

**Harmony of Religions
from the Standpoint of
Sri Ramakrishna and
Swami Vivekananda**

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Publisher's Note

'Harmony of Religions from the Standpoint of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda' was originally one of the papers read at a seminar on 'Exploring Harmony among Religious Traditions in India' held at the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, Kolkata, from January 4 to 6, 2007. This paper, presented at the seventh academic session of the seminar on 6 January 2007, was included among the proceedings of the seminar published in 2008.

Because of the nature of its theme and the warm applause that this brilliant paper evoked at the seminar, we have decided to publish this paper separately in a monograph form. We hope that this will make it accessible to a wider circle of readers. It will be possible for them to have a bird's-eye view of such a subject of vital importance as Sri Ramakrishna's and Swami Vivekananda's attitudes to the harmony of religions.

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Harmony of Religions from the Standpoint of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda

One of the main problems about religion is its plurality or diversity. Not only are there several religions but they differ from one another in many ways. Further, each claims to show the right way of life, each claims to provide supreme peace and fulfilment.

The phenomenon of plurality of religions raises several philosophical questions. These questions lead to another field known as 'Comparative Study of Religions', and so they are not discussed here.

Diversity of religion, however, is not merely a philosophical problem. It has immense social, cultural and political consequences. Differences among religions have been one of the main causes of wars and communal riots all through human history. Even in normal, peaceful society, many people harbour prejudice and ill will towards followers of religions other than their own. More than a hundred years ago, Swami Vivekananda said: 'And thus we find that, though there is nothing that has brought to

man more blessings than religion, yet at the same time, there is nothing that has brought more horror than religion. Nothing has made more for peace and love than religion; nothing has engendered fiercer hatred than religion. Nothing has made the brotherhood of man more tangible than religion; nothing has bred more bitter enmity between man and man than religion. Nothing has built more charitable institutions, more hospitals for men and even for animals, than religion; nothing has deluged the world with more blood than religion.’¹

It is, however, obvious that diversity in itself is not sufficient to account for religious conflicts. For people of diverse temperaments are seen to live together in peace in most societies. Two points are to be noted in this context. In the first place, religious conflicts have intrinsic and external causes. Intrinsic cause is the operation of certain doctrines or customs of one religion which are opposed to those of another religion. External cause is the manipulation of religion by vested interests, institutions, political parties, etc. Speaking about the harm done by the manipulation of religion by institutions supported by the State, Swami Vivekananda said: ‘Now, in my little experience I have collected this knowledge—that for all the devilry that religion is blamed with, religion is not at all at fault. No religion ever persecuted men, no religion ever burned witches, no religion ever did any of these things. What then

incited people to do these things? Politics, but never [true] religion. And if such politics takes the name of religion, whose fault is that?’²

Secondly, when we study the history of religious conflicts, we can see that the nature of conflicts has undergone much change during the past few centuries. These changes have been caused by changes in the role of religion in human life. Before the 18th century religions were almost wholly concerned with salvation. Most of the religious wars and persecutions that took place in the Middle Ages were over the question who would go to heaven and who will go to hell. With the progressive secularization of religion, which began with French Revolution, Industrial Revolution, etc., religion came to be identified with humanistic concerns. As a consequence, religious conflicts in modern times are not over doctrinal differences, but over social, economic and political issues.

India had remained a land of religious harmony from very ancient times till the country attained independence. Religious freedom, toleration and harmony have formed the characteristic texture of Indian ethos. But after independence, especially in recent years, communal unrest, desecration of places of worship, assassination of religious leaders, etc.,

have become quite common. Another controversial change is the rise of fundamentalism. These events, however, are to be seen as deviations from the Indian ethos. These deviations are actually reactions of the Indian psyche to forces acting against the Indian ethos.

Since religious conflicts and communal disharmony have assumed serious proportions in present-day India, harmony of religions has become a most important and vital concern for all people.

UNDERSTANDING HARMONY OF RELIGIONS

Recognition of differences

Harmony of religions should first of all be distinguished from 'indifferentism'. Indifferentism is the view that there is no difference among religions and that they are all more or less the same. This is a philosophical concept. There is a similar popular belief that 'all religions are the same', which is prevalent among the common people especially in the rural areas in India. This kind of simplistic idea is based on ignorance of other religions, and ignorance cannot be a sound basis for harmony.

The starting point for a proper understanding of harmony of religions is the recognition of differences among religions. Each religion has, through centuries of development, acquired a distinct profile

with ever so many unique features which include a complex philosophical framework, a vast literature, many social customs and rich mystical traditions. At the same time, these differences have created insuperable barriers among religions, and any discussion on harmony of religions has to take into account these barriers.

Harmony is different from toleration

Harmony of religions should also be distinguished from religious toleration. Toleration implies a certain degree of condescension and refraining from doing something worse. What Swami Vivekananda said on this point is worth mentioning here, ‘Not only toleration, for so-called toleration is often blasphemy, and I do not believe in it. I believe in acceptance. Why should I tolerate? Toleration means that I think that you are wrong and I am just allowing you to live. Is it not a blasphemy to think that you and I are allowing others to live?’³

Interreligious and Intrareligious Harmony

In discussions on harmony of religions we tend to treat each religion as if it were a monolith. But the truth is each religion is vertically divided into several major sects and a large number of minor sects. Examples are : Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva sects in Hinduism; Catholic, Protestant and Eastern Churches in Christianity; Sunni, Shia and Ismaili sects in

Islam; Mahāyāna, Vajrayāna and Theravāda in Buddhism. Very often these sects show greater animosity towards one another than towards other religions. Discussion on harmony of religions should include harmony within each religion—intrareligious harmony, as well as harmony among religions—interreligious harmony.

Approaches to the Problem of Harmony

There are four main approaches to the problem of harmony of religions: political, social, theological and mystical. By political approach is meant the policy adopted by the government towards religion. In modern times this approach has assumed paramount importance because, without it, the other approaches become ineffective. Even in theocratic countries the government follows a policy of religious toleration and takes care to prevent communal disturbances. In democratic countries like the USA and India the political approach followed is to declare the State to be secular. Secularism has been much criticized and is often thought to have failed in India. But it has denied legitimacy to fundamentalism and social injustice in the name of religion.

Social approach is the one normally followed by the common people. Left to themselves, common people would live in peace with their neighbours

whatever be their religion or faith. They create communal disturbances only when they are incited by vested interests. This is the field in which religious leaders and voluntary organizations have a leading role to play.

Theological approach consists in reinterpreting doctrines in favour of harmony of religions. In all world religions most of the doctrines were formulated many centuries ago. Some of these doctrines are against harmony of religions. If these cannot be changed, they could be reinterpreted to suit the needs of the present-day world. In Hinduism, scriptures have been classified into two groups: the *Śruti* and the *Smṛti*. The eternal truths and laws of the spiritual world revealed to the ancient *ṛṣis* constitute the *Śruti*. It cannot be changed, but it has been interpreted in different ways by *Ācāryas*. All other matters of religion, especially man's duties and ways of life, constitute the *Smṛti*. *Smṛti* can be changed or reinterpreted. In modern times Swami Vivekananda reinterpreted the ancient scriptures in the light of Sri Ramakrishna's experiences. His ideas helped to establish intrareligious harmony within Hinduism, and have given shape to the modern integral Hinduism which stresses interreligious harmony as a basic tenet. In this connection it may be mentioned that it is the theological approach that lies at the bottom of the dialogue movement initiated by

Christian churches in recent years.

Lastly we come to the mystical approach. This approach is based on the principle that, apart from the revealed knowledge gained from the scriptures, it is possible to have direct experience (*aparokṣānubhūti*) of the ultimate Reality known as mystical knowledge. This principle is accepted in all the world religions, and every religion has a rich mystical tradition built through many centuries. One difficulty in this approach is that regarding the content of mystical experience, that is, knowledge gained through mystical experience, there is a great deal of variation among the major religions. The experiences of Rābeyā, Mīrā and St Theresa are not the same, nor are the experiences of Al Ghazzali, St John of the Cross and Jñāneśvara. But, although regarding the content of experience there is variation, all mystics agree that direct experience of the Ultimate Reality is possible; and this agreement can serve as the basis for the establishment of harmony of religions. It was this mystical approach that Sri Ramakrishna followed, and Swami Vivekananda expounded.

While concluding this section, we would like to suggest that, for the establishment of harmony among religions, a combination of all the four approaches would be the ideal approach.

SRI RAMAKRISHNA, THE PROPHET OF HARMONY OF RELIGIONS

The present-day interest in harmony of religions in several parts of the world may have been occasioned by demographic compulsions and other causes. But a direct, indirect or even remote influence of Sri Ramakrishna behind it all cannot be ruled out. He was the first person in modern times to openly preach harmony of religions.

The conservative condition of the society and the orthodox nature of the family in which he was born and brought up were most unfavourable for the development of such a liberal doctrine. In those days an orthodox Brahmin would not accept food, or even drink water, from a lower caste Hindu. As for people belonging to other religions, they were all bracketed together as *mleccha* (similar to the term 'heathen' used in Christianity and 'kāfir' used in Islam). When we study the situation in which Sri Ramakrishna spent his early years, it becomes clear that he did not get the idea of harmony of religions from any external source.

Nor did he preach the doctrine of harmony of religions with the idea of getting recognition for that or for name and fame. Then what made him preach this doctrine? The answer has been given by Sri Sarada Devi, his spiritual spouse. 'It never struck me', she once said, 'that the Master followed the

paths of different religions with the idea of establishing the doctrine of harmony of religions. He was a lover of God and wanted to enjoy the bliss of God in different ways. This was what made him follow different spiritual paths.⁷⁴ In other words, the idea of harmony of religions came to Sri Ramakrishna as a direct mystical experience. It came to him as an inner discovery, a personal revelation.

Born in a poor but virtuous and pious Brahmin family in a remote village (Kamarpukur) in West Bengal, Sri Ramakrishna (1836-1886) showed signs of mystical temperament even in early boyhood. He had just enough schooling to be able to read and write. At the age of nineteen he became a priest at the newly consecrated Kālī Temple at Dakshineswar. Contrary to what usually happens in the case of ordinary priests, service to the deity only inflamed the innate longing for God in the case of Ramakrishna. He began to spend whole nights in contemplation in a solitary place at Dakshineswar, but the main method he followed was intense longing and prayer. At the end of a year he had the wonderful vision of the Divine Mother as a boundless ocean of Light.

Normally, illumined souls remain satisfied by following only one path. But Ramakrishna felt an

insatiable desire to realize God through various paths. First he followed the different paths of Hinduism—the Yogic, the Tantric, the Vaiṣṇava and the other paths and reached the goal of each of them in an incredibly short period, culminating in the experience of non-dual Reality through *Nirvikalpa Samādhi* at the age of 28.

The desire to realize God through other religions became strong in him and, two years later in 1866 he began to follow the Sufi path of Islam under a Sufi guide. He lived like a Muslim, offering Namaz and repeating the name of Allah. This *sādhana* culminated in the vision of a radiant Being who finally merged into the Absolute.

Eight years later, the desire to realize God through the spiritual path of Christianity became strong in him, and he began to listen to readings from the Bible. Some time in 1874, once when he was looking at a picture of Madonna with infant Jesus, he became completely absorbed in the thought of Christ. This inner absorption was so intense that for three days he could not go to the temples or think of Hindu deities. At the end of this period he had a wonderful vision of Jesus Christ which finally merged in the experience of the Absolute.

Here the question may arise as to how Sri

Ramakrishna could realize God through Islamic and Christian paths in such a short time. The answer is obvious to all those who are familiar with the lives and works of great mystics. Sri Ramakrishna had through year of intense spiritual discipline attained such a total purification of mind and perfection in contemplation that he did not have to pass through the different stages of spiritual progress (such as Purgation, Illumination and Union) like ordinary mystics.

There are two points in Sri Ramakrishna's spiritual experiences which deserve special attention. One is that Sri Ramakrishna saw each religion through the eyes of its followers. When he followed the path of any religion, he identified himself totally with the customs of that religion. The second point is that, whatever religious path he followed, they all culminated in the experience of the Absolute. It was from this direct experience that he derived his doctrine of *dharma-samanvaya* or 'harmony of religions' which he described as *yata mat tata path*.

Like all great men, Sri Ramakrishna lived an authentic life. There were no contradictions between his thought, speech and action. Once he was convinced of the truth of harmony of religions, he began to speak about it openly because he saw it was the need of the hour.

Sri Ramakrishna did not merely preach the doctrine of harmony of religions. He lived what he taught. The small room in which he lived at Dakshineswar was the meeting place for people belonging to different religions who flocked to him from all directions. Sri Ramakrishna did not merely welcome people belonging to different religions, he would identify himself with their own views and become one among them. Speaking about this aspect of Sri Ramakrishna's life, Swami Vivekananda once said, 'Ay, long before ideas of universal religion and brotherly feeling between different sects were mooted and discussed in any country in the world, here, in sight of this city, had been living a man whose whole life was a Parliament of Religions as it should be.'⁵

FOUR INTERRELIGIOUS ATTITUDES

Conflicts among followers of different religions are caused by wrong attitudes towards religions other than one's own. A person's attitude towards other religions depends upon several factors. In recent years most of the religious studies have centred on interreligious attitudes.

Western scholars have recognized three main interreligious attitudes: Exclusivism, Inclusivism, and Pluralism⁶. To this we may add Swami Vivekananda's concept of Universalism as a fourth attitude.

1. Exclusivism

Exclusivism is the view that *one's own religion alone is true and all the other religions are false*. According to this view, there can be only one true revelation, and only one true way to salvation.

This was the view that prevailed in the West till the World Parliament of Religions held in Chicago in 1893. It is still held by some religions and by some groups in other religions. In Christianity this view found expression in the dogma, *Extra ecclesiam nulla salus*, 'outside the Church no salvation'. In the early decades of the last century the exclusivistic position was strongly advocated by Karl Barth, Emile Brunner and Hendrik Kraemer. After the second Vatican Council and the formation of the World Council of Churches, this view seems to be no longer popular in Christianity. Liberal-minded people in all religions have given up this view.

When exclusivism finds aggressive social expression, it becomes fundamentalism. The rise of fundamentalism in several religions, and the adaptation of extremist and terrorist tactics by some fundamentalist groups, constitute the main threat to global peace, friendship and prosperity in the present-day world.

2. Inclusivism

Inclusivism also holds that *one's own religion alone is true, but it does not hold that other religions are false, for they are all included in one's own religion*. Revelation in one's own religion is full, perfect and final, whereas revelation in other religions is partial, imperfect or preliminary. Other religions are only preparations to understand and accept one's own religion.

Some form of inclusivism may be found in all the world religions. In Hinduism, Śrī Kṛṣṇa's statement in the *Gītā*, 'In whatever way a person wants to attain me, I bless him in that way. Everywhere people follow my path'⁷, is often cited as an example of Inclusivism. The following statement of St Augustine anticipated inclusivism in Christianity as early as the 4th century, 'For the reality itself, which we now call the Christian religion, was present among the early people, and up to the time of coming of Christ in the flesh, was never absent from the beginning of the human race. So the true religion which already existed now began to be called Christian.'

In modern times Inclusivism as a distinct interreligious attitude was first formulated by the German Catholic theologian Karl Rahner in 1961. According to him, Christ works through all religions, and it is Christ that the followers of other religions

worship through their sacraments, without being aware of the fact. Rahner therefore called the followers of other religions 'anonymous Christians'. This line of thinking was supported by Hans Kung, Henri le Saux (Abhishiktananda), Dom Bede Griffiths, Klaus Klostermaier and other theologians and thinkers.⁸

Some statements of Swami Vivekananda, such as the following one, may give the impression that Swamiji was an inclusivist: 'All of religion is contained in the Vedanta, that is, in the three stages of the Vedanta Philosophy: the *Dvaita*, the *Viśiṣṭādvaita* and the *Advaita*, one comes after the other.'⁹ But, as we shall see later, Swamiji used the term Vedanta in a much larger sense and, therefore he cannot be regarded as an inclusivist.

3. Pluralism

Pluralism holds that *all world religions are true, revelations are many, and there are several paths to salvation / liberation*. Pluralism is a philosophical term which means that truth has ultimately more than one valid construction and that human thinking can approach those constructions in quite different ways. In the context of world religions Pluralism means, in the words of Professor John Hick, '... the great religious traditions are to be regarded as alternative

soteriological spaces within which, or ways along which, men and women find salvation / liberation / fulfilment.’¹⁰

Pluralism is a way of establishing understanding and harmony among religions without ignoring the uniqueness of each. To understand Pluralism we should first of all distinguish it from Indifferentism (this has already been done at the beginning of this paper) and Relativism which represents two extreme views. Pluralism recognizes that differences between religions are real and permanent. This implies recognition of the independence, dignity and validity of each religion. As Professor James Michael Lee has pointed out, ‘Genuine religious Pluralism is not a melting pot in which all diverse religions are liquefied into sameness. On the contrary, genuine religious Pluralism is a mosaic in which all religions occupy privileged, autonomous and interactive positions, thus revealing a picture which displays the full reality of God less inadequately than any single religion, however objectively great, is able to do by itself.’¹¹

It does not, however, mean that the truths of different religions are wholly different and relative, and there is no absolute truth. If there were no absolute Truth or Reality, then each religion would remain isolated as an island and no interaction

among religions would be possible at a higher level. In the words of Professor Grant S. Shockley, 'Pluralism is a method of analysis to aid in critical evaluating, focusing and objectifying. Absolutes, universals and exclusive revelations are valid in themselves, and they are valid for those who believe in them. They are elements of the larger truth or the whole of truth which by definition is unknowable by a single individual.'¹²

Pluralism, however, is not a mere theological matter. In fact, in Pluralism practical considerations are more important than theoretical ones. As Professor Shockley says, 'What is the shape and style of the pluralist approach? Essentially, it is one that seeks an ampler and more functional understanding of the nature and meaning of religion or theology in its situation of diversity—cultural, ethnic, racial, linguistic; seeks ways of enabling persons to live together more creatively in and with diversity; and corporately design ways of achieving selected common goals.'¹³

The idea of religious Pluralism was introduced in Western thought mainly by Arnold Toynbee, W. E. Hocking, and Ernst Troeltsch. The idea was put on a firm foundation by Paul Tillich, Wilfred Cantwell Smith and John Hick. The present pluralist movement in the West owes much to the bold

advocacy of religious Pluralism by Professor Hick. He terms his pluralist scheme 'a Copernican revolution'. He stated, 'And we have to realize the universe of faiths centres upon God, and not upon Christianity or upon any other religion. He is the Sun, the originative source of life and light, whom all the religions reflect in their own way.'¹⁴

Professor James Michael Lee of the University of Alabama has enunciated eight 'Basic Principles of Religious Pluralism'.¹⁵ These are given below in an abridged and adapted form :

1. The ultimate Reality is inexhaustible mystery which expresses itself through diverse revelations in different religions.
2. Each religion represents a distinct socio-cultural response to divine revelation.
3. However, irrespective of the socio-cultural milieu in which a person has grown, everyone encounters God in his own personal way.
4. The followers of all religions are to be treated as equals as far as their religious convictions are concerned. (This does not, however, imply that all religions are equal.)
5. It is necessary to understand the tenets and practices of other religions.
6. Each religion is to be understood through the eyes of its own followers; there should be no

invidious comparisons.

7. The followers of each religion should interact freely with the followers of other religions through dialogue.

8. The follower of each religion should enlarge his religious consciousness by imbibing some of the noble elements of other religions.

In the above discussion we have outlined the main trends in current thinking on Pluralism among theologians in the West. In this context three more points need consideration.

(a) In the first place, Pluralism is no longer a matter to be decided by theologians or Church authorities. It has become the concern of the common man. The social revolution that swept through America and Europe in the 1960s, the influx of oriental spiritual leaders and ideas into the West, secularization of moral authority and other factors have weakened the hold of institutional religions on the minds of Western people. On the other hand, the large presence of immigrants professing different religions, has made multireligious awareness a compelling reality in Western society. As a consequence, hundreds of thousands of people now believe in religious pluralism and follow it in their lives.

(b) This has not, however, reduced the

importance of discussion on religious pluralism. Since the attitudes of people depend to a large extent on the type of education they receive, Pluralism is now receiving the attention of educationists and governments in several countries. Moreover, religious leaders, even if they don't do much good, can do much harm if they hold exclusivistic views. As a matter of fact, fundamentalism is rising in many countries, and this menace to social disharmony can be met only by strengthening the bases of Pluralism in the minds of religious leaders.

(c) The type of Pluralism described above is a Western concept based on Western religious and logical premises, and does not have much relevance to the socio-religious situation in India.

Indian Socio-religious Outlook

Indian socio-religious outlook is derived from two basic factors: one is the Indian ethos and the other is Indian religious consciousness.

The Indian ethos (by which is meant the set of values which govern social outlook and interactions) has always been characterized by harmony and non-violence. Even the much maligned caste system assigned to each group a certain niche in the social fabric and thereby avoided conflict and competition to a great extent. People belonging to various

religious, linguistic and even racial groups could live together in peace. It was this attitude of harmony that enabled Indian society to provide shelter to several waves of migrations— Christian, Jewish, Zoroastrian and even Islamic—from the Middle East .

Moreover, the overall non-violent nature of the Indian people prevented large-scale religious persecutions. There were religious dissensions, and even religious conflicts no doubt, but these seldom escalated into large-scale pogroms or massacres or burning at stake of innocent people.

What was the force which shaped the distinctive profile of Indian ethos? *The understanding of the immanence of Divinity*. Somehow or other, at some point in its ancient history, the Indian mind gasped a great Truth: God indwells everything in the Universe as an unbroken spiritual continuum. God is not an extra-cosmic Being staying somewhere above, but is immanent in creation. The whole universe is shot through and through with Divinity.

This idea of unity of divine immanence gave rise to (a) a sense of harmony with all and (b) a sense of respect for all. Not only every person, but also, everything in the universe—trees, rivers, mountains, etc.—is inherently Divine and should be treated with respect.

We now come to the second factor, viz., religious consciousness of Indian people. In Indian culture, religion has always been a quest for the ultimate Reality or ultimate Truth (and not a mere social response to divine commandments for the establishment of righteousness in the world). The ancient Indian sages realized that beyond this universe, which is ever changing and transitory, there is an unchanging, eternal Reality which is of the nature of pure awareness. They simply called it 'the Vast', Brahman. The dynamic aspect of Brahman is known as *Īśvara* or God.

The transcendent and immanent aspects together constitute the total Reality. It is not something inert but is consciousness itself. It is pictured in the Vedas as a Cosmic Person, the *Puruṣa*, with thousands of heads, thousands of eyes, thousands of hands and feet. That aspect which is immanent in the universe constitutes only one-fourth of the *Puruṣa*, whereas the transcendent aspect constitutes three-fourth of the *Puruṣa*.¹⁶

What this image of the *Puruṣa* implies is that the whole universe is one single *organism*. Just as cells, tissues, organs, etc., constitute the body, so everything in the universe goes to form a cosmic organism. Everything in the universe is interrelated.

Another equally important discovery made in ancient India was that, although the ultimate Reality

is one, the human mind, owing to its diverse nature, comprehends the Reality in diverse ways. As a result, the same Reality appears as several deities. The Vedic sages gave expression to this idea through the dictum: *ekam sat viprāḥ bahudhā vadanti*, 'The Reality is one; the sages call it by various names.'

In other words, the principle of *unity in diversity* underlies the Indian concept of Pluralism. Unlike the Western model of Pluralism based on analytical reasoning, the Indian model of Pluralism is based on holistic, organic intuition.

Dialogue in the Indian Tradition

This idea of unity in diversity, organic unity and harmony of views of the ultimate Reality, that characterized Vedic thought was to some extent lost when the Vedic Age came to an end sometime before the beginning of the Christian era. From the second or third century AD several independent thinkers attempted to systematize Indian thought. As a result there arose six systems of Hindu thought known as *darśanas*. Each *darśana* represents a particular view of Reality.

The six systems are : *Mīmāṃsā* founded by Jaiminī, *Vaiśeṣika* founded by Kaṇāda, *Nyāya* founded by Gautama, *Sāṃkhya* founded by Kapila, Yoga founded by Patañjali, and Vedanta founded by Bādarāyaṇa. At first these systems remained as

isolated groups, each attracting adherents. A new era in philosophical thinking began when Kumārila Bhaṭṭa and Prabhākara of the *Mīmāṃsā* system and Śaṅkara of Vedānta system adopted aggressive polemics to demolish rival views and establish their own systems as representing the true view of Reality and human destiny. Śaṅkara's establishment of Advaita School provoked the rise of several schools within Vedānta, such as *Viśiṣṭādvaita*, *Dvaita*, etc. These Vedāntic schools did not remain merely as schools of philosophy, but developed into sects, each with its own philosophical framework, cult, community, customs and traditions. After the eleventh century, except Vedānta, most of the other systems ceased to be in vogue, and Vedānta with all its schools remained the dominant system of philosophy in India.

All the systems and schools of philosophy carried on vigorous polemics. The scholars of each school, some of whom may be ranked among the most brilliant thinkers in the world, tried to establish their view of Reality and their way to liberation to be the only true one and tried to prove the invalidity or falsity of the views of other systems and schools. Since there was an intellectual community spread all over India which used Sanskrit as the lingua franca, the philosophical controversies took the form of a national dialogue. Indeed the principles of dialogue

were strictly followed. The scholars of each school respected the views of other schools and studied them thoroughly before attempting to controvert them.

It is, however, clear that the original pluralistic spirit was lost. Some of the schools were frankly exclusivistic, while some others like Śāṅkara's Advaita School could at best be described as inclusivistic. Apart from the schools of philosophy, there were many sects. Nevertheless, because of the spirit of tolerance, harmony and non-violence natural to the Indian ethos, all these sects could coexist without violent encounters or communal disturbances. This integral social mosaic of philosophical schools and religious sects was profoundly disturbed by foreign invasions from the 11th to the 18th century and the subsequent subjugation of India under a Western power. There was thus both intrareligious and interreligious disharmony in India.

The situation worsened by the beginning of the 19th century when Indian culture had to face the challenges of Western culture. The society at first responded to these challenges by throwing up reform movements some of which denied India's precious spiritual heritage.

It was at this critical juncture that Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda came on the scene. The French savant Romain Rolland has described Sri Ramakrishna as ‘the consummation of two thousand years of spiritual life of three hundred million people’. Equally insightful is his statement about Swami Vivekananda: ‘In the two words equilibrium and synthesis Vivekananda’s constructive genius may be summed up.’¹⁷ The great work that Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda did was to recover the integral vision of the ultimate Reality, the holistic outlook on life, and the pluralistic acceptance of social realities that India had lost.

Sri Ramakrishna is the first great prophet of religious pluralism in the modern world. However, the pluralism that he advocated was not the Western analytical model but the Indian holistic model. What Sri Ramakrishna did was to reestablish the ancient Indian view of religious harmony by adapting it to the needs of modern society.

4. Universalism

We have discussed three interreligious attitudes, namely, Exclusivism, Inclusivism and Pluralism. We now come to the fourth one: Universalism. *Universalism is the view that there exists a set of*

universally valid religious principles common to or unifying all religions. Whereas Pluralism emphasizes the differences among religions, Universalism emphasizes the common ground among religions.

Sri Ramakrishna laid the foundations of Pluralism, and this is one of his great contributions to the modern world. Swami Vivekananda took Pluralism one step further by showing that pluralism must culminate in Universalism. Universalism is one of Swamiji's great contributions to the modern world. Universalism, however, is a much misunderstood word; it will be dealt with separately later.

SRI RAMAKRISHNA'S DOCTRINE OF DHARMA-SAMANVAYA

As mentioned above, Sri Ramakrishna's doctrine of *dharma-samanvaya* or 'harmony of religions' is the Indian version of religious pluralism. Pluralistic outlook was the common and distinctive religious attitude of the people in ancient India. This pluralistic vision was to a great extent eclipsed during the Middle Ages and subsequent centuries with the rise of schools of philosophy and religious sects.¹⁸ Sri Ramakrishna

revived and re-established the ancient pluralistic attitude of the people.

Sri Ramakrishna's doctrine of Harmony of Religions (*dharma-samanvaya*) was based on certain basic principles which he followed in his life. The first is the principle of direct experience. Sri Ramakrishna's doctrine of harmony was not derived from books or intellectual reasoning, but from his own direct mystical experience. For him religion meant direct experience, and not rituals and dogmas. He believed that if a person follows his religion with faith, sincerity and purity of mind, he is sure to attain direct spiritual experience. And he wanted everyone should follow his own religion and attain the highest fulfilment that it promises. This is what Sri Ramakrishna meant by harmony of religions.

The second principle that Sri Ramakrishna followed was to understand each religion through the eyes of its followers. He never attempted to judge other religions by the standards of the religious tradition in which he was born. This attitude of seeing religions through the eyes of its followers and suspending one's judgment, is known as 'phenomenological method' in modern times. This is

not to suggest that Sri Ramakrishna followed the phenomenological method. On the contrary, the phenomenological method seems to be a parody of what Sri Ramakrishna actually did. Sri Ramakrishna only authenticated the phenomenological method which the Western scholars seldom followed in their own personal lives.¹⁹

The third principle, which Sri Ramakrishna observed all through his life, was not to criticize any religion or sect. (For that matter, he never condemned any person, for he believed that there is hope for even the worst sinner.) Sri Ramakrishna saw God's power working everywhere, and he believed that every religion and sect has some place in God's scheme. In other words, harmony of religions was a natural phenomenon for him, not something to be artificially created through dogmatic assertions. Although born and brought up in an orthodox Hindu family, he was perfectly at home with the Brahmos, Vaiṣṇavas, Christians, Muslims and Sikhs.

The main tenets of Sri Ramakrishna's doctrine of *dharma-samanvaya* may now be stated :

1. The ultimate Reality is only one but is known

by different names in different religions; it is Personal as well as Impersonal.

2. Realization of the ultimate Reality is the true goal and purpose of human life. It is also the central purpose of all religions. It is this direct transcendent experience that gives validity to religions, and not books.

3. There are several paths to the realization of the ultimate Reality. Each religion is such a path. *Yata mat tata path*, 'As many faiths, so many paths'. As paths to the same ultimate goal, all world religions are valid and true.

4. But each person should remain steadfast in his own path in a spirit of *iṣṭāniṣṭhā*, without thinking that his path alone is true and perfect.

5. Furthermore, one should show respect to the founders of all religions as special manifestations of God and, knowing that God dwells in all people, one should serve all without any distinctions of caste, creed, race, etc.

These five tenets constitute the essentials of Sri Ramakrishna's doctrine of *dharma-samanvaya*, or Harmony of Religions. Considering their importance, we discuss them further below.

1. As regards the first point about the ultimate

Reality, one thing Sri Ramakrishna insisted on was not to put any limit to God. God is not wholly unknowable. He can be realized; but the human mind cannot grasp the whole inexhaustible mystery of God. Sri Ramakrishna said, 'Men often think they have understood Brahman fully. Once an ant went to a hill of sugar. One grain filled its stomach. Taking another grain in its mouth it started homeward. On the way it thought, "Next time I shall carry home the whole hill" ... Śukadeva and sages like him may have been big ants.'²⁰

Sri Ramakrishna held that the true nature of Brahman cannot be expressed in words. He said, 'What Brahman is cannot be described. All things in the world—the Vedas, the Puranas, the Tantras, the six systems of philosophy—have been defiled, like food that has been touched by the tongue, for they have been read or uttered by the tongue. Only one thing has not been defiled in this way and that is Brahman.'²¹

Sri Ramakrishna also held that the ultimate Reality is both Personal and Impersonal and it is known by different names in different religions. Just as water congeals into ice, so under the cooling influence of *Bhakta's* love, the Impersonal appears as the Personal.²² Furthermore, 'The Reality is one and

the same; the difference is in name and form. There are three or four ghats on a lake. The Hindus, who drink water at one place, call it *jal*. The Mussalmans at another place call it *pāni*. And the English at a third place call it *water*. All the three denote one and the same thing, the difference being in the name only. In the same way, some address the Reality as Allah, some as God, some as Brahman, some as Kālī, and others by such names as Rāma, Jesus, Durgā, Hari. God is one but His names are many.²³

2. We now come to the second tenet of Sri Ramakrishna that realization of God is the essential core of religion. In all religions the ultimate goal of life is held to be going back to God. In the mystical religions which originated in India, the realization of God through direct mystical experience is regarded as possible even in the present birth. In the other religions, it is expected to take place after death. This God experience, is a central principle on which harmony among religions can be established. Rituals, mythology, customs, etc., vary from religion to religion, and Sri Ramakrishna regarded them as the non-essentials of religion. He used to say, when you go to a mango orchard, your primary aim should be

to eat mangoes and not to count the leaves. In the same way the primary purpose of religion is to experience God and enjoy divine bliss.²⁴

3. The third teaching of Sri Ramakrishna on harmony of religions is that, although the ultimate Reality is one, it can be realized through several paths. Sri Ramakrishna used to say, '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 rope. You can also climb up by a bamboo pole.'²⁵ This is Sri Ramakrishna's well-known doctrine of *yata mat tata path*, 'As many faiths, so many paths.'

In this connection it should be pointed out that Sri Ramakrishna's view that all religions are valid paths to the ultimate Reality, refers to the major religions of the world. He was aware of the existence of certain cults, sects and groups which indulged in degenerate practices. He did not condemn them but compared them to the small back-door in old-fashioned houses in India through which the scavenger enters the house to clean the toilets. The major world religions are like the good front door by

which one should enter the house.

4. *Iṣṭaniṣṭhā* or steadfastness to one's own chosen ideal or path is another principle in Sri Ramakrishna's doctrine of harmony. He followed different spiritual paths, no doubt, but that does not mean he wanted or expected everyone to follow different religious paths. On the contrary, he wanted everyone to stick to his own religion or spiritual path and strive his utmost to realize the supreme goal. Following several paths will deprive the person of one-pointed attention and intensity which are needed in order to reach the goal. It would be like attempting to dig a well in several places instead of doing it in one place.²⁶

5. But along with steadfastness to one's own religion, one should also have respect for other religions and love and sympathy towards the followers of other religions. What Sri Ramakrishna disapproved most was the closed mindset of a dogmatic or fanatic person. The following statement of the Master clearly indicates his view on the subject. 'With sincerity and earnestness one can realize God through all religions. The Vaiṣṇavas will realize God, and so will the *Śāktas*, the Vedantists, and the Brahmos. The Mussalmans and Christians will realize Him too. All will certainly realize God if

they are earnest and sincere. Some people indulge in quarrels, saying, “One cannot attain anything unless one worships our Kṛṣṇa”, or “Nothing can be gained without the worship of Kālī, our Divine Mother”, or “One cannot be saved without accepting the Christian religion”. This is pure dogmatism (*matuyār buddhi*²⁷).

Sri Ramakrishna never liked to disturb anybody’s faith or devotional attitude. He tried to strengthen each person’s faith in his own path and encourage him to follow it.

VIVEKANANDA’S THREE COROLLARIES

Swami Vivekananda carried his Master’s message of harmony of religions to the West. He propounded it first at the famous Chicago Parliament of Religions and subsequently in different parts of USA and England. To Sri Ramakrishna’s four principles of harmony discussed above, Swami added three corollaries. These are :

- Religions of the world are mutually complementary, not contradictory.
- There is no need to change one’s own religion for another.
- The ideal approach is to accept and assimilate

the best elements of other religions while remaining steadfast in one's own religion.

Swamiji summed up these ideas in the address he gave at the Final Session of the Chicago Parliament of Religions as follows: 'Do I wish that the Christian would become Hindu? God forbid. Do I wish that Hindu or Buddhist would become Christian? God forbid. ... The Christian is not to become a Hindu or a Buddhist, nor a Hindu or a Buddhist to become a Christian. But each must assimilate the spirit of the others and yet preserve his individuality and grow according to his own law of growth.'²⁸

SWAMI VIVEKANANDA'S DOCTRINE OF UNIVERSAL RELIGION

As already stated, Swami Vivekananda took the idea of Pluralism one step further and propounded a new concept of Universalism. The idea of Universal Religion was presented by Swamiji first at the World Parliament of Religions held in Chicago in 1893 and later in his lectures given in the USA and England. It is important to note that Swamiji gave a new meaning to the term 'Universal Religion'.

Before Swamiji came, the term 'Universal Religion' meant any religion which was not limited

to a particular nation, race or caste, but was open to all people all over the world. George Galloway in his well-known book *Philosophy of Religion* classifies world religions into two groups: Ethnic Religions and Universal Religions. In ethnic religions membership is determined by birth. Only those who belong to a particular race (as in the case of Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Shintoism) or to the caste hierarchy (as in Hinduism) can become members of ethnic religions. By contrast, in universal religions anybody can become a member by under-going a simple ritual. Galloway regarded only three religions, namely Christianity, Islam and Buddhism, as universal religions.

But each of these three religions claims to be the only true religion in the world, and regards the other religions as false. This kind of claim contradicts the universality of these religions. The idea of one religion triumphing over other religion (this is known as 'triumphalism') is crude and outmoded.

Regarding this, Swami Vivekananda said : 'We find then that if by the idea of a universal religion it is meant that one set of doctrines should be believed in by all mankind, it is wholly impossible. It can never be, there can never be a time when all faces will be the same. Again, if we expect that there will

be one universal mythology, that is also impossible; it cannot be. Neither can there be one universal ritual. Such a state of things can never come into existence; if it ever did, the world would be destroyed, because variety is the first principle of life.’²⁹

In contrast to the above mentioned narrow concept of universal religion, Swamiji’s concept is a broad, truly universal concept. Swamiji’s concept embraces *all* the religions of the world. It is based on universal principles and reconciles the contradictions found among religions. It is not, however, widely known that Swamiji has given three concepts of Universal Religion.

SWAMIJI’S FIRST CONCEPT OF UNIVERSAL RELIGION

In several of his speeches and writings Swami Vivekananda has spoken of Universal Religion as the one Eternal Religion, representing the religious consciousness of humanity, which manifests itself in different places as different religions. Just as science is one, so also religion is one. In his famous lecture on ‘My Master’, Swamiji said :

‘The second idea that I learnt from my Master, and which is perhaps the most vital, is the wonderful truth that the religions of the world are not

contradictory or antagonistic. They are but various phases of one Eternal Religion. That one Eternal Religion is applied to different planes of existence, is applied to the opinions of various minds and various races. There never was my religion or yours.... One infinite Religion existed all through eternity and will ever exist, and this religion is expressing itself in various countries in various ways.’³⁰

It may be mentioned here that social scientists have also treated religion as a universal phenomenon common to all cultures all over the world. E.B. Tylor in his book *Primitive Cultures* held the view that religion is the attempt of the ‘savage mind’ to understand natural phenomena, like death, diseases, dreams, etc. Bronislaw Malinowski, Claude Levi-Strauss and others showed that religion is man’s attempt to find meaning in life. George Simmel and Emile Durkeim developed the theory that religion is the attempt to sanctify human relationships.

Although social scientists have treated religion as a universal phenomenon, their conception of religion is very low, being based on mythology, rituals, institutions, etc., Swami Vivekananda has given a very high conception of religion as a universal phenomenon. He identified religion with transcendental spiritual consciousness, man’s struggle to attain that consciousness and his

experience of it. It is this universal spiritual consciousness of humanity that Swamiji called Universal Religion. It should be noted that Swamiji did not identify Universal Religion with any particular religion like Hinduism (although he made Hinduism a universal religion by throwing open its doors to all people all over the world) but with humanity's common spiritual heritage. He looked upon world religions as manifestations of the universal spiritual consciousness of humanity.

Almost at the time Vivekananda expressed his views on Universal Religion, Professor Max Møller, who was one of the first proponents of Comparative Religion, wrote : 'The living kernel of religion can be found, I believe, in almost every creed, however much the husk may vary. And think what that means! It means that above and beneath and behind all religions there is one eternal, one universal religion.'

A similar idea was expressed a few years later by A. N. Whitehead, who is regarded as one of the greatest thinkers of the modern world. In his book *Religion in the Making* he wrote, 'The great rational religions are the outcome of the emergence of a religious consciousness which is universal, as distinguished from tribal or even social. Because it is universal, it introduces the note of solitariness. Religion is what the individual does with his

solitariness.’³¹

**SWAMIJI’S SECOND CONCEPT OF UNIVERSAL
RELIGION**

Swamiji’s second concept is, *Universal Religion is the sum total of the existing world religions*. Unlike the first concept which regards Universal Religion as a single, separate, abstract, spiritual entity, the second concept regards Universal Religion as the coexistence of all the religions to form a whole. It is like the United Nations. It is something which already exists. In a lecture delivered in Pasadena, California, on ‘The Way to the Realization of a Universal Religion’, Swamiji said : ‘And that universal religion about which philosophers and others have dreamed in every country already exists. It is here If the priests and other people that have taken upon themselves the task of preaching different religions simply cease preaching for a few moments, we shall see it is there. They are disturbing it all the time, because it is to their interest.’³²

What are the basic principles on which this second concept of Universal Religion is based?

1. The first principle is to recognize and respect the unique features of each religion and its right to

retain its individuality. According to Swami Vivekananda, the earlier attempts at actualizing the ideal of Universal Religion failed because they did not show any 'practical way of bringing them (i.e., religions) together so as to enable each of them to maintain its own individuality in the conflux'.³³ Universal Religion does not mean that all the religions of the world would fuse together to form an alloy. It is more like a garden of different flowers; each religion retains its own unique features, while all of them together constitute one whole.

2. The second principle is to recognize the fact that the religions of the world are not contradictory to each other, but complementary. Each religion has certain good points and certain drawbacks, but when brought together under the umbrella of Universal Religion, they make up their deficiencies. Each religion has a certain role to play in the world, and so all religions are necessary. About this Swamiji said, 'I believe that they (i.e., the world religions) are not contradictory; they are supplementary. Each religion, as it were, takes up one part of the great universal truth... . It is, therefore, addition, not exclusion. ... My idea, therefore, is that all these religions are different forces in the economy of God, working for the good of mankind... .' ³⁴

3. The third principle is that Universal Religion is something dynamic. It assumes that religions of the world freely interact with one another for the common welfare of humanity. In the present-day idiom, this interaction among religions is known as 'dialogue'. It means Universal Religion is a sort of permanent round-table conference; a perpetual interreligious dialogue, or mutual sharing among the followers of different religions, in a spirit of acceptance. Regarding this Swamiji said :

'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. I shall go to the mosque of the Mussalman; I shall enter the Christian's church and kneel before the crucifix; I shall enter the Buddhistic temple, where I shall take refuge in Buddha and in his law. I shall go into the forest and sit down in meditation with the Hindu, who is trying to see the Light which enlightens the heart of everyone. Not only shall I do all these, but I shall keep my heart open for all that may come in the future.'³⁵

The above words uttered by a great seer, thinker and spiritual teacher of the modern world are sure to reverberate in the corridors of time for centuries to come. We only hope that Swami Vivekananda's vision of Universal Religion, especially his second

concept, will be widely understood and put into practice.

**SWAMIJI'S THIRD CONCEPT OF UNIVERSAL
RELIGION**

Swamiji's 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. Apart from these, Swami Vivekananda developed a third concept of Universal Religion without any reference to the existing religions. This third concept is meant for all humanity without any distinctions of religion, race or gender. It represents Swamiji's integral view of Life and Reality.

In this third concept, 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 fulfilment. This means religion is a personal quest. Hence Swamiji believed that every person should have his or her own religion. He said, 'No man is born to any religion; he has a religion in his own soul.'³⁶ This idea comes close to

Whitehead's definition, 'Religion is what a man does with his solitariness.'

Nevertheless, since religion concerns the whole humanity, it has a collective aspect also. The collective side of Vivekananda's third concept of Universal Religion is a five-fold harmony. These five types of harmony are briefly discussed below :

(a) *Harmony between the sacred and the secular* : Swamiji saw life as one. He removed the distinction between the sacred and the secular not by secularizing the sacred, but by sacralizing the secular, by divinizing the whole life. Divinization of life is a key concept in Swamiji's view of religion.

(b) *Harmony between Science and Religion* : Science poses the greatest challenge to religion in the modern world. Swami Vivekananda met the challenge by integrating science into religion. Swamiji looked upon science and religion as a single quest of man to know the ultimate Truth; only science conducts the search in the empirical world, whereas religion does it at the transcendental plane of existence.

(c) *Harmony between love for man and love for God* : Love for fellow beings has been considered to be bondage and hence an obstacle to love for God in

Hinduism for centuries. Swamiji unified the two kinds of love (love for man and love for God) by seeing God in man. Man in his true nature (as *Ātman*) is inseparable from God or *Paramātmān*. So, to love man is to love God. Swamiji looked upon Love as an expression of the spiritual oneness of all humanity in God.

(d) *Harmony between contemplative life and active life* : The main purpose of meditation is to make the mind calm so that one may become aware of the Inner Self or Supreme Self. But by practice this meditative Self-awareness can be maintained even while doing work. In fact this is the central principle of *Karma-yoga*. When one attains this state, the inner distinction between contemplative life and active life disappears. Even in the midst of serious work one can maintain intense inner calmness and spiritual awareness.

(e) *Harmonious development of personality* : Every person is naturally endowed with four faculties or capacities. These are: thinking, feeling, willing and work efficiency. For the all-round development of personality it is necessary to have proper development of all these faculties. The development of such well-balanced, integrated individuals is one of the aspects of Swami Vivekananda's third concept of Universal Religion.

In a lecture delivered in California on Universal Religion, Swamiji said, 'Would to God that all men were so constituted that in their minds all these elements of philosophy, mysticism, emotion and of work were equally present in full! That is the ideal, my ideal of a perfect man. ... To become harmoniously balanced in all these four directions is my ideal of religion.'³⁷

For Swami Vivekananda religion is not mere belief in God, allegiance to a creed, or following certain rituals or customs. For him religion involves the whole life. It is nothing short of the transformation of human life into Divine Life. It is the conversion of every thought, feeling, and action into a spiritual discipline. It is the conversion of one's whole life into unbroken yoga, and the deification of man. This deified life can be seen in the lives of great saints and mystics in all religions.

This is Swamiji's concept of Universal Religion. In these days when science, technology, commerce, political strategies and other forces of globalization are bringing people all over the world closer together, this kind of enlightened Universal Religion assumes great importance.

HARMONY OF RELIGIONS : A LIVING

**TRADITION
IN THE RAMAKRISHNA MOVEMENT**

Harmony of religions is a living tradition in the Ramakrishna Movement. Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda's principles of harmony which we outlined above are being put into practice in more than 165 centres of Ramakrishna Math and Mission in India and other parts of the world.

Harmony of religions finds expression in the Ramakrishna Movement in several ways, some of which are discussed below.

In the first place, the Ramakrishna Order of monks admits people belonging to different religions, castes and races. Hindus, Christians, Muslims, Jews and Buddhists, hailing from different countries, live together in mutual love and cooperation like children of the same parents in the monasteries of the Ramakrishna Order.

The lay devotees of the Ramakrishna Movement, who belong to various religious denominations and countries, also live in peace with their neighbours observing the principles of harmony of religions. They are not required to give up their allegiance to their respective religions, and are free to visit the places of worship and follow the rites and customs of

those religions.

In all the centres of the Ramakrishna Movement the birthdays of the great founders of world religions are celebrated.

Ramakrishna Math and Mission publish books and articles on different religions, their founders and their teachings.

Novices of the Ramakrishna Order are taught comparative religion and the scriptures of different religions. The monks of the Order have the freedom to study and derive benefit from the works of the saints and sages of all religions.

Furthermore, speaking ill of other religions and religious leaders is not allowed within the bounds of Ramakrishna Mission Institutions.

Organizing interfaith conferences in which representatives of different religions speak about their own religions is another way Ramakrishna Math and Mission promote the ideal of harmony of religions.

Lastly, members of Ramakrishna Mission keep themselves aloof from fundamentalist groups and from involvement in political activity of any kind.

We have given above a brief account of the ways in which the ideal of harmony of religions is put into practice in the Ramakrishna Movement. No one who studies this Movement can fail to notice certain

unique features of the way harmony of religions is practised in the Ramakrishna Movement.

In the first place, it is not a new thing. Owing to various causes such as the influence of mass media, globalization, the presence of large religious minorities, etc., there is now a growing awareness of the importance of following a pluralistic approach to religion and culture. Modern youths are developing a multi-religious, multicultural and even a multinational outlook. The practice of harmony of religions in the Ramakrishna Movement has nothing to do with these recent trends. It has been in vogue in the Movement for more than one hundred and fifty years.

Another characteristic feature of the practice of harmony of religions in the Ramakrishna Movement is authenticity. The practice of harmony of religions in the Movement is not a show. It is not a stratagem to attract more people. It is a natural way of life for the monks and the laity. It is followed because of the faith that it is the right and true path for the modern people shown by Sri Ramakrishna.

Thirdly, practice of harmony of religions in the Ramakrishna Movement is an expression of Sri Ramakrishna's love for humanity. Sri Ramakrishna is one of the greatest lovers of humanity that the world has ever seen. His love knew no bounds of caste,

creed or race. He loved the founders of world religions—Kṛṣṇa, Buddha, Jesus, Mohammed, Caitanya and others—as if they were his own kith and kin. Naturally, he loved the followers of these great founders. Sri Ramakrishna's universal, unconditional love for all people is one of the two primary forces bonding together the members of the Ramakrishna Movement.

The other force is the equally universal, unconditional, all-forgiving, all-forbearing love of Sri Sarada Devi, known as the Holy Mother, who was the spouse of Sri Ramakrishna. She embodied in herself universal motherhood.

For centuries humanity has been dreaming of universal brotherhood, but this ideal has not been realized. One of the reasons for this is that the bonds that can hold the society together are maternal, and therefore the establishment of universal brotherhood presupposes the establishment of universal motherhood. Ground-breaking work done by eminent anthropologists like J. J. Bachofen, L. H. Morgan and others have shown the important role motherhood plays in social life. Patriarchal societies tend to be exclusive and divisive, whereas matriarchal and matrilineal societies tend to be inclusive and

cohesive. To hold together people belonging to different cultures, religions, races and social strata what is most needed is a mother-figure as its centre.

This is the role that Sri Sarada Devi has played in the Ramakrishna Movement. By her immaculate purity, selfless love, endless patience and by her Divine realizations, she transformed herself from an illiterate village maiden to the mother of Hindus, Christians, Muslims, Persians—indeed the mother of all humanity. Among her ‘sons’ there was a Muslim robber by name Amjad. Referring to him, Holy Mother said : ‘Just as Sharat (Swami Saradananda, the Secretary of Ramakrishna Math and Mission) is my son, so also is Amjad.’ The success that Ramakrishna Math and Mission has achieved in putting into practice the ideal of harmony of religions in its monastic order and among the laity is in no small measure due to the benign, integrating and protective influence that Sri Sarada Devi exerted, and still continues to exert, on the members of the Movement.

LOOKING AHEAD

In the above discourse we attempted to give a brief outline of the main teachings of Sri

Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda on harmony of religions, and also to show how these teachings are being put into practice in the Ramakrishna Math and Mission in different parts of India and the world.

Although it is difficult to predict the future of humanity, there are enough indications to believe that the relevance and influence of the message of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda are likely to increase in the coming decades and centuries.

At the dawn of the 21st century we can see four major trends in the human situation all over the world. One of these is the tremendous influence of science and technology on human life. Another is the globalization of economy. A third trend is enlightened humanism, in the form of awareness of the rights of deprived people and protest against all forms of exploitation, injustice, tyranny, cruelty and suppression. The fourth trend is a gradual awakening of the spiritual consciousness of humanity.

Signs of this spiritual awakening may be seen all over the world in the form of interest in spiritual life, popularity of gurus, yogis, lamas and other types of spiritual teachers, and the coming into existence of thousands of spiritual centres and organizations. Developed countries are plagued by an alarming increase in social problems such as crime, violence,

immorality, alcoholism, breakdown of family, etc., and existential problems such as meaninglessness, loneliness, ennui, neurosis, etc., and there is a growing awareness that these problems can be solved only through spiritual life. Millions of people in these countries now practice meditation, yoga, *Vipāsanā*, and other spiritual techniques.

One noteworthy feature of this modern spiritual trend is that it cuts across the boundaries of traditional religions. Not only that, many of these spiritual movements are independent of all religions and do not need even faith in God or in any scripture. This form of 'secular spirituality', as it is called, comes close to Swami Vivekananda's third concept of universal religion we discussed earlier.

In the middle of the 19th century the divine voice of Sri Ramakrishna reminded people that realization of the ultimate Reality, known by different names, is the ultimate meaning and purpose of human life and through it alone can man attain everlasting fulfilment and peace. Furthermore, Sri Ramakrishna taught that spiritual life is the essential core of all religions. These ideas are now spreading all over the world like a groundswell.

Swami Vivekananda believed that Sri Ramakrishna has awakened the spiritual consciousness of humanity through his intense spiritual practices and fervent prayers. Swamiji foresaw a future period when humanity as a whole would have attained such a high level of consciousness that ordinary human life would be transmuted into spiritual life or Divine Life. Swamiji stated: 'Religious ideas will have to become universal, vast, and infinite; and then alone we shall have the fullest play of religion, for the power of religion has only just begun to manifest in the world. It is sometimes said that religions are dying out, that spiritual ideas are dying out of the world. To me it seems that they have just begun to grow. The power of religion, broadened and purified, is going to penetrate every part of human life. So long as religion was in the hands of a chosen few or of a body of priests, it was in temples, churches, books, dogmas, ceremonials, forms, and rituals. But when we come to the real, spiritual, universal concept, then, and then alone, religion will become real and living; it will come into our very nature, live in our

every movement, penetrate every pore of our society, and be infinitely more a power for good than it has ever been before.’³⁸

These prophetic words of a great seer may not go in vain. They may become a reality, if not in the coming decades, at least in the coming centuries. And we can be sure that the universal message of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda would play a dominant role in bringing about this glorious spiritual transformation of humankind.

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