

VII. Religious Pluralism

Indian: “He who exists is One; the sages call Him variously” (Vedas).¹ “Whatever path men travel is my path: No matter where they walk it leads to me” (BG* 4:11, p. 61). “Even those who worship other deities, and sacrifice to them with faith in their hearts, are really worshipping me, though with a mistaken approach” (BG* 9:23, pp. 106-07).

Old Testament: “My name is great among the nations, and in every place incense is offered to my name, and a pure offering; for my name is great among the nations, says the Lord of hosts” (Mal. 1:11). New Testament: “In my Father’s house are many rooms” (Jn. 14:2). Peter said, “God shows no partiality, but in every nation any one who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him” (Acts 10:34-35). Paul stated, “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious.... I found also an altar with the inscription, ‘To an unknown God.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you” (Acts 17:22-23). “But glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. For God shows no partiality” (Rom. 2:10). “God our savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of truth” (1 Tim. 2:3-4).

According to Sri Ramakrishna the Lord of the universe has created different forms of worship, to suit a wide variety of people. Brahman-God is one but is worshiped under different names and forms. “God has made different religions and creeds to suit different aspirants,” corresponding to their own nature and temperament. “God reveals Himself in the form which His devotee loves most. His love for the devotee knows no bounds.” He “assumes different forms and reveals Himself in different ways for the sake of His devotees.”² “Many are the names of God and infinite forms through which He may be approached. In whatever name and form you worship Him through that you will realize Him. Different creeds are but different paths to reach the one God.... The religious teachers of all lands and of all ages are but so many lamps through which the light of the Spirit streams constantly from the one almighty source.”³ “The same God is worshiped in different countries and ages under different names and forms. He may be worshiped in various ways according to different conceptions—some loving to call Him as father and others as mother, some as friend and others as beloved, some again as their sweet little child—but it is always one and the same God that is worshiped in all

these diverse relations.”⁴ A spiritual aspirant can reach Brahman-God if they follow any genuine path with sincerity and intense wholehearted devotion. Though the Lord can be realized through diverse paths, some are more effective and quicker. If the sincere devotee is in error, Brahman-God will correct their mistakes. Our duty is to realize the Lord and not to try to correct the errors of other religions. All religions at their best are true and legitimate paths to the Lord. Firmly follow one path (marga) to Brahman-God, while at the same time respecting the others. Bigots are like the frog in the well, who knows nothing vaster and more majestic than its own well. Religious bigotry is caused by egotism and a lack of spirituality. “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 ‘pani.’ And the English at a third place call it ‘water.’ All 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 ‘Kali,’ and others by such names as ‘Rama,’ ‘Jesus,’ ‘Durga,’ ‘Hari.’”⁵ Though he accepted all four paths to Brahman-God, Ramakrishna believed the path of devotion was best for the majority of people in the present age.⁶

He also advised, “One should not think, ‘My religion alone is the right path and all other religions are false.’ God can be realized by means of all paths. It is enough to have sincere yearning for God. Infinite are the paths and infinite the opinions.” “Never allow the thought to cross your mind that your ideas are the only true ones, and those of others are false.”⁷ “God can be realized through all paths. All religions are true.”⁸ Sri Ramakrishna means all religions are true because properly followed they lead their devotees to Brahman-God. Not that if they hold contradictory dogmas both are true. “To love these objects, regarding them as one's own, is maya. But to love all things is daya, compassion. To love only the members of the Brahmo Samaj or of one's own family is maya; to love one's own countrymen is maya. But to love the people of all countries, to love the members of all religions, is daya. Such love comes from love of God, from daya.”⁹

Sri Ramakrishna created a new dimension in universalistic religious pluralism. He attained Brahman-God realization following the path of several Hindu denominations, along with Islam and Christianity He experienced the ecstatic spiritual visitation of Rama, Krishna, Jesus, possibly Muhammad, and others. He gained understanding of them from inside as they really are. His disciple Swami Saradananda (1865-1927) wrote, “In the past, rishis, teachers, and avatars had

taught people how to reach the goal by following a particular path, none of them had ever preached the message that one could reach the same goal through all the different spiritual paths.”¹⁰ In the West, we might call it a particular religion, faith, church, denomination, sect, or cult, but he thought of each of them as a path to Brahman-God. This opposes the anti-pluralistic notion that each religion represents a different perspective and only one can be correct. An analogy would be the periphery of a circle, where there are many paths to the center point depending on where you begin.

At times Brahman-God speaks to a religion indirectly, in a positive or critical manner through either members of another faith or through a secular ideology. For example, in the year 1906, when Swami Premananda (1861-1918) “was in the holy city of Puri, and one day in front of the Jagannath Temple he heard a Christian missionary haranguing a crowd of pilgrims about how wrong their religion was. He could not bear to hear Hinduism denounced in that sacred place, and loudly he began to chant the name of the Lord: ‘Hari bol! Hari bol!’ The crowd quickly picked it up, and the missionary’s voice was drowned out. That night Sri Ramakrishna appeared to the Swami in a dream and sternly asked him, ‘Why did you break up that gathering? That man, too, was preaching me. Tomorrow you must find him and apologize.’ The next day he searched until he found the missionary and asked his forgiveness.”¹¹ Of course the missionary did not realize the real reason for his actions. At times people are doing things for a different reason than they are aware of. Paul Tillich (1886-1965) made the point that, “Often God speaks to the church more directly from outside the church, through those who are enemies of religion and Christianity, than within the church, through those who are official representatives of the church.”¹²

It was affirmed by Ramakrishna’s disciple Swami Abhedananda (1866-1939) that the eternal spiritual laws and principles are the foundation of all of the higher religions of the world. They are nonsectarian and do not originate with the Divine Incarnation or a prophet who reveals them. The eternal religion (Sanatana Dharma) underlies and embraces the fundamental principles of all special religions. The universal religion, “is based upon the eternal principles and such spiritual laws as govern our life at all times, only such a religion can claim to be universal. It embraces the fundamental principles of all religions.... It teaches unity in variety, that the Godhead is one, although the eternal Supreme Being is worshipped under different names and in various forms.”¹³ All of the great religions of the world are

partial expressions of the universal religion. There is one God with a variety of manifestations, names and forms who manifests Himself in all religions. God has unlimited love for humanity and can incarnate wherever He/She is needed. “The founders of the different religions of the world represent the different ideals to be realized by different individuals. Each of them expresses only a part of the one eternal religion which is nameless and formless and which is not limited by doctrines and dogmas.”¹⁴

In the following quotation the word “[religion]” or“ [religions]” can be substituted for the preceding word, to illustrate how Thomas Aquinas’ (1225-74) brilliant exposition can be used to support religious pluralism. “The distinction and multitude of things [religions] is from the intention of the first cause, who is God.... because His goodness could not be adequately represented by one creature [religion] alone, He produced many and diverse creatures [religions], so that what was wanting to one in the representation of the Divine goodness might be supplied by another. For goodness ... in creatures [religions] is manifold and divided; and hence the whole universe [all religions] together participates the Divine goodness more perfectly, and represents it better, than any given single creature [religion].... But no creature [religion] perfectly represents the first exemplar which is the Divine essence; and therefore, it can be represented by many things [religions].”¹⁵ “If an agent whose power extends to a number of effects were to produce only one of them [religion], its power would not be as fully actualized as when it produces several [religions].... is there distinction among created things [religions]: that, by being many, they receive God’s likeness more perfectly than by being one.... a plurality of goods [religions] is better than a single finite good [religion], since they contain the latter and more besides.... a multiplicity of species [religions] adds more to the goodness of the universe than a multiplicity of individuals in one species [religion].”¹⁶

The philosophy behind religious pluralism is beautifully expressed by the Russian-American Sociologist Pitirim Sorokin (1889-1968), “In its plenitude this Supreme-Reality can hardly be adequately comprehended by any, finite human mind and by any finite human beliefs. For this reason none of the human religions can claim a monopoly of an adequate comprehension of God, as God’s exclusive confident and agent. On the other hand, the numberless different ripples; of this Infinite Ocean allow the different groups, of believers to pick up somewhat different

sets of its ripples that for various reasons most appeal to them. So understood, the differences in the chosen ripples, usually reflected in the dogmas and rituals of different religions; in no way necessitates for different denominations to be antagonistic to each other or to view one's own beliefs as the only truth while those of other religions as totally false. Cherishing its own beliefs, the believers of each religion can equally respect the beliefs of other religions as supplementary to their own, revealing additional aspects of the *mysterium tremendum et fascinatum* [mystery that repels and fascinates] 'into which fade all things and differentiations' (to use St. Thomas Aquinas' expression). Viewed so, the religious differences can not only be tolerated but genuinely welcomed and esteemed. In their totality they convey to us a fuller knowledge of the Supreme Reality than that given by a single religion."¹⁷

The Indian Christian Professor of Religions at Bishop College in Kolkata, Kalarikkal P. Aleaz developed a topology of four levels of tolerance. "Under the Exclusivist school, one's own religious faith is the sole criterion by which other faiths are understood and evaluated. Other religious paths are defective and one's own faith is the only valid path to liberation.... The Inclusivist approach affirms the salvific presence of God in other religions while still maintaining that one's own religious faith is the definitive and authoritative revelation of God. Inclusivism accepts the Divine presence in other faiths, but rejects them as not being sufficient for liberation apart from one's own faith. All truth in other religions belongs ultimately to one's own faith which is its fulfillment. Pluralism holds that other religions are equally salvific paths to the one God. The Ultimate reality on which the faith of all believers is focused in every religion is the same though interpretations of its essential nature may vary. For this school, truth-claims are complementary and are not conflicting. Pluralistic Inclusivism ... [seeks] fulfillment of the theological and spiritual contents of one's own faith in and through the contributions of other living faiths."¹⁸

In sum, Ramakrishna emphasized that: Brahman-God can be spiritually realized in this lifetime through any valid religion, there is a commonality of spiritual experiences found by adherents of all major religions, Brahman-God has supplied a variety of revelations to humanity because of the differences of cultures and individual temperaments, and the common goal of all religions is liberation-salvation; Thomas Aquinas that God's plan of variety in the universe is necessary for Divine plenitude; Abhedananda that all of the great religions of the world are

partial expressions of the nonsectarian universal religion that embraces the eternal spiritual laws; and Sorokin that the plenitude of the Supreme-Reality is understood in a limited way by any belief system, and consequently there is something to learn from other religions as supplementary to their own, revealing additional aspects.

Though Ramakrishna taught tolerance towards all faiths, he stressed a devotee should exemplify personal commitment to only one religion. In addition he stated, “All will surely realize God. All will be liberated. It may be that some get their meal in the morning, some at noon, and some in the evening, but none will go without food. All, without any exception, will certainly know their real Self.”¹⁹

There are two forms of pluralism, “inter” is between religions and “intra” within a religion that is composed of different denominations and sects. The latter is very necessary to maintain the unity of Hinduism.

For more on this subject see: SVRP, Ch. XV. Religious Pluralism in Indian and Western Thought.

References

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- ¹ CW, III:186.
- ² GSR, pp. 150b, 858l.
- ³ SSR, pp. 149-50.
- ⁴ SSR, p. 148.
- ⁵ SSR, pp. 124, 147-54; GSR, pp. 135, 111-12.
- ⁶ GSR, pp. 468a, 485f, 585a. An excellent source on this subject is Ayon Maharaj, “God Is Infinite, and the Paths to God Are Infinite,” Web: <https://philpapers.org/archive/AYOQII.pdf>
- ⁷ GSR, pp. 158h, 259k.
- ⁸ GSR, p. 111i.
- ⁹ GSR, p. 456d.
- ¹⁰ GSR, pp. 12-34; Saradananda, IV:3.2; 4.41, pp. 601, 646-47.
- ¹¹ Swami Ashokananda, *Swami Premananda* (San Francisco: Vedanta Society of Northern California, 1970), pp. 49-50.
- ¹² Paul Tillich, *Perspectives on 19th and 20th Century Protestant Theology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), p. 236; Ronald Modras, *Paul Tillich's Theology of the Church* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1976), pp. 153, 289.
- ¹³ Swami Abhedananda, *Abhedananda in India* (Calcutta: Ramakrishna Vedanta Math, 1968), p. 116.
- ¹⁴ Abhedananda (1968), pp. 21, 115-16, 183-84; Swami Abhedananda, *Philosophy and Religion* (Calcutta: Ramakrishna Vedanta Math, 1951), pp. 27-28, 37.
- ¹⁵ ST, I, 47.1. For another translation see, Web: www.newadvent.org/summa/1.htm

¹⁶ CG, II, 45.

¹⁷ Pitirim Sorokin, "The Western Religion and Morality of Today," in *Toward Global Sociology*, ed. G. Hallen and R. Prasad (Agra: Satish Book Enterprise, 1970), p. 179.

¹⁸ K. P. Aleaz, *Jesus in Neo-Vedanta* (Delhi: Kant Publications, 1995), pp. 18-19.

¹⁹ CW, p. 818.