

# Swami Vivekananda and Others on Religious Pluralism

GOPAL STAVIG

## The Value of Having Many Religions

Religions often improve people. S. Radhakrishnan (1888-1975) emphasized that, 'Every tradition which helps man to lift his soul to God is held up as worthy of adherence.... The mystics of the world, whether Hindu, Christian, or Muslim, belong to the same brotherhood and have striking family likeness.... The Hindu theory that every human being, every group and every nation has an individuality worthy of reverence is slowly gaining ground. Such a view requires that we should allow absolute freedom to every group to cultivate what is most distinctive and characteristic of it. All peculiarity is unique and incommunicable.'<sup>1</sup>

Origen (c. 185-254) the Greek Alexandrian Christian philosopher, stressed the transforming power of Christianity. He mentioned that many converts gave up their 'acts of licentiousness and injustice and covetousness' and 'from the time that they adopted it, have become in some way meeker, and more religious, and more consistent, so that certain among them, from a desire of exceeding chastity, and a wish to worship God with greater purity, abstain even from the permitted indulgences.'<sup>2</sup>

One of the pioneers of Western psychology Alfred Adler (1870-1937) of Vienna, Austria supported religion as a

positive force that emphasizes living a moral life, service to the community, and being helpful to other people. The practice of religion helps a person develop '(t)he capacity for identification, which alone makes us capable of friendship, love of mankind, sympathy, occupation, and love ... It is almost impossible to exaggerate the value of an increase in social feeling. The mind improves, for intelligence is a communal function. The feeling of worth and value is heightened, giving courage and an optimistic view, and there is a sense of acquiescence in the common advantages and drawbacks of our lot. The individual feels at home in life and feels his existence to be worthwhile just so far as he is useful to others.'<sup>3</sup>

We always have something to learn from other religions. Studying other religions allows one to reflect on one's own religious faith, gain insight, and to appreciate it more. This way we can enrich and broaden our own religious outlook and practice. Since people of other religions look at the same phenomena differently, new discoveries are possible. Swami Vivekananda maintained, 'By the study of different religions we find that in essence they are one.... The proof of one religion depends on the proof of all the rest.... We see, therefore, that if one religion is true, all others must be true. There are differences in non-essentials, but in essentials they are

all one.<sup>4</sup> I learn more about my religion by studying other religions. 'The greater the number of sects, the more chance of people getting religion.' Pay respects to all religions, since each is a path to the Divine world. Judge another religion by its best, not its worse elements. Assimilate the spirit of the other religions, but maintain your own individuality and distinctiveness. 'Do not try to disturb the faith of others.'<sup>5</sup> Religious knowledge is held back because of the lack of the interchange of ideas between religions. Compare this to any science where knowledge is shared and discussed among people from different countries. Each religion tends to focus its attention upon certain aspects of human experience and knowledge while being relatively indifferent to others. Religious people do not aim at the same goal. They may seek liberation-salvation in a higher world, to improve life on earth, to make themselves more materially prosperous, or to patriotically support their country.

Regarding religious pluralism, S. Radhakrishnan stressed the importance of synthetic, comprehensive, and unitive knowledge emphasizing the similarities, rather than the differences between the various religions. It unites rather than divides people. 'A study of other living religions helps and enhances the appreciation of our own faith. If we adopt a wider historical view we obtain a more comprehensive vision and understanding of spiritual truth. Christian thinkers like St. Thomas Aquinas were willing to find confirmation of the truths of Christianity in the works of pagan philosophers.'<sup>6</sup> For example, the broad-minded Aquinas (1225-74) studied the writings of the Muslim religious philosophers from Spain (Averroes) to Afghanistan (Avicenna), and Maimonides,

the Jewish thinker from Spain, Morocco, and Egypt.

Paul Tillich (1886-1965) the German-American Lutheran religious philosopher stressed, 'If you want to speak meaningfully with someone, there must be a common basis of some mutually accepted ideas. The truth that is common to both Christians and pagans must first be elaborated. If they have nothing in common, no conversation is possible.'<sup>7</sup> Listening to other points of view allows one to better examine one's own religious faith. 'Only if you encounter someone else are you able to reflect on yourselves.... When you encounter resistance you reflect.'<sup>8</sup> 'Often God speaks to the church more directly from outside the church, through those who are enemies of religion and Christianity, than within the church, through those who are official representatives of the church.'<sup>9</sup>

Another point made by Tillich is, 'Most human beings, of course, are not able to stand the message of the shaking of the foundations. They reject and attack the prophetic minds, not because they really disagree with them, but because they sense the truth of their words and cannot receive it. They repress it in themselves.'<sup>10</sup> A critic might oppose an idea not because he rationally disagrees with it, but because it produces a negative psychological feeling within him that he dislikes. There is a clash between the *samskāras* (mental impressions) already present in the mind, with the conflicting *samskāras* formed when hearing the new idea.

Ananda Spencer of the Department of Religious Studies at Punjabi University approvingly cited the following remark made by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India explaining the purpose of dialogue. It is 'an attitude and activity wherein committed followers of various religions

accept one another with equal respect and dignity, communicate to one another their religious experiences, convictions, attitudes and riches or their religious outlook on the problems of life, in order to arrive at a deeper knowledge and acceptance of one another and thereby be helped in the common journey to the Ultimate destiny of man.' The goal is through an interpersonal relationship and mutual communication, to reach a deeper understanding and to become aware of the other person's perspective. 'We are living in an age of dialogue. Society has grown religiously and ideologically more pluralistic than ever before.'<sup>11</sup>

At times Brahman-God speaks in a positive manner to a religion through a secular ideology. For example, Swami Vivekananda was able to explain Vedanta better due to his study of modern Western science.

As indicated by the 'Principle of Effect,' the validity of any religion or denomination of the world is proved by its ability to attract large numbers of adherents (an aspect of the 'Law of Large Numbers') over a long period of time, and to have a transforming effect on their lives. When responding to the accusations of Celsus the Middle Platonist (historically after Plato and before the Neo-Platonists), Origen, wrote, 'From the beginning every one opposed the spread of his [Jesus'] doctrine over the whole world, the emperors in each period, the chief generals under them, and all governors, so to speak, who had been entrusted with any power at all, and furthermore, the rulers in each city, the soldiers, and the people. Yet it conquered, since as the word of God it could not be prevented; and as it was stronger than all those adversaries it overcame all Greece and the most part of the barbarian countries, and converted innumerable souls to follow its worship of God.'<sup>12</sup> As Vivekananda put it, 'If

what the modern scientists say is true, that the survival of the fittest is the test, these religions prove by their still living that they are yet fit for some people. There is a reason why they should live, they bring good to many.'<sup>13</sup>

### **The Need for Religious Pluralism**

From the standpoint of pragmatic utility, in today's world there is a vital need for religious pluralism and dialogue to avoid sectarian conflicts. This will lead to harmonious coexistence that springs from mutual esteem and respect among the different faiths. Vivekananda stressed that India is the country of religious freedom and universal toleration. Historically Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, Jains, Parsees (Zoroastrians), and Jews have lived side by side in India, each publicly preaching their respective doctrines. Vivekananda mentioned, 'There was never an organized church in India; so there was never a body of men to formulate doctrines of orthodoxy.'<sup>14</sup> Consequently, polytheism, pantheism, panentheism, and acosmic Absolutism were not anathematized in India, and were allowed to flourish resulting in an encyclopedic religion. Professor Ninian Smart (1927-2001) adds that during Vivekananda's time, 'The divide between Muslims and Hindus in particular could threaten the new national movement. There were other faiths too which were important in the Indian scene, especially in regard to the intelligentsia—there were Christians, the Parsees, Jains, Sikhs, some Buddhists, and so on. India needed an ideology which could express a wider loyalty and promote harmony in a volatile subcontinent.'<sup>15</sup>

According to S. Radhakrishnan, 'Religious provincialism stands in the way of a unitary world culture which is the only enduring basis for a world community.' A

rigid system of dogmas is often narrow and limited, determined by the restricted conceptual scope of its authors. Any temporal and restricted system of ideas cannot be considered to be absolute and comprehensive.<sup>16</sup> A commentator writes on Radhakrishnan's views, 'Just as the political ideal of the world today is not a single empire with one homogeneous civilization but a commonwealth of free nations, having their own institutions and cultures and existing side by side in peace and harmony, so the religious ideal should also be not a single world-religion which is the dream of the proselytizing religions but which is an impossibility, but a commonwealth of religions having their own creeds and organizations and living side by side with mutual toleration and respect as representing the one religious spirit of man.'<sup>17</sup>

The Indian Christian Professor of Religions at Bishop College in Kolkata, Kalarikkal P. Aleaz (b. 1947), developed a topology of four levels of tolerance: 'Under the Exclusivist school, one's own religious faith is the sole criterion by which other faiths are understood and evaluated. Other religious paths are defective and one's own faith is the only valid path to liberation.... The Inclusivist approach affirms the salvific presence of God in other religions while still maintaining that one's own religious faith is the definitive and authoritative revelation of God. Inclusivism accepts the Divine presence in other faiths, but rejects them as not being sufficient for liberation apart from one's own faith. All truth in other religions belongs ultimately to one's own faith which is its fulfillment. Pluralism holds that other religions are equally salvific paths to the one God. The Ultimate reality on which the faith of all believers is focused in every religion is the same though interpretations of its essential nature may vary. For this

school, truth-claims are complementary and are not conflicting. Pluralistic Inclusivism ... [seeks] fulfillment of the theological and spiritual contents of one's own faith in and through the contributions of other living faiths.'<sup>18</sup>

When Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826) against opposition authored the 'Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom' (1779), he believed that all religions should be considered to be equal before the state. He opposed the European idea of a national religion that had special privileges. Consequently, because one is free to choose the religion of one's liking from a wide variety of faiths, the United States has high levels of religiosity (Church attendance, belief in God and afterlife, etc.), unlike many Continental European countries where the majority of people have traditionally belonged to the same denomination. Because of the policy of religious tolerance set down by Jefferson and others, many deeply religious people left Europe where they were persecuted and migrated to the United States. Jefferson pointed out, in the past millions of people were killed in religious wars and persecutions in an effort to prevent religious diversity, and yet now there is more religious diversity than ever.

The celebrated English historian Arnold Toynbee (1889-1975) made the following positive assessment of Hindu pluralism,

In the Hindu view, each of the higher religions is a true vision and a right way, and all of them alike are indispensable to mankind, because each gives a different glimpse of the same truth, and each leads by a different route to the same goal of human endeavours. Each, therefore, has a special spiritual value of its own which is not to be found in any of the others.... Today we are still living in this transitional chapter of the world's history, but it is

already becoming clear that a chapter which had a Western beginning will have to have an Indian ending if it is not to end in the self-destruction of the human race. In the present age, the world has been united on the material plane by Western technology. But this Western skill has not only ‘annihilated distance;’ it has armed the peoples of the world with weapons of devastating power at a time when they have been brought to point-blank range of each other without yet having learnt to know and love each other. At this supremely dangerous moment in human history, the only way of salvation for mankind is an Indian way. The Emperor Ashoka’s and the Mahatma Gandhi’s principle of nonviolence and Sri Ramakrishna’s testimony to the harmony of religions: here we have the attitude and the spirit that can make it possible for the human race to grow together into a single family—and, in the Atomic Age, this is the only alternative to destroying ourselves.<sup>19</sup>

The conceptual aspect of pluralism centers on the acceptance of the doctrines and ritualistic practices of other religions. The active aspect focuses on inter-faith dialogue and is concerned with unity, co-operation, improved understanding, and harmonious coexistence between the different religions. We are most fortunate that we now live in an age dominated by inter-faith dialogue rather than hostile and warlike confrontations. Mediating religious philosophy and theology attempt to bring agreement and reconciliation between two opposing views. For a meaningful dialogue to occur between two world religions, they share a common approach and goal, and neither side can dominate over the other. Each side learns from the other.

All religious revelations are limited by the beliefs, background, language, and historical conditions of the people who honour them. Swami Vivekananda says,

‘Take the *Bible*, for instance, and all the sects that exist amongst Christians; each one puts its own interpretation upon the same text, and each says that it alone understands that text and all the rest are wrong. So with every religion. There are many sects among the Mohammedans and among the Buddhists, and hundreds among the Hindus.’ ‘We are always making this mistake in judging others; we are always inclined to think that our little mental universe is all that is; our ethics, our morality, our sense of duty, our sense of utility, are the only things that are worth having.’ ‘In judging others we always judge them by our own ideals. That is not as it should be. Everyone must be judged according to his own ideal, and not by that of anyone else.... I am of opinion that the vast majority of our quarrels with one another arise simply from this one cause that we are always trying to judge others’ gods by our own, others’ ideals by our ideals, and others’ motives by our motives. Under certain circumstances I might do a certain thing, and when I see another person taking the same course I think he has also the same motive actuating him ... He may have performed the action with quite a different motive from that which impelled me to do it.’<sup>20</sup> ‘I begin to understand the marvelous saying of Christ: “Judge not that ye be not judged.”’ ‘What is needed is a fellow-feeling between the different types of religion, seeing that they all stand or fall together, a fellow-feeling which springs from mutual esteem and mutual respect, and not the condescending, patronizing, niggardly expression of goodwill, unfortunately in vogue at the present time with many.’<sup>21</sup>

The Jain religion of India with its theory of ‘Anekantavada’ espouses the ancient ‘Syadvada’ theory that considers human knowledge to be partial, relative, conditional,

and limited, because what they describe often has multi-dimensional forms. They believe as pointed out by Chatterjee and Datta, 'An omniscient being can obtain an immediate knowledge of an object in all its innumerable aspects. But imperfect beings look at objects from one particular point of view at a time and have consequently the knowledge of only one aspect or character of a thing.... The various systems of philosophy which give different accounts of the universe similarly occupy different points of view and discover the different aspects of the many-sided universe. They quarrel because they do not bear in mind that each account is true only from its own standpoint, and is subject to certain conditions. They fail to realize, therefore, that the different views may be true like the blind men who each touched a leg, trunk, or ear of an elephant and described the whole elephant in those terms.'<sup>22</sup>

On this subject Paul Tillich stated that God is the loving heavenly Father of all humanity. Therefore, there is a universal revelation of God present in all religions. 'In the depth of every religion there is a point at which the religion loses its importance, and that to which it points breaks through its particularity ... to a vision of the spiritual presence in other expressions of the ultimate meaning of man's existence.'<sup>23</sup> 'Revelation is received by man in terms of his finite human situation.... Revelation is received under the conditions of man's estranged character.' 'Every revelation is conditioned by the medium in and through which it appears.' 'God acts through men according to their nature and receptiveness.'<sup>24</sup> Every faith that claims to be the only true religion is idolatrous. There is a danger if a religion is worshiped in place of God. 'All idolatry is nothing else than the absolutizing of symbols of the Holy, and making them identical with

the Holy itself.'<sup>25</sup> 'Idolatry is the elevation of a preliminary concern to ultimacy. Something essentially conditioned is taken as unconditional, something essentially partial is boosted into universality, and something essentially finite is given infinite significance.' 'They confuse eternal truth with a temporal expression of this truth.... It elevates something finite and transitory to infinite and eternal validity.'<sup>26</sup> Church 'doctrines, however necessary and good they were, proved to be not the truth that liberates. Soon they became tools of suppression, of servitude under authorities; they became means to prevent the honest search for truth—weapons to split the souls of people between loyalty to the Church and sincerity to truth.'<sup>27</sup>

Leonard Swidler (b. 1929), Professor of Catholic thought and interreligious dialogue at Temple University, emphasized that religious ideas and practices are to a certain extent historically determined. Four factors to consider are: a) Historicization of truth: 'Only by placing truth statements in their historical situation, could they be properly understood (understanding of a text could be found only in its context).' Knowledge is determined by the prevalent ideas, intellectual categories, literary forms, and psychological setting of the culture. b) Sociology of knowledge: The types of truth statements made are a result of one's intellectual culture, religion, political-social environment, socio-economic class, etc. c) Limits of language: 'All statements about the truth of things necessarily can at most be only partial descriptions of the reality they are trying to describe ... although reality can be seen from an almost limitless number of perspectives, human language can express things from only one, of perhaps a very few, perspectives at once.' d) Hermeneutics: 'All knowledge is interpreted knowledge, the

perceiver is part of the perceived ... for various aspects of nature are observed only through the categories we provide, within the horizon we establish, under the paradigm we utilize, in response to the questions we raise, and in relationship to the connections we make.<sup>28</sup>

It would be harmful to have only a single worldwide religion. Vivekananda warned of the great harm that would be done to the world if all people adhered to the same religion, forms of worship, and dogmas. If everyone thought and felt in the same way, this would bring mental decay and degradation to the society.<sup>29</sup> 'Now, if we all thought alike, we would be like Egyptian mummies in a museum looking vacantly at one another's faces—no more than that!'<sup>30</sup> 'Kill the difference in opinions, and it is the death of thought. Motion is a necessity. Thought is the motion of the mind, and when that ceases death begins.'<sup>31</sup>

Swamiji adds, 'When the differentiating process that is at work in this universe ceases, the universe comes to an end. It is differentiation that causes the phenomena that are before us; unification would reduce them all to a homogeneous and lifeless matter.... It is urged that even in the physical body and social classification, absolute sameness would produce natural death and social death. Absolute sameness of thought and feeling would produce mental decay and degeneration.'<sup>32</sup> 'Woe unto the world when everyone is of the same religious opinion and takes to the same path. Then all religions and all thought will be destroyed. Variety is the very soul of life. When it dies out entirely, creation will die. When this variation in thought is kept up, we must exist; and we need not quarrel because of that variety. Your way is very good for you, but not for me. My way is good for me, but not for you.'<sup>33</sup> 'Do not try to disturb

the faith of any man. If you can, give him something better, if you can get hold of a man where he stands and give him a push upwards, do so, but do not destroy what he has.... All these negative, breaking-down, destructive teachers that are in the world can never do any good.... He [Sri Ramakrishna] left every religion undisturbed because he had realised that in reality, they are all part and parcel of one eternal religion.'<sup>34</sup>

Swami Saradananda (1865-1927) expressed the idea, 'The second great fact, on which the Vedantist builds his universal sympathy and toleration, is that variation is necessary to evolution. What does evolution mean but the unfolding, the changing from one to another, and hence variation? Destroy variation, bring sameness in any field of nature, and you destroy evolution and the universe is such a joined piece of mechanism, and nature is so uniform throughout that this is not only true in the physical and the mental, but also in the spiritual field. Destroy variation, therefore, in the religious field, try to make all men think alike in religion, try to break down all religions and keep one religion in their place, you will find that you have destroyed religion itself. Then again we will find that as all our attempts to make all men think alike will invariably fail, so it is impossible to bring one religion in place of the many. The many will survive as long as creation lasts.'<sup>35</sup>

As indicated by Martin Luther (1483-1546), the leader of the Protestant Reformation, no earthly power can determine who belongs to the spiritual Church and who does not. Only Christ can look into the heart of a person and determine this. Christ 'rejects and condemns every judgment which attempts to establish who are Christians and the people of God and

who are not.<sup>36</sup> Luther's principle applies not only in the Christian fold but also with people of other religions. Similarly, (though Luther did not teach this) when judging people of other religions, only Brahman-God knows which people have at this time received His grace of liberation and salvation and who have not.

There is inter-religious pluralism between religions and intra-religious pluralism within a religion. The former is external and applies to showing genuine respect for other religions that if properly followed lead to Brahman-God. Out of Divine grace, Brahman-God has created these different paths because people have varying ideas and temperaments. Equally important is the internal intra-religious aspect of tolerance, which is concerned with respecting the various faiths and

denominations within one's own particular religion. For example, within its own sphere Hinduism accepts as the path to Brahman-God good works, ritual, faith, devotion, knowledge, and meditation, each aiding the devotee in attaining to the highest. Also, it teaches there is truth in the theistic, transformational pantheistic-panentheistic, and acosmic views of reality. Brahman-God is viewed not narrowly from a reductionist standpoint where only one view is considered correct, but from the standpoint of a plenitude of manifestations. Within India the establishment of internal pluralism among the various denominations and sects and external pluralism to have good relations with the Jains, Muslims, Christians, and other groups is very necessary and pragmatic to bring about the unity of Hinduism and of the Indian people.<sup>37</sup> ■

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