

Philosophy and Progress

Vols. LXVII-LXVIII, January-June, July-December, 2020

ISSN 1607-2278 (Print), DOI : <https://doi.org/10.3329/pp.v67i1-2.60181>

**RELIGIOUS HARMONY AS THE GATEWAY
TO SOCIAL HARMONY AND PEACE: AN
APPROACH FROM LORD BUDDHA AND SWAMI
VIVEKANANDA**

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Abstract

This short paper argues that interreligious and intra-religious harmony is a necessary condition for social harmony, peace and progress. It is an attempt to develop arguments in favour of the above thesis with special reference to the teachings of Buddha and Vivekananda. Buddha taught human beings to be rational, analytical and moral in way of life. Buddha, therefore, taught openness, interdependence and middle path. Vivekananda also argues for universal religion which is based on scientific, rational and compassionate human relations. He considers that the service of human beings is the service of God. It seems to be a direct impact of the compassionate teachings of Buddha upon Vivekananda. Both of them have indirectly contributed to what is called today the philosophical doctrine of Religious Pluralism

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which rests on the principle of ‘live and let live’. Both of them were against all kinds of ‘dogmatism, fanaticism and bigotry’. The proposed form of religious harmony is one of the golden ways or middle paths today for addressing many global issues for social harmony, peace and progress.

Key words: unity, universality, rājavāda, DārāShikuh, religious pluralism

Teachings of both Buddha and Swami Vivekananda (henceforth Vivekananda) have immense impact for addressing the global issues in general and Asian issues in particular. Buddha taught us to be rational and moral in our approach to life and the world. Buddha emphasized critical analysis and he was against all kinds of dogmatism and unscientific customs, which is, in other words, superstition. It is interesting to note here that Buddha encouraged debate, discussion and even dissent in philosophical debate in assembly (sabhāgriha) and not in kingly debate which is called ‘rājavāda’. The kingly debate which is devoid of openness is discouraged by Buddha. In a debate of scholars (paṇḍitavāda) truth is the goal and people must share their thoughts and learn from the views of others. Canonical literature contains record of many such debates, such as in *Milindapanho*, the Questions of the king Milinda. “To judge the purity of gold, it is burnt, cut and rubbed. In the same way, carefully examine the teachings I gave you. If you find truth in them, follow them zealously, do not have hatred for others, simply because it is not ours... Oh Bhiksu! Examine what is said by me through critical reason before admitting it. Please do not admit it just out of blind reverence or faith upon me”¹

There is another such reference. Buddha’s meeting with the Kalamas of Kesaputta: “It is proper for you, Oh! Kalamas, to doubt, to be uncertain, do not be led by reports, or tradition, or hearsay. Do not be led by the authority of religious texts, nor by mere logic or inference, nor by considering appearances, or by delight in speculative opinions, nor by seeming possibilities, nor by the idea, is this ascetic our teacher. But rather, when you yourselves know

[that] certain things are unwholesome and wrong, [that such] things are censured by the wise, and when undertaken, such things lead to harm, [then] abandon them.”² There is no fear of losing one’s faith by coming into contact with the faith of others.

The basic aim of all religions is to control the mind. An undisciplined mind harbours evil thought which stimulate evil action. Buddhism, which is called *saddhamma*, welcomes human fraternity and a sense of brotherhood among the followers of different institutional religious faith. In the coming years we can boost our religious faith identity only by discovering the other-side of our own faith through dialogue. A single faith understood as against the faith of others is no longer adequate in the discovery of full humanity. Each of us is invited to encounter at least one believer of a different faith in tolerance and humility. In doing so, we will not lose any faith within ourselves and within others. We will find full human identity and dignity through dialogue. The basic philosophy of Buddhism gives an important message to the world, “Live and let live.” That is why for the purpose of introducing Buddhism there is no record of interference or damage to any other religion. Buddhists do not regard the existence of other religions as a hindrance to worldly progress and peace. The spirit of Buddhism does not have any interest to convert the followers of other religion to Buddhism. Lord Buddha himself taught many varied methods and they all work harmoniously to help a wide spectrum of different types of people. It is important to respect all traditions, both within Buddhism and outside Buddhism.

Vivekananda was much indebted to Buddha and considered Buddha as “the greatest soul-power that has ever manifested ... the greatest, the boldest preacher of morality that the world ever saw, the greatest preacher of equality”.³ He was much impressed by Buddha’s teaching of universal love for all living beings. However, he wishes to save Buddha’s teaching along with the Vedantic reconciliation of understanding ‘other’ as an alternative to oneself through the extension of first person consciousness to others. However, this philosophic prerequisite will directly enable us to discuss the

problem of social harmony through religious harmony⁴ as it is a common issue in all the countries of South Asian region today. This also forms a major issue in modern study of philosophy of religion.

Vivekananda tries to understand the problem of social harmony chiefly through religious harmony which is grounded on a philosophy of ontological unity of mankind. And this unity is based on Vedanta philosophy. It is known as practical Vedanta in the sense that it is grounded on the application of this universal unity of all creatures in practice.⁵ This is also the logical ground for intra-religious and interreligious dialogue for socio-religious harmony. It is based on the Self as universal and religious way of life based on this. This attitude permits any person to have a choice of adhering to any religion. It does not preach 'uniformity'. On the contrary, it appeals to 'universality'. No religion obviously can have the monopoly to 'holiness, purity and truth'. Harmony among religions is a necessary condition for peace in society. In the absence of religious harmony and peace in a multi-religious society there cannot be any sustainable development and in the absence of sustainable development, there cannot be prosperity and peace.

The first step in understanding harmony of religions is to recognize the differences that exist among different sects of the same religion and among different religions. This is the basis of 'yatamata, tatapatha' (in Bengali) — 'many views, many paths'.⁶ Harmony of religion is, therefore, not 'indifferentism' which admits no difference among religions and claims that all religions are more or less the same. Such a claim only gives us a kind of simplistic understanding founded on peoples' 'ignorance' of diversity of religions.⁷ In a religiously pluralistic society such as India, it is always imperative that the followers of each religion should have an opportunity to know the fundamentals of other religions. There is no question of dominance by any particular religion and the differences among religions are to be overcome through constant dialogue with mutual respect. We are to work together for collective good and sustainable development and for this; we must be ready

to give up the belief that ‘my religion is more genuine and true than that of the others’. The quarrel over superiority of one’s own religion is analogous to the childish quarrel over ‘my dog is better than your dog’. For a spiritual person religion is like a ferry through which other people also cross the watery body of this world. At a certain point everybody is to leave the ferry and take a leap alone to arrive at the end of the watery body. Unless one takes the leap one cannot realize that other co-passengers also reach the same place. Each religious tradition has its own individual uniqueness. In other words, today we need to be educated that my religion is *only one among many*.⁸ For peace and prosperity, we also need to be cooperative, constructive and positive in our interaction with the people of other religions and to be educated how, in spite of differences, we can work for a ‘meeting and commonly sharable’ ground through dialogue.⁹

Once this is achieved, no longer the diversity of religions will act as a hindrance to worldly peace and progress.¹⁰ Besides, for the recognition of difference among religions and for harmony of religions we are to go beyond what is ordinarily known by the word ‘tolerance’.¹¹ Passive tolerance to other religions is not enough for religious harmony.¹² Universal ‘acceptance’ of others’ faith, as good as one’s own, is a stronger ground for religious harmony and peace. It is not just a fact of mere theoretical admission of the multiplicity of religion, but of ‘engagement, involvement and participation’. Naturally, the attitude of disrespect and defeat is absent in genuine approach to understand others’ religion. “Religions become dangerous only when they become rigid and will not move further.”¹³ The third factor of religious harmony is the scope for intra-religious and interreligious harmony. Intra-religious harmony is the harmony among different sects of the same religion. Both intra-religious and interreligious harmony may be sought through dialogue. To address this issue political and social considerations are as important as theological and mystical considerations. The first two can oppose fundamentalism and the denial of distributive justice using religion. On the contrary, through the socio-political factor, peace through

communal harmony may be achieved. Theological factor for harmony of religions consists of the proposal for modification of doctrine regarding some practices of rituals in view of the changing socio-cultural milieu. Mystical approach has a direct evidential place where the direct experience of the reality as such is given more importance than the Scriptural knowledge.

Vivekananda's interpretation of the issue concerning religion and culture has the implication of transcending various commonly known 'world views' and it strengthens the application of the principle of 'live and let live'. It gives humanity a new light in mental and social levels that human being himself or herself is the maker of his/her own fate. Like Buddha, Vivekananda asks us 'to be our own lamp'— 'ātmadipobhava'. Like Buddha he also teaches not to accept anything as true only out of reverence or blind faith to anybody or anything but to analyse it critically and then either accept or reject it. But the application of rationality through critical analysis only is not sufficient for the well being of oneself and society. We must add moral consideration and great compassion to our rational approach. In other words, there should be a complete reconciliation of 'head and heart'. There is no antagonism between religion as pure spirituality and science. If some practices are found dogmatic and not conducive to the discoveries of science it must be given up. The earlier it is done, the better it is, according to Vivekananda.

Similarly, Vivekananda speaks of 'universality' instead of 'uniformity' of religion. Universal religion is founded in universal principles of religious consciousness and it reconciles the apparent contradictions faced by different religions. Religious harmony is a precondition for social harmony. This understanding of harmony of religions is integrally connected with the fact of plurality of human existence in terms of identities, cultures and religions with different sets of moral values. We argue for the thesis that the great religious traditions have important lessons to learn from each other and much to share, because each religion represents man's response to natural and social environment in a historical context and as

such various religions are to be treated as varieties of responses to different natural environments. Each religion must assimilate the spirit of others and yet preserve its 'individuality and grow'. It is relevant in today's world-context to address religious exclusivism, fanaticism and terrorism and also in the context of destructive activities and crime against humanity using the name of religion by political institutions throughout the world. Why should we follow pluralism in living and working together? The answer is: for the sake of distributive justice and good for all. And unless we admit the logic of pluralism and educate ourselves in pluralistic values, there is no hope for getting rid of dogmatism, communalism, fanaticism concerning religion and interreligious conflicts that arise out of misusing religious sentiments as means in today's world. Terrorists who are using religion do not believe in true spirituality and they are religiously exclusivist. They are trained as blind believers of 'closed dogma'. Blind faith in religious exclusivism is a necessary condition for cultivating aggressiveness, fundamentalism and fanaticism. An out and out exclusivist cannot join dialogue. On the contrary, philosophical approach of religious pluralism is a prerequisite for interreligious dialogue. It is to be noted here that if there is a determined fanatic community of the followers of any institutional religion who does not wish to participate, we will never have an interreligious dialogue. In fact, "hostility between the religions was generated theologians, who studied the ancient books, recreating what they believed to be a purer doctrine, and urging obedience to it as cure for all discontents."¹⁴ New scenario arises before us. We are to deal with them in the light of their own individual features. The fundamentalists of religion seek to view everything from their particular standpoint, from narrow and one-sided mind-set of using religion as a means of capturing power.

Vivekananda's understanding of society and pluralism presupposes 'others' as having different alternative identity without any sense of exclusivity. In the context of religion it gives an individual to travel spiritually towards the value world of another tradition which can enrich each other with new insight and wisdom. The logic is: "If

it be true that God is the centre of all religions, and that each of us is moving towards Him along one of these radii, then it is certain that all of us must reach the centre. And at the centre where all *radii* meet, all our differences will cease; but until we reach, difference there must be.”¹⁵ A notion of Universal Religion founded on the unity of humankind gives the logical foundation of interreligious dialogue.¹⁶

Plurality of existence in terms of religion and culture would then be rendered as a *thing of beauty* on the basis of common sharable grounds in spite of differences. The conflict between religions is contrary to pure spirituality which is the very essence of religion. Non-violence, moral consciousness, benevolence, love etc. are essence of spirituality. In today’s world it is reasonable to recommend patience and interfaith understanding through dialogue. Here we may recall the scholarly dialogue as presented in ‘The Questions of the King Milinda’. The aim of such a dialogue is to discover common sharable grounds to unite them. We need to solve the contemporary problems with creativity in order to see peace in this world. The passage of rationality handed down by our tradition may show the way out. We are to use the method of ‘distancing nearness’ (astonishingly) to understand tradition. It is opposite to ‘orthodoxy’. Those who are against reforming or adding to the old practices and thoughts are orthodox and ritualistic in the name of ‘Puritanism’. They are against the idea of progresses. One of our duties today is to oppose this blind and orthodox view of religion with open-mindedness. As we historically inherit the old practices and thoughts we should also get a proper blending of fresh knowledge and gift of science with these. Whatever is old is not always as such good. We are to enrich our own thinking and conduct considering the relevance of place and time. It proposes to clean up the old bottle to hold the vintage. We should not allow any blind obedience to Scripture. For peace and development we are to be open-ended to welcome the development of science, philosophy and culture and liberate ourselves from one-sided dominance of the ‘old creeds and dogmas’. Though we inherit the past, we must claim freedom from the bondage in the past.¹⁷ Our one dimensional

identity such as Hindu or Muslim or Christian creates a solitarist illusion which “can be invoked for the purpose of dividing people into uniquely hardened categories.” The denial of plurality as well as the rejection of choice in matters of identity can produce an astonishingly narrow and misdirected view.”¹⁸ It is historically true that peaceful co-existence of different views and religious ways of life is possible on the basis of the logic of alternation. It does not merely tolerate, but does accept others. This is conducive to peace. If we ignore our multidimensional identity, it invites violence and absence of peace. In societal level it becomes disturbed if there is lacking of intra-religious understanding. All religions speak of peace. Today the choice before us is between living together in peace or dying together in conflicts. The recognition of differences among religions is a precondition for a proper understanding of harmony of religions. Theologians have a role to play today for bringing inter-religious harmony. Some of the religions contain some views against harmony. The task is to reinterpret such views in favour of harmony of religions to suit the need of the day. The Christian churches start dialogue with other religions. Today we must admit that we have different set of practices in different religions because of multiple socio-cultural and historical contexts. In order to keep our dialogue, which is called *Sambada* in Indian vernacular, alive and dynamic the approach of religion must be open to humanity. Even a non-believer can share a platform of dialogue. We must try to realize that the basic ethical principle is one of the common grounds of all great religions, namely cultivation of moral sense and social concern—self-restraint, obligations, responsibilities, solidarity, sympathy, to lérance and truthfulness. Political will is also important here. Secular government denies the legitimacy to fundamentalism and social injustice. The theocratic state also wants to follow a policy of religious toleration in order to prevent communal disturbances for the sake of its stability and development. Unfortunately, our *infatuation about religion* makes us *fanatics* and religious fanaticism multiplies itself due to dirty politics of achieving power. Here we become over-powered by the delusion of pseudo-religion. Fanatics

are similar to lunatics. Religious fanatics cannot recognise God if He appears before him/her with a dress unfamiliar to the description of his own religious Scripture. But a lower animal like dog never fails to recognise its master even if he appears before it with an unusual dress. Today we are to look for a philosophy of “active co-existence, our fundamental attitudes that we are the possessors of light and others are grovelling in darkness will have to be abandoned.”¹⁹

Another great son of South-East Asia was Prince Muhammad Dārā Shikuh who as a student of comparative religion tried to show the essential points agreement between Hinduism and Islam “without exalting or undermining either”.²⁰ For Dārā, ‘Truth is not the monopoly of any religion’... ‘but it can be found in all religions and at all times.’²¹ It was Dārā Shikuh who for the first time translated at least 50 Upaniṣads in persian with the title ‘Sir-e-Akbar’ and from this Persian translation a French scholar Anquetil Duperron translated Upaniṣads into French and Latin in 1801-1802. From that Latin translation Schopenhauer and Schelling, two German philosophers came to know about Upaniṣads and influenced by its thought. Unfortunately the spirit of interreligious dialogue and understanding for societal harmony and peace once initiated by Dārā Shikuh has not been continued in our Indian subcontinent, perhaps, because of ‘politic-priest-craft-combined’ force. When this combined force dominates, religion becomes sectarian and communal. It also misuses the stereo-types and archaic-biological nature of people and their religious sentiments as vote-banks for political gain. In this circumstance, the spirit of dialogue and understanding for harmony, peace and prosperity initiated in the teachings of Buddha and literary works of Dārā Shikuh we may read in our deep study of Vivekananda.

Let us now *re-read* our philosophic heritage with Buddha, Dārā Shikuh and Vivekananda. It would help us to realize the always open, free and potentially creative pluralistic mind to reshape ourselves in the light of the vision which enables us to see truth in others’ views, in others’ ways of life along with the simultaneity of existence.

This would create another dimension of reading Buddha's Middle Path today. Let us, like Romain Rolland,²² wish to feel an electric shock within our nerves from our re-reading of Vivekananda to free ourselves from dogmatism, fanaticism, sectarianism, intolerance and terrorism associated with religion. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, perhaps for this reason, calls Vivekananda a 'spokesman of the Divine Logos'.²³

References:

1. "tāpācchedāccanikaṣātsuvarṇamivapaṇḍitaiḥparīkṣa-ācogrāhyāmbhikṣave,natugauravād" (TattvasamgrahaofŚāntideva, 3587).
2. Digha Nikāya, 1.4, edited in 3 vols and translated into English by T. W. Rhys David, Dialogues of the Buddha, Pali Text Society, 1899—1921.
3. The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, (Henceforth, CW), 1997, 4: 136-137 , AdvaitaAshrama.
4. CW,1989, 2: 482-483.
5. CW, 1989, 2:289-358; There are four lectures with the title "Practical Vedanta" delivered in London on Nov 10,12,17 &18, 1896.
6. The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, (Eng. Tr. Swami Nikhilananda), Chennai Ramakrishna Math, 1996:191; the same spirit is focused when Kenopanishad (2.3) says 'one who claims s/he knows the reality, in fact, does not know. And one who thinks that s/he does not know s/he, in fact, does know the reality' (Eng. tr. mine).
7. CW, 1997, 4 : 7&8; Swami Bhajanananda, Harmony of Religions, Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, Kolkata, 2008:39 &42.
8. Ibid,1989,2 : 500; 'ā no bhadrākratavoviśvataḥ'-- Rgveda, 1.89.10; Keith Ward, "Truth and Diversity of Religion", Religious Studies (Cambridge), 26.2 1990: 16.
9. Rami Mark Shapiro, "Moving the Fence: One Rabbi's View of Interreligious Dialogue" included in Interreligious Dialogue, ed. M.D. Bryant and F. Flinn, New Era Book Paragon House, New York, 1989:32.

10. See, John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1989: 239-240; This difficulty is resolved by philosopher Kalidas Bhattacharyya. He says that “according to Hindu tradition the truth has thousand summits and thousand feet. But every summit and every foot are not inferior to the other. Truth is not the summation of all forms. Each form is the ultimate truth, the absolute Brahman.” For detail discussion, see Bhattacharyya, *Possibility of Different Types of Religion*, Asiatic Society, Kolkata, 1982: 76; Swami Bhajanananda, *Harmony of Religions*, Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, Kolkata, 2008:42; *Ibid*, 39.
11. CW, 1992, 1: 329-332; Two elements are common to all great religions of the world. 1) The experience of transcendent Holy or Divine Reality usually known by the blanket English term God, a Reality in which being and value are one and 2) the interpretation or expression of this religious experience in three different words – intellectual, volitional and social. In religion mere expression in the form of performing divine service or observing cultic rituals without corresponding divine experience is meaningless, because it would be a mere bundle of rituals devoid of any content and in the same way mere religious experience without expressional outlet in the form of interpretation would be a kind of ‘dumb mysticism’ incapable of contributing to ‘social cohesion and aesthetic value’. Because of organized religions’ political and economic interests a long history of bloodshed has been experienced by the human race. Political and economic interests of power-elites are properly served in the guise of religion. Ramakrishna-Vivekananda-tradition is respectful to all religions and celebrates the festivals of major world religions. To quote Vivekananda, “ That for all devilries that religion is blamed with, religion is not at all in fault: no religion ever persecuted men, no religion ever burnt witches, no religion ever did any of these things. What then incited people to do these things? Politics, but never religion; and if such politics takes the name of religion whose fault is that?” -- CW, *Ibid*, 4:125.
12. “I am proud to a religion which has taught the world both tolerance

and universal acceptance. We believe not only in universal toleration, but we accept all religions as true.” -- The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, AdvaitaAshrama, Kolkata, (CW), 1989, 1:3; A. NiyogiBalslev, Religious Tolerance or Acceptance?, The Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, Kolkata, 1987:32.

13. Importance of this way of approach is important and this has been beautifully expressed by Swami Vivekananda at the end of the Parliament of Religions in 1893. In his own words, “ If the World’s Parliament of Religions has shown anything to the world, it is this: It has proved to the world that holiness, purity, and charity are not exclusive possessions of any church in the world, and that every system has produced men and women of the most exalted character.”-- The World’s Parliament of Religions, Chicago: Parliament Publishing Company, 1893, 2: 1582.
14. Theodore Zeldin, *An Intimate History of Humanity*, Harper Perennial Publishers , Los Angeles, California, 1994:22-26.
15. CW, vol. II, 1992: 384-85.
16. CW, vol. III, 1984: 157.
17. According to John Hick, “The difference between the root concepts and experiences of different religions, their different and often conflicting historical and trans-historical beliefs, their incommensurable mythologies, and the diverse and ramifying belief-systems into which all these are build, are compatible with pluralistic hypothesis that great world traditions constitute different conceptions and perceptions of and responses to the Real from within the different cultural ways of being human.”—See, John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1989: 375—376.
18. Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny*, London: Penguin Group, 2006: 67.
19. S. Radhakrishnan, *The Present Crisis of Faith*, New Delhi: Orient, 1970: 154-155.

20. Dara Shikuh, *Majmā-Ul- Bāhrain* (The Mingling of the Two Oceans), Edited in Persian with English translation[partly] by M. MahfuzUIHaq, Calcutta: The Asiatic Society, 1982 (1929): 27.
21. *Ibid.*: 5.
22. Romain Rolland wrote, “Going through the pages of writings of Vivekananda at this distance of 30 years, I feel an electric shock within my nerves. In two words ‘equilibrium’ and ‘synthesis’ Vivekananda’s constructive genius may be summed up.” -- *The Life of Vivekananda and the Universal Gospel*, Kolkata, AdvaitaAshrama, 1965:281.
23. S. Radhakrishnan, “Swami Vivekananda -- A Spokesman of the Divine Logos”, *VedāntaKeśarī*, 50/4 (August), 1963:160.