which is an important cardinal virtue in Hindu tradition. This Truth manifests in action as dharma, spiritual obligation. It expresses itself in human being as love and purity of heart. Religion is the way to experience and practice truth in life. Since the Hindu saints are pre-occupied from the Vedic times with the desire to escape from ahamkara and samsara (sense of ego and world) as the way to the Ultimate Reality, Hinduism can be regarded as one of the highest expressions of mystic experience.

Both the prophetic and non-prophetic religions aim at the same goal, which is the realization of this Truth. In Christianity Jesus Christ identifies himself with truth and declares that He is the only way to God, the Father. In the gospel of John, Christ declares " I am the way, the truth and the life; no one goes to the Father except by me." ¹⁶ Truth is potentially hidden in every individual soul. It is expressed perfectly in the awakened spiritual consciousness. To quote from the Bible: " your body is the temple of the Holy spirit, who lives in you." ¹⁷ The finite soul is considered as environed by the divine spirit and is capable to be filled with the fullness of God.

In the New Testament the whole gospel of Saint John is a powerful incentive to spiritual mysticism. He promises that the Christians shall establish inward contact with God. Jewish mysticism in all its phases of development has its roots in the Old Testament. The visionary experiences of the prophets, and their highest insight into the will of God and their satisfaction at the attainment of this insight and vision constitute the mystical elements. While mysticism is a natural element of Hinduism, the question of mysticism is a new one to Islam. The mystic saints in Islam were called Sufis. The early Sufi mystic saints renounced pleasures and amusements, despised riches and honors and devoted themselves to a life of devotion and seclusion. The later Sufi mystic saints declare that they can establish oneness with God, absorption in the Eternal.

Though certain differences may exist among their interpretations, all saints in different religions agree in one respect and declare in one voice that unity underlies diversity. This is the basic characteristic of mysticism, which in its wider sense may be described as an attitude of the mind founded upon an intuitive experience, which culminates in the expression of Unity or Oneness of all things. The mystic experience is the very center of their being; it is the flame, which enlightens their whole life. It is not confined to any one racial group and is undoubtedly one of the common grounds of personal religion.

The prophetic religions like Judaism, Christianity and Islam maintain that this Truth is essentially unknowable and it can be known only through their prophets. 'Neti Neti' description of Brahman in the Upanishads also points out the same fact that it is essentially unknowable and indescribable. The nature of this Ultimate Truth is mystical and hence cannot be fully described in rational language. In this mystic state the jnani experiences nothing but the quality less Brahman. Even when he comes out of his samadhi the mystic sees every thing as permeated by Brahman; he sees Brahman as the Self or Atman of all beings; he perceives God every where and in every thing: 'Sarvam- khalv-idam Brahma'.

The great pioneers of Indian renaissance search for the truth in all religions. According to Vivekananda, Brahman is Truth and the purpose of

life is to know the Truth. We attain knowledge of Truth when we come to experience that we are at one with the Universal Being. He transforms the truth to wear different groups in accordance with the requirements of the modern age. Universal Religion is rooted in the intuitive experience of this truth, which is lying beyond the limitations of perception and the power of reasoning. This super sensuous experience of the mind is self-evident (Svata Siddha) and is called anirvacanīya (indescribable). It is a state of oneness of existence. This highest stage of experience is one and the same for a Muslim, Christian and a Hindu. A true Muslim is one who experiences the brotherhood of all without any distinction of rich and poor and without the differences of nationalities. Likewise, a true Christian and a true Hindu. In the transcendental state of religious experience the differences of a Hindu or a Christian or a Sikh or a Muslim disappear forever. Though this state is realizable to all men, they do not experience it in their spiritually ignorant condition.

Mahatma Gandhi identifies God with Truth. He states: " God is truth and love; God is ethics and morality." ¹⁸ Later on he changes his emphasis from 'God is Truth' to 'Truth is God.' Since the truth is God, everyone who experiences truth is really experiencing God. Every action of man is an attempt to experience Truth or God in his life. He describes the nature of path towards this truth as straight, narrow and perilous. To quote his own

words: "I know the path, it is straight and narrow. It is like the edge of the sword." ¹⁹ It also preserves the metaphysical and ethical significance of terms like dharma and rta (moral law).

5.4. Religion and Non-injury (Ahimsa)

All religions insist the principle of non-injury (Ahimsa) as a means for the world peace and unity. Non-injury is an attitude and practice of living in harmony with others and with one self. It implies love, compassion, forgiveness, courage and fearlessness. It requires adherence to high standards of truth and self-control, which guarantees the peaceful co-existence of the multitudes.

The concept of non-injury has its roots in Vedanta that every life is a spark of the divine spirit. Vivekananda's religion is based on the recognition and identification of this universal spirit in every living being. This spirit of non-injury depends on the extent of one's conviction about the truth of identity of all living being, universal love, and toleration.

The central teaching of the Gita is not violence, but non-violence. It advocates to reach a state beyond the three gunas of sattva, rajas and tamas, a state in which the individual is free from anger, hatred etc.

Both Buddhism and Jainism insist the practice of non-injury as the highest virtue. The central doctrine of Jainism states 'Ahimsa Paramo

Dharmah.' Hinduism also considers it as the supreme virtue 'Paramodharma'. In Buddhism the concept of Karuna or compassion and friendliness (maitri) involve the spirit of ahimsa.

In Christianity the unconditional practice of love requires non-violence in thought, deed and action. According to Mahatma Gandhi. "A true Christian is one who practices non-violence in his life." ²⁰ Christ's love is non-violence; it is forgiving. He prays to God, "Forgive them, Father! They don't know what they are doing." ²¹ Though there is place for forgiveness, man is condemned to everlasting punishment after death. To return good for evil, of love for hatred, of blessing for curse is the key to non-resistance, which can be acquired only from the power of resistance. The inner purity of mind is as important as the outer manifestation of an action. Therefore, it commands "Be perfect - just as your father in heaven is perfect." ²²

Islam believes 'Allah' as the abode of unconditional mercy and forgiveness that can be attained only by the grace of God, not by human merit. This kind of unconditional mercy is essentially non-violence.

Judaism represents God as "merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and fruitfulness." ²³ But it also describes him as the "God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the terrible

God"²⁴ who executes justice for the orphan and the widow. He is very strict to keep a proper balance between justice and mercy.

Manu interprets the word 'ahimsa' more liberally by allowing the killing of animals for sacrifice and food and even the killing of men in self-defense.

Truth and Ahimsa together constitute the essence of all religions. For Mahatma Gandhi, Truth and Ahimsa are so inextricably related that it is difficult to separate them. They are "like the two sides of a coin, or rather a smooth unstamped metallic disc."²⁵ They are convertible terms. To practice Ahimsa is to realize Truth and to realize Truth is to practice Ahimsa. There is no other means of realizing Truth in human relationships except through the practice of ahimsa. He says, "Truth is my religion and ahimsa is the only way of its realization."²⁶ Non-violence does not imply submission to the will of the doer. On the other hand, it inspires man to stand against the will of the tyrant. It teaches man to love even the evil doers, but not their evil acts. Much effort is required for an ordinary man to achieve this mental state of non-violence. It is the pure quality of heart and has to be acquired by strenuous training.

5.5. Religion and Love

Love is the foundation of all religions. Universal Religion of Vivekananda is the embodiment of pure love, which is the outcome of the realization of the Oneness of humanity. The power of unselfish love is tremendous. It does not seek any return for love. In the words of Vivekananda "It is love without thought of return-love like that of the moth for the light."²⁷ He identifies love with truth for it is love that unities the mother with the child, families with the societies and societies with the whole world. It also unites the individual consciousness with the divine cosmic consciousness. The basis for the entire cosmic creation is love itself. Later on, this love transforms into selfless service and the selfless service into worship. Vivekananda declares: "It is in love that religion exists and not in ceremony, in the pure and sincere love in the heart. Unless a man is pure in body and mind, his coming into a temple and worshipping Shiva is useless."²⁸ More over, in loving others we love ourselves. And this 'ourselves' is not the body or the mind, but the Self within. The real fact is that no one loves the other for other's sake but for the sake of the Self-alone. This love for the Self presupposes love for the ideal of oneness. In hurting others, we hurt ourselves, simply because we are all one. This spirit of love and sympathy towards evildoers is similar to that of Judaism and Christianity. The great commandment of Judaism demands to "love your

neighbour as you love yourself." ²⁹ This ideal of loving one's neighbour as oneself contains the seeds of a powerful egalitarian doctrine of social justice. Jesus Christ identifies God with love and follows the same Rule of Love. He manifests his love and mercy to all men - both good and bad - without regard to need or merit. That love is technically called as 'Agape'. ³⁰ It can be realized only when one attains the ability to overcome anger by loving even his enemy. He preaches to "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." ³¹ Again "If any one slaps you on the right cheek, let him slap your left cheek too." ³² His love is unconditional since he does not expect anything in return. It is divine, noble and motiveless. It is this simple truth that works in the social service field also.

5.6. Religion and Social Service

The central purpose of Universal Religion is service to humanity. Its principles refer to the unity and upliftment of the entire mankind. The people belonging to different faiths, cultures, races and traditions constitute the family of God. For Vivekananda, religion is not mere social service but service of the poor as worship of God. The gist of worship consists in being good and doing well for others. Social charity and service to the poor are natural expressions of love in action. All religions encourage alms-giving. It implies that the rich should economically help the poor and thus economic

inequality should be reduced to the extent possible. Christ's crucifixion is self-sacrifice atoned for the sins of mankind. In Christianity Jesus Christ insists "to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, to welcome the stranger, to cheer the sick, to visit the imprisoned - in short to love and serve man is to love and serve the Father." ³³ Hospitals, nursing homes, dispensaries, homes for the aged, abandoned, and orphanages and a number of other specialized institutions for the service of the weak and ailing members of the society are the expressions of love for all men. The aim of Hinduism is general good of whole mankind, 'lokasaṁgraha,' in the words of Bhagavad-Gita. In Islam, there is Zakat and Sadaq through which a Muslim discharges his duty to the poor and needy. Zakat is a monetary obligation. Every Muslim who possesses more than a minimum amount of wealth has to contribute at least a certain percentage of his total wealth for the welfare function of the society. It is not merely a charity; it is a religious right, which the rich owe to the needy and poor, and to the society at large. The spirit of this compulsory contribution is that it is paid by the rich as an act of worship and not merely as a tax.

5.7. Religion And Morality

World's religions stress the role of morality and in fact both stand for each other. Morality is a necessary and inevitable element for the ascent of

individual soul to the higher spiritual realm of divinity. The moral law that 'as one sows, so one reaps' is inescapable and unavoidable. It knows no exception. Morality is adherence to truth, love, goodness, duty, peace, and non-violence. These moral virtues are the core teaching of all the religions. Righteousness and virtuous character are the essential qualifications for the spiritual journey towards self-perfection.

Hinduism advocates five cardinal virtues. They are non-injury (ahimsa) truth speaking (satya), abstention from stealing (āsteya), celibacy (brahmacarya) and disowning of possessions (aparigraha). Upanishads, Buddhism, Jainism, the yoga system of Patanjali and many others recognize these five virtues, though their interpretation varies from one another. Manu, the great Hindu lawgiver, emphasizes the first three of these virtues while he substitutes purity and self-control for the last two.

Judaism prescribes the famous Ten Commandments. In Christianity there is the way of prayer, of worship, of divine love and of meditation; shariat, tanqut, hagigat in Islam; sila, prajñā, and samādhi in Buddhism; samyak carita (right conduct), samyak jñāna (right knowledge) and samyak darsana (right faith) in Jainism. True religion and morality should go hand in hand. In the words of Vivekananda the essence of Buddhism constitutes: "Be good, be moral, be perfect." ³⁴

Morality and spirituality are the two salient features of Vivekananda's religion. Moral principles are the means and methods for preserving valuable virtues in life. According to R.B. Lal, "the relation between morality and spirituality is the same as that between cause and effect, the means and the end, the seed and the fruit. Godliness is the daughter of goodness, the finest flowering of the tree of morality."³⁵ Morality is the key to spirituality.

According to Vivekananda, Universal Religion, which is based on the principle of unity of all existence, is above morality. Yet it is the sure foundation of morality. Selfish action is the root cause of immorality. Unselfish action is moral. To quote Vivekananda, "That which is selfish is immoral, and that which is unselfish is moral." ³⁶ He asserts that man from birth is endowed with certain physical, biological and pschical conditions, which naturally make him selfish, egoistic and limited. He is bound with certain natural instincts and habits, appetites and passions, love and hatred, pain and pleasure and desires and impulses. Morality is conformity to a rule or standard. It is the pursuit of an end. His view of religion is clear when he declares: "Try to be pure and unselfish- that is the whole of religion. " ³⁷ The keynote of religion exists not in theories but in practice. Unselfishness is religion. That quality which tends to increase the divinity in man is virtue, and that quality which tends to increase brutality in man is vice. Love to all

beings is the unconditional standard for morality and spiritual growth. The central teaching of Gandhi expresses a similar viewpoint. He states, "As soon as we lose moral basis, we cease to be religious." ³⁸ He identifies religion with morality in order to make it dynamically operative in human life. To him "All virtues cease to have its use if it serves no purpose in every walk of life." ³⁹

5.8. Religion and Unity of Mankind

The prophetic religions like Islam and Christianity insist on dogmas and a uniform and unalterable way of life. In Islam, through prayers five times each day, a worshipper enters into a higher dimension of spiritual life by leaving the life of material pursuits. The uniformity in words, their order and of postures ensure unity, equality and brotherhood among all the faithful Muslim believers. The performance of Hajj at Mecca at least once in their lifetime strengthens the universal brotherhood of the Muslims. It also manifests the Islamic equality of the rich and the poor, of the black and white before Allah, irrespective of any race.

In Christianity there is belief in the complete union or oneness of the Father with Son. This deep relationship is evident in the statements, "The Father and I are one" ⁴⁰ and "I am in the Father and the Father in me." ⁴¹ It also signifies universal brotherhood of all men since all are sons of the same

loving Father. The goal of Christianity is to become faithful Christians, to become children of God. God is for all people and all are equal before Him.

The Universal Religion of Vivekananda harmonizes all religions into one single unity. Religious unity does not mean to achieve the external uniformity of religious conduct for social purposes, but a harmonious blending of religious variety into a symphony of spiritual quest. In the words of Romain Rolland, "Vivekananda wanted India to have an Islamic body and Vedantic heart."⁴² That is to say, it would be an egalitarian society, all people being equal and enjoying the same rights as in an Islamic society. And it should have a Vedantic brain, that is, an idealism that recognizes an essential unity behind all the diversity of existence. With reference to Hindu-Muslim difference, he states that the ideal society for India would be a union of the two great religions, Hinduism and Islam.

5.9. Religion and Conversion

Christianity is a missionary religion with emphasis on conversion. The sacred book is Bible, which contains the word of God. Bible preaches Jesus Christ as the only God in the human form. It also preaches Christianity as the only one true religion for the whole mankind. This claim of the monopoly of spiritual truth adds zest to missionary work and makes a religion worthy of consideration by all. But there is also the temptation to

belittle other faiths and the tendency to extol one's own religion. It is because of this reason that the attitude of the Christians towards other religions, except Judaism, is found very negative.

According to Vivekananda, conversion is not a means to attain the Universal Religion. He allows equal validity for all religions. Like his Master, he emphasizes the futility of changing one's own religion. To him, Christianity is the fulfillment of the Old Testament; Buddhism is the fulfillment of the truths of the Hinduism. He stresses strongly the need to synthesize the wonderful philosophy of Hinduism with the humanizing power of the Buddhism as a solution to the problems in life. At the same time he also stresses the need to synthesize the unity of Hinduism with the uniformity of Islam and Christianity. His aim is to lead mankind to the higher spiritual realm, where there is neither the Vedas, nor the Bible, nor the Koran; yet this has to be done only by harmonizing the Vedas, the Bible and the Koran. Universal religion shows the way to conquer oneself, not to conquer others. The unity of existence in Universal Religion cannot be realized by the triumph of any one of the religions and the destruction of the others. The common element in every religion is to help man to attain perfection, peace and harmony.

5.10. Religion and God

Belief in God is the corner stone of all religions. The prophetic religions like Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Zoroastrianism are all monotheistic. For them, God is One, Omniscient, Omnipotent and is transcendent. Judaism proclaims: "I am the first, the last, the only God; there is no other god but me." ⁴³ The cardinal tenet of Islam is "There is no God but Allah" and "Mohammed is the Messenger"⁴⁴ the Unitarian conception of God. The universal order can come into existence only on the basis of a universal faith and not on the basis of commitment to the Gods of race, colour or region. In Christianity, Jehovah is the Lord of the whole world. Jesus Christ universalizes the conception of God and commands: "to love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." ⁴⁵ The parable of the Mustard Seed and the Kingdom of God contains universal significance: "It is like a grain of mustard seed which a man took and sowed in his garden; and it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches." ⁴⁶ These religions share in common: the transcendence of God, the revelation of God through prophets, the resurrection of the dead, the day of judgment, and the doctrine of Heaven and Hell. They also believe in the authority of any particular prophet. Christianity seeks to become Christ-like; Islam seeks to become Mohammed-like; Buddhism seeks to become Buddha-like. From time

immemorial Hinduism is spiritual and it does not demand unquestioning submission to any particular prophet or religious teacher. It is based on the sacred scriptures of Vedas, Upanishads, Puranas, and Bhagavatgita. The aim of this religion is not to know the reality, but to know the reality in order to become that entity. The knower of Brahman becomes Brahman - 'Brahmaveda Brahmaiva Bhavati.'⁴⁷ According to Vivekananda, the ultimate unity of the universe is God. Every religion, consciously or unconsciously is struggling towards the realization of this Unity or God.

5.11. Religion and Freedom

According to Vivekananda, Religion is man's ceaseless struggle to attain freedom. It is not a state to be attained, but is the realization of the true nature of Atman, the identity between the individual self and Brahman as taught in the Upanishads. It needs only the removal of ignorance, which hides the true nature of the Self. Therefore, freedom means the removal of ignorance by knowledge, which consists in the immediate realization of the truth in the form of Oneness of Existence. Following Sri Ramakrishna, Vivekananda states: "We are like silk worms; we make the thread out of our own substance and spin the cocoon, and in course of time are imprisoned inside."⁴⁸ The way of immortality is to break it and come out from it. This struggle for freedom or liberation is the essence of all religions. Upanishads

insist a leap of faith from the untruth to Truth, darkness to Light and mortal to Immortal. ⁴⁹ The progression is from the appearance to the real, from the darkness to the light and not vice versa. The triumph of light over darkness is called liberation. In Hinduism, moksa means freedom from the endless chain of births and deaths. It is the union of individual soul with the supreme soul. It is a state of immortality obtained by the knowledge of Ultimate Reality. Nirvāna is the summum bonum of Buddhism. It means the annihilation of worldly desires, hatred, delusion and ego. It is of the nature of supernatural Bliss, which is eternal and pure. It is similar to the Moksa of Hinduism. The word Brahma-nirvāna of Gītā, Mukti or Moksa in Hinduism, Nirvāna in Buddhism, Liberation or freedom in Jainism are all synonymous. In Jainism, liberation or freedom is a state of perfection by the complete dissociation of soul from matter. In Judaism, salvation means union of the human soul with God by means of strict obedience to the laws of Moses. In Christianity, salvation means deliverance from the burden and guilt of sin and misery, here and here after, by fellowship with God in heaven. In Islam, salvation means the development of the divine spark in man by surrendering one's will to the commandments of Allah and by observing the 'five pillars of faith': Creed, prayer, charity, fasting and pilgrimage.

5.12. Religion and Asceticism

Asceticism or Renunciation is the watchword of all religions, except Judaism. Hinduism regards Vanaprastha or ascetic life in the forest as the highest stage of man's life coming at the end of his life. Buddhism and Jainism recommend asceticism as a way of life undertaken at any time after the Brahmacharya. Even Christianity upholds asceticism to a great extent. The life of Jesus Christ itself is more an ascetic than a householder. His gospel of Kingdom of God is not of this world, but an experience of bliss. In Judaism, nowhere in the Torah man is instructed to detach himself from the world in order to please God. For Vivekananda religion is renunciation in action, not abstention from action. It is the manifestation of the higher Self in man. One cannot, to use an illustration, go down and go up a mountain simultaneously. To love the darkness of the gorge and to love the brilliance above at the same time is impossible. To attain the higher without giving up the lower is impossible. To reach the summit, to attain the supreme end, one should renounce his lower self.

5.13. Religion and Meditation

The basis of all religious faiths of the world is common. It is yoga or meditation. To some, it is a science of the mind. To others, it is an indefinable mystical experience. For Vivekananda it is the realization of

Oneness in the world and in us. The meditative yogi constantly endeavors to decipher the real truth of the Vedic aphorisms (Mahavākyas) like, 'Prajñānam Brahma', ⁵⁰ 'Ayam Ātma Brahma'⁵¹ etc. and realize the essential unity of the Self and the Absolute. One cannot neglect the significance of meditation, which enables man to master harmoniously the workings of the human mind. At the same time it is important to note that many people who are not believers of any religion also practice it all round the world as it provides them peace, wisdom and freedom.

Karma - samsāra - jñāna - mukti are the four-fold pillar of Indian religions. Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism accept it in common. They accept the different principles of yoga, dhyana and samadhi as the means for enlightenment. The followers of Judaism, Christianity and Islam are devoted to worship their Gods through the activity of meditation in one form or other. In Advaita Vedanta of Sankara, prayer and worship are mere means for the purification of the mind. It recommends jnana-marga as the only way for Brahman realization. It insists on four important pre-requisites, which are absolutely necessary for the spiritual aspirant. These four fold pre-requisites are: 1. Nityānityavastu viveka (discrimination between the eternal and non-eternal). 2. Ihamutrārtha-phalabhogavirāga (abstinence from enjoying fruits of any actions here and here after). 3. Samādhi salka Saṁpatti (spiritual exercises such as sama or the control of the mind, dama

or the control of the senses, uparathi or the renunciation of works, titikṣā or the endurance of heat and cold and other pairs of opposites, śraddhā or the faith in the teachings of the Vedānta as imparted by the Guru, and samādhāna or the constant contemplation of the mind). 4. Mumuksutva (the yearning for self realization). Thus a complete control of the external and internal senses is prescribed to aspirants as a prelude to a contemplative life. All these ascetic practices prepare the individual soul for the intuitive vision of the Reality. In addition to these spiritual disciplines, it also prescribes three mental activities, namely, Shravaṇa, Manana and Nididhyāṣana as the immediate preparation for the attainment of Brahma-jñāna. Sravana means hearing the truth in its different aspects from a Guru; cogitating on and accepting that truth; then becoming one with it is the method of the progression. Manana means constant deep reflection over the mystic truth imparted to him by the Guru. Through intense reflection over the truth, the aspirant convinces himself that the doctrine, which he has already heard about from the Guru, is true. Nididhyāṣana is the climax of the yogic training and is the continuation of Śravana and Manana. It is said to be the uninterrupted and prolonged contemplation on the convinced doctrine on which the attention is directed like a stream of oil, which is an unbroken flow. As this contemplation grows in intensity and duration the mind ceases to be the medium through which contemplation takes place. As

a result of this the Self or Consciousness stands apart, the mind becomes Supra-mental conscious. The great people of all the religions have achieved spiritual experiences through arduous methods of training and disciplines that resemble yoga.

To conclude, in every religion essential truth is always found in association with the non-essentials, which are different in different religions. Though the non-essentials are not attractive, the essential truth remains in it. In the Reports in American Newspapers on religious harmony it is stated: "The shell of the oyster is not attractive, but the pearls are within."⁵² Since this essential truth being the same, there is every possibility for the religious harmony. The non-essentials are only apparent, and they do not affect the inner core or the essential truth of religion. Vivekananda admits variation as the sign of life and hence the acceptance of different religious sects and conflicts. According to him, the Universal religion already exists in the form of universal brotherhood of man, although human beings are not aware of it. By Universal Religion Vivekananda does not mean a religion that will have one universal philosophy or one universal mythology or one universal ritual. They may all differ from religion to religion or even from individual to individual, and yet the basic unity or oneness is there as the ultimate goal in life. The quarrels in the name of religion are childish and immature. The greatest ideal is oneness and it should be the song of the new millennium.

The realization of this fact will inspire toleration and respect for religions other than one's own and may serve to enrich and deepen one's insight into one's own religion.

NOTES

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4. Radhakrishnan and Muirhead (ed), Contemporary Indian Philosophy (London: Allen and Unwin, 1952) 502.
5. Luke, 17.21.
6. John, 4.24.
7. Swami Vivekananda, Complete Works, Vol.I (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1994) 19.
8. Ibid. , 24.
9. Ibid., Vol.II (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1992) 374.
10. Ibid., Vol.I (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1994) 177.
11. Ibid., 390.
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13. I bid. , January 30, 1937,25.
14. I bid. , November 28, 1936, 330.

15. I bid. , Yeravada Mandir, 1945, 38-40.
16. John, 14.6.
17. 2 Corinthians, 6.16.
18. M.K.Gandhi, Young India, 5-3-1925, 81.
19. I bid. , 17-6-1926, 92.
20. I bid. , An Autobiography (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Trust, 1948) 106.
21. Luke, 23.34.
22. The Sermon on the Mount, 5.48.
23. Exodus, 34. 6-7.
24. Deuteronomy, 10.17.
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28. I bid. , Vol.III, 141.
29. Leviticus, 19.18.
30. 1 Corinthians XI. 'Agape'- love or charity feast celebrated among the early Christians.
31. The Sermon on the Mount, 5.44.

32. Mathew, 5.39.
33. I bid. , 25. 24 - 46.
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35. R.B.Lal, Religion in the Light of Reason and Science (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1978) 161.
36. Swami Vivekananda, Complete Works, Vol.I (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1992) 244.
37. I bid. , Vol.VI, (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1992) 244.
38. M.K.Gandhi, Young India, 24-11-1921, 385.
39. I bid, Harijan, 26-7-1942.
40. John, 10.30.
41. I bid, 14.11.
42. Romain Rolland, The life of Vivekananda and the Universal gospel (Calcutta:Advaita Ashrama, 1999) 110.
43. Isaiah, 44.6.
44. Surās,6,A.102 and 48,A.29.
45. Mathew, 22.37.
46. Luke, 13. 18-19.

47. Mundāka Upanisad, 111.2.9.
48. Swami Vivekananda, Complete Works, Vol.II (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1992) 355.
49. Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upanisad , 1.3.28.
50. Aitareya Upanisad , 111.5.3.
51. Māṇḍukya Upanisad , 3.2.
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