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INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE AND VIVEKANANDA'S VEDANTIC MODEL OF PLURALISM¹

Mankind ought to be taught that religions are but varied expressions of THE RELIGION, which is Oneness, so that each may choose the path that suits him best.

Swami Vivekananda

ABSTRACT

What are the preconditions of interreligious dialogue? How do philosophical reflections help today a religiously plural society to live in harmony, peace and sustainable development? In this paper I deal with these questions in the light of Swami Vivekananda's concept of Universal Religion and try to search for a philosophical model of interreligious dialogue. Vivekananda propounds that we are to go beyond tolerance, and accept other religions as good as our own. Vivekananda's interpretation has also the implication of transcending various commonly known worldviews in the context of religion and culture. It strengthens the application of the principle of "live and let live." This model of understanding does not regard the existence of other religions as a hindrance to worldly progress and peace. This attitude is rather guided by a practical plan which does not allow for questioning the encountering of religion. It does not destroy the individuality of any man in religion and at the same time shows him a point of union with all others. Our analysis will develop the significance and relevance of this view.

Keywords: one among many, tolerance, acceptance, interreligious dialogue, religious pluralism.

What is dialogue? What are its preconditions? How does it work in the context of a plurality of religions? How do philosophical reflections help today to understand religiously plural society? How to live peacefully in the state of

¹ No diacritic marks have been used in the text of the paper for smooth reading of it, even by a non-Sanskritist. However, diacritic marks have been used in footnotes and references.

a multiplicity of religions today? These are some of the important questions which today everybody is concerned with.

Dialogue reflects understanding of others' concern, creates an atmosphere of harmony and peace; it is, more specifically, dialectic. Dialectic is *theoretical* through and through, whereas dialogue has an *existential core* in it. It is a way to keep our communication active. Dialogue is primarily concerned with a desire of people apparently having different views and faiths to meet and share a ground. Naturally, the attitude of disrespect and defeating is absent in dialogue. Interreligious dialogue

“demands that look into the blind spots of our traditions through the eyes of another; it demands that we are secured enough in where we come from risk venturing where we have never been. Genuine dialogue requires a commitment to our personal ‘ism’ that is strong enough to allow us to suspend belief and step beyond the ‘ism’ to meet ‘is.’ All of this is a prerequisite for genuine dialogue.”²

As interreligious dialogue is primarily co-operative, constructive and positive interaction among people having different faiths, it is imperative to admit the logic of religious pluralism. Humility, empathy, the recognition of common sharable grounds in spite of recognizing differences are some of the conditions admitted in any meaningful dialogue. It is always imperative for interreligious understanding and peace in multi-religious society that the followers of each religion should have the opportunity to know fundamentals of other religions. The plurality of religions would then be rendered as a *thing of beauty* on the basis of common sharable grounds instead of differences. There is no question of dominance by any particular religion and differences are to be overcome through constant discussion with mutual respect. We are to work for collective good and to give up the belief that our faith is more genuine and true than that of others. Today we are to cultivate the belief that my religion is only *one* among *many*.

Why should we follow pluralism in living and working together? The answer is: for the sake of distributive justice and good for all. And unless we admit the logic of pluralism and educate ourselves in pluralistic values, there is no hope for getting rid of dogmatism, communalism, fanaticism concerning religion and interreligious conflicts that arise out of misusing religious sentiments as means in today's world. Terrorists who use religions do not believe in true spirituality and they are religiously exclusivist. They are trained as blind believers of a “closed dogma.” Blind faith in religious exclusivism is a necessary condition of cultivating aggressiveness, fundamentalism and fanaticism. Any out and out

² Shapiro, R. M. 1989. “Moving the Fence: One Rabbi's View of Interreligious Dialogue.” In: *Interreligious Dialogue*. Bryant, M. D., F. Flinn (Eds.). New York: New Era Book Paragon House, 32.

exclusivist cannot join dialogue. On the contrary, the philosophical approach to religious pluralism is a prerequisite for interreligious dialogue. If there is a determined fanatic community of the followers of any institutional religion who does not wish to participate, we will never have an interreligious dialogue.

Pluralism presupposes "others" as having different identity without any sense of exclusivity. In the context of religion it allows an individual to travel spiritually towards the value world of another tradition which can enrich each her/him with a new insight and wisdom. The logic is: "If it be true that God is the center of all religions, and that each of us moves towards Him along one of these radii, then it is certain that all of us must reach the centre. And at the center where all radii meet, all our differences will cease; but until we reach, difference there must be."³ The notion of Universal Religion founded on the unity of humankind gives the logical foundation of interreligious dialogue. Let us focus on Swami Vivekananda's (henceforth, Vivekananda) reflection on the question of "encounter of religion."

In Vivekananda's Vedantic model of understanding, this notion of dialogue is based on Self as universal. Vivekananda uses the notion of universal religion in a unique sense. Amidst the multiplicity of existent religions he looks for a room for universal religion. This is important in present time's world scenario. Historically speaking, who can deny today that religion is used to provoke "bitterest denunciation"? It is also true that religion can be used to inspire "the noblest work of peace."

That universal religion is different from ethnic religions where one's membership is determined by birth in a particular race or institutional religion. On the other hand, in case of universal religion any person can choose any particular religion.

Vivekananda's view on religion is shaped by the pluralistic *milieu* of Indian culture in general and his master Ramakrishna's teaching, in particular. The *Rgveda* says, "Reality is one but wise persons give account of it in various ways." So Ramakrishna says, "all different religions are different faiths, different paths towards the realization of the Ultimate Divine Reality." This fundamental teaching leads Vivekananda to claim that each religious tradition represents *only one among many* possible approaches to the Ultimate Divine Reality; each religious tradition is *only one among many* expressions of religious experience.

The great religious traditions have important lessons to learn from each other and much to share, because each religion represents man's response to natural and social environment in a historical context and as such various religions are to be treated as varieties of responses to different natural environments and no religion has the monopoly of "holiness, purity and charity." The faith in "the practice of passive tolerance of others" is not sufficient for inter-religious understanding and for initiating inter-religious dialogue. Unless various faiths

³ *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*. 1992. Henceforth: CW, 1991, 1989. 2, 384–85.

admit their counterparts at par with their own, no mutual respect will generate. It is not just a fact of the mere theoretical admission of the difference or multiplicity of religion but of “engagement, involvement and participation.” This model of religious pluralism encourages us to cultivate values like the power of self-criticism, self-determination and imagination. It prepares a strong ground for a genuine form of dialogue.

A dialogue is integrally connected with the plurality of human existence in terms of identities, cultures and religions with different set of moral values. For Vivekananda, it is not only wrong but also incompatible with truly religious spirit to accept one’s own religion as the *only* true and to denounce religions other than one’s own as being *untrue*. He has used three inter-linked uses of the term “universal” as the prefix of the word “religion” in his three lectures on Universal Religion. Without an acquaintance with these three uses of the adjective “universal” it would be difficult to grasp the philosophical aspect of his unique understanding of religious pluralism.

The problem of not having an agreed method for attaining truth is raised by the diversity of religions. Here Keith Ward speaks of different versions of religious pluralism such as hard pluralism, soft pluralism, revisionist pluralism etc.⁴ The hard form of religious pluralism, according to Ward, holds that all traditions are equally true ways of achieving or approaching God which is completely unknowable postulate of religious life. But there is an inherent incoherence in this view as it stresses on equal validity, equal authenticity and complete unknowability. The soft form of religious pluralism holds that the Real can manifest itself in different religious traditions through which different human beings can appropriately respond. The revisionist view emphasizes the need for revision of the scriptural revelation in consonance with the development of natural sciences and critical thinking. Hick tries to develop a critical understanding of the problem of religious pluralism in line of the soft version, strongly founded on Kantian epistemology. There is an “world in itself” and the “world as experienced” by us. The second one is partially created by us. The apparent dichotomy between realizing personal God and the impersonal Absolute is resolved by Hick with Kantian categories of noumenon and phenomenon. Hick distinguishes between real *an sich* and the real as variously experienced and thought by different human communities. It is here Hick lays his proposition. Applying his Kantian epistemological model to religious experience, Hick developed a sophisticated conception of the religious ultimate and correspondingly different responses to the Real from within the major variant ways of being human.⁵ In

⁴ Ward, K. 1990. “Truth and Diversity of Religion.” *Religious Studies* (Cambridge), 26, 2, 16.

⁵ See, Hick, J. 1989. *An Interpretation of Religion*, Macmillan, 239–40. This difficulty is resolved by the philosopher Kalidas Bhattacharyya. He says that “according to Hindu tradition the truth has thousand summits and thousand feet. But every summit and every foot are not inferior to the other. Truth is not the summation of all forms. Each form is the ultimate truth, the absolute Brahman.” For a detailed discussion, see Bhattacharyya, K. 1982. *Possibility of Different Types of Religion*. Kolkata: Asiatic Society, 76.

An Interpretation of Religion, Hick interprets human experience in two ways. There is the world in itself (the noumenal) and the world as perceived by each person (phenomenal). Because we have no pure experience of noumenal, according to Kant, each person's experience of it is always an interpretation specific to the individual. Based on this Kant supposed that the world of our objective experience (pure reason) is actually a world partly created by our mind. In *An Interpretation of Religion*, Hick (following Kant) says that there is both the world in itself (*noumenal*), and the world as we understand and perceive it (*phenomenal*). We know this because people see things in the world differently, so we all cannot be seeing the world as it really is (otherwise there would be no disagreement). Each person's experience of the way the world is therefore *an interpretation* of it specific to that individual's point of view. When Hick applies this insight to the matter of religious experience, he concludes that all religious experience is simply a particular experience of the divine by the devotee (what he also calls "experiencing-as").

However, Vivekananda tries to address this issue to the integral realization of truth and the possibility of its multiple expressions. This is rooted in the Vedanta philosophy in application. Vedanta teaches that what is impossible cannot be an object of experience. Vivekananda proposes the concept of Universal Religion, which he often calls the Vedantic View of Religion. It is different from ethnic religions. Vivekananda uses the concept of Universal Religion in three senses.

"The first two concepts of universal religion were formulated with reference to the existing world religions. In the first concept, world religions are regarded as expressions of one eternal Universal Religion. In the second concept Universal religion is the sum-total of all the existing religions. The third concept is meant for all humanity without any distinctions of religion, race or gender. It represents an integral view of life and Reality. Here religion is looked upon as man's struggle to transcend his limitations, to find ultimate meaning in life, and to attain total freedom and everlasting fulfillment."⁶ [...] "Religion is what a man does with his solitariness." (Whitehead)⁷

"Every religion is true, as each is but a different stage in the journey, the aim of which is the perfect conception of the Vedas. Hence, too, we not only tolerate, but we Hindus accept every religion, praying in the mosque of the Mohammedans, worshipping before the fire of the Zoroastrians, and kneeling before the cross of the Christians, knowing that all the religions, from the fetishism to the highest absolutism, mean so many attempts of the human soul to grasp and realize the infinite, each determined by the conditions of its birth and associations, and each of them marking a stage of progress. We

⁶ Swami Bhajanananda. 1998. *Harmony of Religions*. Kolkata: Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, 42.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 39.

gather all these flowers and bind them with the twine of love, making a wonderful bouquet of worship.”⁸

Vivekananda’s understanding of religion is rooted in the highest philosophical teachings of the Vedas. It is called Vedanta. According to this Vedantic model, different religions represent different ways to God-realization; this is shaped by the teaching of his master Sri Ramakrishna. Ramakrishna tells that our dogmatic reasoning (*matuyar buddhi*) leads us to admit that “my own religion is the *only* right one and others religions” are *wrong*.⁹ But as a matter of fact, all different religions are different faiths (*mata*)—different paths (*patha*) towards the realization of the Ultimate Divine Reality which is called “Truth” in the *Rgveda*. The individuality and uniqueness of each religious tradition are as essential as its existence. The plurality of religions cannot be questioned; rather it is justified by the diversity of the human natures and temperaments.

Even when Vivekananda speaks of “unity” in the context of religion, he does not speak of uniformity. Uniformity precludes differences, whereas unity can accommodate plural centres of consciousness on which different faiths are stationed. For Vivekananda, the unity is something which lies in a common orientation to diversity and not in its abolition. His thorough reading of India’s cultural history enables him to decipher the cultural semiosis to realize the always open, free and potentially creative pluralistic Indian mind. To defend the pluralistic approach Vivekananda very often uses analogies and images. As he says, “there may be almost contradictory points of view of the same thing, but they will all indicate the same thing.”¹⁰ This may be considered an important clue to understand religious pluralism and to initiate interreligious dialogue. Each religious tradition, according to Vivekananda, contains a special “evolutionary pattern,” a dynamic openness.

This means that the religious tradition as a way of life is shaped by socio-cultural context and as such the dos and don’ts of each religion are open to the possibility of change and growth. If any religion resists change it provides rigidity and exclusivity. Vivekananda remarks, “Religions become dangerous only when they become rigid and will not move further.”¹¹ Openness towards the possibility of change, modification and growth has been emphasized in the Rgvedic teaching: “let noble thoughts come to us from various directions.”¹² It has been reiterated by Vivekananda. Unless this minimal condition of openness

⁸ CW. 1992, 1, 329–332.

⁹ *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*. 1996. Nikhilananda, S. (Trans.). Chennai Ramakrishna Math, 191; the same spirit is focused when *Kenopanishad* (2.3) says “one who claims she/he knows the reality, in fact, does not know. And one who thinks that she/he does not know she/he, in fact, does know the reality.”

¹⁰ CW. 1992, 4, 7–8.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 2, 500.

¹² ‘à no bhadrà kratavo vísvataḥ—*Rgveda*, 1.89.10.

and receptivity is fulfilled no interreligious dialogue can be initiated because such dialogue must allow us to question and disagree with sincerity and respect. It surely does not stop with the practice of tolerance of others' faiths but goes beyond to accept others' religions as true as one's own. I am open to admit a new possibility of knowing the Truth dominates cultural development of India. The role of opposition is very important in philosophical dialogues and debate in India since the days of *Rgveda*. Vivekananda inherits the past as well as claims freedom from the past. Though Vivekananda is an Advaitin (non-dualist), he does not advocate the view that the truth of Advaita is available only in Hinduism or the Hindu tradition. For he believes that all religious traditions by a process of natural spiritual evolution would grow to Advaita, non-dualism as each individual grows and develops herself/himself according to his own nature.¹³

Vivekananda's approach to religious pluralism may be understood if we read it at the background of the impersonal nature of truth in Advaita Vedanta. Reality-in-itself, according to Advaita Vedanta, is devoid of all kinds of difference. As soon as the essential unity of everything is realized, all differences of appearances will cease to have any importance. According to Sankara, the ultimate reality is realized in two forms—one has the limiting adjunct constituted by the multiplicity of the worlds which are the modifications of name and form, and the other is emptied of all conditioning elements.¹⁴ For him, this distinction is a distinction of standpoints. *Tatastha* or a secondary characteristics such as the creator or the sustainer or the destroyer of the world is the characteristics of the interpretational level assigned to the ultimate reality which as "in- itself" is neither of these. One who is Absolute from the transcendental standpoint is personal God from the mundane (*vyavaharika*) standpoint.

¹³ Two elements are common in all great religions. 1) The experience of transcendent Holy or Divine Reality usually called in English "God", a reality in which being and value are one, and 2) the interpretation or expression of this religious experience in three different words—intellectual, volitional and social. In religion a mere expression in the form of performing divine service or observing cultic rituals without corresponding divine experience is meaningless, because it would be only a bundle of rituals devoid of any content, and in the same way, mere religious experience without an expressional outlet in the form of interpretation would be a kind of "dumb mysticism" incapable of contributing to "social cohesion and aesthetic value." Because of organized religions' political and economic interests a long history of bloodshed has been experienced by the human race. Political and economic interests of power-elites are properly served in the guise of religion. The Ramakrishna-Vivekananda tradition is respectful to all religions and celebrate the festivals of major world religions. To quote Vivekananda, "That for all devilry that religion is blamed with, religion is not at all in fault: no religion ever persecuted men, no religion ever burnt witches, no religion ever did any of these things. What then incited people to do these things? Politics, but never religion; and if such politics takes the name of religion whose fault is that?" CW, 4, 125.

¹⁴ "Dvi rūpam hi brahma avagamyate; nāma-rūpa-vikāra-bheda-upādhi vi-ñānam" – *oāikarabhāṣya* 1.1.11.

The implication of Advaita philosophy, as understood by Vivekananda, admits that there is one truth, one reality for all religions on the level of realization or religious experience. But on the interpretational level we see that reality is clothed in many ways and addressed in many names.

“When a Muslim speaks of Allah and a Hindu speaks of Brahman, they are not referring to two parts of reality but to *two different ways* in which the limitless Reality has been thought of and experienced by different human beings forming and formed by various intellectual frameworks and devotional activities.”¹⁵

The interpretation of religious experience is a historically and culturally determined phenomenon, which differs from culture to culture in accordance with the prevalent concepts, symbols, doctrines and modes of thinking that have gradually emerged within these cultural surroundings. As cultural traditions have diverse geographical, climatic and economic circumstances, so also in different forms the Divine Reality is worshipped in different parts of the world (*viprāḥ bahudhā vadanti*).¹⁶ But all these different interpretations as different ways convey that there is a genuine realization of the Truth (*ekam sat*). From the standpoint of Vivekananda’s approach, though it is a fact that plurality of religions exists, there is neither a justification of conflict of one religion with other nor for reducing all other religions to one’s own or for exclusion of other religions as untrue and not genuine. On the contrary, it defends the view that in all forms of religion people are oriented to the same ultimate Divine Reality—one Truth in different names and forms. Vivekananda’s approach to the fact of plurality of religions may be taken as a ground for both a commitment to truth and a possibility of different interpretations of the same Truth in order to suit the various socio-cultural and historical contexts. It contains enough scope for acceptance of the plurality of religions in simultaneity along with the rejection of any exclusivistic or inclusivistic claims and for highlighting the commitment to truth. A world with the uniformity of thought is a dead one. “Unity in variety is the plan of the universe.”¹⁷ This kind of religious pluralism indicates a direct experience of “otherness,” which is difficult to ignore in today’s world.

From this it appears that for Vivekananda religious disagreement is due to narrow, selfish, dogmatic motive to accept nothing outside, and to negate any existing view. Vivekananda thus discarded and strongly condemned “sectarianism and bigotry.” Vivekananda has condemned religious fanaticism in strong words. “They are very sincere, these fanatics, the most sincere of human beings; but they are quite as irresponsible as other lunatics in the world. This disease of

¹⁵ For details see, Hick, J. 1989. *An Interpretation of Religion*. Macmillan, 343.

¹⁶ *The Rgveda*, 1. 164. 64.

¹⁷ CW. 1992, 2, 384; also see, Swami Vivekananda. 1995. *A Study of Religion*, 11th edition. Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 67.

fanaticism is one of the most dangerous of all diseases. All the wickedness of human nature is roused by it."¹⁸

Vivekananda's understanding of religion is unique. By universal religion he understands a particular outlook of religious diversity. According to him, it is neither necessary nor possible to impose one's viewpoint upon other. His attempt is not to construct the structure of a universal religion by putting together the essential elements from all the existing religions, but rather to emphasize that truth is not confined to any particular faith, nor the truth of each religion lies in a certain philosophy, but in a certain mode of experiencing reality which is only one. It was Vivekananda who first brought home to us, in the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, that the religious unity must be either living or nothing.

The survey of another religious tradition, according to Vivekananda, would improve the understanding of one's own religion. Vivekananda's philosophy in the context of religion provides us an opportunity for the study of other religions not merely from the outside but also from inside. It tells us to internalize our religious position by considering the context of other positions as our own and to transform our approach from "self-centred-ness" to "truth-centred-ness" or "God centredness."¹⁹ In today's world-context, in a religiously pluralistic society each religious tradition should make efforts to absorb the spirit of other religions while reserving its own uniqueness and individuality. Uniqueness will be richer by openness. "The Christian is not to become a Hindu or a Buddhist, not a Hindu or Buddhist to become a Christian. But each must assimilate the spirit of the others and yet preserve individuality and grow according to his law of growth."²⁰

Since all religions are claimed to be path-ways to God, they are equally valid; there is no question of superiority or inferiority among them. In the light of the pluralistic account of religion as advocated in Vivekananda's philosophy, the conflicting truth-claims of different religion may be explained as a corollary of substantial ignorance about other similar responses outside one's own religious tradition. As it is contained in the Gita "whatever be the way of worshipping, it will lead to God realization."²¹ This admits that faiths alien to the Indian mind are also bearers of Divine light, at par with our own. Again, the Gita also speaks of the incarnation of the Divine at every epoch transcending the barriers of nations, particular religions and cultures. In other words, the scope of incarnation is universal/global, not restricted to one chosen race or religion.²² Rama-krishna himself practised different religious modes of spiritual upliftment. For

¹⁸ CW. 1989, 1, 24; also see, Swami Vivekananda. 1995, op. cit., 62.

¹⁹ For details see, Hick, J. 1982. *God Has Many Names*. Macmillan, 83.

²⁰ CW. 1989, 1, 24.

²¹ "ye yathā māṃ prapadyante staṃ tatraiva bhajāmyaham"—*The Bhagvadgītā*, 4, 11.

²² *Ibid.*, 4, 7.

that reason the monks of the Ramakrishna Mission observe the birthday of the prophets of other religions and it is equally respectful to all religions.

This shows the universality of the outlook of the Ramakrishna—Vivekananda tradition—a constant spirit of accommodating all religions being only various streams which flow from the single source. This pluralistic standpoint of Vedic religion reaches its height in Vivekananda's philosophy as a liberal, non-aggressive, non-proselytizing religion fertile enough to cultivate tolerance and respect for other faiths and worthy of participating in interreligious dialogue. If the ultimate Divine Reality is one and if there are diversified ways and means of its expression, where then does the conflict stand? We are to learn today the language of religious pluralism as to “*speak with*” others and not to “*speak about*” others. There are many paths to one God, one Truth and one Perfection. The conflict between religions is contrary to pure spirituality which is the very essence of religion. Non-violence, moral consciousness, benevolence, love etc. are the essence of spirituality. In today's world it is reasonable to recommend patience and interfaith realizing through dialogue.²³ The aim of such dialogue is to discover common sharable grounds to unit all the religions. Let us *re-read* India's philosophic heritage with Vivekananda to realize the always open, free and potentially creative pluralistic Indian mind and reshape ourselves in the light of the vision which enables us to see truth in others' views, in others' ways of life. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, perhaps for this reason, calls Vivekananda a “spokesman of the Divine Logos.”²⁴

Vivekananda's interpretation has also the implication of transcending various commonly known “worldviews” in the context of religion and culture. It strengthens the application of the principle of “live and let live.” Like Buddhism and Jainism, this Vedantic understanding does not “regard the existence of other religions as a hindrance to worldly progress and peace.”²⁵ This type of pluralistic understanding and dialogue indicates a new way in the history of humankind's religious life, too.²⁶ It would initiate, may be slowly, inquisitiveness, the universality of mind and “the implicit conviction that ‘truth’ has ulterior expressions in form of alternative discourses.”²⁷ It is, however, indicative and not

²³ CW. 1989, 1, 3.

²⁴ 1963. “Swami Vivekananda—A Spokesman of the Divine Logos.” *Vedanta Keari*, 50, 4 (August), 160.

²⁵ CW. 1989, 1, 3.

²⁶ The importance of this way of approach is important and has been beautifully expressed by Swami Vivekananda in 1893. In his own words, “If the World's Parliament of Religions has shown anything to the world, it is this: It has proved to the world that holiness, purity, and charity are not exclusive possessions of any church in the world, and that every system has produced men and women of the most exalted character.” 1893. *The World's Parliament of Religions*. Chicago: Parliament Publishing Company, 2, 1582.

²⁷ Mohanty, A. K. 2006. *Comparative Religion*. Utkal University. Bhubaneswar: SAP publication, 296.

exhaustive.²⁸ This is more important and relevant today in the context of destructive activities and crime against humanity in the name of religion. Religious pluralism, as advocated by Vivekananda, "has taught the world both tolerance and universal acceptance. We believe not only in universal toleration, but we accept all religions as true."²⁹

This allows us to question and express our disagreement with respect and sincerity. This way of learning, as it is implicative in Vivekananda's view of religion, is a positive step to interreligious dialogue in the today world. If we have to move creatively into the world we need to learn the oneness of mankind. Instead of the anarchy of foolish competition leading to self-destruction we need to realize the meaning of oneness in our selfhood. Vivekananda's model of religious pluralism speaks of respects for people's rights in diverse cultures and he encourages to self-criticism, self-determination and increasing one's range of choice. In the contemporary world we see the tremendous development of science and technology. This newly achieved power has to be connected with spiritual wisdom, otherwise its application increases our sorrow. We need to utilize our power of knowledge in harmony with our service for humanity. A pluralistic understanding having a ground in spiritual wisdom seems to be the earnest priority of the present age. Any movement for peace will be confidence-inspiring and influential if we can show some commonly sharable ground where there is no element of suspicion and fear. That is what we see in Vivekananda's concept of Universal Religion.

This pluralistic model of understanding of religious diversity indicates—through initiating dialogue—a new way of looking at the phenomenon of religion in the history of mankind. It would initiate, may be slowly, a common spiritual journey to a deep spiritual level of our being. One's being is enriched and deepened through a real religious and spiritual encounter. When Vivekananda speaks of *advaita* (non-dualism), he does not mean only Hinduism, but an essential aspect of all religions. He clearly indicates that we should not impose our views on others to reach this Universal Advaita. We must make room for the people of other faiths. It deepens our understanding of other's view as a good alternative to our view. Because there is the idea of the essential unity of all religions that is embedded in their belief in an absolute and infinite existence. This is the essential aspect of all religions. However, for Vivekananda, there are also non-essential aspects of every religion differing religions from each other. This attitude is guided by a practical plan which does not allow the question of encountering of religion. In other words, it "does not destroy the

²⁸ See, Ki-Young Rhi. 1989. "A Korean Buddhist View on Interreligious Dialogue—Won-Hyo's Ideal on Peace and Union." In: Darrol, M., F. K. B. Flinn. 1989. *Interreligious Dialogue: Voices From a New Frontier* (Eds.). New York: Paragon House, 119–126.

²⁹ See, CW. 1989, 1, 3.

individuality of any man in religion and at the same time shows him a point of union with all others.”³⁰

This is another reason why Vivekananda recognizes different sects of Hinduism, but condemns sectarianism. The concluding paragraph of his opening address on September 11, 1893 in the World Parliament of Religions at Chicago makes it clear when he says,

“Sectarianism, bigotry, and its horrible descendant fanaticism, have long possessed this beautiful earth. They have filled the earth with violence, drenched it often with human blood, destroyed civilizations, and sent whole nations, human society would be far more advanced than it is now. But their time is come: I fervently hope that the bell that tolled this morning in honour of this convention may be death-knell of all fanaticism, of all uncharitable feelings between persons wending their way to the same goal.”³¹

The role of interreligious dialogue is significant today when religion becomes a powerful force of disruption, division and destruction. Today we need to “acquire intellectual insights into the *raison d’etre* of other persuasions which would help us to adopt the attitude of honest understanding towards members of other communities.”³² This very attitude is the pluralistic understanding of religion which emphasizes acceptance instead of confining to mere “tolerance” of other religions; this seems to be an important contribution of Vivekananda. Let us recall what Rabindranath said to Romain Rolland about Vivekananda—“If you want to know India, read Vivekananda.” Romain Rolland after reading some works of Vivekananda said, “Going through the pages of writings of Vivekananda at this distance of 30 years, I feel an electric shock within my nerves. In two words ‘equilibrium’ and ‘synthesis’ Vivekananda’s constructive genius may be summed up.”³³ Let us wish to feel that our *re-reading* of Vivekananda frees us from dogmatism, fanaticism, sectarianism, intolerance and terrorism associated with religion.

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³⁰ CW. 1992, 2, 384.

³¹ Ibid., 1, 4.

³² Balslev, A. N. 1987. *Religious Tolerance or Acceptance?* Kolkata. The Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, 32.

³³ Romain Rolland wrote, “In Two Words ‘Equilibrium’ and ‘Synthesis’ Vivekananda’s Constructive Genius May Be Summed up.” Rolland, R. 1965. *The Life of Vivekananda and the Universal Gospel*. Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 281.

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