HARMONY OF RELIGIONS*

Swami Tyagananda

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Swami Tyagananda, the author of this article, is a senior monk of the Ramakrishna Order and head of the Ramakrishna Vedanta Society in Boston, U.S.A. He is also Hindu chaplain at MIT and Harvard University. The Swami deals with the issue of religious harmony in the present article. The Swami tells us about the various approaches to religious harmony which have been tried by mankind so far, and explains why one particular approach, that of ‘Harmonious Approach’ is particularly relevant to our times. Though the world is constituted of an infinite variety of names and forms, they are all held together by the Spiritual Truth into a complete whole. As Swami Tyagananda says towards the conclusion of his article, “What we need today is a conscious effort to see the thread connecting all religions, forming a beautiful garland adorning the Supreme Being, who is neither a Christian, nor a Jew, nor a Muslim, nor a Buddhist, nor a Hindu, nor belonging to any religion whatsoever. All belong to Him, but He transcends all.”

A.A.
Harmony is a precondition for peace, and peace opens the door to joy. All of us know this from our own experience. In matters of health or study, work or worship, harmony is what we strive to achieve. When harmony is lost, the result is stress and anxiety, pain and sorrow.

Religions of the world have contributed to the loss of social harmony, often because there are simply so many of them and they seem at variance with one another. The distrust and conflict between religions is sad and strange. Considering the fact that all religions deal with the same basic human problems, we would expect the world’s religions to be in the forefront of promoting harmony -- not only among themselves but also at every level of society. Sometimes, religions do work together to promote harmony, but the harmony that is achieved is too fragile to withstand disruptive social forces.

The oldest religious sentiment ever expressed is perhaps the statement on religious harmony found in the ancient Vedas: *Ekam sat, vipra bahudha vadanti*, “Truth is one; sages call it by various names.”

The same sentiment has since then echoed and reechoed in the corridors of time, amplified by enlightened persons of different religions in different parts of the world. As the pagan Roman thinker Quintus Aurelius Symmachus said to St. Ambrose, the dogmatic bishop of Milan: “The heart of so great a mystery cannot ever be reached by following one road only.” Ibn ’Arabi, the great Sufi mystic of thirteenth-century Spain, wrote this in his book *Tarjuman al-Ashwaq* (“The Interpretation of Divine Love”):

My heart is capable of every form,
A cloister of the monk, a temple for idols,
A pasture for gazelles, the votary’s Kaba,
The tables of Torah, the Koran.
Love is the creed I hold: wherever turn
His camels, love is still my creed and faith.

Yet despite these broad, universal sentiments expressed by enlightened beings from different religious traditions, the simple but tragic truth is that humanity as a whole has not yet come to terms with religious plurality. Faith traditions other than one’s own are frequently seen as threats. Religious differences still rankle and continue to produce disharmony, misunderstanding, and mutual distrust.

Part of the problem is the very concept of religion.
What is religion? If we look at the many ways “religion” is defined, we find that the term covers so wide an area that virtually anything can be called a “religion.” There are also varying ideas of what it means to be religious. Since every religion has its own book or prophet as the supreme authority and is believed to be complete in itself, sometimes even communication between one religion and another becomes difficult or is considered unnecessary.

Given all these problems, there is this additional issue of religious plurality. Whichever way religion may be defined and whatever may be the nature of practicing it, we need to find some way to make sense of the different versions of religion that exist all over the world.

Through the centuries people have adopted different approaches to solve this problem. These approaches can be broadly classified into four categories: (1) exclusivistic approach, (2) inclusivistic approach, (3) syncretistic approach, and (4) pluralistic approach. Let us take a brief look at each of these approaches.

**Exclusivistic Approach**

The easiest way to dispose of all the questions concerning religious plurality is to deny it altogether. Only one religion is true. The other so-called religions are false or misguided, and do not really deserve to be called “religions.” Obviously, the underlying message is that “my religion” is the one “true religion.” An implied corollary to this is the idea that if the world were to be united by one religion, that religion could only be “my religion.”

The Archbishop of Canterbury refused to attend the World’s Parliament of Religions at Chicago in 1893 because, he said,

“The Christian religion is the one religion. I do not understand how that religion can be regarded as a member of a Parliament of Religions without assuming the equality of the other intended members and the parity of their positions and claims.”

Every religion has at least a few followers holding such exclusivistic views. Although we call such people “fundamentalists,” there is nothing really “fundamental” about the views they hold. We know from history -- ancient as well as recent -- that these exclusivistic views have produced hatred and violence, death and destruction.

There have been, of course, people in different traditions who have spoken out against exclusivism. In a council held in Buffalo, New York in
1805, Red Jacket, a Native American chief, is reported to have asked a missionary, “Brother, if there is but one way to worship and serve the Great Spirit, if there is but one religion, why do you white people differ so much about it?” The same question was asked by Swami Vivekananda in 1900 in a lecture he gave in Pasadena, California:

“If the claims of a religion that it has all the truth and God has given it all this truth in a certain book were true, why are there so many sects?”

Vivekananda went on to say that if God had put all the truth in certain books, He did not give us those books to quarrel over. But that is precisely what we have done for centuries. All this goes to show that any attempt to bring all humanity to one method of thinking in spiritual matters has been a failure and always will be a failure.

**Inclusivistic Approach**

The inclusivistic approach is based on the belief that one religion -- and, of course, it is always “my religion” -- is the fulfillment of what is best and true in others. Those who take the inclusivistic approach will admit that there must be some divine purpose for the existence of many religions. The other religions cannot be totally false or misguided; they do have some element of truth -- the fullness of which is, however, most clearly revealed in “my religion” alone.

People who follow this approach tend to believe that other religions are based on knowledge derived from human reason, not on divine revelation and are, therefore, inadequate and incomplete. A few among the less conservative Christian theologians have put forward a subtler form of this argument which accepts a kind of progressive or “hidden” revelation in all religions.

Some Muslim theologians argue that historically Islam is God’s most recent revelation, so Judaism and Christianity are not false religions but are “preparations” for the final revelation of the Prophet Muhammad. A similar idea was put forth by a bishop more than a hundred years ago before the Chicago Parliament of Religions began. He wrote: “Civilization, which is making the whole world one, is preparing the way for the reunion of all the world’s religions in their true center -- Jesus Christ.”

A few Hindu thinkers have begun to claim in recent years that their religion covers so vast a metaphysical spectrum that virtually every ideal found in other religions has already a counterpart in their own religion. This is another example of how inclusivism functions.
The inclusivistic approach is found offensive -- or at least irritating -- by most people, because it tends to undermine the special identity and uniqueness of every religion other than one’s own. To give a secular example of the inclusivistic approach, let me draw your attention to an article which appeared in the January edition of *Smithsonian*, where it was suggested that Rhode Island -- being too small to merit existing as a state by itself -- should be made a part of Connecticut. The Rhode Islanders were furious and responded with a flurry of letters to the editor protesting the trivializing of their state. One reader suggested that instead of Rhode Island being made a part of Connecticut, Connecticut was welcome to become a part of Rhode Island. This is the kind of response inclusivism provokes even in the lofty field of religion. We’re tempted to say, “Why should my religion be ‘included’ as a part of some other religion? My own religion is broad enough to include or swallow all other religions!” Such rhetoric is clearly not a pointer to peace, individual or collective.

**Syncretistic Approach**

Some people feel that every existing religion in its present form has certain limitations. Those who follow the syncretistic approach recognize the diversities in religion but hold that these are not antagonistic to one another. They believe that a new religion will eventually emerge, or can be created, by combining the strong points of every religion and omitting their weak points.

This approach was followed by Akbar, India’s sixteenth-century Mughal emperor. Akbar’s syncretism produced Din-ilahi, a religion which was a pantheistic monotheism -- a hotchpotch of elements borrowed from Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Jainism, and Zoroastrianism. As a religion it failed, but it had a few short-term beneficent political results. It produced unity of sorts in Akbar’s kingdom and improved law and order for some time. This new religion’s failure as a common religion meant for all is understandable because, as we have seen before, it is impossible to tie down humanity to just one way of approaching God.

Many today are trying to repeat this four-century-old experiment at the individual level. They create their own sort of “cafeteria” religion -- picking up something from Buddhism here, a little Hinduism there, a little from the Native American tradition, and then topping it off with Christianity and Santa Claus. For many, creating a religion in the way that you would pick up spare parts at an automobile junkyard is appealing because you can discard what’s uncomfortable and keep what’s convenient and pleasant. This might provide a feel-good sensation
for some time, but that’s about all it can do. When we are faced with crises that touch the deeper core of our personality, this kind of self-created superficial “religion” can’t provide the strength and substance that we both need and want.

This does not mean, of course, that we should never combine in our own religious practice elements from other religious traditions. We can do so and it can actually serve to strengthen our core religious beliefs. But, when we do so, it must be done intelligently, so that our spiritual practices form an integrated whole supported by a metaphysically sound way of life. The key words here are integration and harmony. If our religious life is guided by these principles, we are taking the “harmonious approach,” which we shall discuss shortly.

Pluralistic Approach

The pluralistic approach not only acknowledges religious diversity but also accepts that each religion is completely valid according to its own terms and concerns. This is, I believe, the only approach acceptable to thoughtful, reasonable men and women in today’s world. But this approach also poses serious challenges at both the individual and the collective levels. In countries where secular constitutions have been adopted, religious pluralism has become one of their most serious socio-political problems. The separation of church and state has its benefits, of course, but it has also raised questions regarding, for instance, how much or how little the government can do in enforcing laws that go counter to the tenets of a religion. Or take the hotly debated questions regarding prayer in schools, abortion, or even the theory of evolution versus creationism.

Owing to the comprehensiveness of the pluralistic approach, it allows several “sub-approaches” within its fold. Let’s take a quick look at some of these.

Noncommittal approach. This is the approach followed by many people today. They say that since we have to live together anyway, let us develop mutual respect and a spirit of toleration for the sake of collective peace and welfare. Let religion remain every individual’s personal affair. There is no need to make a parade of it in society where it is almost certain to clash with other religions. Let us be religious inside the home and be secular outside of it. In pluralistic countries such as the United States and India, this is the approach followed by the government and it has been incorporated in the constitutions of these countries.
Dialogic Approach. This is another way of responding positively to religious diversity. There are many people who hold that it is better not to have predetermined answers concerning the truth or superiority of any religion or the relationship between various religions. What is essential is to have real dialogue with those of other faiths in a spirit of mutual respect, fellowship, and creative openness. We must learn how to genuinely listen to others’ viewpoints with unprejudiced minds. This dialogic interaction may eventually produce greater understanding of one another. Those who take the dialogic approach believe that the final picture regarding the relationship between religions may turn out to be quite different from what any of the participants in the dialogue have envisioned.

Many traditions today actively promote religious dialogue, as is evident from a large number of interfaith groups in pluralistic countries, such as the United States, Canada, England and India.

Harmonious Approach. This approach has the unique advantage of fulfilling the aspirations of all concerned without destroying anyone’s innate faith. The harmonious approach respects religious diversity. It appreciates the special identity of every religion and finds a way through which all religions can join hands to celebrate the diversity while, simultaneously, recognizing the unity that brings them together. The harmonious approach thus has the potential to produce not only collective peace but also individual growth and maturity.

The harmonious approach is based on the following three principles:

(1) All religions have the same ultimate purpose, namely, transcendence; everything else is secondary. Stripped of all theological trappings, every religion aims to transcend human limitations to contact the reality beyond.

(2) There is only one transcendent, ultimate reality which is known by various names, which may be perceived as having various attributes, and which manifests in various forms or as formless.

(3) The ultimate Reality can be attained through various ways developed by the world religions. Every religion has the inherent power to take its followers to the supreme consummation of human life.

In practical terms, these three principles mean that the world’s religions are not contradictory or antagonistic to one another but complementary. No one need change one’s religion for another or persuade others to
change their religion for one’s own. Every religion is equally true and authentic.

Saying that all religions are equally true and authentic does not, of course, mean that “all religions are the same” or that “differences are merely superficial.” Every religion has a bent, a characteristic feature, a unique trait. For instance, the dominant characteristic of Islam is its spirit of equality and brotherhood; of Judaism -- its emphasis on tradition and the importance of family; of Christianity -- the love and sacrifice exemplified by Christ; of Buddhism -- its stress on renunciation, compassion, and rationality; of Hinduism -- its principle of the basic unity of the universe in consciousness, its insistence on the need for direct mystical experience, and its spirit of acceptance of views different from its own.

At the same time, saying that every religion has its own uniqueness does not mean that religions have nothing to share with one another. There are a great many things to share and learn, and if we really put our minds to this, we shall find that the religions of the world have a lot more in common than we suspect.

In spite of the diversity and the differences, no one can deny that religions do share certain common characteristics such as concern for the existential problems of humanity, transcendence, ultimacy, holiness, fellowship, and the symbolic expression of inner experience. The harmonious approach consists in recognizing this common ground and enriching our own spiritual life by absorbing the best elements of other religions while remaining steadfast in our own.

Ramakrishna, a nineteenth-century Indian saint, is perhaps the best-known symbol of the harmonious approach. Both through his life and teachings he showed that it is possible to remain faithful to one’s own faith while opening one’s heart to the inspiration that comes from other faiths. It is possible to be aware of the harmony underlying all religions but maintain a special relationship with one’s own.

The harmonious approach teaches us that “my religion” doesn’t become greater if it is accompanied by hatred for all others. When true love awakens in the heart, it doesn’t leave any room for hatred. The two can never stay together. It is possible for us all to live together in the global family of religions with mutual sharing, love and cooperation.

At some point we may all come to realize that the different religious traditions -- or “labels” such as Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism and Hinduism -- are really walls dividing the total religious consciousness
of humanity. These walls are necessary, for they do have their utility. Ramakrishna explains this with the example of a hedge to protect a tender, growing plant from stray cattle. Once the plant grows up into a sturdy tree, the hedge is no longer necessary. In fact, it could even be a hindrance. Similarly, religious traditions protect a person from negative influences. Soon, however, the person must evolve and outgrow the necessity of this confinement. Beyond the walls separating one religion from another lies the realm of religion without frontiers, the limitless expanse of the Religion beyond all religions –- the religion with a capital “R”.

From Harmony to Universality

It is possible to view every religion of the world as an expression of the transcendent aspect of religion. The truth every religion represents is an expression of the absolute Truth. It is the transcendent aspect of religion that can be called the religion with a capital “R” or the Religion beyond all religions. It not only transcends every religion but also pervades every one of them. It is the totality of religions.

Vivekananda described this transcendent aspect of religion in the following words:

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, my national religion or your national religion; there never existed many religions, there is only the one. One infinite religion existed all through eternity and will ever exist, and this religion is expressing itself in various countries in various ways.

All religions are expressions of the Religion beyond religions. Every religion is true and authentic, and they all have a thread of harmony connecting them. This thread can be discovered and the underlying harmony can be experienced by truly religious people.

The phrase “truly religious” is, of course, open to interpretation. Vedanta would say that “religious” isn’t a valid term for those who merely believe in some dogma or accept some Savior. True religion (to quote Vivekananda again)

is not talk, or doctrines; nor is it sectarianism... It is the relation between soul and God... Religion does not consist in erecting temples, or building churches, or attending public worship. It is not to be found in books, or in words, or in lectures, or in organizations. Religion consists in realization... [We] must realize God, feel God, see God, talk to God. That is religion.
Doctrines, dogmas, rituals, books, temples, churches are important and have their utility, but they are only “secondary details” of religion. The primary aspects of religion are the supersensuous experience of God, and our efforts to get this experience and to live by the implication of our relationship with God. Thus religion is not a bunch of dogmas or beliefs to be accepted on faith, but an active search for one’s own spiritual roots which culminates in the direct experience of God.

What we need today is a conscious effort to see the thread connecting all religions, forming a beautiful garland adorning the Supreme Being, who is neither a Christian, nor a Jew, nor a Muslim, nor a Buddhist, nor a Hindu, nor belonging to any religion whatsoever. All belong to Him, but He transcends all.

When the spirit of religious harmony animates our soul and the awareness of the Religion beyond religions pervades our consciousness, life will hold a new, richer meaning for us. Then the following words of Swami Vivekananda will find a ready resonance in our hearts:

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.... Is God’s book finished? Or is it still a continuous revelation going on? It is a marvelous book -- these spiritual revelations of the world. The *Bible*, the *Vedas*, the *Koran*, and all other sacred books are but so many pages and an infinite number of pages remain yet to be unfolded. I would leave it open for all of them. We stand in the present, but open ourselves to the infinite future. We take in all that has been in the past, enjoy the light of the present, and open every window of the heart for all that will come in the future. Salutations to all the prophets of the past, to all the great ones of the present, and to all that are to come in the future!

GRATITUDE*

The date was July 16, 2008. It was late in the afternoon and I was sitting in my hotel room in Louisville, Kentucky. I was scheduled to speak that evening for the Kentucky Association of School Administrators (KASA). I was a little “down in the dumps.” I hadn’t gotten to exercise lately because of my travelling schedule and recently I’d experienced some mild bouts of vertigo (that inner ear condition that can cause the room to start spinning). You got it…speaking and “spinning” are not good partners!

My keynote presentation was scheduled for 7:00 PM, but I had been invited to show up at 6:00 to see a performance they said I’d enjoy. Little did I know that I was about to see something I would never forget.

They introduced the young musician. Welcome…Mr. Patrick Henry Hughes. He was rolled onto the stage in his wheelchair, and began to play the piano. His fingers danced across the keys as he made beautiful music.

Learning to Dance in the Rain

He then began to sing as he played, and it was even more beautiful. For some reason, however, I knew that I was seeing something special. There was this aura about him that I really can’t explain and the smile…his smile was magic!

About ten minutes into Patrick’s performance, someone came on the stage and said...“I’d like to share a 7-minute video titled, The Patrick Henry Hughes story.” And the lights went dim.

Patrick Henry Hughes was born with no eyes, and a tightening of the joints which left him crippled for life. However, as a child, he was fitted with artificial eyes and placed in a wheelchair. Before his first birthday, he discovered the piano. His mom said, “I could hit any note on the piano, and within one or two tries, he’d get it.” By his second birthday, he was playing requests (You Are My Sunshine, Twinkle Twinkle Little Star). His father was ecstatic. “We might not play baseball, but we can play music together.”

Today, Patrick is a junior at the University of Louisville. His father attends classes with him and he’s made nearly all A’s, with the exception of 3 B’s. He’s also a part of the 214 member marching band. You read it right…the marching band! He’s a blind, wheelchair-bound trumpet player; and he and his father do it together. They attend all the band practices and the half-time performance in front of thousands. His father rolls and rotates his son around the field to the cheers of Patrick’s fans. In order to attend Patrick’s classes and every band practice, his father works the graveyard shift at UPS. Patrick said...“My dad’s my hero.”

But even more than his unbelievable musical talent, it was Patrick’s “attitude of gratitude” that touched my soul. On stage, between songs, he would talk to the audience about his life and about how blessed he was. He said, “God made me blind and unable to walk. BIG DEAL! He gave me the ability…the musical gifts I have…the great opportunity to meet new people.”
When his performance was over, Patrick and his father were on the stage together. The crowd rose to their feet and cheered for over five minutes. It gave me giant goose bumps!

My life was ready to meet Patrick Henry Hughes. I needed a hero, and I found one for the ages. If I live to be a hundred, I’ll never forget that night, that smile, that music, but most importantly, that wonderful “attitude of gratitude.”

I returned to Chicago and shared Patrick’s story with my wife, my friends, and our team at Simple Truths. About two weeks later, I received a letter from a friend. He said, “Mac, I don’t know who said it, but I think you’ll love this quote.”

“Life is not about waiting for the storms to pass... it’s about learning how to dance in the rain!”

I thought...that’s it! We all face adversity in our life. However, it’s not the adversity, but how we react to it that will determine the joy and happiness in our life. During tough times, do we spend too much time feeling sorry for ourselves, or, can we, with gratitude...learn how to dance in the rain?

It almost sounds too simple to feel important, but one word...gratitude, can change your attitude, thus, your life, forever. Sarah Breathnack said it best...

“When we choose not to focus on what is missing from our lives but are grateful for the abundance that’s present....we experience heaven on earth.”

* Received by e-mail from Kaushik Das, Atma Nirbhar - Ek Challenge [atmanirbhar@sify.com] on Wednesday, March 11, 2009.*