

Prospect of Human Unity through Sri Ramakrishna's Harmony of Religions

SWAMI PRABHANANDA

Let me begin with three pieces of news before I explore the subject thoroughly.

(a) India continues to grapple with the ill-effects of the global meltdown. The Government is keeping a keen eye on the political unrest in the neighbouring states. In the meantime, the people of this largest democracy have elected members for its 15th Parliament. People breathed a sigh of relief to have a stable Government. In Kolkata, the 'Aila' cyclone created havoc. Thereafter, quite flows the Ganga, although its water level has gone deep down.

(b) In the world scenario some experts have claimed the birth and growth of a new kind of spirituality. A core insight from the *World Values Survey* reports that around the world, people are withdrawing trust from traditional institutions and placing greater trust in personal empowerment. It seems an experiential spirituality is emerging. It is a personalized, customized form of faith which minimizes rules and absolutes and differs from the major religions (www.awakeningearth.org). This may be true for a small section of highly westernized Indian minds but Indian people in general are crowding round the temples, mosques and churches these days more than ever.

(c) The General Assembly of the United Nations, while adopting resolution on elimination of all forms of religious

intolerance, emphasized that the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief is far-reaching and profound, and that it encompasses freedom of thought in all matters, personal conviction and the commitment to religion or belief, whether manifested individually or in community with others and in public or private. This happened on 25 November 1981. There is news that the World Body is trying utmost to implement this pious decision of the UNO.

Against this background we are going to consider the prospect of human unity through harmony of religions as practised and preached by Sri Ramakrishna.

Vedantic seers discovered not only human unity but unity in the universe itself. Even as we encounter multiplicity of conscious experiences Vedanta discovered the unity of consciousness as the true self of men and the reality or stuff of the universe. Philosophers like Professor J. N. Mohanty thereupon observed that 'the first fundamental intuitive insight, that all the different aspects of human experience and the different aspects of the world, the universe, have a common ground, a unitary ground in one being, is perhaps the original rational insight of religion.' He further observed at a seminar held in 2007 that 'philosophy and science have tried to justify this later on in different ways.'

Human unity is a universal quest. To achieve unity, some suggested we have to

cut through the robes of nationality, caste and cultures to reveal the bare bones of unity. Honestly speaking, human society has failed to achieve sustainable unity and peace so far. The accusing finger is raised towards religion nowadays. And it is raised by politicians mostly, although it has been observed that it is the politicians who misuse religion to serve their selfish ends. While it is true that religions themselves can be forces of divisiveness, more often it is the interplay of political, economic and social forces, which is responsible for disharmony and conflict.

One hundred years back Swami Vivekananda upheld: 'True, what we want is that religion should not be a social reformer, but we insist at the same time that society has no right to become a religious law-giver. Hands off! Keep yourself to your own bounds and everything would come right.'¹ But, can separation of religion from socio-political matter be brought about in Indian society which is saturated with religious thoughts and practices for centuries? No doubt, however, that these religious conflict and harmony problems crop up only because there is human element in all religious situations. The human element needs to be tamed and true religion can do it. The goal of true religion is to manifest this potential divinity in man, by controlling nature, external and internal.

Wonderful unity

Let us look back for a while. We may recall the British historian, Vincent Smith, as early as 1820, for the first time pointed out that Indian society has maintained a wonderful unity amidst amazing social and cultural diversities. In fact, history records that in the field of religion India has maintained tolerance for thousands of years, unparalleled in world history. India

sheltered the Christians, the Zoroastrians, and the Jews all through.

In Swami Vivekananda's estimation the vitality of the Hindu race, the mission of the race, is religion. He remarked, 'The Hindu man drinks religiously, sleeps religiously, walks religiously, marries religiously, robs religiously.'² Every part of his life was integrated with religion.

In the golden days of India's tradition, religion, politics and sociology have pushed human life progressively from the physical or organic level to the ethical, moral, aesthetic and the higher spiritual level, thus enriching human life qualitatively. Religion was pervasive so much so that it formed the backbone of the nation.

In explaining the evolution of brute into man, and man into God, Swamiji said, 'a spring of infinite power is coiled up and is inside this little body (of man), and that spring is spreading itself.' This spring is religion and its source of strength is spirituality.

During her long history India had thrown up several vast and powerful empires. However, she had been victims of foreign aggression and also of hatred with the appearance of Semitic religions. The conflicts were essentially political. The country's inherent spirit of tolerance persuaded the religious leaders to infuse tolerance into the body politic. With the advent of British Raj, besides aggressive intrusion of Christianity, plunder and annual tribute from India and destruction of the productive organization of the country reduced India to a state of poverty, disease and starvation.

While Indians tried to get settled, the British rulers began to drive the wedge between the communities deeper in the interest of their own self-perpetuation. Tarachand in his 'History of Freedom

Movement in India' quoted from Wood Papers: (Wood to Elgin, 3 March 1862), 'We have maintained power by playing off one part against the other, and we must continue to do so. . . Do what you can, therefore, to prevent all having a common feeling.' (Message, p. 581). In another letter dated 19 May 1862, Wood wrote, 'We cannot afford in India to neglect any means of strengthening our position. Depend upon it, the natural antagonism of races is no inconsiderable element of our strength. If all India was to unite against us, how long could we maintain ourselves?'

Despite enormity of diversity, Indian society has been highly resilient and eclectic in nature; here diversity tended towards unity helping man to a self-ward, spiritual, God-ward direction. This rich tradition was pointed out by Swamiji, Sri Aurobindo and Rabindranath. We need to study this noble tradition in depth before we venture on experiments with modern secularism, etc. seriously. Before we proceed further, let us recall a brief but profound observation Swami Vivekananda made in California on 28 January 1900 about the double-edged role of religion in history. He said, 'Nothing has made more for peace and love than religion; nothing has engendered fiercer hatred than religion.'³ However, at the same time, man cannot do away with religion. It has been tried several times but it did not work. Nevertheless, religion has the potential to effect true human unity.

The line of least resistance

Barring few communal conflagrations like pre and post independent riots, demolition of Ayodhya mosque and its fallout, Indian pluralistic society was a model so much so that Rabindranath Tagore described this land as *Bhārat-Tirtha*, (*Bhārat*, the holy land of pilgrimage).

Swami Vivekananda observed, 'You can work only under the law of least resistance, and this religious line is the line of least resistance in India. This is the line of life, this is the line of growth, and this is the line of well-being in India—to follow the track of religion.'⁴ Anticipating co-operation from leaders in the field of socio-economics and politics, religion should take the lead. Let us remember the basic dictum of the *Mahābhārata*, '*Dhāranāt dharma ityāhuh, dharma dhārayate prajāh*', ie whatever holds people together is religion and what disintegrates people cannot be religion. This true spirit of religion—its inherent binding capacity should be noted and used for human welfare.

We need to consider another issue of great significance. Unfortunately human beings and the natural world are on a collision course. As a result the humanity has been on the verge of devastating the Earth's biosphere and crippling its ecological foundation for future generations. To warn humanity of its grievous consequences, over 1600 senior scientists including majority of the Nobel laureates released a document in 1992 emphasizing the need for fresh approaches to thinking and living. It is true religion which can play a very significant role in bringing human beings and the natural world to a path of amity and peace. As hinted earlier, true religion is committed to transform the brute in man into divine in man and help him to adapt himself to the natural world. Swamiji wants us to step back and gain a proper perspective from India's golden past so that we can make the best use of the benign influence of spirituality.

Swami Vivekananda repeatedly harped on the cultural unity of India based on spirituality. Emphasizing the spiritual aspect of human life, Swamiji observed, 'National

union in India must be a gathering up of its scattered spiritual forces. A nation in India must be a union of those whose hearts beat to the same spiritual tune'.⁵ He did not bother as regards the particular religion to which one belongs. His emphasis was on spirituality, the essence of religion that every religion upholds and brings humans closer.

In his lecture entitled 'My Master', Swami Vivekananda referred to his Master's teaching that 'the religions of the world are not contradictory or antagonistic. They are but various phases of one eternal religion. . . . There never was my religion or yours. . . . One infinite religion existed all through eternity and will ever exist, and this religion is expressing itself in various countries in various ways.'⁶ Needless to point out that the thrust here is on spirituality.

In a pluralistic society neither rejection and tolerance of another religion nor hatred and dogmatic attitude toward it will help in improving inter-relationship. Swami Vivekananda persuaded us to understand, respect, appreciate, accept and finally assimilate the best elements in other religions while remaining steadfast in one's own. This is how we can initiate the process of gathering up of the spiritual forces.

Interfaith relationship

The challenge of interfaith relationship can be met squarely if intrareligious understanding and harmony within the faith can be established beforehand or at least more or less simultaneously. Most of us do not know the different facets of our own faith; yet, we are being acted upon by different traditions and set beliefs. Misunderstanding and distrust lie embedded in various layers and crevices of the human psyche and they manifest in beliefs, customs and practices. Therefore, intrafaith

dialogue is essential. Swami Vivekananda reinterpreted the ancient basic scriptures in the light of Sri Ramakrishna's life and teachings and this has given shape to the integral Hinduism, as has been correctly mentioned by Sister Nivedita. No doubt, it has helped to consolidate the disruptive forces of the Hindu community and play its role effectively in interfaith harmony.

Special features of Sri Ramakrishna's harmony of religions

The harmony of religions as practised and preached by Sri Ramakrishna is the solution, perhaps the best and workable solution. We should not miss to note that here the thrust is on spirituality all through. Here are some of the special features of Sri Ramakrishna's harmony of religions:

(i) It is rooted in Sri Ramakrishna's direct mystical experience. He realized that the ultimate Reality—call it Brahma, or Jehovah or Allah—is only one Truth known by different names in different religions. Sri Ramakrishna said, 'He who has seen God knows really and truly that God has form and that He is formless as well. He has many other aspects that cannot be described.'⁷

(ii) Whenever Sri Ramakrishna practised different sectarian disciplines of Hinduism or other religions, he tried to understand their philosophy, rites and rituals through the eyes of their followers; also he sincerely followed their methods and practices for realizing the Spirit or the ultimate Reality.

(iii) There are more than one path to the realization of the ultimate Reality. Each religion/sectarian discipline is a path. Sri Ramakrishna used to say, 'As many faiths, so many paths.' As the various paths lead to the same goal, all these world religions are valid. He thus verified the veracity of the paths as well as their goal. This was a unique achievement.

(iv) Holy Mother Sarada Devi said, ‘The Master being a lover of God wanted to enjoy God’s bliss in different ways and this prompted him to follow different spiritual paths. The understanding of the conclusion about harmony of religions spontaneously came to him as a direct experience and not by reasoning or reading scriptures.’

(v) From individual perspective he prescribed *Ishtanishthā* (steadfastness in one’s own spiritual path) and from community perspective he recommended *sarvadharmā samabhāva*, ie an understanding that all world religions are valid paths leading to the highest Reality or Truth. Sri Ramakrishna advised Vijay Krishna Goswami, a prominent Brahmo leader, ‘When you mix with people outside your Samaj, love them all. When in their company, be one of them. Don’t harbour malice toward them. . . . It is God alone who makes people see things in different ways. Know that people have different natures. Realize this and mix with them as much as you can. And love all. But enter your own inner chamber to enjoy peace and bliss.’⁸

(vi) Knowing that the same God dwells in all human beings one should mix freely with them irrespective of their creed, race, language, etc. As a corollary to this, a spiritual aspirant should serve God in man in addition to his worshipping God in the temple or the church.

(vii) To Sri Ramakrishna, the harmony of religions was something natural, spontaneous, and not a human creation. He believed that every religion and sect has some place in God’s infinite scheme. Therefore, he never criticized them or their founders or followers.

Obstacles

Despite the fact that Sri Ramakrishna’s harmony of religions has been lauded by different religious groups, rationalists, social

scientists and others because of its potential viability, it is not easy to reap its benefits for several reasons. Among them the following points deserve special mention.

(i) There is lack of cohesion and integration within every major religion and intra-religious corrective steps are necessary.

(ii) Thorns in the rose lying embedded in inter-religious harmony issues are often avoided in interfaith meets. Some of these prickles, for example, are conversion from one religion into another, belief in the exclusive redemptive power of a religion, inherent hatred towards other religious groups labelling them ‘Kafir’, ‘Infidel’, and so on.

(iii) In adapting spiritual charisma of the founder or earlier great saints to the recent-day living condition of the followers, lot of compromises are made to accommodate to the existing socio-political institution. However, it becomes yet another social institution. Problem arises when religion as a social institution tends either to dominate or to be dominated by its socio-political role and, in the process, weakens itself or even alienates itself from its original spirit.

Towards achieving sustainable human unity we need to consider at least the following steps: (a) to be aware of the implication of compulsions of globalization, environmental crisis, global meltdown, increasing threats of terrorism, etc; (b) role of religion in the present crisis as also its potential in resolving the same; (c) to understand the different facets of Sri Ramakrishna’s harmony of religions; and (d) to create a workable common world among the major religious communities to facilitate application of the principles of harmony of religions.

There is agreement among the mystics of various faiths that direct experience of the ultimate Reality is possible, although they disagree about the content of the experience.

This knowledge provides a support for common understanding among different faiths.

In order to have understanding of philosophy and religious practices, people belonging to different faiths need to have a common world, which does not exist now; the leaders of different intrafaith meets and interfaith groups need to create, construct and develop the same. It can hardly be achieved through lectures, seminars, etc. Experts opine that the process of conversation and understanding what the other persons mean are the only effective means. To understand another we have to enter into the other's mind. Thus common elements in different religious traditions are to be explored in the basic texts, the ritualistic practices, the beliefs of the people. These elements are to be searched in the process of conversation.

Participation in religious prayers and rituals and visiting the places of pilgrimage of other religious groups are means of sharing the experiences of those religious groups. This paves the way to clearing the path to the common world and subsequently to understanding. If we do not want to cherish Sri Ramakrishna's harmony of religions simply as a pious wish we shall have to try seriously so that we can understand, appreciate and accept its praiseworthy elements. Thus we can avoid disharmony in our daily life and live in peace. Then only we shall be able to appreciate the old dictum—*basudhaiva kutumvakam*—and realize Holy Mother's advice, 'Learn to make the world your own. No one is a stranger my child, the whole world is your own.' Then and then only we can expect to move towards the goal of human unity. ■

REFERENCES

- | | |
|--|---|
| 1 Swami Vivekananda, <i>The Complete Works</i> , Vol. IV, p. 358 | 5 Ibid., p. 371 |
| 2 Ibid., Vol. VIII, p. 74 | 6 Ibid., Vol. IV, p. 180 |
| 3 Ibid., Vol. II, p. 360 | 7 <i>The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna</i> , p. 191 |
| 4 Ibid., Vol. III, p. 179 | 8 Ibid., p. 637 |

* This article is based on the talk Srimat Swami Prabhanandaji Maharaj, now a Vice President of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, delivered at the Institute on 28 May 2009. At that time he was the General Secretary of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission.

‘God can be realized through all paths. All religions are true. The important thing is to reach the roof. You can reach it by stone stairs or by wooden stairs or by bamboo steps or by a rope. You can also climb up by a bamboo pole. You may say that there are many errors and superstitions in another religion. I should reply: Suppose there are. Every religion has errors.

Everyone thinks that his watch alone gives the correct time. It is enough to have yearning for God. It is enough to love Him and feel attracted to Him. Don't you know that God is the Inner Guide? . . . The devotees call on God alone; though by different names. They call on one Person only. God is one, but His names are many.’ ■

—Sri Ramakrishna