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A Critical Exposition of the Different Religions of the World Regarding the Possibility of a Universal Religion

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Abstract

The different religions of the world have come from different traditions and against different backgrounds. Hence, the presence of difference amongst these religions is bound. Of course, religion, in general, comes in human consciousness due to some common problems the human beings have to face in the world and as people of different religious traditions have some common feelings, ideas and sentiments, therefore, there must have certain agreements also amongst different religions. So, it will be equally untrue to say regarding similarities alone and avoid differences as it will be to say about differences alone and avoid similarities. With a view to realizing whether a universal religion is possible, we should make a comparative analysis amongst the various religions of the world. The scientific study of religions, the aim of a comparative study of them, will have to point out both these similarities and dissimilarities with a balance. Such a balanced comparison can well be considered amongst the religions of the world so far too.

The comparative analysis amongst the different religions of the world shows that the world religions do agree and disagree amongst themselves on several matters. That is why it is one-sided and wrong to give much stress either on the affinities or the differences alone. The same people have so frequently given more emphasis on the similarities with a view to promoting understanding as well as goodwill amongst the followers of different religions. On the other hand, the fanatics always intend to highlight the differences, speaking from the philosophical or scientific point of view, no one of the approaches is commendable, but keeping a social consideration in view, the former, of course, becomes more sound and desirable than the latter. The intention put forward by the fanatics creates a cause of much strife and struggle amongst the world people in the name of religion.

Key Words: *Balanced Comparison, Comparative Analysis, Religious Affinity, Religious Difference, Understanding, Universal Religion.*

Introduction: The differences amongst the different religions are natural and more apparent in respect of practices than beliefs, and such differences are quite natural for the different social and cultural traditions in the world. But these differences should not be let to

create cause for quarrel or fighting. Religion, in one way to understand, is a means to satisfy the hunger of the soul to achieve a position free from the strives and strains of the temporary existence and no reason is there to fight if people of different religious traditions make endeavor to satisfy this hunger in their own different ways. Nevertheless, it is not an easy task to say that religion has been one of the most striking causes of strain and struggle amongst various persons of the world. It pays no less harm than the good it has generated. History witnesses fighting in the name of religion and even the present many national and international issues or problems are purely religious in character. So far it is not being clear and distinct regarding the exact nature of this universal religion. It should be regarded as the only religion pre-existent by nature all over the world which will be acceptable to and followed by religious persons alike. Universal religion will, in this way, become the universally accepted religion. It has been a matter of feeling that once universal religion is realized from within, all bloodshed and enmity in the name of religion will completely be over and the real role of religion, then, will be played, i.e., the role of uniting all people of the world by one thread of universal brotherhood. Here, a question can be raised—Is such an environment really possible, i. e., is there a real possibility of universal religion? It is doubtless that such a religion is logically possible, because the concept of universal religion does not involve any contradiction. But the real question is whether it is practically possible or not.

To answer this question, we will have to enquire into the meaning of the practical possibility of a universal religion, or, in other words what the possible universal religion will possibly be like. It may perhaps be any one of following three possible forms:

- (i) One of the prevailing religions themselves may be taken universally by all people of the world to be their religion instead of one which they have so far been following as their own.
- (ii) Or else, common and essential points of all prevailing religions may be drawn out so as to form common set of beliefs practices to be observed and followed by all religious people of the world.
- (iii) Or again, a totally fresh religion in a fresh manner may be evolved and people all over the world accept it as their common religion.

It is followed that all the religions of the world possess their own particular beliefs and practices which have been prescribed to their respective followers. But we see a lot of similarities about these beliefs and practices amongst various religions, including certain dissimilarities too. Each and every religious tradition of the world keeps its distinct nature and character due to the particular beliefs and practices. These beliefs and practices are being imbibed and prescribed by every religion. Likewise, every religious person is clearly recognized as a Hindu or a Buddhist or a Christian due to the specific beliefs and practices entertained and followed by him. One more thing that we may add, as forming the characteristic nature of a particular religion is the presence of certain specific religious stories or myths within it. R.B. Braithwaite, the famous English Philosopher, analyzing the nature of religious language, has very importantly drawn our attention towards this aspect of

the world religions. According to his analysis, each and every religion of the world comprises of two things—(i) a moral way of life and (ii) some specific stories. The former is primary while the latter is only subsidiary, though they are possessed by every religion of the world. To Braithwaite, each religion indicates an endeavour for finding out a moral way of life comprised of certain stories. He has, by pointing out the role and importance of stories in religion, taken our attention to a very significant aspect of existing religious traditions. Each religion grows with the light of certain mythical stories. These stories generally are read with reverence, listened and remembered by its followers. These stories, from practical perspective, make a significant role in religions and the particular nature and character of one religion are separated to a great extent from others through the presence of different stories in them. In this manner, all the world religions as per observation of their followers, possess chiefly of three things—(i) certain beliefs, (ii) certain practices and (iii) certain religious stories. Naturally, therefore, when a man accepting one particular religion than another, means accepting one set of beliefs and practices and he there by ascertains one set of religious stories on his mind rather than another. Now, we can analyze the question of the acceptability of the so-called universal religion in any of the three possible forms mentioned above by all religious traditions of the world alike through this light. Because practical possibility of universal religion in any form mentioned above indicates its acceptability by all people alike.

The acceptability of the beliefs, practices and religious stories of any one of the existing religions by all religious people of the world may be said to be the practical possibility of the universal religion in its first form. As for example, if Hinduism has been regarded as universal religion, it means that all religious people of the world start believing alike in the immortality of the soul, karma and rebirth, bondage and liberation etc. and all of them accept the Hindu way of prayer and worship, perform Hindu rituals and observed Hindu moral principles etc. In addition to these, all men of the world will start reading, listening and remembering the sacred stories of the Hindus regarding Rama, Krishna and many other Hindu mythical personalities. But the question here arises –at what time this can be possible? The answer may perhaps be while the beliefs, practices and religious stories of Hinduism will be recognized as the most religiously satisfying, i.e., when these will be proved generally satisfactory to the religious instinct and hunger of all the people of the world with the highest significant way. Truly speaking, any religion demands as universal by nature or character, or which is accepted as the suitable with regard to this purpose, must satisfy this condition, viz., its beliefs, practices and religious stories are mostly desirable and satisfactory in nature to all the people of the world. But how can a man prove the supremacy of the beliefs and practices of one particular religion over all others so as to establish it to be the best universal religion? The religious beliefs and practices of each religion are most satisfying to its followers. The followers accept their beliefs and practices most naturally, and conveniently. Now, it will be worthwhile to search for the grounds depending upon which one may demand with conviction the supremacy for the beliefs and practices of any one religion over all others. This is perhaps the most vital point to be

analyzed in respect of finding out the very universal character of a specific religious tradition.

We can have a lot of endeavours in the thoughts of some famous thinkers with a view to proving implicitly or explicitly the supremacy of their own religion with regard to the fact that each religion includes elements to make it most suitable to serve to a universal religion. As for example, in his book 'Philosophy of Religion', George Galloway expresses the view that Christianity contains within it all such elements in the most efficient manner which may make a religion universal. In accordance with him, merely that religion may be taken as universal which touches the inner soul of man which goes beyond all distinctions of class or group such that the ways of deliverance pointed out by it are applicable to all, and not to only a few of a particular class or group. According to George Galloway, the religions like Buddhism, Christianity and Islam only can make satisfaction with these conditions. But it is merely Christianity that has become most satisfactory with the required conditions for the purpose in the most suitable and efficient way. But we well can easily notice very open one-sidedness in Galloway's opinion, and this opinion has been based on an unexpected biasness for his own religion. Each and every religion of the world make attempt on their own way with a view to satisfying the very internal soul of their religious followers and the principles and practices prescribed by them are not meant for any particular group of people only. Not a single religious tradition by original nature becomes sectarian in character. The ways of man's religious performances are not meant for a particular few, but for all men in the world. It is a fact that, merely a few world people truly can follow a particular religion and these people can form a definite religious or social group. The religion of the 'chosen people', i.e., Judaism at least at its face looks like a religion advocated for a specific class or group of people. But, as the later prophets like Isaiah clarified, God took the people of Israel as the chosen people not in the sense that salvation was meant for only them, but in the sense that they were the people whom God has chosen to bear the torchlight and spread his message of the law and the commandments to the people of the world so that all of them might be capable of attaining their salvation. In this way, we cannot find any religion as really sectarian in its approach. The message it spreads out is universal in attitude, although, very unfortunately it is seen that merely a few people of the world accept it and try to undergo themselves a distinct religious group or class. So, we can pass remark that the plea made by G. Galloway cannot make the claim of Christianity stronger than the other religions to become a universal one.

Universality can be claimed by each and every religion of the world and there one can get every likelihood of a quarrel in this context regarding which religion for being a universal religion can make justification in respect of its claim most. Dr. S. Radhakrishnan with an implicit bias for Hinduism now and then seems to attain the possibility of universal religion in the nature and form of Hinduism. In this way, Dr. S. Radhakrishnan in his book 'Eastern religions and Western thought' puts argument that Hinduism has always been very liberal and broad-minded by nature and character, and the approach towards other world religions has always been seen one of tolerance. Hinduism has always been keeping belief

that all world religions indicate the very same reality or truth. All religions should be treated just like the various ways leading to the same goal. If we go through the historical background, we will easily find certain elements with regard to this universalistic approach of Hinduism. At times, people of various religions came to India and settled here. The Hindus quite happily allowed those people to settle and observe their own religions. But, in course of time, these religions could hardly maintain their identity in face of the liberal and universalistic standpoint of Hinduism and these religions ultimately merged into it, Buddhism originated in India, spread and survived throughout the universe, but it could hardly maintain its separate identity in India. The liberality of Hinduism absorbed. Those religions which did not merge into Hinduism were greatly influenced by it and they have hardly been able to maintain their original rigour. These facts establish that Hinduism possesses within it qualities of being a universal religion. But the grounds after examination depending upon which Dr. S. Radhakrishnan expects and keeps beliefs in Hinduism to have included within it the practical possibility of a universal religion cannot be regarded to be more strong. The beliefs in various religions about God or gods and goddess are fundamentally one and the same and that these different religions are nothing but the different pathways leading towards the same goal do not form Hindu religion; rather they construct Hindu philosophy of religion. That is why the practical possibility of universal religion in Hinduism is not depending upon the fact that it treats all other religions with the eyes of sympathy and tolerance, in contrast, it relies on the reply of the question—how far the beliefs, practices and religious stories of Hinduism contain documents within them through which the head and heart of all the world religious people can be satisfied in an efficient manner. One cannot with certainty say that Hinduism possesses elements which will be capable of making the whole world people satisfied. Each and every religion of the world, as it is already mentioned above, would comprise of elements to satisfy their followers to the best in their own way. The examples of history too can make proof nothing. The merger of certain religions at a certain time in some other religion or religions may be a sequel to many local factors of the time. There was a time when other religions merged into Hinduism and today there are several Hindus who are daily undergoing conversion into Christianity. Further, if Hinduism has influenced other religions, the influence of other religions upon Hinduism cannot be denied. Explaining the nature of universal religion, Bhagavan Das in his book “The Essential Unity of All Religions” puts, “That is Religion, ‘re’ and ‘legre’, to bind together anew, again, the hearts of all, to each other, and back again to God, from whom the temptations of the earth cause those hearts to stray away. Vedanta-Tasawwuf-Gnosis is all three; it is a religion which includes the essentials of Philosophy, Science, Art; or if we prefer it so, it is a philosophy which synthesizes here, that the latest speculation of the most renowned scientists tends to reduce all matter to atoms and super-atoms, paramanus, electrons, plutons, neutrons, positrons, etc.; these to electrical energy; that, finally to Mind-force: (pp. 15-22 supra)”¹

It has been reflected here that the new explanation regarding universal religion will have to be maintained on democratic lines, i.e., the lines of ‘majority-rule’, with broad and

general standpoint. From this perspective, those truths and practices which achieve, not only the greatest number of, but unanimous, support from the living religions, those beliefs and observances on which all are agreed, should obviously be treated as forming universal religion. We may have agreement between the great religions, that all teach the same essential truths: their promulgators themselves are all agreed. "Indeed only the names, the words, differ. The thing meant is the same. Allah means God, Akbar means greatest; Ishvara or Deva means God, Parama or Maha means greatest; Allah-Akbar literally means Parama-Ishvara or Maha-Deva. The Zoroastrian Ahura Mazda (equivalent to the Sanskrit Asura-Mahaddha), also means the 'wisest' and the 'greatest' God. Rahim and Shiva both mean the (passively) Benevolent and merciful; Rahman and Sankara both mean the (actively) Beneficent. Dasa and Abd both mean the servant, Qadir and Bhagavan both mean Him who is possessed of Qudrat, Bhaga, Aishvarya, Might, Lordliness; Bhagavan Das is absolutely the same as Abd-ul-Qadir, the servant of God, the Almighty".²

Thus, we have a very simple but very clear and distinct explanation about differences between religions are differences only of words, names, languages; or of non-essential superficial forms; and sometimes emphasis has been given on this aspect of the Truth, or of Virtue, or of Duty, rather than another; never, of Essential Ideas. The Founders of Religions may, indeed, be named, the re-proclaimers, in new forms, of the One Universal Religion. The religions are sometimes seemed to lay great stress, now on this, now on that other aspect of the One Religion, as per requirement by the special times, places, circumstances.

From the above exposition, it follows that the so-called founders of new religions are, in fact, only re-proclaimers of the same Essential Truths, in new expressions of languages, new forms, amidst new settings, new conditions of life. So, these religious founders may be called Reformers only. Really speaking, we receive no new religion (in the singular); but always only the One Eternal Universal Religion, that is the Common Core and Essence of all particular religions. These are new religions (in the plural) in this sense, that, the followers after their Re-proclaiming Reformer, have step by step made up new rites, ceremonies, forms around that core-teaching, in respect of new situations of new times. Hence, it is seen that each particular religion wears the attire of newness, and the more as because the new rituals slowly overpowers, covers up, hides away completely the Ancient Core; so that the Means swallow the End, and start posing themselves as the end. The so-called new religions possess the sameness with the case of new civilizations that grow up and decay side by side. The language, dress, food, housing, social conventions, manners-and-morals, marriage forms, domestic ways, art forms, recreations, etc., of each, are more or less different from those of others; yet the essential urges, needs, appetites, mental and bodily faculties, which are exercised in, and satisfied by, each, are the same. The God in Man, and in all living Beings, fulfils Him-Self in ever-varying ways; in every way is He Him-Self fulfilled.

The different religions of the world should come together, and if they do not maintain continuity of conflict or competition, they must enhance a spirit of comprehension to break down prejudice and misunderstanding and bind these religions as different representations

of a single truth, the essential underlying unity of all the religions of the world. Rig-Veda puts, 'The real is one, the learned call it by various names, Agni, Yama, Matarisvan'. Ramakrishna declared after going through different faiths that Buddha, Christ and Krishna were forms of the supreme and they are not all. A lot of names have been given to the Absolute by the learned for practical purposes such as Law, Self, Truth. 'It is called Person by the Samkhya thinkers, Brahman by the Vedantins, pure and simple consciousness by the Vijnanavadins, Sunya by the Nihilists, the illuminators by the worshippers of the Sun. It is also called the Speaker, the Thinker, the Enjoyer of actions and the Doer of them'.³ Thus, each and every form of religion in the world conveys, in fact, the same message and has been bearing a true spirit of unity in diversified forms. We can have this concept of the spirit of unity amongst different religious traditions in the Bhagavata - 'Just as one substance with many qualities becomes manifold through the apprehension of the senses working in different ways, even so the one Supreme is conceived in different ways through different scriptural traditions'. There is a common ethical and religious ideal influencing the whole civilized world, and every man makes an attempt to find it out in its own religious beliefs and practices, and does detect it here. That is to say, no religion in its present form is final and every religion is seeking for a better expression. Each religion has sat at the feet of teachers that never bowed to its authority, and this process is taking place today on a scale unprecedented in the history of humanity and will have most profound effects upon religion. In a broad environment, religions are helping each other to find their souls and grow to their complete stature. Due to a cross fertilization of ideas and insights, behind which lie centuries of racial and cultural tradition and earnest endeavour, a great unification is taking place in the deeper fabric of human thoughts. Unconsciously perhaps, respect for other view points, appreciation of the treasures of other cultures, confidence in one another's unselfish motives are growing. We are slowly realizing that believers with different options and convictions are; necessary to each other to work out the larger synthesis.

In respect of the very possibility of unity of religions, i.e., the universal religion in disguised form, Dr. S. Radhakrishnan says that the different religions clothe the one Reality in different images and their visions could embrace and fertilize man so as to give them a manifold perfection, the spiritualized Hinduism, the faithful obedience of Judaism, the life of beauty of Greek Paganism, the noble compassion of Buddhism, the vision of divine love of Christianity, and the spirit of resignation to the sovereign lord of Islam.

From the above discussion, it can be said that the dominance of one existing religion over all others to be acceptable to all religious men of the world alike as their own religion appears not to be practicable. The most significant question is-- what is the particular religion which we can regard as competent for the purpose? The answer is none because all religions are merely partly true. All the religions may possess equal demands and the decision as to preference can't easily be made. Nevertheless, the most fundamental question in this respect may perhaps be, whether the same set of beliefs, practices and religious stories can become, capable of satisfying with equal efficiency, the religious feelings of persons from different religious traditions and living at different places in different times

and different environments. Can we have practical possibility there in the same set? The answer should perhaps palpably be negative as it is not possible to satisfy, at the same time, with equal efficiency, all the religious men of the world as they possess particularly religious feelings being influenced by their own religious tradition. And, hence the practical possibility of universal religion in the first form appears to be very sceptical.

The second possibility that perhaps appears as the most viable alternative. To form a common set of beliefs and practices, the common and the essential points of the world religions are drawn out and put together which may perhaps be equally acceptable to all the religious people of the world ungrudgingly. But, it is, on examination and analysis, not so easily practicable. There we may have similarities amongst the world religions on a lot of points already seen by us. But, whether we will be able to form a religion on the basis of these similarities is still under consideration. To accept a religion by a man commonly denotes accepting a definite set of beliefs, practices and religious stories forming the essentials of that religion. Now, the point is that whether we can get any affinities among the mythical stories of different religions for taking out the common characteristics to form the religious stories of the universal religion. Can we have any similarity between the stories of Moses and Jehovah on the one hand and Rama and Krishna on the other? Likewise, is there any affinity between stories about Jesus Christ and others of the Christian tradition and the different religious stories present in Islam, Buddhism etc? What common mythical stories can be derived from amongst them? In the similar way, we may see from the level of beliefs that some religions strictly keep belief in only one God, some in two, some in several gods and goddess and some do not believe in any God or gods at all. Some have taken God as personal, some as impersonal and some as super-personal. What are the common points between them? Again, the central core is the belief in karma and rebirth in one religion, and, there is absolutely no place at all of such belief in another religion. Some religions accept Moksa or Nirvana as the ultimate destiny of man; others accept the attainment of Heaven as man's ultimate destiny. What are the common points of these religious beliefs to form the belief of the universal religion? Thus, it seems very hard to find common religious practices in respect of different religions of the world with a view to forming the rites and rituals of the universal religion.

The third alternative about the practical possibility of universal religion too becomes a matter under consideration. If universal religion becomes a new religion in any form, it is sure and certain that this religion is nothing but one more religion to all other religions existing from beforehand. Every founder of a fresh religious tradition doesn't want his religion to be limited to a particular group of men; rather he wishes the same as the religion of all the people. When a founder attempts to establish a new religion of universal acceptance, it has every time resulted only in creating a new trend of religious world besides existing religions from beforehand. We will perhaps have more or less similar picture about the so-called universal religion if the same has been taken up to be totally a new religion. The only word 'universal' will not be capable of making it universal.

Conclusion: In this way, it is distinct that the question of the practical possibility regarding universal religion seems very cheerless. Truly speaking, such a religion is totally not required. The very needful things are tolerance, sympathy, compassion, mutual understanding or sharing to the followers of all the religions of the world. To our mind, if there is, in fact, a religion that can be named universal by nature and character in any of the three possible forms mentioned above, this will create situation to make an end of true religion. Religion will then be only replaced by fashion. The complete delink situation will be arisen between religion and its root. Religion exists in inner conviction of man's spiritual nature and its result is the apparent way of life, i.e., man's outward way of life is nothing but just a reflection of that conviction. Every man possesses right to differ from others and the evolving of any universal religion seems needless. The chief ideals of religion should be tolerance and accommodation of the ideas and religious sentiments of other religions of the world. Those who find incapable of doing it, he does not possess freedom to demand himself to be religious. The world people are merely to learn to accommodate and respect differences regarding religious matters. These differences are quite natural and they must be recognized and tolerated as such. A man cannot become both intolerant and religious simultaneously.

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