



Hermeneutics of Religious Pluralism and the Vedāntic Canon of Swami Vivekananda: A Philosophical Exploration

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Abstract: Pluralism is an undeniable fact of the contemporary human predicament especially in the vistas of culture and religion which are ontologically significant habitats of the human mind. A look at the various responses to diversity of religions available in the history of religions show that they come broadly within the paradigms of exclusivism, inclusivism, radical pluralism and reductionism. In this paper my attempt is to hermeneutically analyze the response of neo-Vedānta as encapsulated in the Vedāntic Canon of Swami Vivekananda that ‘all religions are true.’ After a prefatory discussion on the thematic mosaic of Indian culture, I analyze the ‘Chicago Addresses’ of Swami Vivekananda. Here I examine his claim that ‘all religions are true’ by showing that the underlying conceptual presupposition is what has been called ‘eclectic hermeneutics’. The inbuilt logic of this hybridization is asymmetrical hierarchization in which various religions are seen as steps of a ladder to reach the summit, that is, ‘the universal religion’ encapsulated in the conception of ‘practical Vedānta’. Admittedly this Neo-Hindu position has advantages for cultivating religious tolerance and fellowship as evidenced by the fact that the Indian culture has been the cradle of all major Indic as well as non-Indic religious traditions of the world. But the lingering question is whether such a notion of inclusivism/universalism does justice to the plurality, uniqueness and identity of various religious traditions *per se* without the temptation to appropriate and assimilate them. Does it not engender a sort of religious relativism? Or, can one see it as a paradigmatic case of appropriation, re-contextualization and mutual fecundation within the generative womb of ‘eclectic hermeneutics’? Is it possible to imagine theoretically the diversity of religions with in the conceptual matrix of ‘multivalued logic’ instead of ‘binary logic’? What are its implications for engaging the cultural pasts of India? I end this paper by making an attempt to spell out the implications of these probing questions inherent in the Vedāntic imaginary of Swami Vivekananda that ‘all religions are true’.

Keywords: Religious Pluralism, Truth, Swami Vivekananda, Eclectic Hermeneutics, Neo-Vedānta, All religions are true

1. The Predicament of Pluralism

A look at the contemporary human predicament would certainly corroborate the fact that there exists diversity of cultures and religions, all claiming to be true and simultaneously making, in an important sense, various conflicting truth-claims. In a very broad sense, one may call it the phenomenon of cultural and religious pluralism. Placing the various religions found in contemporary India in the womb of its cultural traditions, and in a sense subsuming ‘the religious’ under the canopy of the cultural category, noted social anthropologist T.N. Madan comments that India has been the cradle of all the major world religions. The differentiating mark has been that whereas the Indic religions – Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism - are of Indic origin, the Abrahamic religions, namely Judaism, Christianity and Islam together with Zoroastrianism and Bahai faith are of non-Indic origin but made India their home at different periods of time during the last two millennia.[1] Dwelling on the various philosophical, theological and cultural ramifications of diversity of religions, an acclaimed philosopher of religion has this to say: “If I had been born in India, I would probably be a Hindu, if in Egypt, probably a Muslim; if in Sri Lanka probably a Buddhist; but I was born in England and am, predictably, a Christian. ... These different religions seem to say different and incompatible things about the nature of ultimate reality, about the modes of divine activity and about the nature and destiny of the human race. Is the divine nature personal or impersonal? Does deity become incarnate in the world? Are human beings reborn again and again on earth? Is the empirical self the real self, destined for eternal life in fellowship with God, or is it only a temporary and illusory manifestation of an eternal higher self? If what Christianity says in answer to such questions is true, must not what Hinduism says be to a large extent false? If what Buddhism says is true, must not what Islam says be largely false? [2].

To engage this multifaceted question of religious pluralism, as a prefatory remark, one can identify at least four positions found in the writings on religious pluralism and the question of truth. According to *inclusivism*, religious truth is universal and general but in *exclusivism*, religious truth is viewed as singular and general. For *radical pluralism* religious truth is necessarily plural and particular, whereas *reductionism* sees religious truth to be something irrelevant.[3] To engage with this problematic within the dialogical matrix of Indian culture and Christianity, with specific reference to the interface between Christianity and Neo-Hinduism [4], I propose to construct a philosophical imaginary of the hermeneutic contours between the text, the context and the content. To my mind, heuristically, if the mosaic of Indian culture can be constructed as ‘the text’, then the interface between Neo-Hinduism and Christianity could be seen as ‘the context’, and ‘the content’ incarnates itself in the philosophical cum theological hermeneutic positioning of a given religion in response to the challenges of ‘the religious other.’

2. The Text: Locating the Mosaic of Indian Culture

Theorizing culture and employing categories of thought to understand it is a daunting intellectual task. Raymond Williams contends that “*culture* is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language.” [5] In the words of Homi Bhabha, “It is the trope of our times to locate the question of culture in the realm of the *beyond*. At the century’s edge, we are less exercised by annihilation – the death of the author – or epiphany – the birth of the “subject.” Our existence today is marked by a tenebrous sense of survival, living on the borderlines of the “present” for which there seems to be no proper name other than the current and controversial shiftiness of the prefix “post:” *postmodernism*, *postcolonialism*, *postfeminism*. [6] If Homi Bhabha dwells on the problematic of locating the mosaic of a given culture in the contemporary human predicament then the semiotic definition of cultures offered by Clifford Geertz as ‘the webs of significance’ spun by human beings gives many insights into the complex phenomenon of culture. [7] Of course, such a definition, one may point out, presupposes a very significant role played by the semiotic in human life. Pondering over the polysemic complexity and heterogeneity of cultures and the ensuing problematic of cultural identification and violence, Homi Bhabha contends that “there can be no ethically or epistemologically commensurate subject of culture.” The implication is that if it is not possible to identify a transcendent humanity which itself is not embedded in a given culture, then one cannot but come face to face with ‘culture’s archaic undecidability.’[8] As Michael Payne has insightfully remarked to define ‘culture’ is to define the human; to be excluded from the definition can have an ultimate cost.” [9]

The above prefatory remarks on culture help us understand why it becomes all the more contentious and debatable when one wants to engage with the text and texture of what is called ‘Indian culture’. Conceptually the notions of ‘Indian culture’ and ‘Indian ways of thinking’ are intertwined. This has ably been shown by the celebrated author A.K. Ramanujan in his seminal essay entitled, ‘Is there an Indian Way of thinking? An Informal Essay.’ To the question ‘is there an Indian culture?’, taking a cue from Ramanujan, one can possibly indicate a plethora of various binary-responses like these:

- There was an Indian culture and there isn’t any more. No, India never changes and the Indians think like the Vedas.
- There is no single Indian culture for there is great diversity between the Great and Little traditions, ancient and modern, rural and urban etc. No, this apparent diversity of Indian cultures is built on the unitary and holistic view point, for example, the Vedic scholars see a Vedic model in all that is Indian.
- There is nothing unique to Indian culture and various stages of social evolution have occurred in India. No, there exists a unique Indian Way, for it turns all things, especially the rivals and enemies into itself.
- Indians have no philosophy, only religion, no positive sciences, for matter is subordinated to the spirit, rationality to intuition and feeling. No, rather one should celebrate India’s so-called ‘un-thinking’ ways. [10]

Ramanujan then goes on to analyze the nature of Indian culture and contends that unlike the built-in context-freedom of the Western cultures, context-sensitivity is interwoven into the very texture of Indian culture. In his own words: “In ‘traditional’ cultures like India, where context-sensitivity rules and binds, the dream is to be free of context. So *rasas* in aesthetics, *moksha* in the ‘aims of life’, *samnyāsa* in the life-stages, *sphota* in semantics, and *bhakti* in religion define themselves against a background of inexorable contextuality. Where *kāma*, *artha* and *dharma* are all relational in their values, tied to place, time, personal character and social role, *moksha* is the release from all relations. If *brahmacharya* ... is preparation for a fully relational life, *grhastāshrama* ... is a full realization of it. ... *Vānaprastha* ... loosens the bonds, and *samnyāsa* ... cremates all one’s past and present relations. [11] Striking a similar chord while discussing the nature and significance of the Indian worldview, another celebrated Indian author and psychoanalyst Sudhir Kakar has this to say: “...the Hindu worldview, the relational orientation, that go into the formation of the Indian mind, are not abstractions to be more or less hazily comprehended during the adult years. They are constituents of an Indian psyche, absorbed by the child in his relationship with his caretakers from the very beginning of life as the underlying truth of the world. Rarely summoned for conscious examination, this cultural part of mind is neither determinedly universal nor utterly idiosyncratic. The mental representation of our cultural heritage, it remains in constant conversation with the universal and individual aspects of our mind throughout life, each influencing and shaping the other two at every moment of our being.” [12]

Such a nuanced understanding of the genealogy of Indian culture would help us critically appreciate the complex ontology involved in conceptualizing the Indian way of life. This becomes all the more significant when one considers the fact that religious identity is built into the very rubric of the cultural identity. Jawaharlal Nehru attests to this fact when he says: “Those who professed a religion of non-Indian origin ... became distinctively Indian in the course of a few generations, such as Christians, Jews, Parsees, Muslims. Indian converts to some of these religions never ceased to be Indians on account of a change of their faith. ... India was ... a country of many religions, in spite of the dominance of the Hindu faith in its various shapes and forms. Apart from Jainism and Buddhism ... there were Christianity and the Hebrew religion. Both of these had reached probably during the first century after Christ, and both had found a place in the country. There were large numbers of Syrian Christians and Nestorians in South India and they were as much part of the country as anyone else. So were the Jews. And so too were the Zoroastrians ... [and the many] Muslims.[13] But there are scholars today who because of their ideological persuasions would vehemently contest such an intrinsically pluralistic conceptualization of Indian culture. But to my mind, the very survival of ‘the idea of India’ is dependent on the basic spirit of this model. As Bhikku Parekh has insightfully noted, one might want to revisit it in the light of contemporary challenges confronting the modern India.[14] Also one might as well make the claim that there is no homogenous and univocal idea of India but possibly there exists ‘many ideas of India’. This, in an important sense, is tied to two differing descriptions of Indian history. As Sunil Khilnani has pointed out: “One ... [narrative] sees India as victim of recurring invasions, whether led by Muslim horsemen or European adventurers, Aryan tribes or satellite TV moguls. The other views India as an arena of civilizational encounters, often uncomfortable, between unequal protagonists, which have produced unique and splendid cultural forms. The first sees India’s history over the last millennium as a series of rude interruptions: its adherents promise to end all such interruptions, and to return to an original purity. The second celebrates the mongrel character of India’s peoples and their histories: instead of hankering for purity, it sees the moments of mixture as the most creative and imaginative ones. It is a view that insists that what was distinctive about India’s past was the ability to transform invasion into accommodation, rupture into continuity, division into diversity.[15]

It is in the framework of the latter reading of history with its conception of modern India as the synthetic product of civilizational encounters that I wish to locate the hermeneutics of religious pluralism entailed in the Vedāntic canon of Swami Vivekananda.

3. The Context: The Advent of Non-Indic Religions and the Rise of Renascent Neo-Hinduism

The context of the interface between Christianity and Neo-Hinduism becomes all the more pronounced in the speeches and writings of one of the predominant representative of Neo-Hinduism, Swami Vivekananda. At this juncture a word or two may be in order regarding the notion of ‘Neo-Hinduism’. According to the renowned Indologist Paul Hacker, it was Robert Antoine who used the term ‘neo-Hinduism’ for the first time and he used it to refer to Bankim Chandra Chatterjee as a ‘pioneer of Neo-Hinduism’. Paul Hacker himself divided the period of modern Indian thought into ‘Neo-Hinduism’ and ‘surviving traditional Hinduism’ but avoided the use of the terms ‘Renaissance’ and ‘Reformation’. Thus for Hacker, Neo-Hinduism and Traditionalism are the two main ideological trends that shaped the phase of the modern Hindu thought. [16] Thus the focal point of the context can be articulated in this way. Being confronted with the might of the British colonial power, the Orientalist assessment of Hindu religious beliefs and practices, [17] the perception of Christian religion as essentially a missionary and proselytizing creed, and the challenges of ‘modernity’, there took place a deep churning within the Hindu religio-philosophic tradition. This gave birth to what is called ‘Neo-Hinduism.’ In some quarters it is also called *Neo-Vedānta* or Modern Hinduism. It is often perceived as “a national revival through modernization of Hinduism, bypassing popular Hinduism and reformulating classical Hinduism.” [18]

4. The Content: Eclectic Hermeneutics as the Conceptual Tool-box of the Neo-Hindu Discourse

A cursory look at the literature that forms the world of the Neo-Hindu discourse reveals the trajectories of what one might call ‘eclectic hermeneutics.’ [19] This is very true of the writings of our chosen Neo-Hindu thinker, Swami Vivekananda. The French philosopher Denis Diderot has described eclectic hermeneutic enterprise as that which creates its own philosophy from the resources of experience and rationality. In his own words: “An eclectic is a philosopher who tramples underfoot prejudice, tradition, seniority, universal consent, authority, and everything which subjugates mass opinion; who dares to think for himself, go back to the clearest principles, examine them, discuss them, and accept nothing except on the evidence of his own experience and reason; and who, from all the philosophies which he has analyzed without respect to persons, and without partiality, makes a philosophy of his own, peculiar to himself. [20] Significantly, writing from the postcolonial perspective of a South Asian living abroad what Salman Rushdie has said echoes analogously the problematic that stimulated the minds of the Neo-Hindu thinkers: “How should we discuss the need for change within ourselves and our community without seeming to play into the hands of our racial enemies? What are the consequences, both spiritual and practical, of refusing to make any concessions to Western ideas and practices? What are the consequences of embracing those ideas and practices and turning away from the ones that came here with us? ... How are we to live in this world?” [21]

In attempting to answer these questions, the Neo-Hindu thinker Swami Vivekananda in an important sense re-shaped the Western notion of value and dignity of the individual by drastically modifying the classical non-dualistic doctrine of

Vedānta. His interpretative focus was not so much on the purity of the canonical literature as distinguished from the non-canonical, but on giving shape to an eclectic vision in the language of Indian modernity and reascent Hinduism.[22]

4. Eclectic Hermeneutic Thesis of Swami Vivekananda: ‘All Religions are True’

If Narendranath Datta was the child of popular Hinduism, then, to my mind, Swami Vivekananda, spiritually nurtured and nourished by his mystic-mentor Ramakrishna Paramahansa, was the icon of Neo-Hinduism or Neo-*Vedānta*. For our purpose of taking a close look at Swami Vivekananda’s eclectic hermeneutics, I shall comment upon what has come to be known as his ‘Chicago Addresses’, the much celebrated six lectures that he gave at the World’s Parliament of Religions held in Chicago in September 1893. [23]

Interestingly, the very phrase with which Swami Vivekananda addressed the gathering, ‘Sisters and Brothers of America’ in his inaugural lecture on September 11 celebrates a revolutionary paradigm in the disciplinary matrix of religious pluralism. To my mind, it echoes the spiritual mastery, catholicity and non-exclusivism of the colonized Hindu civilization over the colonizer that a Hindu monk is spiritually impelled to address the ‘religious other’, the non-Hindu religious believers, as ‘sisters and brothers’. The salient points of Swami Vivekananda’s Chicago addresses can be briefly pointed out in the form of seven brief extracts, analogous to the *sapta-svaras* of Indian music, as follows:

1. “I am proud to belong to a religion which has taught the world both tolerance and universal acceptance. We believe not only in universal toleration, but we accept all religions as true. I am proud to belong to a nation which has sheltered the persecuted and the refugees of all religions and nations of the earth.” [24]
2. “As the different streams having their sources indifferent places all mingle their water in the sea, so, O Lord, the different paths which men take through different tendencies, various though they appear, crooked or straight, all lead to Thee.” [25]
3. “... sect after sect arose in India and seemed to shake the religion of the Vedas to its very foundations but ... these sects were all sucked in, absorbed, and assimilated into the immense body of the mother faith.” [26]
4. “To the Hindu ... the whole world of religions is only a travelling, a coming up, of different men and women, through various conditions and circumstances, to the same goal. Every religion is only evolving a God out of the material man, and the same God is the inspirer of all of them. Why, then, are there so many contradictions? They are only apparent, says the Hindu. The contradictions come from the same truth adapting itself to the varying circumstances of different natures.” [27]
5. “It is the same light coming through glasses of different colours. And these little variations are necessary for purposes of adaptation. But in the heart of everything the same truth reigns. The Lord has declared to the Hindu in His incarnation as Krishna: ‘I am in every religion as the thread through a string of pearls. Wherever thou seest extraordinary holiness and extraordinary power raising and purifying humanity, know thou that I am there.’ And what has been the result? I challenge the world to find, throughout the whole system of Sanskrit philosophy, any such expression as that the Hindu alone will be saved and not others.” [28]
6. “... if there is ever to be a universal religion, it must be one which will have no location in place or time, which will be infinite like the God it will preach, and whose sun will shine upon the followers of Krishna and of Christ, on saints and sinners alike, which will not be Brahmanic or Buddhistic, Christian or Mohammedan, but the sum total of all these, and still have infinite space for development... It will be a religion which will have no place for persecution or intolerance in its polity, which will recognize divinity in every man and woman, and whose whole scope, whose whole force, will be centered in aiding humanity to realize its sown true, divine nature.” [29]
7. “... holiness, purity and charity are not the exclusive possessions of any church in the world, and that every system has produced men and women of the exalted character. In the face of this evidence, if anybody dreams of the exclusive survival of his own religion and the destruction of others, I pity him from the bottom of my heart, and point out to him that upon the banner of every religion will soon be written, in spite of resistance: ‘Help and not Fight’, ‘Assimilation and not Destruction’, ‘Harmony and Peace and not Dissension’.” [30]

5. Towards a Critique

A look at the above seven extracts or the *sapta-svaras* from the Chicago addresses would reveal the rigorous logic of argument employed by Swami Vivekananda to prove the fundamental thesis that ‘all religions are true’ as well as to justify the theoretical implications that follow from it. The hermeneutic contours of this logic can be indicated as follows.

1) Swami Vivekananda uses the available method of interrogating philosophical problem in the classical Indian philosophy, i.e., *purvapaksha* (statement of the opponent’s position), *khandana* (critiquing the said position) and

siddhāntapaksha (the concluding statement of the proved position, which undoubtedly is author's own position) in his theoretical exposition. The *purvapaksha* is the thesis that given the pluralism of religions, one religion is perceived as radically different from the other, therefore *contra* other. In *khandana* Swami Vivekananda critiques this position by re-interpreting in an eclectic fashion the Hindu philosophical, religious and spiritual tradition where difference and variety are taken to be true at the apparent level but are seen to be necessarily inter-woven and celebratory of one and the same Truth or the same God/Divinity at a transcendental level. This interpretation paves the way for the *siddhāntapaksha* of Swami Vivekananda that 'All religions are true'.

2) In his inaugural address, as if in the midst of *sāstrārtha*, Swami Vivekananda states his theoretical position with utmost clarity and the zeal of a Hindu missionary: Hinduism believes in toleration and universal acceptance of all religious traditions because of its firm conviction, the *ur-mantra* that 'all religions are true'. Further he qualifies Hinduism as the mother of all religions which has nurtured and nourished the persecuted religious believers of the world. In support of his thesis, Swami Vivekananda presents a cumulative proof from the Hindu Tradition, with quotations from both the canonical and the non-canonical texts. Here one could justifiably ask this question: Is such an interpretation warranted?

3) The answer to the above question, to my mind, takes two inter-woven forms.

First, one has to anchor Swami Vivekananda's interpretative *weltanschauung* in the holistic vision of Ramakrishna Paramahansa, his mystic-mentor. In the radically transformative words of Ramakrishna: "God can be realized through all paths. All religions are true. The important thing is to reach the roof. You can reach it by stone stairs or by wooden stairs or by bamboo steps or by a rope. You can also climb up by a bamboo pole ... It is not good to feel that one's religion alone is true and all others are false. God is one only and not two. Different people call him by different names: some as Allah, some as God, and others as Krishna, Siva and Brahman. ... Each religion is only a path leading to God, as rivers come from different directions and ultimately become one in the one ocean. ... The Eternal religion, the religion of the rishis, has been in existence from time out of mind and will exist eternally. There exist in this *Sanātana Dharma* all forms of worship.[31] These words of Ramakrishna, to my mind, form the conceptual fulcrum of Swami Vivekananda's *weltanschauung* and the foundationally radical thesis that 'all religions are true.'

Second, one has to recognize that the logic employed by Swami Vivekananda can be called 'the multi-valued logic' or 'eclectic logic' and as such it is to be distinguished from 'binary logic' or 'two-valued logic'. In binary-logic or two-valued logic there is an in-built principle of contradiction between '*that p*' and '*that ~p*'. But in multi-valued logic, such contradiction is transcended, because the criterion of justifiability is located in a different type of conceptual logic. The Indian philosophical conceptions of '*advaya*' and '*sunyatā*' in *Mādhyamaka* Buddhism; '*advaita*' and '*nirguna*' in Shankaracharya's *kevalādvaita-vāda*; '*anekāntavāda*' and '*sapta-bhangi-naya*' in Jainism are homologous parallels of such logico-conceptual constructions. Being rooted in the Indian philosophical tradition, Swami Vivekananda employs primarily the logical and conceptual categories available in the *Vedānta* tradition to weave together his arguments to justify the thesis that 'all religions are true'. In such conceptual logic, differences and contradictions are not irresolvable entities; rather they stand harmoniously interwoven and ingeniously inter-related from a transcendental perspective of reality and truth. What is the proof of all these claims? one might justifiably ask. For Swami Vivekananda, it is the *Yogi*, the one who has 'seen the Truth' through direct experience, the paradigmatic exemplar of spiritual realization in the Hindu imaginary. And Ramakrishna, his teacher, is perceived as the paradigmatic *Yogi*-exemplar: "What better equipment could one have who was to represent before the Parliament of Religions, India in its entirety – Vedic and Vedāntic, Buddhistic and Jain, Shaivic and Vaishnavic and even Mohammedan? Who else could be better fitted for this task than this disciple of one who was in himself a parliament of Religions in a true sense? [32].

For Swami Vivekananda, such spiritual realization is the true religion, the universal religion, and the institutionalized religions are only relative or rather mere 'kindergartens' to this primal religious experience of 'I am That' or 'I am God'. In his own words: "The hour comes when great men shall arise and cast off these kindergartens of religion and shall make vivid and powerful the true religion, the worship of the Spirit by the Spirit." [33]

4) Here, one might raise a query: Is such an interpretation of Hinduism warranted? I think the assessment of Wilhelm Halbfass is very much significant here. According to him, Swami Vivekananda's Neo-Hinduism is paradigmatic of the hybridization of traditional self-understanding and not a mere adaptation of Western ideas and ideals. It celebrates a transformative self-understanding rooted in the Vedic revelation. [34] Notwithstanding such an assessment, some scholars find Swami Vivekananda's method of hybridization 'essentially eclectic.' Taking a cue from the renowned inter-cultural philosopher Raimundo Panikkar, Brian A. Hatcher qualifies Vivekananda's method as 'aristocratic eclecticism' and distinguishes it from other forms of eclecticism such as experimental eclecticism, systematic eclecticism, rational eclecticism, emotional eclecticism, scientific eclecticism etc. It is a method that "picks up the best of each system so as to offer the cream, so to speak, of the different human experiences. Here the eclectic is not the minimalist but the maximalist, the man of genius who is able to offer a 'better' system based on the 'best' experiences of mankind." [35] Some other scholars contend that Swami Vivekananda in his hybridization implicitly takes recourse to 'hierarchization' in which a particular spiritual tradition is ultimately privileged over and above others. Other religious traditions are acknowledged but seen as steps in the ladder to climb up to the summit of the presupposed

soteriological ideal of the privileged religious tradition. As David Smith has perceptively remarked, “Vivekananda took up the non-dualist Vedānta as a hammer to smash the [exclusivist/absolutist claims and] pretensions of Christianity and Islam. Vedānta’s spiritual hierarchy and levels of truth enabled it to encompass all religions without leaving any doubt as to its own superiority.” Unlike David Smith, R.W. Neufeldt offers a nuanced reading of this problematic of ‘hierarchization.’ [36] To my mind, if one could see appropriation, re-contextualization and mutual fecundation as in-built logical principles of eclectic hermeneutics, then this can be justified as a case of ‘heuristic violence’ and ‘darkness’ generative in the very womb of such hermeneutics.

5) At this juncture, it is significant to note that the eclectic hermeneutics of Swami Vivekananda also posed an internal challenge by deconstructing an important claim made by Shankaracharya, the acknowledged Philosopher par excellence of the Advaita Vedānta tradition in Indian philosophy and culture. The contested domain is that of *Sruti*. Shankaracharya unequivocally claims that *Sruti* is the only valid means to attain *brahman*-knowledge which is nothing but *moksha*. Swami Vivekananda deconstructs this claim of Shankaracharya on the primacy of *Sruti* and makes the counter-claim that direct personal experience (*anubhava* or *samādhi*) of *brahman* above scriptures is the only way to *moksha*. [37] Some scholars who have re-visited this debate have claimed, and to my mind rightly so, that Shankaracharya does justice to the reality of *difference* and *pluralism* (*bheda*), but Vivekananda glosses over the *differences* of doctrine as unimportant by emphasizing the centrality of the *samādhi* of *rājayoga* as the true religion. [38] At the same time, aware of the politics of legitimation, in my view, one should not be tempted to interpret Swami Vivekananda as the latter-day Shankaracharya of the colonial India. Swami Vivekananda himself viewed his work not as systematic exposition, but as something uniquely practical. In his own words, “The dry, abstract Advaita must become living – poetic - in everyday life. ... That is my life’s work.” [39]

However, taking this stimulating debate further, my contention is that if one wishes to do justice to the reality of *difference* among religions and cultures and at the same time celebrate the fulcrum of inter-woven as well as intra-woven spiritual unity of vision among all religions, without negating in any sense the unique identity and texture of each of these religions and cultures, then the helpful category may not be necessarily *ananyatva* (non-otherness of the other) but possibly *aparthaka-siddhi* (the nature of being distinct but not separate) as advocated by the philosopher Achārya Ramanuja, the proponent of *Visishtādvaita Vedānta*.

6) Further according to some critics Swami Vivekananda’s cluster of arguments seems to be characterized by the colonizer’s internalization of the prejudices cultivated by Orientalism [40] according to which the West stands exclusively for enslaving materialism whereas the East exclusively celebrates soul-lifting spiritualism. In the words of Partha Chatterjee: “The world was where the European power had challenged the non-European peoples and, by virtue of its superior material culture, had subjugated them. But the nationalists asserted, it had failed to colonize the inner, essential identity of the East, which lay in its distinctive, and superior, spiritual culture. Here the East was undominated, sovereign, master of its own fate.” [41]

In the writings of Swami Vivekananda, this becomes clear when one carefully analyzes the significance of his poetic translation of *Katha Upanishad* 3.14: *uttishtatha jāgrata prāpya varānni-bodhata*” as “Arise, awake, and stop not till the goal is reached” as the mantra of pride, determination and success. Some authors, like David Smith, have contended that after the success of his Chicago addresses, Swami Vivekananda returned to India with vigour and dynamism calling for a muscular Hinduism, declaring that “India must conquer the world”. [42] Meera Nanda opines that some writers use the idiomatic, metaphorical and poetic expressions of Swami Vivekananda to construct ‘Hindu triumphalism’ which unapologetically celebrates the conception of superiority of Hinduism over the alleged depravity of Semitic monotheistic religions, namely Islam and Christianity. [43] I think here one should carefully make a distinction between the uses and abuses of a given ideology and religion in politics, especially in our contemporary predicament of competing ideologies that hasten to appropriate and interpret the cultural pasts of our country,

6. Concluding Remarks

To conclude our investigations thus far: our focal point has been to interrogate the significance and implications of the hermeneutic thesis advanced by Swami Vivekananda that ‘all religions are true’ with reference to religious pluralism. Locating the text of our inquiry within the mosaic of Indian culture, we anchored this axiomatic statement within the context of the dialogical encounter between Neo-Hinduism and Christianity. To articulate the content of this axiomatic thesis, we made a study of the ‘Chicago addresses’ and laid bare the evolutionary contours of the conceptual logic called ‘eclectic hermeneutics’ employed by Swami Vivekananda. In our critique of this axiom, we also examined the conceptual problems that it gives rise to and emphasized the need for articulating and demarcating the context-specificity of this thesis responding to the reality of religious pluralism.

The moot problem is: *are religions true?* To recapitulate what we have seen so far, for Swami Vivekananda, every religion has a soul and it may differ from the soul of another religion, but these ‘differences’ are not ‘contradictory’ but ‘complementary.’ That means conceptually ‘differences do relate.’ But the crucial question is ‘to what?’ Interrogating this question, Swami Vivekananda projected ‘spiritual realization’ as the mystical core of all religions and its unquestionable primacy though he privileged it in Vedāntic Hinduism. Thus he finds the radical equality of all

religions. This he calls 'the universal religion', 'the religion of the Vedanta' or 'the practical Vedanta'. Is this position acceptable to all the religious traditions? Does the thesis 'all religions are true' imply that all religions are equal, all religions are one, or that all religions are the same? This is a complex question and cannot be easily answered in the fashion of binary logic, either by 'yes' or 'no'; nor by 'identity' or 'difference'; nor by the conceptual play of the 'self' or its 'other'. [44] To my mind, the axiomatic thesis of Swami Vivekananda, along with its limitations which I prefer to describe as generative 'violence' and 'darkness' enmeshed in the womb of 'eclectic hermeneutics', celebrates the myriad mutual fecundation and inter-weaving of *advaita* and *agape*, *kenosis* and *sunyatā* in a dialogical matrix. And this has been engraved in a significant manner in the bedrock of civilizational encounter that has shaped the texture of Indian culture. Taking a cue from homologization, the metaphor that comes vivid is that of the rainbow. When the sun shines in the rain, an arch of different colours is formed in the sky. The relationship between particularity and universality, the outer and the inner, the body and the soul, the husk and the kernel, the periphery and the centre, is dialogical and co-terminus. Philosophically this is what Nagarjuna, the first century Buddhist philosopher, claimed by showing that any conceptual predication in itself is relational and consequently not autonomous and has in a radical sense no essence at all. I believe this is the logical entailment of what Swami Vivekananda claims when he says that Buddhism is the soteriological fulfillment of Hinduism. More importantly this is the philosophic truth contained in the divine experience Swami Vivekananda claims to have had in the Kshir Bhavani Devi Temple at Kashmir few years before his death. Seeing the dilapidated condition of the Temple and enraged by the devastation caused by the invading Mohammedans, Swami Vivekananda told the Mother Devi that if he were alive at that time he would never have allowed this to happen. Then suddenly he heard the divine voice of the Mother saying "It was according to My desire that the Mohammedans destroyed this temple. It is My desire that I should live in a dilapidated Temple ... What can you do, Vivekananda? Shall I protect you or shall you protect me!" [45] To my mind, here in lies the key to the hermeneutics of religious pluralism encapsulated in the Vedāntic canon of Swami Vivekananda that 'all religions are true.'

Notes & References

- [1] T.N. Madan, "Religions of India: Plurality and Pluralism" in Jamal Malik & Helmut Reifeld (eds.), *Religious Pluralism in South Asia and Europe*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 42.
- [2] John H. Hick, *Philosophy of Religion*, 4th edition, Delhi, Pearson / Prentice-Hall, 2005, p. 120.
- [3] See Gerald James Larson, "Contra Pluralism" in Joseph Prabhu (ed.), *The Intercultural Challenge of Raimon Panikkar*, New York, Orbis Books, 1996, p. 79.
- [4] Here I am aware of the perennial debate among the scholars regarding employing the term 'religion' which in a sense is peculiar to the Abrahamic tradition to the Indic traditions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism etc. This debate becomes all the more intense when some scholars claim that 'Hinduism' is a colonial construct and that the appropriate word is *dharma* which is polyvalent and its referent is certainly more than that of 'religion'- See David N. Lorenzen, "Who Invented Hinduism" *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 41, No. 4, 1999, pp. 630-659. I think the problem can be satisfactorily solved if one recognizes, after Wittgenstein, the 'polythetic' and not the constructed 'monothetic' character of the use of the word 'religion.'
- [5] Raymond Williams, *Key Words*, London, Fontana, 1988 (1976), p. 87.
- [6] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London, Routledge, 1994, p.1.
- [7] See Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York, Basic Books, 1993 (1973), p. 5.
- [8] See Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p. 135.
- [9] Michael Payne (ed.), *A Dictionary of Cultural and Critical Theory*, Malden, Blackwell Publishing, 1996, p. 129.
- [10] A. K. Ramanujan, "Is There an Indian Way of Thinking? An Informal Essay", *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, Vol.23, No.1, 1989, pp. 41-42.
- [11] *Ibid.*, p. 54.
- [12] Sudhir Kakar, "The Indian Mind" in *The Essential Sudhir Kakar*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, p. 370.
- [13] Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, with an Introduction by Sunil Khilnani, New Delhi, Penguin Books, 2012 (1946), pp. 55 & 253.
- [14] According to Bhikhu Parekh, "Nehru's vision had its characteristic strengths and weaknesses. It was inclusive, secular, culturally sensitive, based on the ethnic and cultural plurality of India. It gave democratic institutions deep roots in Indian self-consciousness. ... Its limitations were just as great. It was statist, elitist, did little to speed up India's economic development ... and was insufficiently insensitive to rural India and the religious aspirations of its people." - Bhikhu Parekh, "Defining India's Identity" *India International Centre Quarterly*, Vol. 33, No.1, 2006, p. 6.
- [15] Sunil Khilnani, *The Idea of India*, New Delhi, Penguin Books, 2004 (1997), p. xi-xii.
- [16] See Wilhelm Halbfass, *India and Europe: An Essay in Philosophical Understanding*, First Indian Edition, Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Private Limited, 1990 (1988), pp. 219-221.
- [17] Wendy Doniger, taking a cue from Sheldon Pollock, makes a distinction between deep orientalism and shallow orientalism. Both Orientalism and Occidentalism are misrepresented and stereotyped views of 'the self and its Other'. The East is taken to stand for religion, spirit, nature, the exotic, adventure, danger, Romanticism, myth, feminine etc. And the West is taken to represent science, materialism, the city, boredom, comfort, safety, the Enlightenment, logos, male etc. -See Wendy Doniger, *The Hindus. An Alternative History*, New Delhi, Penguin / Viking, 2009, p. 593.
- [18] David Smith, *Hinduism and Modernity*, Malden, Basil Blackwell Publishing, 2003, p. 40.
- [19] I have taken this phrase 'eclectic hermeneutics' from Brian A. Hatcher, *Eclecticism and Modern Hindu Discourse*, New York, Oxford University Press, p. 47.
- [20] Denis Diderot quoted in Brian A. Hatcher, *Eclecticism and Modern Hindu Discourse*, New York/ Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999, p.22.
- [21] Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homeland: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*, New Delhi, Viking, 1991, pp. 17-18.

- [22] See Agehananda Bharati, "The Hindu Renaissance and its Apologetic Patterns" *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 29, No.2, 1970, p. 287.
- [23] The first lecture ['Response to Welcome'] was given on September 11 in the afternoon, the second ['Why We Disagree'] was given on 15 September, the third ['Paper on Hinduism'] on September 19, the fourth ['Religion Not the Crying Need of India'] on September 20, the fifth ['Buddhism: The Fulfillment of Hinduism'] on September 26, and the sixth and the final lecture ['Address at the Final Session'] on September 27 - See Swami Vivekananda, *Chicago Addresses*, Kokata, Advaita Ashrama, 39th Impression, 2008, pp. 19-60.
- [24] Swami Vivekananda, "Response to Welcome" in *Chicago Addresses*, p. 20.
- [25] Ibid., p. 20. This is a quotation Vivekananda uses from the work of popular Hindu religion called *Siva Mahimah Stotram*, 7.
- [26] Ibid., 'Paper on Hinduism', pp. 25-26.
- [27] Ibid., 'Paper on Hinduism', p. 46.
- [28] Ibid., 'Paper on Hinduism', p. 47.
- [29] Ibid., 'Paper on Hinduism', p. 48.
- [30] Ibid., "Address at the Final Session", p. 60.
- [31] *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, translated by Swami Nikhilananda, Madras, Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1969, pp. 39, 204 and 249.
- [32] *The Life of Swami Vivekananda by His Eastern and Western Disciples*, Vol. 1, 6th edition, Calcutta, Advaita Ashrama, 1989, p. 392.
- [33] Swami Vivekananda, *Vedanta: Voice of Freedom*, Kolkatta, Advaita Ashrama, 2002 (1987), p. 301.
- [34] See Wilhelm Halbfass, *Tradition and Reflection: Explorations in Indian Thought*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 1991, pp. 14 &16.
- [35] Brian A. Hatcher, *Eclecticism and Modern Hindu Discourse*, pp. 96-97.
- [36] David Smith, *Hinduism and Modernity*, Malden, Blackwell Publishing, 2003, p. 175. For a much guarded observation on this problem see R.W. Neufeldt, "The Response of the Ramakrishna Mission" in Harold G. Coward, *Modern Indian Responses to Religious Pluralism*, Delhi, Sri Satguru Publications, 1991 (1987), p.75.
- [37] Swami Vivekananda, *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Calcutta, Advaita Ashrama, 1985, Vol. 7, p. 41.
- [38] See Anantanand Rambachan, *The Limits of Scripture: Vivekananda's Reinterpretation of the Vedas*, Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 1994, p.61
- [39] Swami Vivekananda, *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol. 5, pp. 104-105.
- [40] According to Edward Said, Orientalism "can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient – dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style of dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient."- Edward Said, *Orientalism*, New York, Vintage Books, 1969, p. 3.
- [41] Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1993, p. 121.
- [42] See David Smith, *Hinduism and Modernity*, p. 175.
- [43] See Meera Nanda, "Hindu Triumphalism and the Clash of Civilizations" *Economic & Political Weekly*, July 11, 2009, pp. 106-114.
- [44] Writing on this problematic, Arvind Sharma makes this claim: "The neo-Hindu position is not that all religions are equal or true or one or the same, but rather they are all valid" (p. 67). I find this claim contentious given the complex texture of the eclectic hermeneutics of Vivekananda and later on that of Mahatma Gandhi. See Arvind Sharma, "All Religions Are: Equal? One? True? Same?: A Critical Examination of Some Formulations of the Neo-Hindu Position", *Philosophy East & West*, Vol. 29, No. 1, 1979, pp. 59-72.
- [45] Swami Vivekananda, *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol.7, p. 4. E-source: <https://en.wikisource.org>. Accessed on 09/07/2021.