

Harmony of Religions

Genuine revelations express the highest spiritual experiences.

Swami Vivekananda says: "To learn this central secret that the truth may be one and yet many at the same time, that we may have different visions of the same truth from different standpoints, is exactly what must be done. Then, instead of antagonism to anyone, we shall have infinite sympathy with all. Knowing that as long as there are different natures born in this world, the same religious truth will require different adaptations, we shall understand that we are bound to have forbearance with each other."

The genuine spiritual experience that is had by some people will be essentially the same.

Hinduism—non-theistic and non-dogmatic—has always merged harmoniously with theistic religions which, except for recent Judaism, are historically characterized by interreligious conflict and aggressive missionary zeal.

The labels, "heathen," "un-Hindu," "uncivilized," and "inferior religion" have never been broadcast by Hinduism. Though Hindu masses traditionally honor and cling to the provincial religious customs learned while growing up in their respective tiny hamlets, villages and cities, they have never gone to war to convert others to Hinduism. Its acceptance of diversity prevents Hinduism from becoming oppressive, monotonous, static and insipid.

Hinduism does not pigeonhole truth into a single creed, recommending instead various helpful disciplines suitable for growth in different individuals. Vedanta [the most prominent of the six schools of Hindu philosophy] grants wide latitude for personal choice in religion.

That is why within Hinduism, we find religious expression in a bewildering variety of sects, rituals, beliefs and forms of worship.

We worship according to our individual spiritual development and knowledge.

A Sanskrit text draws attention to this fact of life: "The higher castes worship God in the fire, the advanced seekers meditate on Him in their own hearts, the ignorant think of Him in the image, and those who have attained to the Infinite realize His presence everywhere."

Swami Vivekananda says: Mark, the same earnest man who is kneeling before the idol tells you, "Him the sun cannot express, nor the moon, nor the star; the lightning cannot express Him, nor what we speak of as fire; through Him they shine."

But he does not abuse anyone's idol or call its worship sin. He recognizes in it a necessary stage of life. "The child is father of the man." Would it be right for an old man to say that childhood is a sin or youth a sin?

If a man can realize his divine nature with the help of an image, would it be right to call that a sin? Nor even when he has passed that stage, should he call it an error?

To the Hindu, man is not traveling from error to truth, but from truth to truth, from lower to higher truth. To him, all the religions, from the lowest fetishism to the highest absolutism, mean so many attempts of the human soul to grasp and realize the Infinite, each determined by the conditions of its birth and association, and each of these marks a stage of progress; and every soul is a young eagle soaring higher and higher, gathering more and more strength, till it reaches the Glorious Sun.

Shri Ramakrishna experimented with the various methods of Hinduism and followed the paths prescribed by the scriptures; he followed also the scriptural paths of Christianity and Islam and realized their essences to be one essence—he saw God in everything.

This is the opinion of one venerable monk about Ramakrishna: In his life one finds an unsurpassed record of God-intoxication, spotless purity and suing [wooing] love for humanity. And then with his mind broad as the sky, strong as adamant and pure as crystal, he plumbed the depths of spirituality, collected the treasures of the entire wisdom of the past, tested their worth and reinvested them with a fresh hallmark of truth. From his lips the world hears the voice of the ancient prophets; in his life it discovers the meaning of the scriptures. Through his life and teachings man has got an opportunity of learning the old lessons afresh.

By his deep and extensive spiritual experience of the entire range of Upanishadic truths, Ramakrishna surely heralded an epoch-making Hindu renaissance, which is expected to bring in its train a general spiritual upheaval all over the world. He discovered the wonderful spirit of Catholicism within the sealed bosom of Hinduism and released it through his own realizations to spread all over the globe and liberalize all communal and sectarian views.

His advent marks a new era in the evolution of religion, when all sects and all communities, keeping intact the individual characteristics of their faiths, will transcend the limitation of a narrow and sectarian outlook and thus pave the path for a universal Brotherhood.

After submitting himself to intense austerities and spiritual practices according to Hinduism and other religions with fervor to realize God, Shri Ramakrishna became a harmonious blend of all religions.

The Master's thesis, "As many faiths, so many paths," is likely to be misunderstood, unless we accept one God as the sole support and substratum of the manifold universe.

Therefore, Swamiji says: We must learn that truth may be expressed in a hundred thousand ways, and that each of these ways is true as far as it goes.

We must learn that the same thing can be viewed from a hundred different standpoints, and yet be the same thing.

Take for instance the sun. Suppose a man standing on the earth looks at the sun when it rises in the morning; he sees a big ball. Suppose he starts on a journey towards the sun and takes a camera with him, taking photographs at every stage of his journey, until he reaches the sun. The photographs of each stage will be seen to be different from those of the other stages; in fact, when he gets back, he brings with him so many photographs of so many different suns, as it would appear; and yet we know that the same sun was photographed by the man at the different stages of his progress.

Even so it is with the Lord. Through high philosophy or low, through the most exalted mythology or the grossest, through the most refined ritualism or arrant fetishism, every sect, every soul, every nation, every religion, consciously or unconsciously, is struggling upward, towards God; every vision of truth that man has is a vision of Him and none else.

Suppose we all go with vessels in our hands to fetch water from a lake. One has a cup, another a jar, another a bucket, and so forth, and we all fill our vessels. The water in each case naturally takes the form of the vessel carried by each of us. He who brought the cup has the water in the form of a cup; he who brought the jar—his water is in the shape of a jar, and so forth; but, in every case, water, and nothing but water, is in the vessel.

So it is in the case of religion; our minds are like these vessels, and each one of us is trying to arrive at the realization of God. God is like that water filling these different vessels, and in each vessel the vision of God comes in the form of the vessel. Yet He is One. He is God in every case. This is the only recognition of universality that we can get.

We are all at different stages of evolution; our minds and emotions vary. Swamiji accepted this variation: "You cannot make all conform to the same ideas: that is a fact, and I thank God that it is so. . . . Now, if we all thought alike, we would be like Egyptian mummies. . . . Variation is the sign of life and it must be there." "Just as we have recognized unity by our very nature, so we must also recognize variation."

Source: Adapted from Tathagatananda, Swami. "Fundamental Principles of Vedanta". New York: Vedanta Society of New York.