

CHAPTER-4

ŚRĪ RAMAKRISHNA'S DOCTRINE OF DHARMA – SAMANVAYA OR HARMONY OF RELIGION

Religion is the most powerful factor in the evolution of humanity. From earliest times, it has provided the motive for social cohesion and social progress. Besides satisfying the spiritual needs of human beings, it also possesses the power to unite human beings in to various groups and communities. However, it is a strange paradox that this same impulse, which has contributed to human unity and welfare, has also been the cause of conflict and disagreement among mankind.¹ As a result, various quasi-religious movements like secularism, Marxism, positivism, scientific humanism, nationalism etc. have developed and spread all over the world.

4.1. Religion and dharma:

There exists a great controversy regarding the etymological meaning of religion. The dictionary meaning of religion is – “System of faith and worship, human recognition of super human controlling power, and especially of a personal God, effect of this on conduct etc.”² Max Muller, a philologist said that the root of the English word ‘religion’ is the Latin word ‘religio’ which means reverence for the gods.³ Religion also has a French root which means religious community. St. Augustine stated that the term ‘religion’ has been derived from the Latin word ‘religare’ meaning ‘to tie’ or ‘to bind’. Cicero, a writer said that it has been

derived from the word ‘relegere’ which means ‘to read over again’.⁴ Definitions of religion are also various in number. One such definition of religion is:

“Religion is an organized collection of beliefs, cultural systems and world views that relate humanity to an order of existence. Many religions have narratives, symbols and sacred histories that are intended to explain the meaning of life... or to explain the origin of life or the Universe. From their beliefs about the cosmos and human nature, people derive morality, ethics, religious laws or a preferred life style.”⁵

Edward Burnett Tylor defines religion as – “ ‘The belief in spiritual beings.’⁶” Frederick Ferre gives a definition of religion as “ ‘One’s way of valuing most comprehensively and intensively.’⁷” Theologian Paul Tillich said, “Religion is the substance, the ground, and the depth of man’s spiritual life.”⁸ William James defined religion as – “ ‘The feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine.’⁹” In modern times religion is regarded as a social institution with a functional value in human lives.

In India, ‘religion’ is called ‘*dharma*’. The term ‘*dharma*’ has been derived from the Sanskrit root ‘*dhṛ*’, which means to hold or sustain. In *Mahābhārata*, *dharma* is defined as ---

“*Dhāraṇāt dharma ityāhuḥ dharmo dhārayate prajāḥ*
Yo dhāraṇa saṁyuktaḥ sa dharma iti niścayaḥ”

(Mahābhārata, 69.58).

That is, ‘by sustenance it is called *dharma*. *Dharma* sustains the society. That which has the capacity to sustain, is indeed *dharma*’. In *Manu Smṛti*, it is stated ---

“ ‘Dharma leads to destruction when it is itself destroyed, and protects when it is safeguarded; therefore it must not be endangered, for the reason that Dharma which is harmed may not ruin us. ... One’s soul is one’s witness, and his final resort; therefore disregard not your inner self which is the highest witness of man. ... Sinners imagine that none sees them; but then the gods watch closely, as also the inner being in oneself’ ” (Manu Smṛti, viii. 15, 84, 85).

Dharma includes the entire gamut of living beings, the entire universe. It is not rigid or constant; rather it changes with the needs of the time. It removes all dualities; and all differences converge into the One Reality, which sustains everything. This is the core of *dharma* practiced in India.¹⁰

It is noteworthy that in India, a big cultural experiment was done by the *Vedic* and pre-*Vedic* people due to which a wonderful assimilation of urban and rural culture came into being. The Indus valley is the urban and the Aryans are the rural. Behind this great blending, there is a spiritual vision called ‘unity in diversity’. Diversity enriches a culture. We should focus on diversity as the central theme of spiritual unity. This is the revelation of the ancient sages and it continuously inspired India starting from the ancient to the modern period. The spirit of concord, tolerance and acceptance are the characteristics of India, which came into existence from the *Ṛg Vedic* discovery called ‘unity in religion’. It is a historic discovery in the world of religion.¹¹ The cults of the *Smṛtis* and *Purāṇas*

are the result of the forces of conservation and adaptation. In the post-*Vedic* period, Śrī Rāma has crystallized the essence of the *Vedic* religion. He is called the *Veda-puruṣa* for he is the embodiment of *Vedic dharma*. He is neither a theoretician nor a theologian; rather he is a man of action. He appeared as the savior of humanity who acted in the world and showed how *dharma* has to be lived. In other words, he preached through conduct and showed through action that *dharma* is highly practical. He is the supreme exemplifier of applied religion where truth (*satya*) and righteousness (*dharma*) become involuntary habit and conduct in the life of man.¹² Kumārila and Śaṅkara made the last supreme effort to revitalize the *Vedic* religion. The history of India gives an account of the rise of many religious teachers like Vallabhācārya, Śrī Caitanya, Rāmānuja, Rāmānanda and others who tried to reveal the essentials of religion; and to fulfill the ultimate end of Hinduism. However, it is an irony of fate that every saint and reformer concluded by finding a new sect and the spirit of intolerance became stronger than before due to the envious attachment to their own doctrines. Therefore, India had the need of a prophet to bring forth the basic truth of all religions and the spirit of tolerance; and such a prophet is Śrī Ramakrishna. He ‘synthesized’ the ideas and principles of his predecessors.¹³ Besides this, he also revived Hinduism that is basically the ‘*sanātana dharma*’; and the ancient belief that religion is universal and that there is truth in all religions.

4.2. Religion, science and faith:

Śrī Ramakrishna’s understanding of religion is based not on intellectual knowledge, but on experimental wisdom. For him, religion is not religious

knowledge about God or philosophical speculation on God; rather it is the direct experience or realization of God. Therefore, religion is realization. In order to get an experience of God, self-purification or purification of the mind is necessary. This can be illustrated as – a magnet does not attract a needle when it is covered with mud; but when the mud is removed, the magnet attracts it. In a like manner, when our mind is full of impurities, God does not attract it; but when all impurities are removed, God attracts our mind.¹⁴ Along with self-purification, the virtues of discrimination and detachment (*viveka* and *vairāgya*) are also necessary. We must discriminate between the self and the mind-body; and should discriminate well from the evil, the eternal from the ephemeral and so on. We must also free ourselves from the desire for sensual pleasures, greed etc.; and renounce all forms of self-indulgence. This attitude of distaste towards all objects is called detachment (*vairāgya*).¹⁵

It is noteworthy that man's religious inquiry cannot be completed without the blessings of God. God's grace makes the impossible possible. Spirituality is the essence of every religion and a man who follows it with purity and sincerity will be able to realize God irrespective of the religion he belongs to. To quote Śrī Ramakrishna, “ ‘just as we cannot see the face of a watchman at night until at our request he kindly turns the light of the lantern in his hand upon his own face, so we have to pray to God to reveal Himself to us and God being pleased gives us His grace and unveils His face before us’ .¹⁶” On account of the will of God, different religions have come into existence. To be more specific, God has made different religions to suit different aspirants of different temperaments. Just as a

mother prepares fish in different ways for her children – pilau, pickled fish, fried fish and so on – depending on their taste and power of digestion, so also God has provided different religious paths to suit the spiritual taste and power of assimilation of her children. All religions are true and are only so many paths leading to the same goal. Hence, we should not show disrespect to any religion; and must stick to our own religion or chosen path with whole-hearted devotion. This steadfast devotion or *Iṣṭaniṣṭhā* is one of the noticeable characteristics of Śrī Ramakrishna's spirituality or religion.¹⁷ Swami Vivekananda also stated that one infinite religion exists all through eternity and will ever exist; but this very religion express itself in various ways in various countries, languages and customs. One person manifests religion as *karma*, another as *bhakti*, a third one as *yoga* and a fourth one as *jñāna*. This implies that the same religion manifests itself in a different way both geographically and culturally; and within individuals.¹⁸ Therefore, the difference between the religions of the world is one of expression and not of substance.

In modern times, it has become customary for many people to denounce religion and praise science on the ground that religion has no scientific basis and hence is wrong. This trend began with René Descartes (1596-1650) who first brought the concept of division through x-axis and y-axis. Later on, based on this division, people began to consider mind and matter, God and world, science and religion as separate. Semitic religious concept of a single creation also causes confusion between science and religion. The essential difference between science and religion lies in the fact that science is reductionist but religion is holistic.

Science teaches us how to turn the wheel of the world, while religion teaches us the way to stop our inner wheel. Science depends on models, which help it in its discoveries; but religion does not require any model to explain God. Science is based on axioms that can be arbitrary or absurd despite the fact that they are mutually consistent. Science has its root in logic and reasoning. Scientists are doubtful about the fact whether religion is rational and consistent at all. Unlike science, religion is not axiomatic, rather it is experiential. Every religion has its root in the transcendental experience of the prophets or sages. Religion is definitely consistent and makes life meaningful; and is universally applicable. The consistency of religion can be proved by referring to the problem of infinity observed by the *Vedic* sages: “ ‘*Purṇasya purṇamadaya purṇam-eva-avashishyate*’ ” [Taking the infinitude of the infinite (universe) it remains as the infinite (Brahman) itself] (*Rg Veda*, 10.129.6). Religion is rational also and it becomes evident from the fact that it has contributed to ‘*syādvāda*’ (probability theory of *Jainism*) and the ‘*neti-neti*’ (process of negation of *Vedānta*) which are the two powerful tools of reasoning.¹⁹

In fact, science is necessary , but is not sufficient. It does not lead to complete development of human potentialities. Religion develops unity and goodwill among men. It enables us to realize the essential nature of man. The unity of existence, fellowship of man and the dignity and divinity of man are the ideals that can help us to build a happy and just social order. Both science and religion are necessary for human beings to integrate themselves with their own self and society. These together help us to overcome fanaticism, materialism and

sophistry.²⁰ By comparing the two disciplines, Swami Vivekananda said: “ ‘Science and religion are both attempts to help us out of bondage; only religion is the more ancient, and we have the superstition that it is the more holy. In a way it is, because it makes morality a vital point, and science does not.’²¹” He stated that there need not be any conflict between religion and science for they are concerned with two different realities. The effort to unify religion and science is one of the greatest contributions of Swami Vivekananda to mankind.

It is religion that sustains an individual, a society and a nation during periods of stress. Sometimes, religion is used interchangeably with faith. Faith is a factor that helps humanity in preventing disintegration and death. It has control over evil forces and is able to save man. This faith has evolved from the primitive age and involves faith in three things – (a) faith in a personal God, (b) faith in a prophet and (c) faith in a book. However, this religion of faith has certain drawbacks also. First one is that it is blind in nature for reason has no place in it; and secondly, it excludes other faiths. Thereby, it becomes the cause of conflicts and wars. Hence, though religion as faith is a powerful factor in the integration of man; yet it has acted as a disintegrating force also.²² As Swami Vivekananda said:

“ ‘... though there is nothing that has brought to man more blessings than religion, yet at the sametime, there is nothing that has brought more horror than religion ... Nothing has made the brotherhood of man more tangible than religion; nothing has bred more bitter enmity between man and man than religion. Nothing has built more charitable institutions, more hospitals for men and even for animals, than religion; nothing

has deluged the world with more blood than religion.’²³”

4.3. Diversity of religion:

Diversity is the plan of nature. Every man has his own individual temperament. Just as each man needs a coat of his own size, likewise everybody needs a specific religion which may resemble that of another man, but will necessarily be different from it.²⁴ Diversity of religion is not only a philosophical problem, but it has social, cultural and political consequences also. It becomes evident from the above that sometimes religion acts as the cause of conflicts, wars and communal riots. The reason for this is the diversity or differences among religions. However, it is not the sole cause of religious conflicts because in many countries or societies, people of diverse temperaments live together in peace and harmony.

Religious conflicts have intrinsic and extrinsic causes. Former one is the operation of certain doctrines or customs of one religion, which are contradictory to those of another religion. Latter one is the manipulation of religion by states, institutions, political parties’ etc.²⁵ Regarding the harm done by the manipulation of religion by institutions, Swami Vivekananda said:

“ ‘... No religion ever persecuted men, no religion ever burned witches, no religion ever did any of these things. What then incited people to do these things? Politics, but never [true] religion ...’²⁶” (Complete works, 1985).

During the last few centuries, due to the changes in the role of religion in human life, there occurred changes in the nature of religious conflicts also. Before the 18th century, religions were concerned with salvation. This resembles *exclusivism* according to which only one religion is true and that religion is ‘my religion’. Exclusivists regard all other religions as invalid and false. The exclusivist view is most common in monotheistic religions like Christianity, Islam and Judaism.

The religious wars and persecutions in the Middle Ages centered round the question about heaven and hell. Heaven is regarded as a place that has plenty of gardens and honey flowing rivers; while hell is full of torture. This is the most common view towards other religions called inclusivism. *Inclusivism* states that there may be truth in other religions also; but people belonging to other religions should come to my religion in this life or afterlife for ‘my religion is the best religion’.

The progressive secularization of religion began with French Revolution, Industrial Revolution etc. and it identified religion with humanistic concerns. It has resemblance to syncretism. *Syncretism* is a blending of two or more religious belief systems into a new system. It also means incorporation of beliefs from unrelated traditions into a religious tradition. It facilitates co-existence of different religious faiths and plays an important role in secular societies. However, it fails to reconcile mutually incompatible elements among religions.

In modern times, religious conflicts are not caused by doctrinal differences, but by social, economic and political issues. In other words, doctrinal and institutional differences are secondary; and this is one of the variants of universalism. *Universalism* states that all religions have an essential unity among them. It inculcates the belief that all religions are inter connected by universal beliefs and that each religion contains valid aspects. One more aspect of universalism is that there is one universal truth and this truth extends far beyond the theological, social and geographical limits. Universalism declares that all religions are equal; and, hence, it differs from pluralism, which respects diversity of religions.

Pluralism asserts that all religious beliefs and practices are valid. No single religion can claim to be the superior to all others as all religions are conditioned human responses to the one divine reality. It is, actually, an attempt at establishing harmony among religions without ignoring the uniqueness of each; and finding a way through which all religions can join hands to rejoice diversity.²⁷ Praising the pluralistic idea of religion, Swami Vivekananda said: “I pray that they may multiply so that at least there will be as many sects as human beings, and each one will have his own method, his individual method of thought in religion.”²⁸ He took pluralism one-step further and stated that pluralism must culminate in universalism.

4.4. Harmony of religion:

India is a land of religious harmony from the ancient period to till the period of independence. Religious freedom, toleration and harmony have formed

the very characteristics of Indian ethos. In India, theists, atheists, monists, dualists and monotheists live together in harmony. However, after independence communal unrest, desecration of places of worship, assassination of religious leaders, rise of fundamentalism etc. have become prevalent. Fundamentalism upholds the view that there is only one true religion and one correct way of life. As there is only one true way, so the country is under constant threat and has become a place of persecution.²⁹ In this situation, harmony of religion has become the most important and vital concern for all people. It is noteworthy that Śrī Krishna gave the teaching on harmony in the *Bhagavad Gītā* by stating:

*“Ye yathā mām prapadyante tām tathaiva
bhajāmyaham;*

Mama vartmānuvartante manuṣyāḥ pārtha sarvaśaḥ”.
(*Gītā*, 4. 11).

That is, ‘in whatever way men and women worship me, in the same way do I fulfil their desires; (it is) my path, O son of *Prthā*, (that) people tread, in all ways’. This in turn implies that though there are various paths in the world of religion, and different people follow different paths; all the paths lead to the Lord Krishna. This harmony is also the theme of one of the inscriptions of Mauryān Emperor *Aśoka* of third century B.C. In one of his rock edicts located in Sourashtra region occurs the sentence --- “*samavāya, eva Sādhuḥ*” [Concord alone is the correct way and attitude (in the field of religion...)].³⁰

Harmony of religion is different from indifferentism. Indifferentism is a philosophical concept, which states that there is no difference among religions for

they are almost same. But this idea is based on ignorance of other religions and ignorance can never be a sound basis for harmony. The very starting point of harmony of religion is the recognition of differences among religions. Harmony of religion should also be distinguished from religious toleration. Toleration means refraining from doing something worse.³¹ In this context, we can quote Swami Vivekananda:

“ ‘Not only toleration, for so-called toleration is often blasphemy, and I do not believe in it. I believe in acceptance ... Toleration means that I think that you are wrong and I am just allowing you to live ...’³²”
(Complete works, 1963).

Harmony of religion has two aspects called intra-religious harmony (harmony within each religion) and inter-religious harmony (harmony among different religions). Each religion is divided in to several major sects and a large number of minor sects. For instance, *Vaiṣṇava* and *Śaiva* sects in Hinduism; Catholic, Protestant and Eastern Churches in Christianity; Sunni, Shia and Ismaili sects in Islam and so on. Sometimes, these sects show hostility towards one another than towards other religions. As a result, intra-religious harmony becomes difficult.³³

There are four approaches to the problem of harmony of religion such as political, social, theological and mystical:

i) Political approach:

It denotes the policy adopted by the government towards religion. The government follows a policy of religious toleration and tries to prevent communal

disturbances. In a democratic country like India, this approach declares the State secular; but secularism is often regarded as being failed in India. The reason for this is that there is a lot of confusion in the understanding of the term 'secularism'. The spirit of secularism can be effectively expressed by proper understanding of the equality of all religions. It has to be understood with reference to universality of spiritual values. The cultural ethos of India does not accept secularism as opposed to religion. Nirad C. Choudhuri, an acute commentator of the contemporary events of India said: " 'In India secularism of even the highest European type is not needed, for Hinduism as a religion is itself secular, and it has sanctified worldliness by infusing it with moral and spiritual qualities. To take away the secularism from the Hindus is to make them immoral and culturally debased.'³⁴"

ii) Social approach:

The common people who live in peace with their neighbors irrespective of their religion or faith follow this approach. It consists of customs, festivals and social institutions such as Church, Mosque and Temple etc. In this approach, religions express maximum diversity.

iii) Theological approach:

It consists in re-interpreting doctrines in favour of harmony of religions. In all world religions, most of the doctrines were formulated many centuries ago; and these cannot be changed, but can be re-interpreted to suit the needs of the present-day world. In Hinduism, scriptures have been classified into two groups called the

Śruti and the *Smṛti*. *Śruti* includes the eternal truths and laws of the spiritual world revealed to the ancient *ṛsis*. These cannot be changed, but has been interpreted in different ways by *Ācāryas*. On the contrary, all other matters of religion especially man's duties and ways of life constitute the *Smṛti*. *Smṛti* can be changed or re-interpreted.

In modern times, Swami Vivekananda re-interpreted the ancient scriptures in the light of Śrī Ramakrishna's experiences. His ideas helped to establish intra-religious harmony within Hinduism and have given shape to the modern integral Hinduism, which emphasizes inter-religious harmony as a basic tenet.³⁵ In the World Parliament of Religions, Swami Vivekananda had urged to evolve a universal religion which will be a sum-total of all religions having infinite space for development. In one of his lectures in the Parliament of Religions, he said:

“Holiness, purity and charity are not the exclusive possessions of any church in the world ... if anybody dreams of the exclusive survival of his own religion and the destruction of the others, I pity for him from the bottom of my heart and point out to him that upon the banner of every religion will soon be written, inspite of resistance: ‘Help and not Fight’, ‘Assimilation and not Destruction’, ‘Harmony and Peace and not Dissension.’ ”³⁶

iv) Mystical approach:

This approach is based on the principle that apart from the revealed knowledge derived from the scriptures, it is possible to have direct experience (*aparokṣānubhuti*) of the Ultimate Reality. This principle is accepted in all the

religions of the world. One difficulty in this approach is that there is a great deal of variation among the major religions regarding the content of mystical experience. The mystical experiences of *Hindu Mira*, *Christian Teresa* and *Muslim Rabeya* are not the same. Still, all the mystics agree regarding the possibility of the direct experience of the Ultimate Reality; and this agreement serves as the basis for the establishment of harmony of religion. Śrī Ramakrishna followed this approach throughout his life. He is the only person who traversed the spiritual paths of different religions and attained transcendental experiences through all of them.³⁷

4.5. Śrī Ramakrishna and the doctrine of harmony of religion:

Śrī Ramakrishna believed in the variety of religious experience and belief. This idea of variety is the uniqueness of his religion. Religion, according to him, means direct experience and not rituals or dogmas. Religion is something to be felt in one's very pulse, something that is one's heartbeat. It is a concrete reality and not an abstract something. It is that which stimulates one's senses. His religion is new because it adds universality to religion. His religion is not merely knowing the truth, but embodying it, living it and giving oneself unconditionally to it. He believed that if a person follows his religion with faith, sincerity and purity of mind, he would definitely attain direct spiritual experience. He wanted everyone to follow his own religion and attain the highest fulfillment that it assures. This is what he meant by harmony of religion. He has not derived the idea of harmony of religion from any external source; rather it came to him as an inner discovery or personal revelation. That is, he got this idea from his own direct

mystical experience. It is surprising to note that the conservative condition of the society and the orthodox nature of the family in which he was born and brought up were very much unfavorable for the development of such a liberal idea. In those days, an orthodox Brahmin would not accept food or even drink water from a lower caste Hindu; and people belonging to other religions were bracketed together as '*mleccha*'. In this critical juncture, he not only developed the doctrine of harmony of religion, but openly preached it also. His doctrine of harmony of religion (*dharma-samanvaya*) is the Indian version of religious pluralism that asserts that harmony is an affirmation of the oneness, which underlies all that seems divergent; and is quite different from the Western analytical model. He revived and re-established the ancient Indian view of religious harmony by adapting it to the needs of the modern world. His doctrine of harmony of religion is sevenfold in character, namely, (a) harmony between religion and religion, (b) harmony between philosophy and philosophy, (c) harmony between various paths of spiritual discipline, (d) harmony between the personal and impersonal aspects of God, (e) harmony between the different types of super consciousness, which are the goals of different forms of spiritual discipline, (f) harmony between sects and denominations within the same religion and (g) harmony between the duties of man belonging to different *varṇas* and *āśramas*.

Śrī Ramakrishna's doctrine of harmony of religion is based on certain basic principles:

1. One principle that Śrī Ramakrishna followed is to understand each religion through the eyes of its followers. He never attempted to judge other religions by

the standard of the religious tradition in which he was born. This attitude of seeing religions through the eyes of its followers and suspending one's judgment is called 'phenomenological method' in modern times. Phenomenology is a school of Western Philosophy propounded by Edmund Husserl (1859-1938). Two Dutch scholars – W.B.Kristensen and G.Van Der Leeuw, applied its methods such as suspension of judgment (epoche) and empathy in the study of religion. We have to keep in mind that Śrī Ramakrishna never followed the phenomenological method. Rather, this method seems to be a travesty of what Śrī Ramakrishna actually did.

2. Another principle is not to criticize any religion or sect. He believed that every religion and sect has some place in God's plan. He was quite familiar with the *Brāhmos*, *Vaiṣṇavas*, Christians, Muslims and Sikhs.³⁸ He stated that the common aim of all the religions is to raise a human being above the physical and mental dimension to the spiritual dimension. Therefore, he brought the focus of religion to man and insisted on the divinity of human beings. His life is the embodiment of the realization of humanity and divinity.

3. He recognized the differences, but acknowledged the common unity between religions also.³⁹ He demonstrated by his life that there is nothing but unity. This very unity is universal and eternal. He joined two different principles – a great negation on the one hand and the affirmation of the unity of spirit on the other.⁴⁰ Swami Vivekananda added a corollary to this principle of his Master and said that all religions of the world are mutually complementary, not contradictory. For him, all religions are nothing but sects of the one universal religion. He made a distinction between religion and sect or creed; and opined that while religion

embraces all religions, the sectarian creedal view is ‘frog-in-the-well’ attitude of exclusivism.⁴¹

The main tenets of Śrī Ramakrishna’s doctrine of harmony of religion are :

i) The Ultimate Reality is only one, but it is known by different names in different religions. Sometimes it is called God, sometimes Allah, sometimes *Hari* and at other times *Brahman*. This can be illustrated as – in a potter’s shop, there are several vessels of different shapes and forms such as pots, jars, dishes, plates etc.; but all these are made of the same clay. Similarly, God is one, but He is worshipped in different ages and climes under different names and aspects.⁴² That the one Reality pervades the entire universe is a constant awareness for Śrī Ramakrishna. His varied experiences of this Reality have been described in the Gospel as:

“ ‘The Divine Mother revealed to me in the kāli temple that it was She who had become everything. ... I saw a wicked man in front of the kāli temple; but in him also I saw the power of the Divine Mother vibrating. That was why I fed a cat with the food that was to be offered to the Divine Mother. I clearly perceived that all this was the Divine Mother – even the cat ...’⁴³” (Gupta, 1942).

He also held that the Ultimate Reality is both Personal and Impersonal. His doctrine of religious harmony is based on the realization of the non-dual Reality called *Brahman*, which appears many due to ignorance. Hence, all apparent differences are nothing but different interpretation of the same Reality.

ii) Realization of the Ultimate Reality is the core of all religions. In the mystical religions of India, the realization of God is regarded as possible during lifetime; but in other religions, it is supposed to occur after death. Śrī Ramakrishna considered rituals, mythology, customs etc. as the non-essentials of religion; and these vary from religion to religion.⁴⁴ Likewise, Swami Vivekananda stated that while philosophy is the substantial core or the very soul of every religion; mythology and rituals are the secondary details or mere expressions of it. The primary purpose of religion according to Śrī Ramakrishna is to experience God; and it is the central principle because of which harmony among religions can be established. As he said: "... when you go to a mango orchard, what need have you to know how many hundreds of trees there are in the orchard, how many thousands of branches, and how many millions of leaves? You have come to the garden to eat mangoes. Go and eat them ..."⁴⁵

iii) There are several paths to the realization of the Ultimate Reality. Each religion is such a path. There is no one path, which is the right path; rather all the paths lead men to God.⁴⁶ To quote Śrī Ramakrishna,

"God can be realized through all paths. All religions are true. The important thing is to reach the roof. You can reach it by stone stairs or by wooden stairs or by bamboo steps or by a rope. You can also climb up by a bamboo pole"⁴⁷ (Gupta, 1942).

This is his well-known doctrine of '*yata mat tata path*' or 'as many faiths, so many paths'. By stating that all religions are valid paths to realize the Ultimate Reality, he referred to the major religions of the world like Hinduism,

Mohammedanism, Christianity, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism. Though he was aware of the existence of certain cults, sects and groups, which indulged in dogmatic practices, he did not condemn them; rather compared them to the small back door in old-fashioned houses in India through which the scavenger enters the house to clean the toilets. The major world religions, on the contrary, are like the good front door by which one should enter the house.⁴⁸

It becomes evident from the above discussion that Śrī Ramakrishna wanted to experience the Reality through different paths. In other words, he felt an insatiable desire to realize God through different forms of religion. At first, he practiced different paths of *Hinduism* --- the *Yogic*, the *Tāntric*, the *Vaiṣṇava* and so on. He reached the goal of each of these forms in a very short period; and attained the experience of non-dual Reality through *Nirvikalpa samādhi* at the age of 28.⁴⁹ The desire to realize God through other religions became strong in him and at the end of 1866; he began to practice the discipline of *Islām* under the guidance of a humble *Mussalmān*, *Govinda Rai*. During that period, he forgot the Hindu gods and goddesses completely, even *Kāli* and gave up visiting the temples. He lived like a Muslim, wore the robes of a Muslim, began to offer *Namaz* and repeated the name of *Āllāh*. He was even ready to eat the forbidden food of the sacred animal, the cow. This *sāadhanā* ended in the vision of a radiant Being (*Mohammed*) who finally amalgamated into the Absolute (*Brahman*). Hence, he realized the union of *Āllāh* with *Brahman*. Eight years later, the desire to realize God through the path of *Christianity* became strong in him. Somewhere about November 1874, he began to listen to readings from the *Bible* from *Sambhu*

Charan Mallik. One day when he was looking at the picture of *Madonna* with infant *Jesus*, he became completely absorbed in the thought of *Christ*. The effect of this experience was stronger than that of *Mohammed*. For three days, he could not go to the *Kāli* temple or think of Hindu deities. At the end of this period, he had a wonderful vision of *Jesus Christ*, which also merged in the Absolute. Therefore, he experienced the truth that *Christianity* also is a path leading to God.⁵⁰

Despite the fact that Śrī Ramakrishna followed different spiritual paths, he never wanted everyone to follow this because following several paths will interrupt the one-pointed attention and intensity that are essential for reaching the goal. In the Gospel, he said: "... All will certainly realize God if they are earnest and sincere." "Some people indulge in quarrels, saying, 'One can not attain anything unless one worships our Krishna', or 'Nothing can be gained without the worship of Kāli, our Divine Mother', or 'One can not be saved without accepting the Christian religion'⁵¹" (Gupta, 1942). This is pure dogmatism, which Śrī Ramakrishna disapproved. He also strongly criticized the religious sectarianism, narrowness, fanaticism and bigotry.

Śrī Ramakrishna did not merely preach the doctrine of harmony of religion; but also lived what he taught. In the room in which he lived at *Dakshineshwar*, he not only welcomed people belonging to different religions, but also identified himself with their views and became one among them. As regards this aspect of Śrī Ramakrishna's life, Swami Vivekananda said: " 'Aye, long before ideas of universal religion and brotherly feeling between different sects

were mooted and discussed in any country in the world, here, in sight of this city, had been living a man whose whole life was a Parliament of Religions as it should be⁵²”. He maintained that harmony is the very theme of *Vedānta* and he saw religious harmony in terms of *Practical Vedānta*. *Vedānta* reveals the common ground between all religions. *Advaita Vedānta* considers all the different religions as true manifestations of the same Truth. That all religious experiences are a progress from *Dvaita* to *Viśiṣṭādvaita* to *Advaita* is a new finding by Swami Vivekananda.⁵³ Śrī Ramakrishna also believed in the co-existence of *Advaita* and *Dvaita* in man’s religious life.

Actually, harmony and peace are the crying need of the modern world that is overwhelmed by narrow nationalism, religious fanaticism, political tension, violence and hatred. The dis-harmony and unrest prevalent in present times is largely due to non-religious, materialistic forces than religion. The secularists hold that religion should be abolished and thereby all social problems will disappear. However, they have forgotten that peace or harmony, unity or integration achieved without the religious roots would always be superficial. So, religion has become very much important and relevant in the lives of man now-a-days. Even socialist countries have started to recognize the importance of religion.⁵⁴ In order to bring about harmony; different religions will have to make concessions, sometimes, very large and painful. The more the sacrifice a religion undertakes for the sake of harmony, the more it advances in truth. Fellow feeling between different religions, re-defining and re-interpreting the fundamentals of one’s own religion; and a theoretical or ideological research within each religion to discover

and highlight the universal aspects of religion are also needed for harmony. Religions should realize that they all either stand or fall together.⁵⁵ It is noteworthy that Śrī Ramakrishna also stated that religion must not have only one tone. It is a symphony, polyphony with so many tones, so many aspects and so many experiences. He himself gathered religious experiences from different points of view and this is one of the most important aspects of his doctrine of harmony of religion.

Harmony of religion is something, which we have to construct or create. A way of creating it in the light of Śrī Ramakrishna's teaching is to engage ourselves in the effort of trying to understand other religions. Understanding is the result of a very difficult process of dialogue and conversation. Dialogue should continue in such a way that it goes beyond the so-called religions; and enters and embraces a secular space. It comprehends all the changes, which are produced by the communication and interchange of ideas, by the turning of thoughts from one side to the other. In German, it is called the threshing out of a subject. In India, dialogue or dialectical process is prevalent from the ancient times. *Caitanyadeva* went through this process in his lifetime. It has also played a very important role in Śrī Ramakrishna's life and teachings. He shared all his ideas, thoughts and realizations by means of dialogue; and can be regarded as a living embodiment of dialogue or dialectical process.

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