

A Dynamic Unity In Religious Pluralism: A Study On Swami Vivekananda.

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One of the arguments put forward by the advocates of religious pluralism is that all religions originate from the same source. This is evident in the works of John Hick, Raimondo Panikkar and others. However, the view that all religions will meet together at some point is not widely discussed, and probably not an accepted presupposition. Hence the search for the unity of religions is a dream that can never be fulfilled. However, it will not be an impossibility to inquire theoretically into the possibility of such unity, given the fact that all religions have a goal. Some religions believe in the eternal communion with the Divine as the ultimate goal whereas some aims at self-realization. As a kind of reaction to the pluralist view, the concept of 'unity in diversity' finds a place in the human religious quest the concept which holds that there is a unity of all religions at some level despite their differences in various respects. In this manner it is argued that different religions are different paths for reaching the same goal. Just like different religions are different ways of responding to the revelation, the same can be seen as different ways of arriving at the Source. Hence by unity of religion we understand as the state where different religions come together as one unit. For some people such unity can be attained at the transcendental level where the souls attain their final destiny. The souls unite together in God where plurality is destroyed. We can also understand unity as the coming together of all religions at some stages.

The quest for the understanding of God, soul and human destiny has taken much of human energy, says Swami Vivekananda. This is true especially with the rise of theology as a systematic study of God and with the development in knowledge. Humans are not contend with only what is here and now, but also strive and search for what is beyond at the level of the transcendence. All that we called progress, evolution, according to Vivekananda has been always measured by that one search, that is, the search for human destiny, the search for the truth or God. The search for the beyond has been the pursuit which every human is engaged with. But the manner and the method through which it is carried are different and are manifested in religions. Different religions represent different responses to the Divine and the differences in which the divine revelation is received and conceptualized. Advocates of religious pluralism hold that there are varieties of ways in which humans can respond to the Divine, and that each religion presents some aspects of the whole truth. As such there are different ways of understanding God, salvation, human destiny and truths. All religions are treated as true and represent different paths for attaining salvation and for understanding God. Vivekananda is very much aware of the claims of religious pluralism and acknowledged all religions as important manifestations of God. He also acknowledged the negative effects of religious pluralism that it gives rise to conflict and violence. But pluralism has a positive implication which contributes towards mutual respect and recognition.

One of the defects of religious pluralism is that it tends to undermine each religion's claim to absoluteness. Affirmation of religious pluralism will lead to a vicious relativism and finally to a self-defeating skepticism which will hamper religious commitment and seriousness. Secondly, by acknowledging that all religions are same will amount to non-self-evaluation because there is no urgency for doing that. Our general belief is that pluralism will accommodate the various tastes, experiences and aspirations of the people. Hence, religious pluralism recognizes and respects all religions which represent the different experiences, emotions, intuition, beliefs and practices of the people. Vivekananda welcomes

varieties when he says that if all were to think exactly the same thoughts, there would be no thoughts for us to think. We know that two or more forces must come into collision in order to produce motion. It is the clash of thought, the differentiation of thought that awakes thought. His view is that thinking beings must differ and must represent different signs of thought. He says "I am a thoughtful man, certainly, I ought to like to live amongst thoughtful persons where there are differences of opinion"¹. This means that differences would open up different possibilities and alternatives which contribute toward richer understanding of oneself and the other. Differences can be seen as a condition for expanding the horizons of human experiences and perceptions. But this has also the tendency to integrate all these varieties into one united whole. This approach is to enable to create a harmonious relationship amongst religions. Unity is the goal of religion, according to Vivekananda. Since no religion is perfect, therefore each religion is in the process of improving itself and transforming itself until a kind of 'topological invariant' is found. Swami Vivekananda advocates the idea of a universal religion which designates unity or harmony of all religions at certain point. Such idea of harmony or integration is one of the practical implications of the Vedanta metaphysics of the One Reality. The many and the One are the same reality seen by the same mind at different times and different attitudes. Unity in the Brahman is the nature of every existence. To realize that unity human has to acquire certain merits like contemplation, inspiration and knowledge.

Religion in general

The general idea about religion as an integrated system of belief and practices centering the Sacred or God presupposes that religion has a metaphysical dimension where human destiny is hidden beyond the empirical life. Religion thus has social as well as spiritual dimensions which makes it more pervasive and promising. Religion designates human response to the reality beyond the mundane domain of facts, and a promise for something spiritual. Thus religion and culture overlap in many ways for it is said that culture gives form to faith and faith gives spirit to culture. Understood in this way, religion of mankind signifies human response to the Divine which is embodied within a cultural sphere or tradition. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, however, challenges this kind of approach to the understanding of religion. His contention is that such conception of religion implies that religion is the creation of human mind. As an empirical entity it can be traced historically and be mapped geographically. In this manner the so called religions like Hinduism or Islam, and so on are human creations whose history is part of the wider history of human culture. This way of understanding the religion of mankind is bound to have serious consequences on the society. Depending on how the God or the Ultimate Reality is conceived by the various traditions or how the revelation is received and interpreted by them, and how these different traditions conceive of the responses to the God, we have different religions as bearers of different doctrines, dogmas, symbols etc. Different religions are like different entities embedded within them the different dimensions of religion. Such religious entities embody within themselves many things like idea of God, belief system, worldview, doctrines, and so on. Hence religious life of the people is generally understood in relation to all these. Religious life, therefore consists in adhering to these various doctrines or teachings etc, and by doing so, believers are ensured of attaining their final destiny. Whatever conception of religion humanity has, such religion is practiced and therefore constitutes a religious way of life which believers adhere to. Such conception of religion, as argued by Cantwell Smith is a human creation or invention and not given by God or any supernatural being; therefore can never attain universality. But such religion is being exported to different places. The designated goal of religion is salvation, but we cannot ignore the other functions of religion at the level of our social relations. But our understanding of religion is always dominated by this doctrinal and communal form of religion that we see pluralism in this context. Religion thus is an integrated system which is a bearer of certain doctrines, rituals, myths, worldview etc. Hence, we witness plurality of religions and plurality of creeds, rituals, doctrines etc.

¹ The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda Vol 2. Kolkata: Advaita Ashram, 2013 p 366-367

Unity in diversity

The quest for unity in the midst of plurality or diversity poses a great challenge to those who want to establish unity of religions. Vivekananda believes that it is possible that the day will come when separation will vanish and that Oneness to which we are all going will become manifest. He holds that it is the very nature of the variety to bring unity, and it is the very nature of every existence to realize unity at some level. He further says that “universal religion about which philosophers and others have dreamed in every country already exists. It is here. As the universal brotherhood of man is already existing, so also is universal religion”². However, looking at religions as entities which are bearers of different creeds, doctrines, worldviews and dogmas etc makes one puzzled whether such unity can ever be achieved. Different religions are not mere shadows of some universal Form of the Platonic sense but are distinct realities embodying different sorts of religious dimensions and truth claims about God, about salvation and so on. Hick maintains that all truth-claims concerning God relate not only to the god itself but to one’s subjective experience of God. In other words, each religion has its own dignity and status which cannot be ignored. Each religion represents a human quest for God or the Ultimate, raises questions about life, the world around us and prescribing certain principles and ways of life. Religion is like a world in its own. Therefore, each religion as an entity is seen to have its own system of meaning and values which shapes the way of life of the people to a large extent.

Keeping in mind the specificity, value, dignity, identity and utility of various religions, the question is: ‘is unity necessary?’ and if it is necessary, “is it possible?” Different religions can co-exist side by side sharing and learning from each other. Different religions share the same world together thereby respecting each other with the hope of arriving at some common good. Each religion can perform its specific role within its own framework and contributes towards the wellbeing of its adherents. The adherents of each religion want to assert their own distinct religious identity. The issue of unity or coming together will not arise unless there is some driving force for bringing them together. There had been attempts in the past to bring all religions together as one during the time of Akbar in India. But such attempt failed. This is so partly because religion is so attached with the culture and tradition of the people. Even if all religions have the same goal, same origin etc, there is no guarantee that they will unite together as one unless there is some driving force which necessitates that. If unity takes place only between similar groups, why can we talk of unity amongst different groups? There is no guarantee that religions having the same goal and same origin can unite together. We can still talk of religions which have the same origin or same goal etc, but as a result of twisting of man’s intellect or taste they can never unite together. The question therefore is whether unity is possible in practice is a matter of debate. Further one can question whether unity has a greater good to contribute to the society as compared to the individuals. If unity is possible then what will happen to the individual religions who claim their identity, their dignity and right as an institution? In short we can question the very ground and possibility of unity in diversity.

If we take plurality seriously the question of unity would be like a dream that can never come true. However, we can still think of such possibility and philosophize on it. Religion is not an asset of believers only but as a social phenomenon it is subjected to theological and philosophical inquiry. Depending on how one understands the concept of unity one can pass a judgment without infringing the right of religions. If unity is understood as a consummation of all different religions into one single religion, then unity of religions may become problematic. Can religions with diverse teachings, practices, doctrines, truth-claims etc can ever hope to come together and surrender themselves? Further, religion is a system of beliefs, practices centering the supernatural being or power though gets embodied in a tradition or culture. Swami Vivekananda approves plurality and appreciates it because it indicates human sensitivity towards what is around, and also a mean for further knowledge. Different religions and sect represent different ways and approaches to the truth. As such they represent an ongoing effort to understand the truth. Religions differ with respect to doctrines, mythology and practices. He says: “we must learn that truth may be expressed in a hundred thousand ways, and that each of these ways is true as far as it goes. We must learn that the same thing can be viewed from a hundred different

² Ibid, p 368

standpoints, and yet be the same thing”³. He further says that “each religion, as it were, takes up one part of the great universal truth, and spends its whole force in embodying and typifying that part of the great truth”⁴. We are all looking at truth from different standpoints which vary according to our birth, education, surroundings and so on, he says. According to him all these religions are different forces in the economy of God, working for the good of mankind. He further says that every religion has a soul behind it, and that soul may differ from the soul of another religion. The soul of every religion may differ from each other but are not contradictory but supplement each other. If that were so, then he says that such varieties are welcomed because if all “were to think exactly the same thoughts, there would be no thoughts for us to think. We know that two or more forces must come into collision in order to produce motion. It is the clash of thought, the differentiation of thought that awakes thought”. This kind of insight indicates that truth is not the exclusive property of a particular tradition. He further argues that so long as humankind thinks, there will be sects. Variation, he says, is a sign of life, and it must be there. “Thinking beings must differ; difference is the first sign of thought. I am a thoughtful man, certainly, I ought to like to live amongst thoughtful persons where there are differences of opinion”⁵. It is perhaps this kind of insight which has made him to look beyond, that is, to look beyond the reality of religions.

Religions understood in terms of creed gives rise to conflicting truth-claims; but at the same time they co-exist together. However, since everything meets at one Ultimate point, therefore it amounts to the unity of all in One. Hence all religions will meet at that point. He has a vision of an ideal or a greater truth which accommodates all variations or truths. He says that “everything that makes for oneness is truth”⁶. This is the ideal of universal form of religion. That according to him has already existed. “So it is with this universal religion, which runs through all the various religions of the world in the form of God; it must and does exist through eternity”⁷. “Unity in variety is the plan of the universe”⁸. He believes that even if humans differ in terms of religion, yet they have a common goal or destiny. Similarly religions differ at the phenomenal level but will unite in the One who caused them. He refers to this statement: “I am the thread that runs through all these pearls” and each pearl according to him is a religion or even a sect thereof. The different pearls signify different religions and the thread signifies the Lord that runs through all of them⁹. Humans differ in many respects, but they form one kind of humanity which accommodates all differences. Similarly religions differ but like different pearls they are stitched together by one thread who is the Lord. In religion our minds act like different vessels, and each one of us is trying to arrive at the realization of God; and God is like water filling these different vessels¹⁰. This is an idea of universality or unity that can be ascertained.

Unity in variety is the plan of the universe, as mentioned earlier. Hence unity in diversity is not a new invention but something which needs to be achieved in religion. The goal of religions is the same, that is, the realization of God or the One Reality. For Vivekananda each religion is living and is intelligently on the march. Because of variety or difference religions interact with each other and learn from each other. Because of interaction we move closer to the truth. Vivekananda argues that as existence we are one with God the ground of existence. In Him we are all one; though at the same time, in manifestations, these differences must always remain. Realizing our existence or our true nature we can come closer to what we actually are our nature and our destiny. Hence to be in unity with the Ultimate, the ground of all existences is our destiny. He says “Man will ever (seek) the highest ideal. He knows that it exists and that religion is the search after the highest ideal”¹¹.

³ Ibid p384

⁴ Ibid p 367

⁵ Ibid p 366

⁶ Ibid p 308

⁷ Ibid p 383

⁸ Ibid p 383

⁹ Ibid p 383

¹⁰ Ibid p 385

¹¹ Ibid p 462

"What then do I mean by the ideal of universal religion? I do not mean any one universal philosophy, or any universal mythology, or any one universal ritual held alike by all; for I know that this world must go on working, wheel within wheel....[...] What can we do then? We can make it run smoothly, we can lessen the friction, we can grease the wheels, as it were. How? By recognizing the natural necessity of variation. Just as we have recognized unity by our very nature, so we must also recognize variation. We must learn that truth may be expressed in a hundred thousand ways, and that each of these ways is true as far as it goes. We must learn that the same thing can be viewed from a hundred different standpoints, and yet be the same thing"¹²

In this manner every religion, consciously or unconsciously, is struggling upward, towards God. But this sounds to be more theoretical, and hence may not have practical implication. Vivekananda looks for a more practical method which can be put into practice. The first step he suggests is acceptance of otherness. He says I accept all religions that were in the past, and worship with them all; I worship God with every one of them, in whatever form they worship Him. Further he says: "If it is true that God is the centre of all religions, and that each of us is moving towards Him along one of these radii, then it is certain that all of us must reach that centre. And at the centre, where all the radii meet, all our differences cease; but until we reach there, differences there must be. All these radii converge to the same centre"¹³. He believes that each one of us is naturally growing and developing to come to know the highest truth, though in different methods or routes. Each one may try to travel in his or her own path which is different from the others, but all will reach the centre for as it is said 'All roads lead to Rome'. This can be attained through certain form of knowledge which is embodied through religion and philosophy.

Instinct and reason can act as a source of knowledge where reason applies to human. But since reason has limits, therefore it has to be supplemented with inspiration. So instinct, reason and inspiration are the three instruments of knowledge. But for him it is reason that develops into inspiration. Hence inspiration should not undermine nor contradict reason. For the Raja-yogi the key to knowledge is concentration. The Karma-yogi teaches us to work for the sake of the work or duty which implies selfless efforts. The Bhakti-yoga teaches us to love God, to love others without ulterior motives. He says that if one feels for others then one is growing in oneness. Love is truth and makes for oneness. Hatred is false and creates difference or separateness. The Jnana-yogi is a philosopher who wants to go beyond the visible. He is more interested to know what the Reality is and realize It. He enjoys his intellectual wisdom more than sense-happiness. The highest wisdom must be the spiritual knowledge. Hence God for him is like his life his soul, and his own self. Knowledge consists in finding the unity which is in God for what at last remains is God Himself. Man is in the process of coming closer to God and become one with God. "When he has come near enough, he sees that he is no other than God". Jnana-yoga tells man that he is essentially divine and man should realize his nature. It shows to mankind the real unity of being, and that each one of us is the Lord God Himself, manifested on earth. These yogas have to be carried out in practice. Religion, then is not a bundle of ideas or theories, nor an intellectual assent; it will enter in our very self. "Religion is realization, nor talk nor doctrine, nor theories.....nor hearing or acknowledging; it is the whole soul becoming changed into what it believes"¹⁴.

Idea of Universal religion

The idea of universal religion dominates Swami Vivekananda philosophical quest. The ideal of universal religion has already existed according to him. His idea of religion is not confined only to rituals, doctrines or mythologies, but the entire way of life or lived experience. This understanding enables him to transcend beyond the narrow boundaries of doctrines, rituals, dogmas, etc but searched for the truth which is available in all religions or sects. His view is that truth is nobody's property; no race, no individual can lay any exclusive claim to it. Truth is the nature of all souls which has to be made practical. Endowed with the capacity of self-reflection, humans always strive for the ultimate truth and human destiny. He prescribed different arguments and justifications to support the idea of unity of religions. He used many

¹² Ibid p 384

¹³ Ibid p 386

¹⁴ Ibid p 397

metaphors and examples to substantiate his claims. He said: "it is my great hope that in course of time the whole of humanity will be efficient in the same manner". He refers to the bubbles rising together in a kettle when it is boiled. So individuals or nations they rise together and reach one final destiny where separateness will vanish. Then the Oneness to which we are all going will become manifest. For him all humans are struggling towards that one end through our jealousies and hatred, through our love and cooperation. Although it appears that the idea of a universal religion seems to be impractical given the fact of plurality of religions with different truth-claims, different sets of doctrines, rituals etc yet he believes in the harmony of religions at some level. As a neo-vedantin he claims that in the whole of this universe there is only One Existence; but when seen from different standpoints it appears as many.

Vivekananda was aware of this plurality of religions and also the existence of various sects in religion. But he does not denounce them nor consider them as irrelevant. Rather he believes that beyond all these varieties there is another principle which unites all religions and where all human selves are absorbed. He says: "Man has wanted to look beyond, wanted to expand himself; and all that we call progress, evolution, has been always measured by that one search, the search for human destiny, the search for God"¹⁵. Different social organizations in the society are representing different needs of human; their spiritual needs and aspirations are represented by various religions of the world. This quest for spiritual needs and aspirations resulted into the rise of different religions which embody different creeds, doctrines, practices, symbols and so on. Further, he says that each religion has its internal soul which differs from religion to another. Each religion, as it were, takes up one part of the great universal truth and spends its whole force in embodying and typifying that part of the reveal truth. We are all looking at truth from different standpoints, which vary according to our birth, education, surroundings, and so on. Depending on how we conceive the truth and interpret it we can have differences of view points. He says that all these religions are different forces in the economy of God, working for the good of mankind. He welcomes varieties because he says that if all were to think exactly the same thoughts, there would be no thoughts for us to think. We know that two or more forces must come into collision in order to produce motion. It is the clash of thought, the differentiation of thought that awakes thought". It follows therefore, that because of variety that we can ever think or derive universality or unity. This kind of insight indicates that truth is not the exclusive property of a particular tradition. He further argues that so long as humankind thinks, there will be sects. Variation, he says, is a sign of life, and it must be there. "Thinking beings must differ; difference is the first sign of thought. I am a thoughtful man, certainly, I ought to like to live amongst thoughtful persons where there are differences of opinion"¹⁶. Variety ignites thought, and thought leads to arriving at some conclusion. Variety occurs at some level But Vivekananda does not look for unity at these levels. He says unity does not mean to have only one universal doctrine or ritual. He is visualizing a unity at the higher level where all religions meet at one point.

Vivekananda has a vision of an ideal or a greater truth which accommodates all variations or truths. He says that everything that makes for oneness is truth". He says that as individuals we differ from each other but share something in common. As humans we differ from each other but as humanity we are the same. It is through this generalized entity that we identify ourselves. So it is with this universal religion, which runs through all the various religions of the world in the form of God. Different religions, as mentioned earlier are like different pearls joined together by a thread which runs through all of them. The thread is God who binds all religions together. Hence for him unity is already there though it is not yet realized by us. Just like truth may be expressed in a hundred thousand ways, and that each of this way is true as far as it goes, similarly human relationship with God can be represented in a variety of ways. Different religions conceive of God in a multiplicity of ways depending on how He manifests Himself to the different traditions and to the individuals. John Hick, following Wilfred Cantwell Smith argues that different traditions receive the divine revelation in a variety of ways which give rise to different religions or religious entities. This implies that though religions differ at certain levels, yet they converge at a particular point and that is God.

¹⁵ Ibid p 361

¹⁶ Ibid p 366-367

Unity in variety is the plan of the universe, he said. As humans we are distinct from each other and from other creatures. But as existence we are one with God the ground of existence. In Him we are all one. At the same time, in manifestations, these differences must always remain. But in spite of variety there is a universal form of religion. He said that universal form of religion has already existed. As mentioned earlier, he talks about brotherhood as a sign of unity, though misused by religions. But brotherhood signifies unity of mankind as a member of the same humanity. "Various are our faces, I see no two alike, yet we are all human beings"¹⁷. There is an abstract humanity which is common to all man and woman, though we may not grasp it by our senses; and humanity is common to all of us. It is through this generalized entity that we see such gender differences as men or women. Different religions are like different pearls stitched together by a thread that is God. So in God all religions are united as one. In this manner every religion represents human quest to reach God. But the same God is conceived differently by different religions like different shapes of water are determined by the different shapes different containers. But water is one, so is the case with God. All religions lead to God, therefore unite together in God. Although at some level there are differences, but at some other level, all religions meet together.

Proper understanding of religion leads to the understanding of human destiny. Such understanding can never be taught in terms of theories but has to be acquired by individuals. Each individual is endowed with certain capacities which help him or her grows and achieves the final truth. The final truth is the final human destiny where everything becomes God or Brahman. He says: "If it be true that God is the centre of all religions, and that each of us is moving towards Him along one of these radii, then it is certain that all of us must reach that centre. And at the centre, where all the radii meet, all our differences cease; but until we reach there, differences there must be. All these radii converge to the same centre. One, according to his nature, travels along one of these lines, and another, another; and if we all push onward along our lines, we shall surely come to the centre, because, All roads lead to Rome"¹⁸. The final goal of all religions is the realization of God. He believes that each individual is naturally growing and developing towards the realization of the highest truth. This capacity is inherent in the very nature of human, and no teaching is necessary and possible. Growth must come from inside and not does not require any external aid.

Vivekananda emphasizes on reason and philosophy as a tool where one can apply to reach the truth. He refers to the four yoga-namely the Raja-yoga, the Karma-yoga, the Bhakti-yoga and the Jnana-yoga. And all these yogas are means for knowing the truth. Instinct, reason and inspiration are different sources of knowledge; but reason is an important asset of human. Reason is superior and that it develops into inspiration. Hence inspiration should not undermine nor contradict reason. For the Raja-yogi the key to knowledge is concentration. The Karma-yogi teaches us to work for the sake of the work or duty which is based on reason. The Bhakti-yoga teaches us to love God, to love others without ulterior motives. He says that if one feels for others then one is growing in oneness. Love is truth and makes for oneness. The Jnana-yogi is a philosopher who wants to go beyond the visible. He is more interested to know what the Reality is and realize it. Hence God for him is like his life his soul, and his own self. What at last remains is God Himself. Man is in the process of coming closer to God and become one with God. "When he has come near enough, he sees that he is no other than God". Jnana-yoga tells man that he is essentially divine. It shows to mankind the real unity of being, and that each one of us is the Lord God Himself, manifested on earth. Hence, religion will no longer remain a bundle of ideas or theories, nor an intellectual assent; it will enter in our very self. Religion, as he said, is realization, nor talk nor doctrine, nor theories, nor hearing or acknowledging; it is the whole soul becoming changed into what it believes. Religion is a lived experience which preceeds rituals and doctrines and goes beyond that. Religion, as many conceived is a relation between persons and the Divine. For Vivekananda religion is the realization of human true nature in God or Brahman. The only God to worship is the human soul in the human body

¹⁷ Ibid p 383

¹⁸ Ibid p 386

An appraisal

The main focus of Vivekananda is that the goal of all religions is the same that is it helps human to realize the ultimate destiny. Religion is a lived experience which enables humans to achieve their ultimate goal that is the soul being itself Brahman. Different religions are different paths for the realization of the Ultimate goal. Religions may differ in terms of doctrines, rituals, philosophy, symbols etc but the ultimate goal is the same or one only. It has been mentioned that for Vivekananda religion is not seen in terms of doctrines or rituals but in terms of realization. His view is that we are looking at truth from different stand points which vary according to our birth, education, surroundings, and so on, but the truth is one. Hence at that point of realization of the goal all religions converge and harmonize together. Being one with divinity or Brahman is the ultimate goal, and beyond that there can not be any further progress. Here all individuality and differences in the name of religion disappear. Chemists are seeking to resolve all known substances into their original element, and if possible, to find out one element from where all these are derived. In religion such Source is already here, therefore all religions will culminate in that Source. Hence any element of particularity which amounts to plurality and differences is ultimately absorbed into the ultimate Source. Similarly religions which emerged from the one source will be absorbed into that one source. Finally, there is, but unity of all religions. His contention is that we must end where we begin. Since we begin in God, therefore we must end in God where all religions come together. Religions have their source from the same Reality, therefore must go back to that Reality.

What Vivekananda tries to envisage is that unity is not to be arrived at the level of practices which consists of different sets of doctrines, rituals etc. He is more concern with the kind of unity that can be realized at the level of the soul where the soul returns to its Source though such unity underlies harmony in daily life, harmony among people, harmony of religions, harmony of science and religion. Such unity is more ideal and transcendental in nature, but can have implication on the various aspects of life. The ground of unity lies on the basic principle of the Brahman. It is the Brahman which provides a ground for the dynamic unity in religious pluralism. Different religions might have conceived some aspects of the Brahman and personalized it as their "God". Therefore, unity is possible at the level of the soul becoming one with God. But to talk of unity at that level is to talk of hypothesis or a matter of faith. The metaphysical ground of unity does not admit of any evidence that religions really meet at one point. It only assumes that all religions will meet together at some point; hence we are only talking of hypothesis. Such hypothesis is based on the principle of critical realism which claims that there is a reality beyond, but such reality is not grasped by the intellect. Therefore, such thesis cannot really state that there is a real unity, but only a presumption that there could be unity. Hence such unity may not have a direct and practical significance.

Further some can question the application of the ultimate ground across religions. If such ground is available in a particular religion only, then such thesis amounts to perspectivism and hence may not have universal applicability. Is the God that different religions worship designates the various nature of the Brahman as the ultimate Reality? Even if we accept the view that Yaweh, Ishwara and Allah are different faces of the Brahman, different traditions may have their own conception of the Ultimate Reality. John Cobb questions the idea of a single Reality manifesting itself in many religions. The pluralistic account of the same Reality manifesting differently to different religions is not acceptable to him. He refers to his dialogue with a Japanese Zen Buddhist where their experience of *Emptiness* has no similarity with the Christian experience of God. He says that what is named by 'Yaweh' and 'the Father of Jesus Christ' is not the same as what is named by 'Emptiness' [in Buddhism]. Hence, for Cobb to insist as Christians that *Emptiness* is a Buddhist name for what we call God is dangerous and misleading. It cuts us off from our Biblical heritage¹⁹. Therefore, what may be understood by Ultimate in Buddhism will not be the same as it is understood in Christianity. One of Raimundo Panikkar's illustrations of differences between India and the West is that in India the image of final destiny is the falling of a drop of water into the ocean. To the West this appears profoundly unacceptable since they identify themselves with the drops of water in its distinction from other drops. The particularity of the drop (person) is not lost or got absorbed completely

¹⁹ "Christian Witness is a Plural World" by Cobb, John in Hick, John and Askari, Hassan ed The Experience of Religious Diversity. Gower: Brookfield: VT, 1985 p 157

into the ocean. To the Indians the true self is not lost but is identified with the Ocean. Gautama Buddha does not consider Brahman as the Ultimate Reality because the Brahman is substantial and identified with Atman.

According to Cobb instead of focusing only on the Brahman as the ultimate reality or principle, we can, *prima facie* begin by examining the idea of the Ultimate as it is understood in various religions. Accordingly a common basic principle can be postulated or evolved basing on some points of similarity and complementarity. A principle which accommodates all other views needs to be sought rather than implementing something which is not universally accepted. Such principle should be of the nature of emptiness, self- negation, open-endedness and non-substantial. At the same time such principle should be all-pervasive to act as a driving force.

Hence, to look for a dynamic unity in religious pluralism, it is not appropriate to take “God” as Ultimate ground. One, therefore, needs to go beyond “God”, for “God” with particular name and particular virtues, however universal the virtue may be, are by nature not truly compatible with, but rather exclusive of, each other because each of them is believed by their adherents to be the positive centre and focus for their religious faiths. The basic principle for the dynamic unity of religions should refer to such principle where “God” emerge and absorbed for “God” as conceived in religion is a substantial being. Religious realities like Yaweh, Allah, Iswara etc are realities with whom different adherents relate themselves. Hence to talk about a dynamic unity, the ground should be able to accommodate all these realities. Hence only when one goes beyond “God” and looks for other principle that the unity of all religions be established without eliminating each religions claim of absolute. Hence in order to open up a dynamic unity in religious pluralism, each religion, especially religions based on the notion of “God”, must break through their traditional form of personal-God-centredness, and look for an ‘empty openness’ which is like a matrix for containing every reality. Likewise a religion which is based on the underlying absolute unitary principle, such as Brahman, must soar behind its substantial, self-identical principle and awaken to the dynamic, self-negating ‘boundless openness’ as the ultimate ground. Such principle cannot have an actual existence as far as religion is concerned. Even if we can ever thought of such principle, it cannot be totally neutral as a great void. Swami Vivekananda by referring to reason and by accepting other religions as presenting other aspects of the truth, he tries to reach that principle which will accommodate all views. But in the process of finding such principle he stumbles upon the Brahman. But many might argue that Vivekananda has visualized a new insight of the complementarity of science and religion. This needs further articulation and explanation and a dialogue between science and religion.

Further, to talk about unity on the basis of some common features would undermine the importance of other dissimilar groups. For argument sake if it is possible to think of a religion whose goal is not realization of God, it implies that such religion is excluded from such attempt to harmony. Vivekananda is very clear that religion has both social and spiritual dimension, though the former can be included into the latter. That is why he is more concerned with the unity at the higher level where human realizes the divine in them. This will make harmony meaningful and appropriate even in the cases of dissimilarity, at the level of human spiritual experiences.

Therefore, what is envisaged in his philosophy is that unity is already there prior to the existence of duality or variety as a condition of existence of all things. But due to some reasons such unity is not manifested due to some reasons and as a result it gives rise to plurality or differences. The different colors of the rainbow as per Pannikkar’s argument are due to the diffraction of light when it touches the different surfaces of the prism; but these differences ultimately points to the unity in terms of origination. It is like saying that substances can change or modify into various forms or stages but ultimately seek their own root. Plurality is not inherent in the substance but are produced due to the influence of various factors. Once these conditions are removed plurality or duality is destroyed. Therefore unity in this sense is in the very nature of a substance, but needs to be discovered. Unity is not an ideal to be constructed, but to be realized because unity is already there. Vivekananda’s standpoint is that we must stand up and reason out and not to have mere blind faith for religion is a question of being and becoming, not of believing. For Vivekananda religion is not a bundle of

ideas or theories, nor an intellectual assent; religion is realization; it is the whole soul becoming changed into what it believes²⁰. Religion is thus more of a lived experience which has more practical dimension and goal-oriented.

In lieu of conclusion

It is true that to look at religion as a set of doctrines or practices is not appropriate because religion, to my mind is a human quest for the Ultimate and for realizing something higher. But in the attempt to make sense of our search conceptual framework of culture and traditions play a very significant role. But that does not mean that religion is determined solely by such conditions. Hence if religion were to make sense to us it should also transcend the boundary of culture and tradition to reach to something higher. Hence in the midst of plurality at the phenomenal level there is a possibility of inquiring into the apex in which all religions converge. At the phenomenal level religions can come together and unite together but at the transcendental level another possibility can be envisaged. But this area is mostly not seriously explored by scholars of religion and only remains as postulates. If, as many scholars argue religions originate from the same source, will it not make sense to make an attempt to show that they might have the same end? This is what thinkers like Swami Vivekananda, Mahatma Gandhi and other Indian thinkers try to argue. But, there is a need for further research and arguments to substantiate this claim.

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²⁰ The complete works of Swami Vivekananda, Vol 2, p 397