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#### XIV. Religious Pluralism in Indian and Western Thought

Indian: "To what is One [the Supreme Being], sages give many a title: they call it Agni, Yama, Matarisvan" (RV 1:164.46). "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: "Not every one who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven" (Mt. 7:21; 12:50; Mk. 3:35; Lk. 8:21). "In my Father's house are many rooms" (Jn. 14:2). "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). "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).

The word "religious pluralism" has in many cases replaced the original phrase of "religious toleration." Along this line in January 1900, Vivekananda stated at the Universalist Church in Pasadena, California, "Our watchword, then, will be acceptance, and not exclusion. 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?”<sup>1</sup> What follows are 14 topics discussed in regards to the need for universalistic religious pluralism. Egalitarian models of pluralism emphasize.

## 1. Brahman-God’s Plan of Divine Plenitude

1) At the highest level of existence there is only one eternal universal transcendental religion with many partial manifestations: Swami Vivekananda ascertained, “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, my national religion or your national religion; there never existed many religions, there is only the one. One Infinite religion existed through all eternity and will ever exist, and this religion is expressing itself in various countries in various ways. Therefore we must respect all religions and we must try to accept them all as far as we can.”<sup>2</sup> “So it is with this universal religion, which runs through all the various religions of the world in the form of God; it must and does exist through eternity.” “Each religion, as it were, takes up one part of the great universal truth, and spends its whole force in embodying and typifying that part of the great truth. It is, therefore, addition, not exclusion.”<sup>3</sup>

It was affirmed by 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.”<sup>4</sup> All of the great religions of the world are only 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 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.”<sup>5</sup>

In the ontological creative process of the universe the One becomes many by a process of division, the homogeneous Unity becomes heterogeneous. Consequently, the One religion subdivides into many religions at the Divine Loka-Heavenly level, which among other things consist of the Eternal Truths. As Jesus said, “In my Father’s house are many rooms” (Jn. 14:2). Ontologically means this process is occurring at this very moment (and every other moment in time), and chronologically implies this event occurred sometime in the past. The highest aspects of earthly religions are only approximations of the Loka-Heavenly religion. On earth we find the universal moral principles common to all of the major religions. For example, the moral precept that one should not steal is found in all religions and therefore part of the universal religion. We can also think of the One religion as the Essence of Brahman-God, which externalizes into the various Manifestations of Brahman-God, thereby subdividing into many faiths at the Divine level.

2) Brahman-God’s plan of variety in the universe is necessary for Divine plenitude, the fullness of Lord’s expressions: Vivekananda discerned, “My idea, therefore, is that all these religions are different forces in the economy of God, working for the good of mankind; and that not one can become dead, not one can be killed. Just as you cannot kill any force in nature, so you cannot kill any one of these spiritual forces. You have seen that each religion is living. From time to time it may retrograde or go forward. At one time, it may be shorn of a good many of its trappings; at another time it may be covered with all sorts of trappings; but all the same, the soul is ever there, it can never be lost. The ideal which every religion represents is never lost, and so every religion is intelligently on the march. And that universal religion about which philosophers and others have dreamed in every country already exists. It is here. As the universal brotherhood of man is already existing, so also is universal religion. Which of you, that have traveled far and wide, have not found brothers and sisters in every nation? I have found them all over the world.”<sup>6</sup>

In the following quotation the word “[religion]” or “[religions]” can be substituted for the preceding word, to illustrate how Thomas Aquinas (1225-74) the Italian Catholic and Doctor of the Church exposition on divine plenitude 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].”<sup>7</sup> “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].”<sup>8</sup>

Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) the German founder of modern Protestant theology reasoned that, “The whole circumference of religion is infinite, and is not to be comprehended under one form, but only under the sum total of all forms.... He must be conscious that his religion is only part of the whole; that about the same circumferences there may be views and sentiments quite different from his, yet just as pious; and that there may be perceptions and feelings belonging to other modifications of religion, for which the sense may entirely fail him.”<sup>9</sup> “Abandon the vain and foolish wish that there should be only one religion ... You are wrong therefore, with your universal religion that is to be natural to all; for no one will have his own true and right religion if it is the same for all.” “He [Jesus] never maintained He was the only mediator, the only one in whom His idea actualized itself.” “As nothing is more irreligious than to demand general uniformity in mankind, so nothing is more unchristian than to seek uniformity in religion.... Varied types of religion are possible, both in proximity and in combination, and it is necessary that every type be actualized at one time or another.” The totality of religion requires that all of the various views and relations to God be developed. It is best for every valid form of religion to be actualized.<sup>10</sup> Religious differences preserve the variety and individuality of each culture.

The philosophy behind religious pluralism is beautifully expressed by

the Russian 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 mysteries *tremendous et fascines* ‘into which fade all things and differentiations’ (to use St. Thomas Aquinas’ expression). Viewed so, the religious differences cannot 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.”<sup>11</sup>

It is possible that as a broad generalization that Hinduism and Buddhism have traditionally placed more emphasizes on being liberated from or transcending the world, Judaism and Christianity (at least under the influence of Greek thought) on changing or mastering the world, and Confucianism on harmonizing with or adapting to the world.

Liberation-salvation history (Heilsgeschichte) is not static, but is subject to change. In the course of liberation-salvation history, God discloses Himself/Herself more in one religion than in another depending on the Divine plan. The Lord works through the religion that is best suited for Its specific purpose at that particular time in history. For example, of the many religions in the world, the Lord selected the *Old Testament* Hebrew religion for the birth and mission of Jesus Christ. Through the grace of God, great souls take human birth as members of a religion in order to revitalize it and give it new life and strength.

3) God has supplied a variety of revelations to humanity because of the differences of cultures, belief systems, and individual temperaments: According to the two following newspaper accounts Swami Vivekananda stated, “The same truth has manifested itself in different forms, and the forms are according to the different circumstances of the physical or

mental nature of the different nations.” “I make the distinction between religion and creed. Religion is the acceptance of all existing creeds, seeing in them the same striving towards the same destination. Creed is something antagonistic and combative. There are different creeds, because there are different people, and the creed is adapted to the commonwealth where it furnishes what people want. As the world is made up of infinite variety of persons of different natures, intellectually, spiritually, and materially, so these people take to themselves that form of belief in the existence of a great and good moral law, which is best fitted for them. Religion recognizes and is glad of the existence of all these forms because of the beautiful underlying principle.”<sup>12</sup> “Do not think that people do not like religion. I do not believe that. The preachers cannot give them what they need. The same man that may have been branded as an atheist, as a materialist, or what not, may meet a man who gives him the truth needed by him, and he may turn out the most spiritual man in the community.”<sup>13</sup>

Swami Prabhavananda (1893-1976) taught that if a spiritual devotee practices any religion with sincerity and regularity, the Lord will lead that individual along the correct path. Avatars and prophets come in every age, but their message changes according to the signs of the times. Brahman-God reveals Himself to the sages of the various religions, but His disclosure is limited and partial. Revelation is relative to the historical time and location, varying with each nationality, culture, individual temperament, and level of consciousness. One religious teaching may supplement and not contradict another, since the total truth is not explained by a single theory, but is a synthesis of many theories. Spirituality is the unfolding of the Divinity already within the soul, regardless of the individual’s religious preference.<sup>14</sup>

A Jewish Neo-Platonic thinker from Yemen, Nethanel al-Fayyumi (d. c. 1165) taught that God sends prophets to every nation, to people who are capable of receiving the revelation. Each nation receives from its prophets the appropriate revelation in the language that it speaks, which specifies the means for attaining the supreme goal. Revelations differ as a consequence of the particular characteristics of each nation. God is the good doctor, who varies His prescriptions according to the nature of His patients.<sup>15</sup> Following this idea, each major religion is a revelation of God meant primarily for a portion of humanity. The ethnocentric and religiocentric idea that God is only concerned with one favored religion and culture, and ignores the others is incorrect.

Religious bigotry is a form of ethnocentrism where the individual views the world from the perspective of his or her own group that is considered to be inherently superior. There in-group is the prototype and other religions are judged with reference to this ideal. There is a danger of an inability to adequately understand religions that are different from one's own.<sup>16</sup> Ethnocentrism means a personal identification with and special concern for one's own country and its cultural components including religion. One feels a moral duty to support the countries religion and to ally with others who share the same sentiment.

The German Cardinal Nicholas of Cusa (1400-64) explained that, God is responsible for the differing forms of sacred worship. Religious diversity exists because the Lord dispatched different prophets and lawgivers to the various countries, each revealing the Divine law. All religions are grounded in a common faith and a core of beliefs, creating a unique harmony and unity of religions. All pious worship is directed to the one God. By obeying their own religion, they are obedient to God. "The worship of many gods admits Divinity. When they teach a plurality of gods, they teach one antecedent principle of them all; as those who say there are many saints must say there is one Saint of saints, in whose participation all the others are saints."<sup>17</sup>

Also important is that cultures change overtime. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century Paul Tillich (1886-1965) the German-American Lutheran theologian maintained that God's self-disclosure is related to the receptive capacities of humans. "There is continuous revelation in the history of the church, but it is dependent revelation. The original miracle, together with its original reception, is the permanent point of reference, while the Spiritual reception by following generations changes continuously.... new generations with new potentialities of reception enter the correlation and transform it. No ecclesiastical traditionalism and no orthodox Biblicism can escape this situation of 'dependent revelation.'" Theological beliefs and practices are to some extent historically conditioned and cannot be separated from this process. Some religious knowledge is never final and is open to revision being subject to new interpretations that reflect the movement of history. For example, some ancient Christian symbols (and those of other religions also) have lost much of their power and meaning, and require new modes of interpretation. There is a need for a new terminology, to make the ancient Biblical words and symbols intelligible to the contemporary situation.<sup>18</sup> There has been a tendency when writing

about other religions to think of them as being “frozen in time,” not realizing they have undergone changes over the centuries.

By “revelation” Tillich means the religious scriptures or portions of them, such as the teachings of Moses in the *Old Testament* and Jesus in the *New Testament*. Revelation unlike reason comes from a higher plane of existence. It may be transmitted by sight as Shankara was denoted as the Seer philosopher, hearing as the Sanskrit word Shrutis is revelation that is heard or Jesus speaking to the Father in Heaven or Sri Ramakrishna speaking to Mother Kali, or is communicated by thought. Since it is “Dependent” revelation must be interpreted. For example, Shankara, Ramanuja, and Madhva interpretation of the Upanishadic revelation of the Vedic Rishis in some ways differ. The original revelation and the later interpretation combine to produce the meaning. Possibly in some higher state the revelation and interpretation are one, but this is certainly above discursive thought. Also Tillich implies that the revelation is to some extent interpreted differently over time. For example, because of the increase in scientific and historical knowledge our understanding of scripture varies to some extent from people who lived two thousand years ago. The principles should remain constant, but the details are subject to alteration.

John Hick (1922-2012) an English Presbyterian Minister who taught at Claremont Graduate School in California proposed a “Copernican revolution in theology.” “[It] involves an equally radical transformation in our conception of the universe of faiths and the place of our religions within it ... [It demands] a paradigm shift from a Christianity-centered or Jesus-centered to a God-centered model of the universe of faiths. One then sees the great world religions as different human responses to the one divine Reality, embodying different perceptions which have been formed in different historical and cultural circumstances.”<sup>19</sup> Each religion is a reflection of the Divine, though some are more capable of mediating God to humanity than others. One heavenly Reality pervades all religions, which share the common goal of salvation. In Its infinite depths, the Godhead is beyond human experience. Each religion experiences different aspects of the one supersensuous Noumenon. If properly understood, the apparent contradictions between the theologies of the differences religions, is more often complementary than contradictory.<sup>20</sup>

Each great soul who established a new world religion like Buddhism, Christianity, or Islam created to some extent a new path to Brahman-God. The Lord’s love extends to people of all faiths, and through His knowledge



He has created a variety of paths depending on the general nature, beliefs, and temperament of the members of a particular religious group. At the transcendental level religion (such as Vedanta) is vast. From the nearly unlimited storehouse of ideas and practices, each religious group and prophet (e.g. Shankara, Ramanuja, Madhva, Sri Chaitanya) selects out a limited portion of these principles. The selection process is largely determined by the cultural milieu, the prevailing ideas of the time. It is dogmatic to absolutize only one approach and perspective, and to think all others are false, which is a form of ideological bigotry. In 1897 when the Ramakrishna Order was being formed, Swami Vivekananda told his fellow disciples that in relation to what religious practices should be followed, Sri Ramakrishna was broader than they thought he was.

## 2. The Common Core of Religious Beliefs

4) Religions have a common core of beliefs and agree on the essential matters: Vivekananda emphasized, “I studied the Christian religion, the Mohammedan, the Buddhistic, and others, and what was my surprise to find that the same foundation principles taught by my religion were also taught by all religions.” “The Hindus have received their religion through revelation, the Vedas. They hold that the Vedas are without beginning and without end. It may sound ludicrous to this audience, how a book can be without beginning or end. But by the Vedas no books are meant. They mean the accumulated treasury of spiritual laws discovered by different persons in different times.”<sup>21</sup> These spiritual laws form the bases of a possible universal consensus of beliefs held by all of the major religion of the world. Hence when Vivekananda lectured on the truth of the *Vedas* (Eternal Truths), he is at the same time to some extent covering the truths of Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism. If one religion agrees with another this is added confirmation to their mutual teachings.

Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1888-1975), emphasized that “The world would be a much poorer thing if one creed absorbed the rest. God wills a rich harmony and not a colorless uniformity.” The God of love is not partial to only a fraction of humanity, but embraces all the major faiths of the world. Diversities of religions occur not in their inner core, but at the external level in the form of varying dogmas and ceremonies. Using different symbols and words, the same truths are presented by the various faiths. Not dogmas, but God realization and mystical union with

the Supreme, are the essence of every religion. Mystically oriented traditions are more tolerant than those that are centered on intellectual beliefs. There is universality in the mystical experience that transcends theological differences.<sup>22</sup>

The German Pastor Friedrich Heiler (1892-1967) stressed, “There is no religious concept, no dogmatic teaching, no ethical demand, no churchly institution, no cultic form and practice of piety in Christianity which does not have diverse parallels in the non-Christian religions.”<sup>23</sup>

There is one physics, biology, chemistry, and astronomy, but many religions. Yet, the world’s leading faiths agree on far more things than most people realize particularly concerning the innermost core of a religion. If similar ideas were discovered by people of different religions in different parts of the world this offers further verification for their correctness. If on the other hand religions continually disagree with one another, this will cause more people to become atheists and agnostics. The sum total of these common ideas we can refer to as meta-religion. Differences sometimes occur in culturally conditioned, concepts, theories, lifestyles, and religious practices. Also, considerable differences of opinion can be found among members of the same tradition.

Moses Maimonides (1135-1204) specified thirteen fundamental principles of the Hebrew religion. They are: 1) Belief in the existence of God; 2) God’s unity and oneness; 3) God’s incorporeality; 4) The eternity of God; 5) Worship only God; 6) Divine prophecy; 7) Moses the greatest prophet; 8) The *Torah* given to Moses is of Divine origin; 9) The *Torah* is unchangeable; 10) God knows the thoughts and deeds of all people; 11) God rewards and punishes; 12) The Messiah; and the 13) Resurrection and the Immortality of the Soul. These subjects that are discussed throughout this book, are to a large extent accepted by the Hindu religion.

5) Revealed supernatural truths are found in all of the major religions of the world: Paul E. Murphy a Catholic theologian made the very important point that, “Christian theology tells us that certain doctrines belong, without doubt, to the supernatural order, since the limited powers of man’s finite faculties could not have conceived them. The fact that God is one and three (Trinity), that He can identify and unite with human nature (Incarnation), and that he gratuitously communicates Himself with the creatures (Grace) and makes Himself eternal present (Beatific Vision) are all examples of doctrines known to the Church through supernatural revelation.” These and other Church doctrines are found in other religions

of the world, which “proves supernatural revelation outside the Judeo-Christian tradition.”

Jose Pereira added, “Non-Christian faiths are impregnated with truths which Christians hold to be supernatural ... [this] leaves us with no alternative but to posit a universal revelation.”

6) Religious beliefs and morality are grounded in the universal autonomy of reason: Vivekananda wrote, “The salvation of Europe depends on a rationalistic religion, and Advaita--the non-duality, the Oneness, the idea of the Impersonal God--is the only religion that can have any hold on any intellectual people. It comes whenever religion seems to disappear and irreligion seems to prevail, and that is why it has taken ground in Europe and America.”<sup>24</sup>

For Thomas Aquinas, “There is a twofold mode of truth in what we profess about God. Some truths about God exceed all the ability of human reason. Such is the truth that God is triune. But there are some truths which the natural reason also is able to reach. Such are the truth that God exists, that he is one, and the like. In fact, such truths about God have been proved demonstratively by the philosophers, guided by the light of natural reason.”<sup>25</sup>

The German philosopher and father of Reformed Judaism Moses Mendelssohn (1729-86) taught, “All the inhabitants of the earth are invited to partake of blessedness, and the means thereto are as extensive as the human race itself.” As a representative of the historical period known as the Enlightenment, he advocated universal religious beliefs and a system of morality grounded in the autonomy of reason. The Eternal Truths of the religion of reason apply to all humanity transcending the parameters of any particular faith. Mendelssohn’s views are expressed by a commentator, “Of necessity, eternal truths, which by definition are basic for the happiness and blessedness of man, should be equally available to all men. If revelation were truly necessary for making them known, it would contradict the goodness of God, for he would then be revealing them to only a portion of mankind and the rest of the human race would be left without such revelation.... His idea of the religion of reason provided the theoretical justification of a new attitude, which seemed to him about to recast the spiritual life of Europe.... every attempt to unify the religions of the world ultimately tends to the destruction of freedom of thought. Freedom of thought is impossible without equal respect being granted to different religious ideas and opinions, respect which allots to

each man the right to call on God according to his lights and in the manner of his ancestors.”<sup>26</sup> Mendelssohn pointed out that European scholars did not understand the religion of India, because they misinterpreted the meaning of their religious symbols.

Human reason and a common human nature are universal factors that bring about some commonality in religious beliefs, practices, and morality. Natural religion is universal and common to all religions. Without these universal characteristic religions would differ far more than they presently do. Natural theology (or natural reason) is a method of inquiry into religious matters without referring or appealing to any sacred religious texts or supernatural revelation. Solutions to the problems of religious beliefs, practices, and morality are arrived at through the use of reason, empirical data, scientific findings, and historical research. These truths of natural reason fall within the capacity of the human intellect to discover, verify, and organize new religious ideas. According to Thomas Aquinas certain general ideas like the existence of God and some of the Divine attributes can be known through human reason, but more specific doctrines like the Trinity and Incarnation are known to humans only because God has revealed them to us.<sup>27</sup>

In a sense each religion is to some degree a different paradigm. Due to the limitations of human knowledge, some paradoxes arise in each paradigm. Normal religion works within an accepted paradigm and revolutionary religion between the old and the new paradigm. Some hard-core ideas cannot be abandoned, while others are subject to revision.

### 3. Religious Experience

7) Brahman-God can be spiritually realized in this lifetime through any valid religion: There is a commonality of spiritual experiences found in all of the major religions that transcend theological differences. S. Radhakrishnan indicated, “The mystics of the world, whether Hindu, Christian or Muslim, belong to the same brotherhood and have striking family likeness. Evelyn Underhill (1875-1941) writes, ‘Though mystical theologies of the East and West differ widely ... Yet in the experience of the saints this conflict is seen to be transcended. When the love of God is reached, divergences become impossible, for the soul has passed beyond the sphere of the manifold and is immersed in the one reality.’”<sup>28</sup>

Ibn al-'Arabi (1165-1240) the Islamic sage born in Muslim Spain realized, “God will manifest Himself to His devotee in the form of His belief. But

you do not confine Him to any particular form; He is above limitations; so you must become a believer in all forms of beliefs. 'Wherever thou turnest thy face, there is the face of the Lord.' The face refers to the Dhat or Essence of God, which is His reality and which is everywhere and in everything." "Beyond doubt, the worshipper of this particular God shows ignorance when he criticizes others on account of their beliefs. If he understood the saying of Junayd, 'The colour of the water is the colour of the vessel containing it', he would not interfere with the beliefs of others, but would perceive God in every form and in every belief. He has opinion, not knowledge, therefore God said: 'I am in My servant's opinion of Me', i.e., I do not manifest Myself to him save in the form of his belief. God is absolute or restricted as He pleases, and the God of religious belief is subject to limitations; for He is the God who is contained in the heart of His servant. But the absolute God is not contained by anything; for He is the being of all things and the being of Himself."<sup>29</sup> "The perfect gnostic recognizes Him in every form in which He discloses Himself and in every form in which He descends. Other than the gnostic recognizes Him only in the form of his own belief and denies Him when He discloses Himself to him in another form. He never ceases tying himself to his own belief and denying the belief of others."<sup>30</sup> "He who does not restrict Him thus does not deny Him, but affirms His Reality in every formal transformation, worshiping Him in His infinite forms, since there is no limit to the forms in which He manifests Himself."

Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531) the Swiss Protestant intuited, "God can give truth, through the Spirit, in non-Christians also." "According to the teaching of Paul, the invisible Church is that which came down from heaven, that is to say, the Church which knows and embraces God by the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit. To this Church belong all who believe the whole world over. It is not called invisible because believers are invisible, but because it is concealed from the eyes of men who they are: for believers are known only to God and to themselves."<sup>31</sup> Truth comes to the individual through the Holy Spirit, and this Spirit is present even where the word of the *Bible* is not present. God works in His ordinary ways through the Word of the *Bible*, and in an extraordinary manner with the faithful of other religions.<sup>32</sup> The Spiritual Anabaptist's movement that began in Germany in the 16th century taught the doctrine of the "invisible church," which includes pious Muslims and pagans who obey the "inner Word" of the Spirit.<sup>33</sup>

8) Realizing Brahman-God and our innate Divinity is the primary goal of religion. Intellectual profundity, believing in particular dogmas, and following specific forms of ritual are secondary: In his writings Shankara (c. 688/788-720/820) the Advaita Vedantist seer-philosopher urged that a devotee should not quarrel over theological differences, since self-realization is a result of spiritual practice and experience, and not of utilizing subtle arguments to expound and defend the dogmas of a specific religious view. “Erudition, well-articulated speech, and wealth of words, and skill in expounding the scriptures—these things give pleasure to the learned, but they do not bring liberation.... A network of words is like a dense forest, which causes the mind to wander hither and thither. Therefore, those who know this truth should struggle hard to experience Brahman [God].” The Atman “can be reached by meditation, contemplation and other spiritual disciplines such as a knower of Brahman may prescribe—but never by subtle arguments.”<sup>34</sup>

As Vivekananda emphasized, “Religion is not in doctrines, in dogmas, nor in intellectual argumentation; it is being and becoming, it is realisation. We hear so many talking about God and the soul, and all the mysteries of the universe, but if you take them one by one, and ask them, ‘Have you realised God? Have you seen your Soul?’ How many can say they have? And yet they are all fighting with one another!”<sup>35</sup>

To quote S. Radhakrishnan, “The characteristics of intuitive realization, non-dogmatic toleration, as well as insistence on the non-aggressive virtues and universalistic ethics, mark Jesus out as a typical eastern seer.... Jesus’ religion was one of love and sympathy, tolerance and inwardness. He founded no organization but enjoined only private prayer. He was utterly indifferent to labels and creeds.... He did not profess to teach a new religion but only deepened spiritual life. He formulated no doctrine and did not sacrifice thinking to believing. Similarly, “The Hindu attitude is based on a definite philosophy of life which assumes that religion is a matter of personal realization. Creeds and dogmas, words and symbols have only an instrumental value. Their function is to aid the growth of spirit by supplying supports for a task that is strictly personal.”<sup>36</sup>

#### 4. The Value of Having Many Religions

9) As indicated by the “Principle of Effect,” the validity of any religion or denomination of the world is proved by its ability to attract

large numbers of adherents (an aspect of the “Law of Large Numbers”) over a long period of time, and to have a transforming affect on their lives: When responding to the accusations of Celsus the Middle Platonist (historically after Plato and before the Neo-Platonists), Origen the Greek religious philosopher from Alexandria, Egypt (c. 185-254), wrote, “Anyone who examines the facts will see that Jesus ventured to do things beyond the power of human nature and that what he ventured to do he accomplished. From the beginning every one opposed the spread of his doctrine over the whole world, the emperors in each period, the chief generals under them, and all governors, so to speak, who had been entrusted with any power at all, and furthermore, the rulers in each city, the soldiers, and the people. Yet it conquered, since as the word of God it could not be prevented; and as it was stronger than all those adversaries it overcame all Greece and the most part of the barbarian countries, and converted innumerable souls to follow its worship of God.”<sup>37</sup> He added, “But now it is well known to all that ‘the word of this preaching’ has been so accepted by multitudes in almost the whole world that they have realized that their belief rests, ‘not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power’” (I Cor. 2:4).<sup>38</sup>

10) All religions are of value to their adherents: Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan accepted the conception that each organized religion is a partial and limited, aspect and manifestation of the Divine. “Every tradition which helps man to lift his soul to God is held up as worthy of adherence.... The mystics of the world, whether Hindu, Christian or Muslim, belong to the same brotherhood and have striking family likeness.... The Hindu theory that every human being, every group and every nation has an individuality worthy of reverence is slowly gaining ground. Such a view requires that we should allow absolute freedom to every group to cultivate what is most distinctive and characteristic of it. All peculiarity is unique and incommunicable.”<sup>39</sup>

Origen stressed the great transforming power of Christianity, whereby many converts gave up their life of “licentiousness and injustice and covetousness,” and became humbler and more religious. Because of the Word of God, Christians on the average live on a higher moral plane than other members of Western society.<sup>40</sup>

One of the pioneers of Western psychology Alfred Adler (1870-1937) of Vienna, Austria supported religion as a positive force that emphasizes living a moral life, service to the community, and being helpful to other

people. The practice of religion helps a person develop, “The capacity for identification, which alone makes us capable of friendship, love of mankind, sympathy, occupation, and love ... It is almost impossible to exaggerate the value of an increase in social feeling. The mind improves, for intelligence is a communal function. The feeling of worth and value is heightened, giving courage and an optimistic view, and there is a sense of acquiescence in the common advantages and drawbacks of our lot. The individual feels at home in life and feels his existence to be worthwhile just so far as he is useful to others.”<sup>41</sup>

11) We have something to learn from other religions. Studying other religions allows one to reflect on one’s own religious faith, gain insight, and to appreciate it more. Since the ideas of the other religion are looked at from a different standpoint, new discoveries are possible: Swami Vivekananda maintained that, “The study of comparative religions. By the study of different religions we find that in essence they are one.... The proof of one religion depends on the proof of all the rest.... We see, therefore, that if one religion is true, all others must be true. There are differences in non-essentials, but in essentials they are all one.”<sup>42</sup> I learn more about my religion by studying other religions. “The greater the number of sects, the more chance of people getting religion.” Pay respects to all religions, since each is a path to the Divine world. Judge another religion by its best, not its worse. Assimilate the spirit of the other religions, but maintain your own individuality and distinctiveness. “Do not try to disturb the faith of” others.<sup>43</sup> Religious knowledge is held back because of the lack of the interchange of ideas between religions. Compare this to any science where knowledge is shared and discussed among people from different countries. Each religion tends to focus its attention upon certain aspects of human experience and knowledge while being relatively indifferent to others. All religions do not aim at the same goal. They may seek liberation-salvation in a higher world, to improve life on earth, to make themselves more materially prosperous, or to patriotically support their country.

Regarding religious pluralism S. Radhakrishnan stressed that synthetic, comprehensive, and unitive knowledge emphasizes the similarities, rather than the differences between the various religions. It unites rather than divides people. “A study of other living religions helps and enhances the appreciation of our own faith. If we adopt a wider historical view we obtain a more comprehensive vision and understanding



of spiritual truth. Christian thinkers like St. Thomas Aquinas were willing to find confirmation of the truths of Christianity in the works of pagan philosophers.”<sup>44</sup>

Paul Tillich stressed, “If you want to speak meaningfully with someone, there must be a common basis of some mutually accepted ideas. The truth that is common to both Christians and pagans must first be elaborated. If they have nothing in common, no conversation is possible.”<sup>45</sup> Listening to other points of view allows one to examine their own religious faith. “Only if you encounter someone else are you able to reflect on yourselves.... When you encounter resistance you reflect.”<sup>46</sup> “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.”<sup>47</sup>

At times Brahman-Atman speaks in a positive manner to a religion through a secular ideology. For example, Swami Vivekananda learned much from his study of modern Western science. Or in a negative manner through critical members of another faith. In 1906, Swami Premananda (1861-1918) a monastic disciple of Sri Ramakrishna “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 [the Lord’s message]. Tomorrow you must find him and apologize.’ The next day he searched until he found the missionary and asked his forgiveness.”<sup>48</sup>

Another point made by Tillich is, “Most human beings, of course, are not able to stand the message of the shaking of the foundations. They reject and attack the prophetic minds, not because they really disagree with them, but because they sense the truth of their words and cannot receive it. They repress it in themselves.”<sup>49</sup> A critic might oppose an idea not because they rationally disagree with it, but because it produces a negative psychological feeling within them that they dislike. There is a clash between the samskaras (mental impressions) already present in the mind, with the conflicting samskaras formed when hearing the new idea.

It was Jacques-Albert Cuttat (b. 1943) the Swiss Ambassador to India who applied some of Edmund Husserl’s (1859-1938)

phenomenological concepts, in order to establish a fruitful religious dialogue. Joseph Mattam presents Cuttat's ideas this way. First comes "epoché, suspension of judgment, the 'placing in brackets' of all prejudices in the widest possible sense. We put in parenthesis all the accidental modalities of our religion, its historical, cultural, social, and psychological concomitants, in a word, everything that prevents us from listening to the other, in as much as he is other. I not only withhold my judgment as long as the other speaks to me, but I 'suspend the explicit adherence to my faith with a view to interiorly producing in me the spiritual, central act of my partner.' This silencing of my religious convictions does not mean that I deny them; the epoché abstains only provisionally from allowing them to prejudice my discoveries and conclusions. Such a 'placing in parenthesis' allows the thing to speak, to reveal its essence—eidos. However this interreligious phenomenological epoché is only a first step which calls for a second, that of dropping the parenthesis when the essence of the thing in itself has been discovered, has been manifested to me. As soon as I realize that it is time for me to give my answer, I must 'reopen the parenthesis,' for if I fail to reopen it, I shall be conducting only a monologue: my opinion would not only be reduced, but over reduced, suppressed. This placing in parenthesis of my religious convictions does not weaken them; on the contrary, they emerge strengthened, enriched by new dimensions." By striving to understand, rather than to correct the other person's theology we will hopefully will gain a better understanding of our own faith.<sup>50</sup>

## 5. The Need for Religious Pluralism

12) From the standpoint of pragmatic utility, in today's world there is a vital need for religious pluralism and dialogue to avoid sectarian conflicts. This will lead to harmonious coexistence that springs from mutual esteem and respect among the different faiths: Vivekananda stressed that India is the country of religious freedom and universal toleration. Historically Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, Jains, Parsees (Zoroastrians), Jews, and Atheists have lived side by side in India, each publicly preaching their respective doctrines. "There was never an organized church in India; so there was never a body of men to formulate doctrines of orthodoxy."<sup>51</sup> Consequently, polytheism, pantheism-panentheism, and acosmic Absolutism were not anathematized in India, and were allowed to flourish resulting in an encyclopedic religion. Professor Ninian Smart (1927-2001) adds during Vivekananda's time, "The divide

between Muslims and Hindus in particular could threaten the new national movement. There were other faiths too which were important in the Indian scene, especially in regard to the intelligentsia--there were Christians, the Parsers, Jains, Sikhs, some Buddhists, and so on. The emerging India had to focus the loyalty not just of Hindus but all these others as well.... India needed an ideology which could express a wider loyalty and promote harmony in a volatile subcontinent.”<sup>52</sup>

According to S. Radhakrishnan, “Religious provincialism stands in the way a unitary world culture which is the only enduring basis for a world community.” A rigid system of dogmas is often narrow and limited, determined by the restricted conceptual scope of its authors. Any temporal and restricted system of ideas cannot be considered to be absolute and comprehensive.<sup>53</sup> A commentator writes on Radhakrishnan’s views, “Just as the political ideal of the world today is not a single empire with one homogeneous civilization but a commonwealth of free nations, having their own institutions and cultures and existing side by side in peace and harmony, so the religious ideal should also be not a single world-religion which is the dream of the proselytizing religions but which is an impossibility, but a commonwealth of religions having their own creeds and organizations and living side by side with mutual toleration and respect as representing the one religious spirit of man.”<sup>54</sup>

The Indian Christian Professor of Religions at Bishop College in Kolkata, Kalarikkal P. Aleaz (b. 1947) 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.”<sup>55</sup>

Ananda Spencer of the Department of Religious Studies at Punjabi University approvingly cited the following quotation, made by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India explaining the purpose of dialogue. It is "an attitude and activity wherein committed followers of various religions accept one another with equal respect and dignity, communicate to one another their religious experiences, convictions, attitudes and riches or their religious outlook on the problems of life, in order to arrive at a deeper knowledge and acceptance of one another and thereby be helped in the common journey to the Ultimate destiny of man." The goal is through an interpersonal relationship and mutual communication, to reach a deeper understanding and to become aware of the other person's perspective. "We are living in an age of dialogue. Society has grown religiously and ideologically more pluralistic than ever before."<sup>56</sup>

When Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826) against opposition authored the State of "Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom" (1779), he believed that all religions should be considered to be equal before the state. He opposed the European idea of a national religion that had special privileges. Consequently, because one is free to choose the religion of their liking from a wide variety of faiths, the United States has high levels of religiosity (Church attendance, belief in God and afterlife, etc.); unlike many Continental European countries where the majority of people have traditionally belonged to the same denomination. Because of the policy of religious tolerance set down by Jefferson and others, many deeply religious people left Europe where they were persecuted and migrated to the United States. Jefferson pointed out, in the past millions of people were killed in religious wars and persecutions in an effort to prevent religious diversity, and at that time there was more religious diversity than ever.

The celebrated English historian Arnold Toynbee (1889-1975) made the following positive assessment of Hindu pluralism, "In the Hindu view, each of the higher religions is a true vision and a right way, and all of them alike are indispensable to mankind, because each gives a different glimpse of the same truth, and each leads by a different route to the same goal of human endeavors. Each, therefore, has a special spiritual value of its own which is not to be found in any of the others.... Today we are still living in this transitional chapter of the world's history, but it is already becoming clear that a chapter which had a Western beginning will have to have an Indian ending if it is not to end in the self-destruction of the human race. In the present age, the world has been united on the material plane by

Western technology. But this Western skill has not only ‘annihilated distance;’ it has armed the peoples of the world with weapons of devastating power at a time when they have been brought to point blank range of each other without yet having learnt to know and love each other. At this supremely dangerous moment in human history, the only way of salvation for mankind is an Indian way. The Emperor Ashoka’s and the Mahatma Gandhi’s principle of nonviolence and Sri Ramakrishna’s testimony to the harmony of religions: here we have the attitude and the spirit that can make it possible for the human race to grow together into a single family—and, in the Atomic Age, this is the only alternative to destroying ourselves.”<sup>57</sup>

The conceptual aspect of pluralism centers on the acceptance of the doctrines and ritualistic practices of other religions. Conversely, the active aspect focuses on interfaith dialogue and is concerned with unity, cooperation, improved understanding, and harmonious coexistence between the different religions. We are most fortunate that we now live in an age dominated by interfaith dialogue rather than hostile and warlike confrontations. Mediating religious philosophy and theology attempts to bring agreement and reconciliation between two opposing views. For a meaningful dialogue to occur between two world religions, neither side can dominate over the other. Each side learns from the other. In addition to inter-religious pluralism between religions, there is also intra-religious pluralism within a religion. This is necessary to unite the various denominations within a faith and to end bigotry. It is one thing not understand another religion and another thing not to understand that they do not understand another religion.

13) All religious revelations are limited by the beliefs, background, language, and historical conditions of the recipient: Following the teachings of Swami Vivekananda, “Take the *Bible*, for instance, and all the sects that exist amongst Christians; each one puts its own interpretation upon the same text, and each says that it alone understands that text and all the rest are wrong. So with every religion. There are many sects among the Mohammedans and among the Buddhists, and hundreds among the Hindus.” We are always making this mistake in judging others; we are always inclined to think that our little mental universe is all that is; our ethics, our morality, our sense of duty, our sense of utility, are the only things that are worth having.” “In judging others we always judge them by our own ideals. That is not as it should be. Everyone must be judged

according to his own ideal, and not by that of anyone else.... I am of opinion that the vast majority of our quarrels with one another arise simply from this one cause that we are always trying to judge others' gods by our own, others' ideals by our ideals, and others' motives by our motives. Under certain circumstances I might do a certain thing, and when I see another person taking the same course I think he has also the same motive actuating him ... He may have performed the action with quite a different motive from that which impelled me to do it.”<sup>58</sup> “I begin to understand the marvelous saying of Christ: ‘Judge not that ye be not judged.’” “What is needed is a fellow-feeling between the different types of religion, seeing that they all stand or fall together, a fellow-feeling which springs from mutual esteem and mutual respect, and not the condescending, patronizing, niggardly expression of goodwill, unfortunately in vogue at the present time with many.”<sup>59</sup>

It is a big mistake to think of any major religion as a single, stereotyped, monolithic entity. The variations and nuances within each tradition on the various religious philosophical issues must be considered.

The Jain religion of India espouses the ancient Syadvada theory that considers human knowledge to be partial, relative, conditional, and limited. They believe as pointed out by Chatterjee and Datta, “An omniscient being can obtain an immediate knowledge of an object in all its innumerable aspects. But imperfect beings look at objects from one particular point of view at a time and have consequently the knowledge of only one aspect or character of a thing. Such partial knowledge about some one of the innumerable aspects of an object ... The various systems of philosophy which give different accounts of the universe similarly occupy different points of view and discover the different aspects of the many-sided universe. They quarrel because they do not bear in mind that each account is true only from its own standpoint, and is subject to certain conditions. They fail to realize, therefore, that the different views may be true like [the blind men who each touched a leg, trunk, or ear of an elephant and described the whole elephant in those terms.]”<sup>60</sup>

People quarrel because they mistakenly consider their limited knowledge to be absolute. Problems arise when one religious judgment and interpretation claims to be absolute and universally valid, and that it applies under all “conditions, circumstances, or senses.” “There is no universal and absolute position or negation, and all judgments are valid only conditionally.” Each religion is apt to forget these limitations, and claims to represent the whole truth about reality. Therefore, we should

show respect for the other people's point of view.<sup>61</sup> Because of the limitations of the human mind all paradigms are limited in nature. Only an omniscient Being can have a paradigm that encompasses all knowledge.

On this subject Paul Tillich stated that God is the loving heavenly Father of all humanity. Therefore, there is a universal revelation of God present in all religions. "In the depth of every religion there is a point at which the religion loses its importance, and that to which it points breaks through its particularity ... to a vision of the spiritual presence in other expressions of the ultimate meaning of man's existence."<sup>62</sup> "Christianity has in its very nature an openness in all directions, and for centuries this openness and receptivity was its glory."<sup>63</sup> Protestants oppose the notion of the infallibility of a particular religious institution. "Revelation is received by man in terms of his finite human situation.... Revelation is received under the conditions of man's estranged character." "Every revelation is conditioned by the medium in and through which it appears." "God acts through men according to their nature and receptiveness."<sup>64</sup> Every faith that claims to be the only true religion is idolatrous. There is a danger if a religion is worshiped in place of God. "All idolatry is nothing else than the absolutizing of symbols of the Holy, and making them identical with the Holy itself."<sup>65</sup> A religion is idolatrous if it makes an absolute claim for its particular doctrines, system of morality or organization. "Idolatry is the elevation of a preliminary concern to ultimacy. Something essentially conditioned is taken as unconditional, something essentially partial is boosted into universality, and something essentially finite is given infinite significance." "They confuse eternal truth with a temporal expression of this truth.... It elevates something finite and transitory to infinite and eternal validity."<sup>66</sup> Church "doctrines, however necessary and good they were, proved to be not the truth that liberates. Soon they became tools of suppression, of servitude under authorities; they became means to prevent the honest search for truth—weapons to split the souls of people between loyalty to the Church and sincerity to truth."<sup>67</sup>

Leonard Swidler (b. 1929) Professor of Catholic thought and interreligious dialogue at Temple University emphasized that religious ideas and practices are to a certain extent historically determined. Four factors to consider are: a). Historicization of truth: "Only by placing truth statements in their historical situation, could they be properly understood (understanding of a text could be found only in its context)." Knowledge is determined by the prevalent ideas, intellectual categories, literary forms and psychological setting of the culture. b). Sociology of knowledge: The

types of truth statements made are a result of one's intellectual culture, religion, political-social environment, socioeconomic class, etc. c). Limits of language: "All statements about the truth of things necessarily can at most be only partial descriptions of the reality they are trying to describe ... although reality can be seen from an almost limitless number of perspectives, human language can express things from only one, of perhaps a very few, perspectives at once." d). Hermeneutics: "All knowledge is interpreted knowledge, the perceiver is part of the perceived ... for various aspects of nature are observed only through the categories we provide, within the horizon we establish, under the paradigm we utilize, in response to the questions we raise, and in relationship to the connections we make."<sup>68</sup>

14) It would be harmful to have only a single worldwide religion: Vivekananda warned of the great harm that would be done to the world if all people adhered to the same religion, forms of worship, and dogmas. If everyone thought and felt in the same way this would bring mental decay and degradation to the society.<sup>69</sup> "Now, if we all thought alike, we would be like Egyptian mummies in a museum looking vacantly at one another's faces—no more than that!"<sup>70</sup> "Kill the difference in opinions, and it is the death of thought. Motion is a necessity. Thought is the motion of the mind, and when that ceases death begins."<sup>71</sup>

He adds, "When the differentiating process that is at work in this universe ceases, the universe comes to an end. It is differentiation that causes the phenomena that are before us; unification would reduce them all to a homogeneous and lifeless matter.... It is urged that even in the physical body and social classification, absolute sameness would produce natural death and social death. Absolute sameness of thought and feeling would produce mental decay and degeneration."<sup>72</sup> "Woe unto the world when everyone is of the same religious opinion and takes to the same path. Then all religions and all thought will be destroyed. Variety is the very soul of life. When it dies out entirely, creation will die. When this variation in thought is kept up, we must exist; and we need not quarrel because of that variety. Your way is very good for you, but not for me. My way is good for me, but not for you."<sup>73</sup>

Swami Saradananda (1865-1927) expressed the idea, "The second great fact, on which the Vedantist builds his universal sympathy and toleration, is that variation is necessary to evolution. What does evolution mean but the unfolding, the changing from one to another, and hence



variation? Destroy variation, bring sameness in any field of nature, and you destroy evolution and the universe is such a joined piece of mechanism, and nature is so uniform throughout that this is not only true in the physical and the mental, but also in the spiritual field. Destroy variation, therefore, in the religious field, try to make all men think alike in religion, try to break down all religions and keep one religion in their place you will find that you have destroyed religion itself. Then again we will find that as all our attempts to make all men think alike will invariably fail, so it is impossible to bring one religion in place of the many. The many will survive as long as creation lasts.”<sup>74</sup>

As indicated by Martin Luther (1483-1546) the leader of the Protestant Reformation no earthly power can determine who belongs to the spiritual Church and who does not. Only Christ can look into the heart of a person and determine this. Christ “rejects and condemns every judgment which attempts to establish who are Christians and the people of God and who are not.”<sup>75</sup> Similarly (though Luther did not teach this) when judging people of other religions, only God knows who are “the people of God” who have at this time received His grace of liberation and salvation and who have not. Luther’s principle applies not only in the Christian fold but also with people of other religions.

Following Nicholas Wolterstorff idea of “perspectival particularism” there are an irreducible plurality of fundamental perspectives on reality. A person's acceptance of one of them is strongly influenced by their pre-existent belief system and environmental influences. It is not possible to demonstrate by neutral philosophical argument which of these perspectives is the correct one. Therefore, it is perfectly acceptable for a person to accept one perspective, even if it cannot be proven to others.

Pluralism has an external and internal aspect. One type is external and applies to showing genuine respect for other religions that if properly followed lead to Brahman-God. Out of Divine grace Brahman-God has created these different paths because people have varying ideas and temperaments. Equally important is the internal aspect of tolerance, which is concerned with respecting the various faiths and denominations within one’s own particular religion. For example, within its own sphere Hinduism accepts the path to Brahman-God of good works, ritual, faith, devotion, knowledge, and meditation each aiding the devotee in attaining to the highest. Also, it teaches there is truth in the theistic, transformational pantheistic-panentheistic, and acosmic views of reality. Brahman-God is viewed not narrowly from a reductionist standpoint where only one view is

considered correct, but from the standpoint of a plenitude of manifestations. Within India the establishment of internal pluralism among the various denominations and sects was very necessary and pragmatic to bring about the unity of Hinduism and of the Indian people, and external pluralism to have good relations with the Muslims, Jains, Christians, and other groups.

## 6. Additional Ideas Concerning Pluralism

In a broader aspect modern universalistic pluralism means a more positive and cooperative relation between religion and all of the sciences (physical, behavioral, social) and humanities. More and more these disciplines are working together to produce a common body of knowledge. They are becoming more global geographically and ideologically and conceptually comprehensive.

The great religions of the world are different responses to the one transcendent reality. They differ because they arise in a different historical and cultural context. Every Divine Incarnation, prophet, and sage was in some ways a product of their own religious culture and tradition. The path to Brahman-God they emphasized was based in part on the thinking of that time. They expressed universal truths in a way that could be understood by the people they associated with. For that reason we cannot expect Buddha to speak like Mohammad or Mohammed like Buddha. Hence the differences in their teachings.

The purpose of a religion is to bring people of different backgrounds together, not to create more bigotry. Most important a universal religious philosophy must be one of inclusion not exclusion. It is not a matter of one major religion dominating over the rest. All of the participants should contribute, each major religion serves as teachers and also as students learning from the others. Other religions look altogether different when evaluated "from inside" rather than "from outside."

Pluralism has been held back because many people consider religious group identification, affiliations, and loyalties to be more important than being objective. From a religiocentric standpoint, they tend to view other religions from its negative side, being oblivious to the higher and more sublime aspects of other faiths. Regarding their own religion as inherently superior, a greater manifestation of the self-revelation of Brahman-God, they judge the worth of other religions in relationship to their own standards. They demonstrate an inability to appreciate the viewpoints of

other religions and to recognize the similarities and commonalities between their religion and others. “Pejorem partem” means interpreting the actions, ritual, symbols, and ideas of other religions from the worst possible standpoint. The proper attitude is “meliorem partem” to evaluate other religions and points of view that differ from yours in the best possible light.

In the area of social psychology Naive Realism is the human tendency to believe that we see the world objectively, and people who disagree with us as being irrational, biased, uninformed, or morally defective. People interpret the world according to their own background, personality, needs, and previously formed cognitive patterns. Naïve Realism causes people to exaggerate the differences between their views and others. There is also a tendency to overestimate the extent to which other people share our point of view. We might think that our shortcomings are due to objective factors, while our opponents are caused by their subjective weaknesses.

In the realm of ideas, five reasons Hindus are more likely to favor religious pluralism are due to the belief:

- 1) In universal liberation-salvation, i.e., all people will eventually be liberated-saved;
- 2) in reincarnation which means all people will get additional opportunities to achieve liberation-salvation in their future lives, and that their present denominational preferences are conditioned largely by their prior life events. A reincarnationist in the spirit of religious pluralism and tolerance realizes that Brahman-God creates different religions for different people depending on their temperament, environmental situation, and present stage in the multiple life process. For most people, the particular religion they identify with determines to a large extent in what environment the person will live in during their afterlife, and in what type of a religious situation they will be reborn into in their next life;
- 3) in the Atman and the inherent Divinity of the Soul (Self), which all people will eventually realize;
- 4) that each religion of the world is a limited and partial manifestation of Brahman-God. Hence, the Lord has created a wide variety of varying religions that are accepted as authentic paths to the Lord. Being that each religious faith provides a partial view of reality, understanding another religion broadens our understanding of the subject. A religion that is best for one person may not be at all suitable for another individual; and
- 5) that religion is primarily a matter of spiritual realization and not of adhering to particular dogmas or following specific forms of ritual.

Some people believe that only their religion is grounded in Divine revelation from Brahman-God, and that all other religions result from natural “theology based upon the fundamental premise of the ability of man to construct his theory of God and of the world out of the framework of his own [human] reason.” The question arises where does reason end and revelation begin? Depth thinkers like Plato and Plotinus for example, through the use of their powerful and highly concentrated powers of intellect were able to enter into the higher Divine realms of Ideas. That it is not necessary to encounter anthropomorphic Divine Beings. Interpretations of scriptures in all religions are based largely on human reason and the events of this world.

There is also the “Fallacy of Overinterpretation,” whereby due to a “Quest for Certainty” conceptually more is made out of the implications of the ideas in a religious scripture than was originally intended by the author. The adherent assumes their scriptures reveal the total and complete truth about a religious matter, which might not be the case.

Bartolome Medina (1528-80) a Catholic theologian developed the theory of “probabilism” as applied to moral action. As expressed by Justo Gonzalez, “What Medina means by ‘probable’ is a view supported by reason and by wise counsel, but not by a final and undeniable authority. An unreasonable opinion is not probable. But in the case of probable opinions the level of certitude is such that, while one is justified in following that opinion, it is still possible that another view might be shown to be more probable.” Following the logic of probabilism outside the moral realm, one should not deny the beliefs of other religions if their validity is a possibility, even though the religious adherent considers another view to be more likely.

The Divine status of a religion (or a country) is subject to change depending on its level of performance. Achieved status of a religion is far more important than the ascribed status given by its followers. “Liberation-Salvation History” is not static, but is subject to change. The Lord has no single preferential religion, just as a culture or nation can rise and fall, so can a religion. Yet, in the course of sacred history, Brahman-God might disclose Itself more in one religion than in another depending on the functional needs of the time. One religion may have a superior theology and philosophy, yet fall short of other if these principles are not put into practice. What is crucial is whether or not its members live up to the tenants of their religion. On the positive side, under rare occasions through the grace of Brahman-God, great souls take human birth as

members of a religion in order to revitalize it and give it new life. Another significant factor is that the Lord works through the religion that is best suited for His/Her particular purpose at that particular time in history. For example the *Old Testament* Hebrew religion was selected for the birth of Jesus Christ because of its superiority over the European religions at that time. The Lord employs a division of labor working in somewhat diverse ways through different religions. Also, there is a Principle of Compensation whereby one religion excels in one area of development, and another religion in another.

Modern sociologists have come up with concepts favoring religious pluralism such as: Functional and cultural alternatives implying that there are a wide range of attitudes, beliefs, and behavior patterns that can be employed to achieve a desired religious goal. The concept denies the functional indispensability of a particular religious structure to reach a particular objective. “Advocates of cultural pluralism hold that cultural [including religious] differences within a society should be retained ... culturally diverse groups can live in harmony, and that mutual understanding rather than assimilation should be the goal.” According to the Principle of Equifinality, “A biological system or social system can reach the same final state from differing initial conditions and by a variety of paths.” Equifinality applies to an open system where a number of choices can be made, not a closed system of action that physicists deal with.

We oppose the type of reductionism that reduces religion to a single revelation and faith. That rejects and eliminates the many approaches to religion in favor of a single methodology. That accepts only theology, philosophy, or mysticism, and rejects the other two. This is a form of intellectual imperialism. Along with the psychology, sociology, and history of religion, etc. each approach contributes to our knowledge of religion.

The first stage is one of conflict, a direct and conscious struggle where one group tries to defeat or destroy the other. Conflict theory holds that social phenomena arise as a result of conflict that is a creative and inevitable fact of social life. Next comes competition, the pursuit of a goal by a group that depends on other groups not attaining the same end. The primary concern is directed toward the objects pursued and not the competitor. Highest is cooperation, whereby for their mutual benefit groups engage in joint action to achieve a commonly desired goal.

John Farquhar (1861-1929) a missionary in India between 1891 and 1923, sought a more acceptable association between Hinduism and

Christianity than one of mutual exclusion. He aspired to create a new missionary evaluation of non-Christian religions. In *The Crown of Hinduism* published in 1913 he considered “Higher Hinduism” to be a valid and legitimate religion.<sup>76</sup> If there is a “Higher Hinduism” as Farquhar suggests, then there is also a Higher Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, etc.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> CW, II:374.

<sup>2</sup> CW, IV:180.

<sup>3</sup> CW, II:381, 365.

<sup>4</sup> *Abhedananda in India* (Calcutta: Ramakrishna Vedanta Math, 1968), p. 116.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 21, 115-16, 183-84; Swami Abhedananda, *Philosophy and Religion* (Calcutta: Ramakrishna Vedanta Math, 1951, pp. 27-28, 37.

<sup>6</sup> CW, II:366-67.

<sup>7</sup> ST, I, 47.1.

<sup>8</sup> CG, II, 45.

<sup>9</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion*, tr. J. Oman (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1955), p. 54.

<sup>10</sup> James Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought* (New York: Macmillan, 1971), pp. 82, 104-05.

<sup>11</sup> 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.

<sup>12</sup> CW, II:499; VII:286.

<sup>13</sup> CW, II:368.

<sup>14</sup> Lecture notes.

<sup>15</sup> Colette Sirat, *A History of Jewish Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: University Press, 1995), pp. 92-93.

<sup>16</sup> Web: [www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199766567/obo-9780199766567-0045.xml](http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199766567/obo-9780199766567-0045.xml)

<sup>17</sup> John Dolan, ed., *Unity and Reform, Nicholas De Cusa* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1962), pp. 204, 187-88.

<sup>18</sup> Tillich, I, pp. 126-27; Heinz Zahrnt, *The Question of God* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1969), pp. 297-98, 306; Ronald Modras, *Paul Tillich's Theology of the Church* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1976), p. 149.

<sup>19</sup> Paul Knitter, *No Other Name?* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985), p. 147.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 147-49.

<sup>21</sup> CW, I:6-7.

<sup>22</sup> K. P. Aleaz, *Jesus in Neo-Vedanta* (Delhi: Kant Publications, 1995), pp. 19-23.

<sup>23</sup> Paul Murphy, *Triadic Mysticism* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1986), pp. 180-81.

<sup>24</sup> CW, II:139.

<sup>25</sup> CG, I, 3.

<sup>26</sup> Julius Guttmann, *Philosophies of Judaism*, tr. Franz Rosenzweig (New York: Schocken Books, 1973), pp. 337-43.

<sup>27</sup> Web: <http://www.iep.utm.edu/theo-nat/>

<sup>28</sup> S. Radhakrishnan, *The Hindu View of Life* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1927, 1941), p. 34.

<sup>29</sup> S.A.Q. Husaini, *Ibn Al-'Arabi* (Pakistan: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1977), pp. 62, 74.

<sup>30</sup> Chittick, p. 352.

<sup>31</sup> Justo Gonzales, *A History of Christian Thought* (3 vols.; New York: Abingdon Press, 1975), III, p. 72.

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<sup>32</sup> HCT, pp. 257-58.

<sup>33</sup> NCE, I, p. 460.

<sup>34</sup> VC, pp. 49-50.

<sup>35</sup> CW, 1962), II:43.

<sup>36</sup> Mathew Vekathanam, *Christology in the Indian Anthropological Context* (New York: Peter Lang, 1986), p. 177. A good portion of sections 1-2-3 appeared in an article by G. Stavig in the VK (Oct-Nov. 2015), pp. 377-79, 431-35.

<sup>37</sup> CC, I, 27.

<sup>38</sup> FP, IV, 1:7.

<sup>39</sup> Radhakrishnan (1927, 1941), pp. 20, 34, 51.

<sup>40</sup> CC I, 26; FP, IV, 1:1-2.

<sup>41</sup> Heinz and Rowena Ansbacher, eds., *The Individual Psychology of Alfred Adler* (New York: Basic Books, 1956), pp. 136, 138, 155-56.

<sup>42</sup> CW, I:317-18.

<sup>43</sup> CW, I:348; II :141, 368, 499; III:186-87.

<sup>44</sup> Whit Burnett, ed., *This is My Philosophy* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957), pp. 357-58.

<sup>45</sup> HCY, p. 26.

<sup>46</sup> HCT, p. 181.

<sup>47</sup> Paul Tillich, *Perspectives on 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Century Protestant Theology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), p. 236; Modras (1976), pp. 153, 289.

<sup>48</sup> Swami Ashokananda, *Swami Premananda* (San Francisco: Vedanta Society of Northern California, 1970), pp. 49-50.

<sup>49</sup> F. Forrester Church, ed., *The Essential Tillich* (New York: Macmillan, 1987), p. 137.

<sup>50</sup> Joseph Mattam, *Land of the Trinity* (Bangalore: TPI, 1975), pp. 77-79.

<sup>51</sup> CW, V:297.

<sup>52</sup> Ninian Smart, *World Philosophies* (Routledge, 1999), p. 318.

<sup>53</sup> Burnett (1957), pp. 357-58.

<sup>54</sup> D. S. Sarma, *Hinduism Through the Ages* (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1961), p. 234.

<sup>55</sup> K. P. Aleaz, *Jesus in Neo-Vedanta* (Delhi: Kant Publications, 1995), pp. 18-19.

<sup>56</sup> Anand Spencer, *Understanding Religion* (New Delhi: Vision & Venture, 1997), pp. 135-37.

<sup>57</sup> Swami Ghanananda, *Sri Ramakrishna and His Unique Message* (London, 1970), pp. vii-ix.

<sup>58</sup> CW, II:363, 24, 105-06.

<sup>59</sup> CW, II:25, 68.

<sup>60</sup> Chatterjee, pp. 80-81.

<sup>61</sup> Surendranath Dasgupta, *A History of Indian Philosophy* (5 vols.; Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1922, 1988), I, pp. 179-81.

<sup>62</sup> Richard Grigg, *Symbol and Empowerment: Paul Tillich's Post-Theistic System* (Macon GA: Mercer, 1985), p. 107.



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<sup>63</sup> John Hick and B. Hebblethwaite, *Christianity and Other Religions* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), p. 112.

<sup>64</sup> Tillich, I, pp. 133, 139.

<sup>65</sup> Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 60.

<sup>66</sup> Tillich, I, pp. 3, 13; Thomas O'Meara, *Paul Tillich in Catholic Thought* (Dubuque, IA: Priority Press, 1964), p. 261.

<sup>67</sup> Paul Tillich, "What Is Truth," *Canadian Journal of Theology* 1 (1955), p. 120; Tillich (1951-63), III, p. 208.

<sup>68</sup> Leonard Swidler, ed., *Toward a Universal Theology of Religion* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987), pp. 7-10.

<sup>69</sup> CW, II:363-66; IV:434-35.

<sup>70</sup> CW, II:363.

<sup>71</sup> CW, VII:428.

<sup>72</sup> CW, I:430-31.

<sup>73</sup> CW, III:131.

<sup>74</sup> Swami Saradananda, *Lectures: Literary and Religious* (Madras: Brahmavadin, 1898), p. 57.

<sup>75</sup> Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, tr. Robert Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), p. 292.

<sup>76</sup> In *Modern Religious Movements in India* (New York: Macmillan, 1915), pp. 201-07, Farquhar discusses Vivekananda's system of religious pluralism.