No. 49 (2001)

Swami Vivekananda's Idea of Religious Diversity and Harmony

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The origin of the religious experience, says Vivekananda, is man's instinctive urge to transcend the sensual world. He believes that man is a compound of two fundamental elements: *sense arid mind.* While through the senses he receives impressions of the objective world, he cannot remain satisfied with his senses, simply because he wants to go beyond them. Therefore, through his mind, at certain moments he transcends the limitations of the senses. But he also transcends the power of reasoning. He then comes face to face with the facts which he could never have sensed, could never have reasoned out. According to Vivekananda, this fact is the main basis of all the religions of the world.[1]

Furthermore, we, as human beings, have not only the inner urge of self-transcendence, but also we are self-conscious beings. We can think about ourselves within the immediate environment, as also amidst the entire world. Having the power of reasoning and discriminating, different from other beings, we also reflect about means and ends, about the meaning, value, and purpose of life. Hence we are confronted with the disturbing, pressing questions of life: "Why am I here?" "Why do righteous people suffer?" "Is death the end of life?" "to whom or to what do I owe my ultimate loyalty and devotion?" These are some of the existential questions concerning life. They are universal and perennial. We need sets of coherent answers to these questions, because our lives, unlike those of other animal species, are not definable solely in terms of the satisfaction of the basic biological needs of food, shelter, sex and other comforts. While these are basic necessities for life, they are not sufficient to satisfy our soul.

Again as humans, we are all too conscious of things that challenge and threaten to destroy our deepest commitments and values - things such as moral failure, tragedy, inexplicable evil, and death itself. These realities can fill us with dread and terror, in part because they lie beyond our control. As a result, we can say that religion or religious feeling is a response to the three fundamental features of human existence: *uncertainty, powerlessness, and scarcity.*[2]

It may be observed that since self-consciousness and the desire of self-transcendence always persists in man, therefore religious experience is an inseparable phenomenon of human life from time immemorial. This fact is also evinced from the archaeological findings of such excavation sites as Mohanjedoro Harappa (Indus Valley), Egypt, Hattutas (Turkey), Ur (Mesopotamia), and other parts of the world.

While keeping the above facts in mind, the other fact we have to consider is the multiplicity or plurality of the manifestations of religious ideas and feelings. In other words, expressions of religious feelings in practical life are not the monolithic. In our daily life these religious ideas are expressed within a very vast spectrum. And they change from time to time, from place to place, and even from person to person.

Consequently, today we have not only one kind of religious doctrine, ritual and experience, but almost every group has its own faith and rituals. That is why most of us, as religious beings in the contemporary world, claim to be a Hindu, a Muslim, a Christian, or a Buddhist, much before accepting ourselves as a religious person.

This diversity of religions is accepted as fundamental by Sri Ramakrishna as the will of God. He explains that it is by God's will that different religions and opinions have come into existence. God gives to different people what they can relish and digest. "The mother does not give fish pilau to all her children. All cannot digest it; so she prepares simple fish soup for some. Everyone cherishes his own way and follows his own nature."[3] Swami Vivekananda also, by following his teacher's advice, believes that the diversity of religions is created by God himself. He puts this idea into the following words:

"This is a fact in the history of human race, that all these great religions exist, and are spreading and multiplying (except Zoroastrianism). Now, there is a meaning, certainly, to this and had it been the will of all-wise and all-merciful creator that only one of these religions should exist and the rest should die, it would have become a fact long, long ago. If it were a . fact that one of these religions is true and all the rest are false, by this time it would have covered the whole ground."[4]

Furthermore, the plurality of religions, says Vivekananda, is not only a fact but is necessary for the spiritual and material development of society. Again, it is the clash of thought, the differentiation of thoughts, that awakens thought and makes societies dynamic.[5] More important than this, he proclaims, "If there were not different religions, different world-views, no one religion would survive."[6]

In view of the above, it can be claimed that there is no need to be afraid of religious diversity. Rather, diversity is the source of our survival; we have to encourage it. At the same time, we are aware that religious diversity is one of the main causes of contemporary social and political conflicts. Followers of different religions have fought against one another for centuries. Today also they continue to fight and kill one another, in many cases unfortunately in the name of religion. Whether all this fighting was and is for the sake of religion or for the sake of personal or national ambitions hidden under the pretext of religion is a matter to investigate, and this is not my concern here. But no one can deny that the greatest part of the blame can be laid upon religion, which, with the passage of time, comes to be remembered as a subject of dispute, conflict and bloody wars rather than a way of personal

and collective salvation. I think the following lines of Wilfred Cantwel Smith, a renowned theologian, clearly explain the danger of religious diversity for the contemporary world:

"Religious diversity poses a general human problem today because it disrupts community. It does so with a new force in the modern world because divergent traditions that in the past did and could develop separately are today face to face. Different civilizations have in the past either ignored each other, or fought each other; very occasionally in tirry ways perhaps they met each other. Today they not only meet but interpenetrate; they meet not only each other but jointly meet joint problems, and must jointly try to solve them. They must collaborate. Perhaps the single most important challenge that mankind faces in our day is the need to turn our nascent world society into a world community."[7]

The tragic consequences of Smith's above remarks that "religious diversity disrupts community" are all too evident in Lebanon, Bosnia, Caucasia (Negoma, Karabakh and Abhazia) and no less in India. Then the question arises, Is religious diversity a source of survival and maintenance of society, as claimed by Swami Vivekananda? Or is it a disruptive force to the unity of a society, as remarked by W.C. Smith? Or can human beings choose to use it in either way? If so, how can this choice be made?

Actually, the problem pointed out by Vivekananda and Smith is not merely related to the nature of diversity itself. Instead, everything depends upon the manner in which we look at diversity: as a creative power or a destructive force. In other words, whether "unity in diversity" is achieved, or the unity of a society is extinguished by religious differences, mostly depends upon how different religious groups perceive one another: whether as enemies or as friends. Therefore, the question of what has to be our behaviour towards others in order to achieve religious harmony becomes more important than the existence of diversity of religions itself.

Now, to find a satisfactory answer to these questions, I think it will be helpful for us to examine different approaches. The attitudes towards others can be classified into three main groups, namely dogmatic, syncretistic and pluralistic.

1. *Dogmatic Attitude*: This view propounds the idea that "my religion or conviction is the only true one; the rest are wrong." Thus the dogmatic view considers as false whatever negates or denies its own assertions. Commonly, most of us, as religious beings in a competitive situation, are more or less dogmatic in our attitudes. This may be the result of our feeling threatened by others and consequently fearing the loss of our religious identity, or it may be the result of misguidance an the part of some religious leaders. But in many cases, the dogmatic behavior can be seen as an outcome of either ignorance of holy texts or misinterpretation of them for the sake of our personal or national interests. For example, in the Gita, Lord Krishna says, "Whoever comes to me, through whatsoever form, I reach him; all men are struggling through paths which in the end lead to me."[8] But in practice, in arguing for devotion to Lard Krishna we are forcing others to accept our way of worship, or at least we are claiming that our way is the best. Likewise in the Quran, God says, "There is no compulsion in religion."[9] And "O, you who believe, you are firstly in charge of your own selves."[10] Again "There will be neither fear nor grief for those who believe in God and the last Day, and do righteous deeds, whether Muslim, or Jew, or Christian, or Sabaeans."[11] But in the life of many contemporary Muslims, these and many other similar principles of

the Quran are overlooked. In this regard, the situation of the followers of other religious traditions today is not much better than Hindus and Muslims.

The attitudes of the dogmatics have been described by Sri Ramakrishna as resembling those of the blind men who examined an elephant, came to different conclusions, and started to quarrel about their partial or limited standpoints.[12] Furthermore, he condemns dogmatism as follows:

"I keep man's own ideals intact. I ask a Vaishnava to hold to his Vaishnava attitude and a Sakta to his. But this also I say to them: "Never feel that your path alone is right and that the paths o f others are wrong and fall of error. "[13]

We also all know that Swami Vivekananda compares sectarian views with the attitude of the well-frog, in the story of the same name, who has no idea of the ocean.[14]

However, the dogmatic attitude, as rightly expressed by Helmut von Glasenapp, undeniably offers to the follower of a religion some special advantages. It gives him or her an unshakable foundation for considering the world and life, and builds a solid embankment against the waves of doubt, as the standpoint offers immediately a sure code of conduct.

The history of the world proves beyond doubt that all great men who have decidedly influenced human thought were able to do so only because they were convinced of the general applicability of their own views and felt that the views of others were erroneous, and would therefore have to be corrected."[15]

So, how can we condemn the dogmatic attitude even though it provides a solid basis for success? It is simply because by exceeding a fine barrier it leads to fanaticism and strife which are dangerous and harmful for the welfare and unity of society. So dogmatism or exclusivism must be repudiated for the sake of harmony.

2. *Syncretistic Attitude*: Syncretism is the reconciliation of the different religions by taking keystones from different faiths. If we look at the history of religions, we will easily notice that most of the syncretistic thinkers such as Akbar (1542-1605), Kabir (15thC), Bahaullah (1817-1892) and Ram Mohan Roy (1773-1883) were responding to the conditions in which they lived. They were trying to prevent the endless bloodshed and fighting between the different religious groups by uniting them, Islam and Hinduism in the case of Akbar and Kabir, Christianity and Hinduism in the case of Ram Mohan Roy. That is why all these attempts were praiseworthy and successful, at least in the beginning. However, we can not claim that their successes were permanent. This is because, first of all, syncretism can mean the rather artificial joining of quite different religious beliefs and practices that together lack necessary coherence and consistency. Every religion has a recognizable character of its own, an organic unity. Therefore, it cannot melt into another easily. Secondly, most syncretistic attempts result in the emergence of a new faith by the side of the other two faiths, like the Sikh religion and the Bah'ai religion. Furthermore, most of these movements became dogmatic or sectarian in their attitude as soon as their founder passed away. We can therefore conclude that religious harmony cannot be established by combining bits and pieces of different religious traditions. What we learn from history is that all endeavours to create unity in this way have only been of a transitory nature. They ceased

with the life of the founder and his circle, or they have undergone a change with time. Thus syncretistic solutions will not ultimately produce religious harmony.

3. *Pluralistic Attitude*: Unlike the former two attitudes, the pluralistic standpoint attempts to accept others as they are. Since there is no generally accepted criterion to distinguish between the truth and falsehood of different religious systems, it is important that the followers of such systems should admit that other systems are true in their own way. For the sake of unity and harmony of today's world community, it is unnecessary to specify in what respect each is true. I believe that today this is the most appropriate way to approach diversity.

We can easily see that Sri Ramakrishna and his disciple Swami Vivekananda were not only good exemplars of this pluralism for us, but also have done a great service by accepting different religions as different paths leading to the same goal. I believe that they also helped people of different religions to understand their respective holy texts much more clearly than before, at least with regard to diversity. All of us know that the plurality of religions is explained by Ramakrishna with different analogies, such as the analogy of reaching the roof through different ways, either by stone stairs or by wooden stairs or by bamboo steps or by a rope or by a bamboo pole;[16] and the analogy of going to Dakshineswar by carriage, by boat, by steamer, or an foot. You will choose the way according to your convenience and taste, but the destination for all is the same. Some of you will arrive earlier than others, but all will arrive.[17] Ramakrishna not only advocated this idea an a theoretical level, but, following Christian and Islamic ways of worship and reaching the realization of Christ and Mohammed respectively, he showed us this is a fact rather than a fiction.[18]

In this regard the literature of Swami Vivekananda also provides us enough evidence to see how far he strictly adopted his master's views and developed them. Thus he proclaims, "I have not one word to say against any religion or founder of any religion in the world. All religions are sacred to me."[19] "You must express your sympathy with people of all sects."[20] In his lecture delivered an March 25, 1900, in San Francisco, he explains his attitude towards Prophet Mohammed, founder of Islam, with these words: "The characters of the great souls are mysterious, their methods past our finding out. We must not judge them. Christ may judge Mohammed. Who are you and I?"[21] In other well-known and often quoted words, Swami Vivekananda, following his master's way, says:

"I accept all the religions that were in the past, and worship them all; I worship God with every one of them, in whatever form they worship Him. I shall go to the mosque of Mohammedan, I shall enter the Christians Church and kneel before the crucifix; I shall enter the Buddhist 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 find the light which enlightens the heart of every one."[22]

In the writings of Swami Vivekananda we can find many more such statements. Even though at times Vivekananda criticized different traditions, he did so without any attempt to reject or to synthesize them, accepting them as they are. He did not consider all of them as the same, because he was very much aware of the differences among the various Systems. I am of the opinion that he was doing so because this was the only way to make religious diversity a source of dynamism rather than a destructive element to the unity and harmony of the community.

Now, if we, as followers or admirers of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda, want to develop religious unity and harmony in our societies, let us put their ideas into practice, firstly in our personal lives, then by helping and supporting the people who are going in this direction, before it is too late.

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2 James C. Livingston. *Anatomy of the Sacred.- An Introduction to Religion,* New York, 1989, pp. 9-10. See also *Vivekananda,* II, p. 33.

3 Mahendranath Gupta, *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna,* tr. Swami Nikhilananda, Madras. 1985. 11. p. 540.

4 *Vivekananda,* II, p. 362

5 *Vivekananda,* II, pp. 363-64.

6 *Vivekananda,* II, p. 482.

7 Wilfred C. *Smith, "The Christian in a Religiously Plural World," in Christianity and Other Religions,* ed. John Hick and B. Hebbletwaite, Philadelphia, 1980, pp. 94-95.

8 *Bhagavat Gita,* tr. S. Radhakrishnan, Bombay, 1974, Ch. V11/21-22.

9 *Kur`an-ý Kerim,* Bakara 2/256.

10 *Kur'an- ý Kerim,* Maide 5/105.

11 *Kur'an-ý Kerim,* Maide 5/69.

12 *Gupta,* I, p. 191.

13 *Gupta,* II, p. 596.

14 *Vivekananda,* III, pp. 483-84; also in his speech at the Parliament of Religions, "Why We Disagree," Chicago, 1893.

15 Helmut von Glasenapp, "Ramakrishna and Harmony of Religions," in *Sri Ramakrishna and His Admirers,* pp. 85-86.

16 *Gupta,* I, pp. 374 and 514.

17 *Gupta,* II, p. 1010.

18 Swami Saradananda, *Sri Ramakrishna the Great Master, tr.* Swami Jagadananda, Madras, 1978, vol I, pp. 299-300 and 339.

19 *Vivekananda,* VII, p. 458.

20 *Vivekananda,* V, p. 305.

21 *Vivekananda,* I, p. 482.

22 *Vivekananda,* II, p. 374.