



Swami Vivekananda's Universal Ideal Religion and the Four Yogas: A Pathway to Religious Harmony

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ABSTRACT

It is evident, since time immemorial, that the principles of unity in diversity, pluralism, syncretism, ecumenism, tolerance, mutual acceptance, and coexistence have always been the foundational ethos of the Indic philosophical and cultural heritage. Anchored in this rich civilisational and cultural continuum, the present article shall explore what 'religion' is from the perspective of the revered saint Swami Vivekananda and his invaluable insights on the underlying factors of the contemporary sectarian and communal unrest. It also discusses the major religions of the world and critically interrogates the discourse on religious harmony, thereby highlighting the structural and ideological barriers to its realisation. Furthermore, the present study draws upon Swami Vivekananda's lectures and speeches to underscore the salient principles for interreligious harmony, elucidate his insights on the validity of all spiritual paths to reach the same spiritual destination, and examine his defence of the indispensability of religious pluralism. The central objective of this study is to highlight the modern relevance of Swami Vivekananda's philosophy of 'Yoga' and 'Universal Ideal Religion' in promoting religious pluralism and spiritual unity across the world. In this context, the final section of the article analyses Swami Vivekananda's philosophy of 'Yoga' and 'Universal Ideal Religion', as a proposed practical and philosophical path to foster

**Introduction:**

Swami Vivekananda was a globally renowned and influential Hindu spiritual leader and thinker who was born on the 12th January 1863, in the state of West Bengal, India. He was a disciple of the great Indian saint Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa, whose spiritual teachings were instrumental in developing his later universal and pluralistic understanding of religion and philosophy of ‘Universal Ideal Religion’ and ‘Yoga’, which propagates the message of spiritual unity and validity of all religious paths to reach the same Divine Supreme Soul. His understanding of ‘religion’, which transcends mere religious dogmas and rituals, means direct personal experience and realisation of the Divine Supreme Soul through any chosen spiritual paths based on one’s temperament and spiritual inclination, is rooted in his philosophy of ‘Universal Ideal Religion’ and ‘Yoga’. In this context, Swami Vivekananda’s philosophy of ‘Yoga’ advocates the four practical spiritual paths of yoga, such as Karma Yoga, Raja Yoga, Bhakti Yoga, and Jnana Yoga, that can be adopted by any spiritual seeker as per their inclinations and temperaments. These distinct spiritual paths, present in all religious traditions, are unified in his philosophy of ‘Universal Ideal Religion’, which provides a universal theoretical framework affirming the essential oneness of all religions (Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, 2015, pp. 2-35).

In the backdrop of the contemporary socio-religious and political scenarios of the world marked by religious intolerance, fanaticism and sectarianism, the present article seeks to analyse Swami Vivekananda’s understanding of religion grounded in his philosophy of ‘Yoga’ and ‘Universal Ideal Religion’, explore the barriers to inter-religious harmony, and assess the relevance of his philosophy of ‘Yoga’ and ‘Universal Ideal Religion’ as a universal theoretical framework in addressing religious antagonisms and intolerance of the modern day world.

Swami Vivekananda’s Vision of Religion:

According to Swami Vivekananda, ‘religion’ relates to men’s self-realisation of spiritual principles and philosophical ideals so that their soul becomes or transforms into what they truly believe in. He also preached that ‘religion’ is neither mere rhetoric, nor theological propositions, nor dogmas, and so religious adherents should abstain from superficial and transient adoption of religious and philosophical principles, which is a reflection of their lack of direct and personal spiritual experience of the Divine Supreme Soul (Vivekananda, 2016, p. 81).



Asha Nimali Fernando, in her study “Concept of Religion According to Swami Vivekananda”, also affirms the aforementioned understanding of ‘religion’ as articulated by Swami Vivekananda. Her research findings also underscore that Swami Vivekananda’s perception of religion is aligned with the Vedantic teachings and philosophies that the Divine Supreme Soul permeates all existence in the cosmos and is inherently in unity with Atman (Individual Soul). She also reinforces his research findings by citing Swami Vivekananda’s words- “I shall try to bring before you the Hindu theory that religions do not come from without, but from within. It is my belief that religious thought is in man's very constitution, so much so that it is impossible for him to give up religion until he can give up his mind and body, until he can give up his thought and life.” (Fernando, n.d., p. 2). The concluding results of her study show that ‘religion’ as articulated by Swami Vivekananda is the personal cultivation and practice of these divine universal truths with the spiritual goal to attain self-realisation that the Jiva Atman (living beings’ soul) is already in one with the Divine Supreme Soul and hence inherently divine (Fernando, n.d., pp. 2-3).

Drawing from the above analysis, it can be interpreted that, according to Swami Vivekananda, ‘religion’ transcends mere religious doctrines and rituals, and that his understanding of religion aligns closely with the Vedantic teachings that ‘religion’ has to do with men’s self-realisation that their Atman (soul) is inherently divine and in unity with the Divine Supreme Soul. Such spiritual realisation, in Swami Vivekananda’s view, requires one’s personal and deep connection with the Divine Supreme Soul. It also implies that religion in its true essence is unchanging since it is rooted in universal truths such as love, compassion, the unity of all beings, and the self-realisation of inherent divinity, and that true religion calls for direct and personal cultivation of these truths through a persistent, in-depth and honest spiritual path, rather than superficial engagement with fleeting doctrines.

As the present study has discussed in detail, Swami Vivekananda’s understanding of ‘religion’ as the path of self-realisation of men’s inherent divinity of their Atman, in the following section, it is pertinent to analyse Swami Vivekananda’s view on the dual nature of religion since its analysis would give insights on the root causes of religious conflicts.

The Dual Nature of Religion and the Roots of Sectarian Conflict:

After undertaking an in-depth study of “The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda” containing his various lectures, speeches and writings, it is found that Swami Vivekananda sheds light on how



religious sectarian conflict originates due to the dualistic nature of religion- the unifying essence of all religions on one hand and the divisive potential of religion on the other.

Swami Vivekananda brings to light that all phenomena that exist in the cosmos, externally as well as internally in the physical realm and within the mind, are shaped by dualistic forces- action and reaction. In the context of human beings, these dualistic forces manifest in the form of good and evil, love and hatred, etc., wherein one naturally attracts men, while the other repels them. He also emphasises that the higher the sphere of action and thought, such as in the case of religion, the more powerful these dualistic forces become. This is illustrated by Swami Vivekananda when he states that the highest form of love and purest olive branch of peace, as well as the gravest violent conflict and antithetical hatred, can be seen to originate from religion. In other words, it means that religion has the potential to bring out the inner noblest virtue of men, but when veiled by fanaticism and ignorance, it can also become a source of sectarian conflict and violence. (Vivekananda, 2016, pp. 57-69).

On the bases of the above analyses, it can be concluded that Swami Vivekananda acknowledges that the universal dualistic opposing forces also exist in the realm of religion, and that the understanding of these forces is necessary to prevent the degradation and misuse of religion, and instead harness religion as a means to self-realisation of unity with the Divine Supreme Soul (Brahman), and hence, the unity of all living souls (Jiva Atman).

In light of the preceding section that explores Swami Vivekananda's conception of the dualistic nature of religion and the cause of religious sectarian conflict rooted in one of the opposing forces, which exists in every phenomenon, the following section shall draw on the insights of Swami Vivekananda and contemporary academic scholars to highlight the barriers to the realisation of a Universal Religion.

Barriers to the Realisation of a Universal Religion: A Synthesis of Swami Vivekananda and Contemporary Perspectives

The present study finds that Swami Vivekananda and contemporary academic scholars like N. Jayaram, Matthias Basedau, and Sebastian Prediger have presented the following three impediments to the realisation of Universal Ideal Religion:

1. Doctrinal Exclusivism

N. Jayaram, in his study "Identity, Community, and Conflict: A Survey of Issues and Analyses", identifies doctrinal exclusivism as the first impediment to the realisation of religious and communal



harmony. His study explains doctrinal exclusivism as the tendency of a particular religious sect to regard its doctrines as absolute, while disregarding the doctrines of other religious sects as false (Jayaram, 2012, pp. 48-49). It can be inferred based on the study that doctrinal exclusivism resembles a finite element claiming itself as the infinite spiritual reality, which is untrue.

2. Inability to perceive the universal truth

In “The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda”, it is found that Swami Vivekananda claims that the universal religion, which connotes the universal truth underlying all religions of the world, is already present in the world as an inherent reality. According to Swami Vivekananda, the inability of men to perceive the universal truth of all religions stems from religious leaders who cater to their sectarian interests, instead of serving the universal truth. Amidst these challenges, he also gives a beacon of hope that pure, enlightened souls who follow the inner light of the Divine God and value the universal truth shall march ahead and illuminate the universal religion for men to perceive and realise it (Vivekananda, 2016, pp. 45-55).

3. Lack of a practical framework

Matthias Basedau, Simone Gobien, and Sebastian Prediger, in their research report “The Ambivalent Role of Religion for Sustainable Development: A Review of the Empirical Evidence”, state that the main problem in recognising the same universal truth underlying all religions is the lack of a practical framework for its application in a real-world context. (Basedau, Gobien, & Prediger, 2017, pp. 5-65). In other words, it can be inferred that there is a lack of practical mechanisms to create awareness and feelings of religious and spiritual unity, and it continues to exist merely as rhetoric and philosophical abstracts.

After analysing the barriers to the realisation of Universal Ideal Religion, the present study shall, in the section below, draw on Swami Vivekananda’s universal and spiritual philosophical framework as solutions to address the barriers to the realisation of Swami Vivekananda’s philosophy of Universal Ideal Religion, which has the potential to develop religious harmony and coexistence.

Swami Vivekananda’s philosophical framework for realising the Universal Ideal Religion:

It is observed that in “The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda”, Swami Vivekananda has formulated a philosophical framework to accommodate religious pluralism as well as to harmonise



different religious sects. His philosophical framework can be said to consist of practical postulations that can be put into practice in the spirit of his philosophy of Universal Ideal Religion. These aforementioned practical postulations shall be discussed here as follows:

1. Swami Vivekananda teaches all men to recognise and practise the principle “do not destroy” (Vivekananda, 2016, p. 376) and hurt the religious and spiritual convictions of others, as long as these are held and practised in utmost sincerity (Vivekananda, 2016, pp. 367-387).
2. He also teaches men to accept and encourage others’ perspectives and beliefs, and to aid them in their chosen paths to attain spiritual realisation (Vivekananda, 2016, pp. 367-387).

The above two postulations can be interpreted as teaching the spirit of unity in variety. It means the Divine Brahman (Divine Supreme Soul) is the same spiritual destination of all these varied religions, and that all these different spiritual journeys lead to the same Divine Brahman as long as the journey is genuine and sincere.

3. Swami Vivekananda also posits that the spiritual development of men occurs from within when the seekers teach themselves, cultivate and practise to realise their inherent divinity within. This spiritual development can be attained through any of the spiritual seekers’ chosen religious journeys based on their temperaments and inclinations. It is based on these reasons that he appeals to all men to promote and remove the hindrances to such natural spiritual progression of spiritual seekers, since this cannot be implanted externally (Vivekananda, 2016, pp. 367-387).

The present study finds that the rationale of the above three postulations is grounded in the fourth postulation, which shall be enunciated here as follows:

4. He also posits that men’s nature and temperament are shaped by four types of mental makeup, such as the worker’s mind, the emotional mind, the mystical mind, and the philosophical mind, based on which men choose their spiritual journeys to attain spiritual realisation. According to Swami Vivekananda, the worker’s mind is inclined to work actively and do good karmas (Vivekananda, 2016, pp. 1-9), the emotional mind has the attribute of utmost devotion and love for the Divine Brahman (Vivekananda, 2016, pp. 260-266), the mystical mind is characterised by self-reflection and introspection to understand the workings of the men’s mind and to master control over it (Vivekananda, 2016, pp. 10-23), and lastly, the philosophical mind has the inherent potential and inclination to decode the phenomena occurring in the cosmos (Vivekananda, 2016, pp. 57-281).



With the completion of studying the above four postulations of Swami Vivekananda that constitute his universal and inclusive spiritual framework to bring religious harmony, it can be inferred that men adopt their particular religions based on their inherent temperaments and inclinations, and that this is necessary for sincere and genuine spiritual journey, which can only lead to the final goal of spiritual realisation of the same Divine Supreme Soul. Therefore, it can be said that Swami Vivekananda's philosophy of Universal Ideal Religion is based on these four postulations that accommodate, harmonise, and recognise the validity of all religious traditions.

In light of the above study of the four types of minds, it is also found that Swami Vivekananda gave four types of Yoga as the practical paths, each of which aligns with these four types of minds, for the realisation of his Universal Ideal Religion, which is a philosophical foundation for developing religious harmony. The four types of yoga shall be explored under the following head:

Towards Interfaith Reconciliation: The Unifying Power of Yoga

In “The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda”, Swami Vivekananda mentioned four types of minds, which are as follows:

1. **Karma Yoga:** According to Swami Vivekananda, Karma Yoga is that spiritual path of attaining spiritual realisation that aligns with the ‘working mind’. Karma Yoga teaches one to do good deeds without attachment to the rewards of such deeds. The rationale for this that Swami Vivekananda put forth was that all sufferings of life originate from worldly attachments, which in turn, deter one from conducting good deeds. He, therefore, advocated that a Karma Yogi should work as a manifestation of his inherent nature and as a benefactor to humanity, thereby liberating himself from worldly attachments and desires, leading to self-realisation of his inherent unity with the Divine Supreme Soul (Vivekananda, 2016, pp. 239-241, 245-248).
2. **Bhakti Yoga:** Another mental inclination that Swami Vivekananda mentions is that of the emotional men. According to Swami Vivekananda, the men of Bhakti are deeply devoted and attempt to establish a personal relationship and experience with the Divine Supreme Soul. They believe in rituals, mythologies, and symbolisms related to the Divine Supreme Soul as a means to attain realisation of the Divine Supreme Soul. It is also observed that the practice of Bhakti Yoga, as stated by Swami Vivekananda, does not necessitate the understanding of abstract and complex notions of the Divine Supreme Soul, because for them, the Divine Supreme Soul manifests in their sincere devotional and personal relationship with Him. Swami Vivekananda teaches that the



highest expression of love and devotion to the Divine Supreme Soul is for men to conceive of Him as the love manifested eternally and universally when they expand their heart to show sincere and selfless affection to their fellow beings and all existences (Vivekananda, 2016, pp. 31-69).

3. Raja Yoga: The third type of mind that Swami Vivekananda mentions in “The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda” is the mystic mind, and according to him, a mystical mind can attain self-realisation of the Divine Supreme Soul through the path of Raja Yoga. It is observed that Raja Yoga is the spiritual path of disciplining and mastering one’s mind through various Raja Yoga techniques, such as concentration, meditation, breathing exercises, etc., to attain the state of ‘Samadhi’, where one’s sense of ego “I” (false self-identity) fades away and attains self-realisation that the Jiva Atman (Inner Soul) and the Divine Supreme Soul are innately one. According to Swami Vivekananda, mental mastery and discipline through Raja Yoga are important since an undisciplined and disturbed mind wastes its energy on many superficial, fragmented things, thereby obscuring men from realising their intrinsic union with the Divine Supreme Soul. This is the reason, as given by Swami Vivekananda, that for the men of mystic mind, a calm and controlled mind through the path of Raja Yoga would lead to self-realisation of the Divine Supreme Soul (Vivekananda, 2016, pp. 119-314).
4. Jnana Yoga: The fourth type of mental inclination that Swami Vivekananda mentions is the philosophical and introspective mind, and for such a mind, he prescribes the path of Jnana Yoga to attain self-realisation of the Divine Supreme Soul. It is highlighted in “The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda” that Jnana Yoga is the path of wisdom and knowledge through self-introspection, contemplation, rational and critical inquiry to attain self-realisation. It is also found that Jnana Yoga transcends mere accumulation of dry intellectual knowledge, but also encompasses the use of discrimination (Viveka) to distinguish the real (the Divine Supreme Soul) and the unreal (the temporary material world and forms) through self-introspection, contemplation and inquiry. In this manner, a Jnana Yogi begins to understand the true nature of his inner-self (Jiva Atman), that it is real and permanent, inherently in unity with the Divine Supreme Soul (Vivekananda, 2016, pp. 57-284).

With the understanding of the four paths of Yoga, each corresponding to the four types of mental temperaments of men that Swami Vivekananda identified, it is timely and pertinent to discuss Swami Vivekananda’s vision of Universal Ideal Religion, which the four yogas serve as the practical paths for its realisation.

**Universal Ideal Religion:**

Swami Vivekananda's philosophy of Universal Ideal Religion, based on the philosophical foundation of 'unity in diversity', posits that all religions are true and that different spiritual paths lead men to the same spiritual destination of realising the Divine Supreme Soul. Swami Vivekananda states that the Divine Supreme Soul permeates through all the religions of the world, which he illustrates by saying, "I am the thread that runs through all these pearls." (Vivekananda, 2016, p. 371). It is pertinent to highlight that, according to Swami Vivekananda, the universal truth manifests in different ways and that each understanding of the truth is equally true. He also states that variation is a nature of existence, which is inevitable, and yet the Divine Supreme Soul is the unifying underlying spirit of all these existences. It means that all religious traditions, regardless of their philosophical and mythological bases, rituals and ceremonies, help men in their spiritual development to reach the same spiritual destination of realising the Divine Supreme Soul (Vivekananda, 2016, pp. 367-387). Therefore, it can be inferred that Swami Vivekananda's vision of the Universal Ideal Religion embraces the cardinal principle of unity in diversity rather than uniformity, affirming that all religious traditions could lead men to spiritual realisation when pursued with utmost sincerity and devotion.

Conclusion:

Based on the above study, it can be concluded that Swami Vivekananda's philosophy of Universal Ideal Religion and Yoga, rooted in the spirit of 'unity in diversity', provides a philosophical and practical framework to develop religious harmony, mutual acceptance and coexistence, which can address the contemporary pressing challenges of communalism, intolerance, ideological exclusivism, and sectarian conflicts. It is also found that Swami Vivekananda's understanding of religion transcends mere religious doctrines and dogmas, instead emphasising the establishment of a personal and experiential relationship with the Divine Supreme Soul. His understanding of religion, thus, means the realisation of the inherent divinity of Jiva Atman (Inner Soul) and the validity of all such sincere religious journeys that lead men to this self-realisation. The findings of the study also highlight the inherent differences in mental temperaments and dispositions of men, for which Swami Vivekananda provided the four yogas, such as the Karma Yoga, Raja Yoga, Bhakti Yoga, and Jnana Yoga, as practical spiritual paths converging the diverse religious traditions at the same destination of spiritual realisation of the Divine Supreme Soul. Lastly, it is evident that in the contemporary scenarios marked by religious fanaticism, communal hatred, and sectarian division, Swami Vivekananda's philosophy of Universal Ideal Religion and Yoga is more relevant than ever before since it celebrates and recognises religious pluralism as



different manifestations of the same absolute reality. Therefore, his philosophy of Universal Ideal Religion and Yoga preaches to the world to realise diversity as the nature of existence, while simultaneously awakening to a deeper unity rooted in the inherent divinity of all existences.

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