



Universal Religion of Swami Vivekananda: A Way Towards Religious Integration

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Abstract:

Religion plays a vital role in society that is impossible to ignore. Even in twenty-first century where science and technology is transforming the way we live our lives, religion continues to hold paramount importance in our everyday existence. Religion, primarily, is the principle of integration and harmonization as is pertinent from its etymological meaning, which is 'to bind the individual of society'. However, in present times we can witness the negative impact of religion on our society as it is misunderstood and misinterpreted by people for their benefits, thereby causing conflict in society and resulting in religious extremism and fanaticism.

In present day scenario, we have numerous kinds of religions in the world with their different kinds of beliefs, rituals, philosophy, and practices. In such diversity of religions, we often have to deal with differences, conflicts, and violence based on the existing religious plurality. The main problem beneath all kinds of religious differences is the conflict of truth claims where the adherents of each religion try to establish the superiority of their religion over other religions by claiming their religion as the only true religion in the world. The concept of religious exclusivism originates from such conflicts of truth claims, where each religion claims its components as the truth and excludes all the other religions by marking them as false and nonsense. Such attitude of exclusion is the main issue that gives rise to different kinds of religious conflicts. Therefore, to solve such differences and problems concerned with religious diversity, which at many instances resulted into disastrous consequences, many thinkers, scholars, and philosophers put forth different solutions like religious inclusivism and religious pluralism. However, Swami Vivekananda is one such thinker who has shown the limitations of these models while making a case for the idea of universal religion that he has derived from Śaṅkara's Advaita Philosophy. In this paper, I will discuss the importance of Swami Vivekananda's idea of universal religion in twenty-first century while showing the limitations of religious inclusivism and religious pluralism against his idea of universal religion that is rooted in the non-dualistic philosophy of Śaṅkara.

Swami Vivekananda's notion of universal religion not only provides the solution for resolving the differences and conflicts between different religions but also gives a practical model for the better sustenance of the world. The idea of universal religion is something that is beyond the boundaries of all world religions but also assimilates all the religions in it at the same time, which provides the best way for the realization of the ultimate reality. In other words, universal religion transcends all the religions of the world as well as also encompasses all of them at the same time. While showing the underlying unity of all religions of the world, the idea of universal religion works around two important domains: firstly, respect for each religion of the world, and secondly, the acceptance of the religious diversity that we have in this world. These two things are very much necessary for the establishment of peace and harmony in the world. Universal religion has the potential to accommodate all the individuals by accepting differences. It is capable enough to provide comfort and

solace to all the individuals of different religious sects by superseding the conflicts and differences of different religions.

Keywords: *Religion, Religious differences, Religious Exclusivism, Swami Vivekananda, Non-dualistic vision, Universal Religion.*

1. Introduction

Swami Vivekananda has been one of the legendary figures of 19th century in the history of India. He is not only an admirable figure of Indian history but an institution in itself. He conveyed innumerable messages for our country from his teachings which are beneficial not only in modern times but also has a deep significance for the present-day society. He was inspired and influenced by the ancient culture and philosophy of India that can be easily traced from all his messages and teachings as they all were rooted in the philosophy of Upanishads. He derived many ideas from Vedānta philosophy which is not only related to metaphysics but also has social and practical implications in human life. If we look at his idea of religion it completely springs out from Vedāntic philosophy.

Religion is one of that idea which plays a vital role in our society which cannot be ignored. Even in the contemporary threshold of twenty-first century where science and technology are evolving day by day all around the world but still the role of religion is well acknowledged by each of us. Primarily, if we go deep down in the idea of religion it is the principle of integration and harmonization which could be seen from its etymological meaning which is 'to bind the individual of society'. There are numerous definitions of religion provided by various people and scholars which makes it more complex but none of them could justify itself as which includes the innumerable aspects of this complex idea. But they all put forth the idea of religion very positively which could be taken into account from its etymological definition. But in present times we can witness the negative impact of religion on our society as it is misunderstood and also misinterpreted by people for their benefits which create much tension in our society that resulted in religious extremism and fanaticism. This shows the relevance of the study of the idea of religion by which we can assess the concept of religion, its definition, its impact in society, nature and scope. So, in this Paper, I will discuss the views of Swami Vivekananda on the idea of religion, problem of religious exclusivism and its solution. Swami Vivekananda was one of the pioneers of this subject in India who presented the idea of religion in a very different way that gave us a new frame and direction to interpret the idea of religion.

Vivekananda's thoughts are completely rooted in the philosophy of Vedānta, which could be traced from his writings and as well as from the teachings he has given to the world. All his theories and ideas which he has put forth to the world on various concepts are deeply rooted in Vedāntic philosophy especially the non-dualistic (Advaitic) interpretation of Vedānta that is propounded by Śāṅkara. He reinterprets those ideas from modern frames in order to make the teachings of Upanishads conveniently intelligible to modern minds. So, all the teachings and preaching's he has provided to the entire world springs out from his non-dualistic vision and comes from the teachings of Vedānta philosophy. In this paper, I will also try to discuss Vivekananda's concept of universal religion which comes out from the Vedānta philosophy, as he thinks that this is the only philosophy which is not only theoretical but also has practical implications as it has the potential not only to provide the path to individuals to satisfy their spiritual aspirations in life but could also supersede the religious differences and conflicts which is one of the major problem of present day world.

2. Research Methodology

Using analytic research methods, the paper reads Swami Vivekananda's writings to deduce the notion of 'universal religion' propounded by him. In addition to that, in some parts of the paper, I have also used descriptive and critical methods to argue for the utility of the concept of 'universal religion' over

the other concepts like 'religious inclusivism' and 'religious pluralism' in the contemporary world. The objective of this paper is to propose a way forward from religious conflicts in the present world by arguing the utility of the idea of Universal Religion as posited by Swami Vivekananda.

3. Literature Review

I am relying mostly on the original writings of Swami Vivekananda for my primary material. Although, his writings have received extensive scholarly attention in recent times, his letters and speeches remain understudied and requires close reading in order to understand his ideas in a better light. I mostly rely on these two aspects of his oeuvre. These speeches and letters are available in "The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda" and I use the same to read them. By reading the letters and speeches of Swami Vivekananda alongside his books, I try to make sense of his ideas on religion. Apart from this, the same exercise had also undertaken with regard to the other works produced by other philosophers on the concerning figure as well as about the idea related to the topic. I had also undertaken an interpretive analysis of the existing books and articles on the topic.

4. Non-Dualistic Vision

Non-dualistic vision simply refers to the philosophy of Vedānta, specifically the non-dual (Advaita) philosophy and understanding of Upanishads, propounded by Śaṅkara that Swami Vivekananda has used to derive his notion of universal religion. Vedānta consists of two terms which are 'Veda' and 'anta', it literally means 'the end of the Vedas'. All the four Vedas consists of four parts which deals with different aspects which are namely, The Saṃhitā, the second one is Brāhmaṇa, the third part called as Āraṇyaka, and the last fourth part of Vedas are Upanishads. From the point of view of some scholars the first two are called Karma-kānda and the last two are called Jñāna-kānda.¹ The Saṃhitā consists of mantras which are used for the worship of different deities, The Brāhmaṇa deals with the explanation of these Hymns and also deals with the rituals. Further, the Āraṇyaka focuses on the interpretation and explanation of the rituals. The last part which is Upanishad deals with the philosophical aspects of the teachings of Vedas and also concludes the teachings of all the Vedic literature. So, Vedānta refers simply to the teachings of Upanishads.

We have a number of Upanishads which makes it much complex to understand the philosophical aspects of Vedas which they all primarily deal with. So, in order to simplify them Bādarāyaṇa was the first who put forth the teachings of various Upanishads in other words, we can say the core philosophy of all the Upanishads were reflected in his writing named as Brahma-Sūtras and also popularly known as Vedānta-Sūtras. This text which is written by Bādarāyaṇa is very significant in the history of development of Upanishadic philosophy as the text Brahma Sūtra has been interpreted by different distinguished people in different ways. Because of these different interpretations of Brahma-Sūtras it gives birth to different schools concerned with teachings of Upanishads, out of which the three major schools of Vedānta are 'Advaita' which is founded by Śaṅkara, 'Viśiṣṭādvaita' founded by Ramanujan and 'Dvaita Vedānta' by Madhvāchārya. All of these systems of thoughts are primarily metaphysical in nature and explains the teachings of Upanishadic philosophy in their own way.

The Advaita philosophy of Śaṅkara influenced so many scholars which can be seen from the writings of different eminent scholars. In India, the philosophy of Advaita has been reinterpreted by different people in modern times to suit the need of the time, Vivekananda is also one among the eminent personalities who have been influenced by the Advaita philosophy which can be easily found in his writings, he has also reinterpreted the philosophy of Advaita and used it as an instrument to solve the problems and evils of the society.

¹ Stephen Knapp, The Heart of Hinduism: The Eastern Path to Freedom, Empowerment and Illumination, (USA: iUniverse, Inc., 2005), 10-11.

He describes the Advaitic philosophy as “the crest-jewel of all spiritual thought.”² The significance of Advaita philosophy and its influence on him can be seen in his words as he says, “Whether we call it Vedantism or any ism, the truth is that Advaitism is the last word of religion and thought and the only position from which one can look up on all religions and sects with love. I believe it is the religion of the future enlightened humanity.”³ Vivekananda follows the Advaitic version of Vedānta philosophy from the bottom of his heart but to present the complex teachings of Advaita to modern minds, he reinterprets the Vedānta philosophy which includes all the different interpretations of Upanishads either it is Madhvā’s doctrine of dualism or qualified non-dualism of Ramānujan or the classical Advaita philosophy of Śaṅkara. It includes various other things in it so that it can fulfill its purpose in modern times. Vivekananda philosophy of Vedānta doesn’t focus only on the metaphysical aspects of Upanishads but also extracts the ethical, logical, and social aspects of Upanishadic teachings from its metaphysics.

Vivekananda’s philosophy of Vedānta is completely rooted in his metaphysics which springs out from the teachings of Upanishads and from Advaita philosophy which can be easily traced from his interpretations of various concepts either about the supreme reality or Brahman, Man, Karma theory, Religion or liberation etc. He used the metaphysics of Advaita Vedānta as an instrument and also shows its implications in other functional aspects of human life which can work as a solution for all the problems that prevails in modern society. He has also shown that his philosophy is not just grounded upon faith and scriptures, also is not just a product of mere intellectual speculations but is reinforced by logic, reasons and is also scientific in nature.

Vivekananda put forth several theories and ideas which are deeply rooted in the philosophy of Vedānta. He tried to show that Vedānta philosophy is not just bound to the metaphysics but also has ethical, social and practical implications. In order to do so he offers his theories and ideas on several concepts and they all are grounded in Vedānta philosophy. I will not discuss the other theories or concepts he set forth but particularly discuss his philosophy of religion. The idea of Universal Religion, which is propounded by Vivekananda, is one of the valued examples of his non-dualistic vision, springs out from the same source that is Vedānta. The concept of Universal religion rejects all the differences that are based upon the diverse religions and their elements like their doctrines, myths, rituals and practices etc. It was mainly concerned in the refurbishment of religious values and attitudes which were completely based upon one and the only thing that is humanity. It is a solution for all the problems that arises in the domain of religion and prevents the destruction of society from all kind of religious conflicts which we are facing in present times.

5. Religion and Religious Differences: Vivekananda’s View

Vivekananda expresses himself in so many ways when it comes to define religion in general, though he understands that it is a very complex term and it is very difficult to define religion as it has various and diverse elements in it which makes it so much complex. Though he shows the incapability of defining religion but still he expresses himself in various ways to describe the concept of religion. For instance, a) religion is some kind realization of the divinity, it’s not any doctrine, neither any specific theories, nor any particular belief. It’s about the realization of supreme being and also becoming alike, not about just acknowledging that reality and recognizing it in any form⁴, b) religion is the expression of the divinity that exists nowhere but within each human being, it is the key by which one could rediscover that divinity which is already in us⁵, c) religion is nothing but the idea which teaches us the lesson of humanity, spread peace, promote harmony and is important for the integration of the society.

² Ibid., 432.

³ Swami Vivekananda, *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda VI*, (Calcutta: Advaita Asharma, 2006), 415.

⁴ Swami Vivekananda, *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda IV*, (Calcutta: Advaita Asharma, 2006), 219.

⁵ Swami Vivekananda, *What Religion is in the Words of Swami Vivekananda*, (California: Julian Press, 1962), 1.

Therefore, the idea of religion according to Vivekananda is very wide as it includes psychological, metaphysical, sociological etc. aspects of human life. He says, "Religion is realization; not talk, nor doctrine, nor theories, however beautiful they may be. It is being and becoming, not hearing or acknowledging; it is the whole soul becoming changed into what it believes. That is religion."⁶ The domain of religion is not just limited to the spiritual upliftment of human being but also has moral, mental, and sociological implications in the life of each individual and also in the society.

Religion is a vital part of human culture and beliefs. In contemporary world religion is not just a concept but plays a significant role in society as an institution. The role it plays in society is very much forceful but uncertain in a sense as it has different aspects which includes several components and perform different parts in any society in both positive and negative sense. The force of religion can be understood in a better way in the words of Vivekananda as he says, "Religious thought is in man's very constitution, so much so that it is impossible for him to give up religion until he can give up his mind and body, until he can stop thought and life. As long as a man thinks, this struggle must go on, and so long man must have some form of religion. Thus we see various forms of religion in the world."⁷ He explains the force of religion in our lives, as it is one the most vital urges of mankind since it deals with so many aspects of human existence from life to liberation, sacred to profane, etc. so, there is no point that one can ignore the force that has been created by religion in our lives in both positive and negative sense.

Positively, it works as an integrating force in the society which binds people undermining many differences and unites them on the basis of faith. In strengthening the idea of morality, religion plays a major role as every religion teaches the lesson of values and ethics to follow in our lives. The motive behind this concept as defined by different people seems very much needed which is to establish harmony, promote peace and the feeling of brotherhood between people in order for better functioning of the society all over the world.

But unfortunately, in the society we are living, one can easily find so much violence and conflicts which has been based on religion. Such instances question the nature and the definitions which were provided to us and tells us the motive behind the concept of religion and sometimes it looks very much opposite to those conceptions which were provided. Johan Galtung presents that, "every religion contains, in varying degrees, elements of the soft and the hard"⁸ that contribute to both war and peace. Vivekananda also points out both positive and negative contribution of religion in our society. He says, "No other human motive has deluged the world with blood so much as religion, at the same time, nothing has brought into existence so many hospitals and asylums for the poor; no other human influence has taken such care, not only of humanity, but also of the lowest of animals, as religion has done. Nothing makes us so cruel as religion, and nothing makes us so tender as religion."⁹ It is also observed through research which shows that "about two thirds of contemporary wars turn on issues of religious, ethnic, or national identity"¹⁰. The important question here is that, when religion teaches us so many virtuous things and wants us to follow those teachings and virtues truly, then, why such instances came where it brings so much tension in the society as people kill, fight with each other in the name of religion if they are truthfully religious in spirit.

⁶ Swami Vivekananda, *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda II*, (Calcutta: Advaita Asharma, 2006), 392.

⁷ Swami Vivekananda, *The Complete Works of Vivekananda IV*, (Calcutta: Advaita Asharma, 2006), 203-04.

⁸ Johan Galtung, "Religions Hard and Soft-Cross currents," *Association for Religion and Intellectual Life*, (1997): 437.

⁹ Swami Vivekananda, *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda II*, (Calcutta: Advaita Asharma, 2006), 375-376.

¹⁰ R. Scott Appleby, *Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation*, (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000), 17.

So, apart from all the positives, it also be seen from the history of mankind that there were instances where religion also creates conflicts among the people associated with different type of faiths which leads to the separation of the society on the basis of religious faiths. These inter-religious conflicts show the negative side of the concept of religion which creates tension among the people belonging to different religions. From history to present we have witnessed tension among the people belonging to different religion and have diverse religious faith in each and every corner of the world.

The concept of religious exclusivism originates from such conflicts of truth claims, where each religion claims its components only true and excludes all the other religions by claiming them false and nonsense. Such attitude of exclusion is the main issue that gives rise to different kinds of religious conflicts. To solve the problem of religious exclusivism and any kind of differences that create strife and conflicts in society, many philosophers have suggested solutions in order to root out such issues. Among these solutions, the idea of religious inclusivism and religious pluralism are the two most prominent ideas.

The idea of Inclusivism indicates the position where people believes that only their religion is the true religion but all the other religions are also included in that particular religion. Bernd Irlenborn in his article, "Religious Diversity: A Philosophical Defence of Religious Inclusivism" suggests that "the inclusivist model is empirically and epistemically the most viable position to adopt in response to the challenge of the plurality of religious truth claims."¹¹ It shows that religious inclusivism can solve the problem of communal strife, which plagues our present society. Rose Drew has countered this position by showing the failure of the idea of inclusivism as she considers it as some kind of hidden form of the idea of religious exclusivism only because it doesn't recognize other religions as an individual entity. She also notes that it doesn't see all the religions from equal position but includes them in their own idea of religion.¹² Thus, rendering the idea of religious inclusivism as futile.

Whereas, the idea of religious pluralism is much wider than the idea of inclusivism as it suggests that all religions are true and valid forms to attain the ultimate goals of life. Religious pluralism somewhat fits as the means to fulfil our goal of establishing religious harmony in the world but it also lacks where it projects the idea of tolerance among religion because tolerance somewhere shows the feeling of supremacy. Vivekananda also points out the sense of supremacy behind the idea of tolerance, which is key concept of religious pluralism. He asserts, "toleration is often blasphemy...Toleration means that I think that you are wrong and I am just allowing you to live. It is not a blasphemy to think that you and I are allowing others to live."¹³ Thus, both of these models couldn't solve the problems of religious exclusivism as well as all kinds of religious dissensions in order to establish peace, promote brotherhood and spread harmony in the society. Then what model should we prefer and which is the best way to maintain religious harmony in the society. This particular question helped me to form my hypothesis which is that the only solution for all the issues related to religion is the non-dualistic vision of religion that could work as a model for all religious differences and problems arising due to those differences as well as extend the boundaries of the term religion which is more universal, wide and inclusive in nature.

The concept of universal religion that is propounded by Vivekananda is the key solution not for just the problem of religious exclusivism but applies on all those problems, which are rooted in all the religious conflicts around the globe as it accepts all the diversity of the world either in terms of culture,

¹¹ Bernd Irlenborn, —Religious Diversity: A Philosophical Defense of Religious Inclusivism, *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 2, no.2 (2010): 140.

¹² Rose Drew, —Reconsidering the Possibility of Pluralism, *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 40, no.3 (2003):247–48.

¹³ Swami Vivekananda, *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda II*, (Calcutta: Advaita Asharma, 2006), 373-74.

views, ideologies, or religion itself. According to Vivekananda, universal religion is the way out to all the religious disagreements whatsoever came to fore in any corner of the world.

6. Idea of Universal Religion

Vivekananda's concept of universal religion springs out from the Vedānta philosophy, as he thinks that only this philosophy has the potential not only to provide the path to individuals to satisfy their spiritual aspirations in life but could also supersede the religious differences and conflicts, so the idea of universal religion is ultimately the outcome of Vivekananda's non-dualistic vision which springs out from Advaitic interpretation and philosophy based of Upanishads. As he thinks it is, "The duty of Vedānta, to harmonize all these aspirations, to manifest the common ground between all the religions of the world, the highest as well as the lowest."¹⁴ He further says, "Vedānta, and Vedānta alone can become the universal religion of man, and that no other is fitted for that role."¹⁵ Therefore, he claimed that Vedānta philosophy has the potential to harmonize the diversity of religions and also binds them in a thread of unity. Therefore, he coined the concept of universal religion which shows his non-dualistic vision because it is completely rooted in the philosophy of Vedānta and teaches us the lesson of non-duality.

The diversity of opinions based on religions is very important and necessary for the growth and advancement of religious thoughts and also for discussions. Otherwise, if there will be no differences, religious discourse will lose its dynamism and become static so, to reach to the desired aim of religion these dissimilarities of thought are very much needed as they give rise to further thoughts which makes them more filtered. Vivekananda also argued that, "religious differences are necessary for the progress of religious thoughts. Otherwise, it will lost its flow and become stagnant and there are no whirlpools in stagnant dead water."¹⁶ All the different religious sects are of much value as they gave us different path to rediscover the divinity within each of us and we should choose the suitable path for ourselves. Vivekananda believes that plurality of religious sects is not an issue but sectarianism is the root cause of all the conflicts between different religious faiths. Sectarianism is the feeling of extremism which becomes the main cause of fanaticism that gives rise to religious dissension based on these differences. As he says, "Sects must be, but sectarianism need not. The world would not be better for sectarianism, but the world cannot move on without having sects."¹⁷ He rejects the idea of sectarianism which gives birth to extremism, plurality of sects is really not the problem as it gives us various alternatives and paths to choose in order to achieve our goals in life but where the feeling of extremism is attached to the idea of religion it gives rise to many difficulties and becomes the root cause of all religious differences, conflicts, and violence.

These all different religious sects are based upon different ideas which make their ideologies. All the diverse ideologies have taught us different ways to live our life and to achieve our goals. They are convincingly unlike from each other's standpoint and also contradictory at times. But such differences don't bring any change into that one ground which is there in all the religion, that one reality which is eternal and non-dual. All the differences among them are just apparent as well as external which depends upon the different forms of accepting that one reality into one's religious beliefs. All the diverse religions of the world give us various forms of ideas and also have different components therefore it's not an easy task to find any mutual component shared by all of them in the same way. Vivekananda also stressed on these differences in his views as he said, "Islam for example, lays emphasis on universal brotherhood, Hinduism on spirituality, Christianity on self-purification for entering into the kingdom of God. It is difficult to compare these and, therefore, the tenants of

¹⁴ Swami Vivekananda, *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda II*, (Calcutta: Advaita Asharma, 2006), 125.

¹⁵ Swami Vivekananda, *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda III*, (Calcutta: Advaita Asharma, 2006), 182.

¹⁶ <http://www.sncwgs.ac.in/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Art-6-Jharna-Bhattacharyya-Swami-Vivekananda-Religion.pdf>

¹⁷ Swami Vivekananda, *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda III*, (Calcutta: Advaita Asharma, 2006), 369.

universal religion would not be the common character of different religions.”¹⁸ He also affirms that it is so difficult to shape each religion in a similar form but still there is a unique feature which is mutual to all religion which is the one ultimate reality that lies in the center of each religion which presents the essence of all in a same way. So, whatsoever differences all the religions carry with each other but apart from them also there is a possibility to put forth the appeal which is there in each religion and is universal in nature.

Vivekananda believes that all the different kind of religious sects should essentially exist and there is no issue if they also keep on multiplying. As these differences gives us various ways and paths to achieve our spiritual goals in life. The more religious antithesis we would have our synthesis will get filtered more and more which helps us in achieving our ultimate aim. But these differences should not turn to any form of conflict or violence. Otherwise they will lose their purpose.

Vivekananda expresses himself on the issue of contradictory ideas and differences that we find in different religions through an example which says, “If we take photograph of the same object from different angles, no two photographs will be alike- they may even give opposite impressions; but they are photographs of the same object.”¹⁹ Through this example Vivekananda describes those differences just as the photographs of the same thing clicked from different angles but object is the same in each of them, that object is the divine reality which is supreme to all and the very essence of each religion and lies in the center of all the diverse religions of the world. The contradictions and differences we saw just depends on our standpoint that in which way we accept and realize that one reality which has been described and explained in various different forms in every religion. The reality which is eternal, infinite and the true spirit, that never changes in any mode of time either past, present or future.

Religion is not just about belief system, rituals and practices but it has a vivid and lively force in it which impels people to satisfy their spiritual quest that is found in each man. Every individual thinks about the reality and truth in one’s life and for that matter one wants to think beyond the phenomenal world. Such urges of men originate from one’s spiritual desires and search for that ultimate reality and for eternal truth and to satisfy these spiritual desires and quest in him, he has to resort to some kind of religion which can fulfill these desires of men. That’s why all the religious sects are developing day by day. Vivekananda also says, “Not one of the great religions of world has died; not only so, each one of them is progressive.”²⁰ In fact all the religions have so many differences between each other in so many sense but they all claim to satisfy the spiritual needs of men and also have one fundamental thing in common as they all believe in some supreme reality in various forms which is eternally real and ultimate truth. He opines, “One fact stands out from all these different religions, that there is an Ideal Unit Abstraction, which is put before us, either in the form of a Person, or an Impersonal Being, or a Law, or a Presence, or an Essence.”²¹ So, the ultimate aim of each religion is same in its very core as they all claim to lead us to that supreme reality which we want to achieve in our life. Vivekananda also established that “the ultimate goal of all mankind, the aim and end of all religions, is but one – re-union with God, or, what amounts to the same, with the divinity which is every man's true nature.”²² In this way, the idea of universal religion shows the underlying unity of all religions.

Every religion defines and describes the ultimate reality in their own way and helps the individuals to satisfy their spiritual search. Vivekananda also shed light on the spiritual quest of man and its force as

¹⁸ Basant Kumar, *Contemporary Indian philosophy*, (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 1978), 45.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 44.

²⁰ Swami Vivekananda, *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda II*, (Calcutta: Advaita Asharma, 2006), 359.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 62.

²² Vivekananda, *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda V*, (Calcutta: Advaita Asharma, 2006), 219.

he says, "No search has been dearer to the human heart than that which brings to us light from God."²³ In that process any individual belonging to any religion travels from the lowest form of truth to the uppermost truth. In their each effort, they all are trying to realize the ultimate truth and every moment of their journey they all are going closer to their desired ends. Vivekananda believes that we cannot claim any peculiar religion as it is the only true and right path to achieve that ultimate reality and others are false as each religion shows their own way which they find suitable in order to realize the supreme reality. So, in that case the concept of religious exclusion is incorrect and in order to save the society from the evil effects of such exclusion we must follow the teachings of Upanishads, which gives us the solution to avoid such things and which is the concept of universal religion. The notion of universal religion is completely based on the philosophy which gives us the message of universal acceptance of all the religions of the world. As he says, "The one watch-word for Universal Religion, according to Vivekananda, is acceptance. Acceptance is not just tolerance. Tolerance is negative in its import..."²⁴ For Vivekananda, universal religion has the potential to accommodate all the individuals and shelter them. It is capable enough to provide comfort and solace to all the individuals of different religious sects by superseding all the conflicts and differences of different religions.

The idea of universal religion gives equivalent importance to each religion and claims that each religion establishes a unique kind of model, which shapes that religion and also the adherents of that particular religion which is very much beneficial for the society and for mankind. For instance, as he says, "Islam makes its followers all equal-so, that, you see, is the peculiar excellence of Mohammedanism...and all the other ideas about heaven and of life etc. are not Mohammedanism. They are accretions."²⁵ Here the core message of the teachings of Islam observed by Vivekananda is brotherhood among all the individuals. Similarly, Hinduism has the nature which is more spiritual and is ideal. Christianity also has its own set of principles.

He explains that all the diversity we perceive in this world is apparent but essentially everything in this world is only the manifestation of that one ultimate reality which is non-dual and lies within our inner selves. All the differences between men or among any creatures are important and can't be demolished but we have to understand the unity that lies amongst all of us which is that we all are the fragments of same existence. The existence which is the ultimate and supreme reality, this is the only message of the one universal religion and also the universal religion itself. Universal religion doesn't entail any kind of universal doctrine, faith, mythology or rituals as he also says "Such a state of things can never come into existence; if it even did, the world would be destroyed, because variety is the first principle of life."²⁶ So, the concept of universal religion simply points out to the universal existence and tells us all that we all are the parts of that same existence which is divine.

The idea of universal religion points out that the ultimate reality, which we seek all around the world and by various ways in different religions, lies within us. We just have to rediscover that divinity which lies within our inner selves and for that matter religion plays a role just as a means which helps to rediscover the divinity within ourselves. Vivekananda brings a crucial change by his idea of universal religion as it doesn't only provide the solution for resolving the differences and conflicts between different religions but also provides a perfect model for the better sustenance of the world. The idea of universal religion is something that is beyond the boundaries of all world religions but also assimilates all the religions in it at the same time, which provides the best way for the realization of the ultimate reality. In other words, universal religion transcends all the religions of the world as well as also encompasses all of them at the same time.

²³ Swami Vivekananda, *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda II*, (Calcutta: Advaita Asharma, 2006), 357.

²⁴ Basant Kumar Lal, *Contemporary Indian Philosophy*, (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 1978), 45.

²⁵ Swami Vivekananda, *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda II*, (Calcutta: Advaita Asharma, 2006), 371-372.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 388.

The message conveyed by the concept of universal religion has two important and major things which are, first the respect for each and every religion of the globe and other is the acceptance of this religious diversity we have in this world. As, these two things are very much necessary for the establishment of peace and harmony in the world.

The notion of universal religion teaches us that there is not only one way to express the truth and reality but it can be expressed in so many ways. All the different religions express the same reality in various ways and diverse forms but they all ultimately refers to one and the same thing. Vivekananda explains this by an example, 'suppose we all have to fetch some water from the same source and for that purpose we have different vessels, someone has bucket, some has cup, others have jar and so on. The water we all fetch will automatically takes the form of the container, that has been carried by all of us... similar case happens with our minds which are like those vessels and each of us wants to attain the realization of that supreme reality which is here as water filled in these different vessels. The vision of that supreme reality we get through the shape of our vessels (minds) will be different for all of us but yet it is one and same. He is the supreme reality in each case only our vision is different. Such universality of different religion can only be recognized through the notion of universal religion which is its main objective.²⁷ Hence, Vivekananda put forth the non-dualistic vision of religion derived from the teachings of Upanishads. His vision is not only theoretical but has an intense practicality in it as it provided a finest model to harmonize the religious diversity and to supersede all the religious dissensions. Its usefulness and relevance was not only limited to modern times but also has so much significance in present day society because we are facing so much problems because of religious dissensions in present time and universal religion can give us the best way out to resolve all such problems.

7. Conclusion

Universal religion is the model that put forth the non-dualistic vision of religion by Swami Vivekananda. It is the notion that could provide us solution for all kinds of religious dissensions. The beauty of this very idea is that it doesn't subsume the uniqueness and peculiarities of any particular religion rather it appreciates and endorses the plurality of religions, also at the same time it binds the religious diversity into a golden thread of unity. The idea of universal religion has the potential to provide the best out from all kind of religious dissensions that creates so much trouble in society. It is something that is beyond the conceptions that is held by different world religions on the basis of which so many differences arise between religions as it doesn't have any particular rituals, practices, scriptures, prophet and also the feeling of supremacy. If we emphasize on the differences between religions based on the external aspects of religion, all kind of religious conflicts will persist and continuously goes on but once we realize the thread of unity which binds all the different religions which is the core and essential part of each religion then all the differences and conflicts vanishes naturally. So, there is no place for any kind of intolerance, hatred, conversion, persecution, bloodshed and the feeling of superiority in universal religion that produces differences between religions, it is simply based on the expression of non-dualism that teaches us the feeling of oneness. The foundation of this idea lies on the concept that is the service of humanity is the service of divine supreme reality as it sees the true nature of man which is divine. It teaches us that every human being has latent divinity and spirituality within; we just have to rediscover that divinity which is the ultimate goal of human life. In such a way it divinizes the relationship between each human being that not only helps us to prevent the degradation of man but also gives significance to human life and makes it worth living. Universal religion is very significant idea and no one could deny that it is also an ideal approach that accepts all the diverse opinions, beliefs, cultures and respects the diversity in order to bring peace, promote brotherhood and harmony for the better functioning and sustenance of human life and society.

²⁷ Swami Vivekananda, *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda II*, (Calcutta: Advaita Asharma, 2006), 381.

It teaches us the lesson that there is not only one way to achieve the truth which is one without second rather we have innumerable paths to achieve the same.

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