

# Harmony among Religions in 21<sup>st</sup> Century: A Vedantic Approach towards Making Interfaith Dialouge

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**Abstract:** Inter-religious dialogue among different ethnicity and social background is a unique experience especially for those who newly become believers of certain faith. Dialogue is a process of conversation through speech. This paper shows that Vedanta has always been an important part of people's lives, providing a sense of deeper meaning and purpose to their everyday lives. Vedanta have also had a very mixed track record historically—on whether they have been used as a force to justify conflict, violence, war, and indeed hatred of others.

**Keywords:** Interfaith Dialogue, Spiritual Enrichment, Vedanta, Vivekananda, Modern Age.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

### Interfaith Dialogue:

“Religion is outraged when outrage is committed in the name of religion”, Gandhi declared. Religion has served throughout history as the ultimate authority in giving meaning to life. In reaching to the roots of motivation, religion has awakened in peoples the capacities to love, to forgive, to create, to dare greatly, to sacrifice for the common good, and to discipline the impulses of our baser instincts. It is a unique power in humanity's collective life. So far as the history of interfaith dialogue is concerned it is as old as the religions themselves. Since time immemorial when people used to live in peace with their neighbours, they used to have dialogue to understand them, not least because understanding is a strategy for defence, but also because for as long as there is dialogue wars are delayed. There are many recorded history of interfaith initiatives and dialogue throughout the ages. In modern times one of the notable events of the history of interfaith dialogue is the Parliament of the World's Religions, particularly in the year 1893, the first attempt to create a global dialogue of faiths. The event was celebrated by another conference on its centenary in 1993. This led to a new series of conferences under the official title "Parliament of the World's Religions".

Dialogue is a conversation of two or more persons. It could be defined as the intention to seek mutual understanding on an issue or situation through inquiry and learning that can lead to consensus. Thus Interreligious dialogue is a conversation of two or more believers of different religions or living faiths. Plato says, Interreligious dialogue is a way that God the Father through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit has shown his people for a bright future. It includes human interaction and relationships. It can take place between individuals and communities and on many levels. Dialogue provides access to windows of understanding of how others define themselves and challenges us to grow in our own faith through the experience of the other. It necessitates a shift in paradigm, asking us to embrace those we have previously excluded or demonized. Dialogue is the first step toward accommodating or making space within oneself for the other. It is essential that we move away from defining ourselves over and above an enemy “other.” This is an important measure in establishing a peaceful relationship. Summarily,

- An encounter of people of different religions and faiths in an atmosphere of freedom and openness for each partner to listen and understand himself and the other. One person speaks and another listens and responds and vice versa.
- A sharing -conversation- of the truth found in different religions and faiths. Though the truth must be said, we need to know how, when and to whom to articulate it.
- A working and walking together in search of what is good and right with the desire of living together and in communion.
- Living together in spite of our differences. Differences make sense then they are well understood.
- Affirms that mutual understanding and interreligious dialogue constitute important dimensions of the dialogue among civilizations and of the culture of peace.

Interreligious dialogue is necessary for peace. Plato says: "*He seems to me to have thought the world foolish in not understanding that all are always at war with one another; and if in war there ought to be common meals and certain persons regularly appointed under others to protect an army, they should be continued in peace*". There are several aspects of mutual spiritual enrichment that are found in interreligious dialogue. These often include:

- Intensity and character of spiritual life
- Prayer life
- Ethics and morality
- Social norms
- Practical life

For dialogue to be meaningful, it is also important to convey to the other that religious space is contested by many factions and that there are many perspectives within each religious tradition. Furthermore, acknowledging the diversity and plurality of views held within one's own tradition is indicative of that tradition's ability to tolerate and accept views that are not considered normative. When people engage in dialogue, they soon realize that they hold a great number of convictions and values in common and face similar difficulties and challenges. Recognition of common values and human concerns allows a group to work with others. This is because peaceful relations between human beings are grounded on a community's construction of an order based on egalitarianism, justice, and a shared concern for the moral and social well-being of all its citizens.

We also have noticed in this century the concern of some world leaders over religious revival; we also note their efforts to block the forward advance of ethical, social and political life among all peoples in the wake of the failed ideologies that were very influential in the last century; they are frightened by this because some perceive religious revival as a source of increase struggle and dissension. Their attitude is found most notably among those fanatics, here and there, who sow the seeds of evil by calling for the clash of civilizations which they characterize as the end of history.

We today are called upon to invest in this mutual humanism by fashioning international programs that give concrete form to these mutual views and that are consonant with the perspective of many who face the same threats and similar problems. Although not an end in itself-without doubt-it is however the ideal method to cement relations between peoples, to bridge the chasm that separates them, and to eliminate differences and lack of cooperation in order to surmount the walls of separation that have historically caused most of the problems and conflicts.

All the world's religions are rooted in active nonviolence. Islam means peace. Judaism upholds the vision of shalom, where people beat swords into plowshares and study war no more. Gandhi exemplified Hinduism as the spiritual life of active nonviolence. Buddhism calls for compassion toward all living beings. Even Christianity requires active and creative non-violence. Often the interaction among religions takes place is at the highest level, where the people are open and do not have prejudices. It is at lower levels that people become insecure and develop a football team mentality: "*This is my football team and the other religions are opposing football teams!*" With such an attitude, we compete and fight.

## 2. VEDANTA AND INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

We do not find any specific term for interfaith dialogue in Vedanta tradition. However, we do find two words for dialogue: *Kathopakathana*, lit., "talking/intensive talking," and *Samvāda*, "speaking together". While *Kathana* (as in *kathopakathana*) also includes the meaning "Conversing", *Vāda* (as in *Samvāda*) has developed quite distinctly the specified meaning of an emphatic or formulated speech-assertion doctrine. Other associated terms are *Lapanā* (talking), *Alapana* (addressing), *Sallāpa* (conversation), and *Vivāda*, (dispute, contention). There are two terms for communication--*Nivedana* (lit. making one know) and *Anamana-Sambhandha* (binding together one and the other). According to the tradition, from that day onwards, in an almost fatherly way, he exhorted his subjects in how to live in harmony with one another, in spite of their differences.

Sacred Books of Hinduism are divided into two groups, namely *Srutis* and *Smritis*. *Sruti* means heard, perceived, understood, or revealed. They are considered Divine in origin. They include *Vedas* and *Upanishads* (Vedanta). *Smriti* means remembered, or from memory or from thought process. *Vedas* consist of four parts--*Samhita*, *Brahmana*, *Aranyaka* and *Upanishad*. *Samhita* portion consists of *Mantras* used in rituals. *Isavasya* Upanishad is different in the sense it belongs in the *Samhita* portion of *Shukla Yajur Veda*. The ideas in it are elaborated further in *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*.

The Upanishad or Vedanta begins with *Om* and *Atha*, two of the holiest words in Hinduism. *Om* denotes the supreme Brahman. *Atha* denotes now or hereafter. It implies that one is fit to study about Brahman only after one has finished studying the six philosophies and have mastered various other topics like logic conversation or dialogue etc.

Vedanta does not refer to any sectarian process of religion. It is the eternal function of the eternal living entities in relationship with the eternal Supreme Lord. The English word religion is a little different from *Sanatana-Dharma*. Religion conveys the idea of faith, and faith may change. One may have faith in a particular process, and he may change this faith and adopt another, but *Sanatana-Dharma* refers to that activity which cannot be changed.

The *Prashna Upanishad* states that in the beginning God created *prana*, that is, *Hiranyagarbha*. This is also known as the 'world egg' or primal matter, the germ from which the perishable beings are created. The Divine Essence (God) Itself is beyond any distinctions and is without qualities (*gunas*).

The Rig Veda, an ancient text of Sanatana Dharma, declares: Truth is one; sages speak of it in different ways. The teachings of all dharmas, Vedic, Judeo-Christian, Islamic, Sikhism and other, as well as the words of the saints, great religious scholars and poets, all emphasize this fundamental oneness of Truth.

In the Bhagavad-Gita, Lord Krishna also advises Arjuna to meditate upon his form beyond the perishable and imperishable, which is Absolute and One. The Holy Qu'ran is also filled with references to the unity of God. And the Lord's Prayer, the most common prayer of Christianity, addresses God as our Father, the Father common to us all.

Vedic dharma has its temples, Christianity its churches, and Islam its mosques. But the real temple is the heart. God is attained within: the path to God lies within one's own self, as all the saints have taught this with unanimity. This is core theme of Vedanta.

Engaging in dialogue with other religions of the world is no bar at all. As Vedanta is neither a system of dogmas, nor a doctrine of "materialism", as the term matter is generally understood in atheistic religions. The Shankara exhorted his disciples not to take anything on blind faith, not even his words. Rather, they should listen, and then examine the teachings for themselves, so that they might be convinced of its truth. He expressed his own intention regarding religion in terms of three vows. He vowed to do everything in his power:

- To help others to realize the heart of their own religion.
- To work for mutual good understanding among the religions.
- To co-operate in dragging the world out from under the power of materialism.

People must understand the core of their own tradition in order to have inter-religious exchange and cooperation. Only when we can speak from our own deep experiences of our respective traditions will there be a basis for understanding the religions of others. He gives the following assumptions of inter-religious faith---

- Religion is not necessary in the modern world. That we have somehow advanced beyond the need for religion.

- Religion should not enemy of socio-economic development.
- Non-Religious phenomena such as psychic powers and emotional exuberance are religious or spiritual.
- Religion is not necessary in the modern world. That we have somehow advanced beyond the need for religion.
- It should be free from greed, hatred, and delusion.
- It should be easy to recognise an element of truth here.
- Value charity, non-violence, spiritual education, moral thought and action, devotion, and service to God.
- Value qualities such as humility, tolerance, compassion, cleanliness, self-control, simplicity, steadiness, knowledge, honesty, and personal integrity.
- Value and respect the right to life of all other living beings, be they human, animal, aquatic, or plant life.
- Recognise the institution of the family to be an essential element in maintaining social stability and promoting spiritual values.

Vedanta points out the oneness of existence and it calls upon man to realize this oneness in this very life. In its universal appeal, it teaches that different paths of spiritual practices ultimately lead man to the same Truth that is called by different names by different religions. When man realizes this Supreme Truth, he reaches a state of perfection. This is the same state that Jesus Christ speaks of in his Sermon on the Mount – “*Be thou perfect even as thy father in heaven is perfect.*”

Vedanta is an applied science, a practical science and a practical religion. It helps man build up his character, not only for his own good but also for the welfare of mankind. A true Vedantin (follower of Vedanta) is an ideal servant of humanity, for he offers his service to men with the consciousness that all living beings are veritable forms of god. His life is a blessing for all living beings, as selfless service is his nature. The life of such an ideal man is a living benediction to his fellow beings for he follows a life of complete selflessness, consecration and love, and becomes a lasting force to promote peace and happiness for all.

Vedanta expressed his own intention regarding religion in the following terms of three modes:

- To help others to realize the heart of their own religion.
- To work for mutual good understanding among the religions.
- To cooperate in dragging the world out from under the power of materialism.

The call to dialogue emanated from the heart of the whole World. It was an expression of the sincere desire of the Vedanta to choose dialogue as the strategic option to reduce crises, to overcome the differences that confront our today's life, and to concentrate instead on positive cooperation in the spirit of communality. It was an expression of their desire to provide peoples with the opportunity to know each other and to know each other's cultures and the full extent of their heritage and uniqueness and to distant themselves from past judgments and pains that brought no relief or comfort to them.

Swami Vivekanada had a mandate to invigorate humanity with the message of Vedanta: the philosophy and wisdom accumulated over time by humans immersed in thought, guided by reason and enriched in spiritual experience. Although this school of philosophy started and flourished in the Indian subcontinent the wealth of this wisdom applies to the entire world, beyond geographical boundaries.

The world is currently trying to reorganize at a larger, globally interdependent system level, while honoring both global and local needs of people, and both our unity, as well as our diversity, including of cultures and religions. Such transition periods are always difficult for some people, and require more forward thinking people to aid other people in addressing their fears about the increasing diversity they are encountering, and how their needs will still be met in this increasingly diverse and interdependent world.

Vedanta views the promotion of peace, harmony and unity as her primary duty. There is only one community and it consists of all peoples. They have only one origin, since God made the whole human race inhabit the entire earth. They have only one ultimate destiny, God, whose providence, goodness, and plan for salvation extend to all. Each religion has

its own ideals and ideas; each community has its own traditions and beliefs. The relevance and necessity of the 'dialogue' is more explicit here. Dialogue is the way with which mutual relation can be made possible. It "is more a matter of entering into the life stream of people and growing in deeper friendly relationships with them than dwelling by experts on the subtle nuances and vagaries of philosophy.

### 3. CONCLUSION

However, the hopeful among the followers of religion are aware that they possess the capacity of mutually shared values and shared views that makes possible the cooperation of most thinking people to confront and suppress the international threats in a world that, after all, resembles a small village, where what happens to the individual impacts the collective. In multi-religious context, dialogue refers to "*All positive and constructive inter-religious relations with individuals and communities of other faiths which are directed at mutual understanding and enrichment in obedience to truth and respect for freedom*".

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