
Reinvestigating Vivekananda's Image as a Religious Pluralist and Universalist

Dr. NosheenZaheer⁽¹⁾

Abstract

Religious pluralism and universalism are two inseparable concepts. Religious pluralism is an approach that not only accepts the diversity in religions, but also culminates their peaceful existence in a universal religion. In nineteenth century Bengal, Vivekananda's doctrines of pluralism and universalism were applauded by the world parliaments of religions. He symbolizes this plurality of religions with different paths leading to same destination (realization of God in soul). While his claimed universal religion was so extensive in nature that it could embrace the spirit all religions and thus it cannot be limited within the boundaries of fix beliefs and practices. But his pluralism and universalism becomes dubious and demands reinvestigation of his image as a pluralist and Universalist when he fails to acknowledge the individuality of each religion. Vivekananda not only tried to adjust these religions (Christianity, Islam and Buddhism) in evolutionary scheme of Vedanta. But also assign *Advaita Vedanta* the crowning place on each religion in the form of universal religion.

1-Introduction

Religious pluralism is an approach that values and encourages diversity of religious expression and in theology it "suggests harmony, convergence or compatibility across religious traditions-in opposition to religious exclusivism."² An Asian representative in world's parliament of religion (1893) who emerged as the symbol of reasoned tolerance and pluralism was Vivekananda.³ He was born in famous Datta's family of Calcutta. He inherited the pluralistic vision of religions from his father Vishvanath, who

(1)Assistant ProfessorSardar Bahadur Khan Women University (SBKWU), Quetta

²Thomas Banchoff, ed. *Religious Pluralism, Globalization, and World Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc.,2008), 4.

³Harold Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism: The Challenge to Christian Faith & Mission* (England: Appolos, 2001), 114.

took delight in studying Bible and Persian poems of Hafiz.¹ While the centerpiece of Vivekananda's pluralism approach revolves around his teacher; Ramakrishna's mystical experiential claim that all religions are true.² That allows Vivekananda to come with his approach of non-acceptability of diversity and differences as absoluteness to deal diversity of beliefs and practices within Hinduism and outside Hinduism.³ That enabled him to flourish the intra Hindu pluralism of *astika* and *nastika*.⁴ In case of non-Hindu religions he connected these religions by emphasizing that every religion has the same objective of realization of God in soul.⁵

1.1-History and Nature of Vivekananda's Pluralistic Approach

History of his religious pluralism did not begin as an abstract theoretical scheme; it was rather the result of religious encounters of the pluralistic nineteenth century Bengal society. In this society, the religions were not in watertight compartments rather in dynamic socio-cultural and religious encountering. His pluralist approach on the one hand was matured under the influence of Western education and Christian missionaries' criticism, while on the other hand the importance of the apologetic attitude of his *neo-Vedantic* predecessors and the wave of Western theories of religious pluralism (spreading in the nineteenth century Bengal) should not be ignored.⁶ He borrowed religious liberty from western pluralism that not only facilitated him to be committed to his own faith but also be opened to witness the change or to be changed.⁷

1Swami Tejasananda, *A Short Life of Swami Vivekananda* (Calcuta: Fifteenth Impression, 1995), 7.

2Harold G. Coward, ed. *Modern Indian Responses to Religious Pluralism* (Albany: State University of New York Press,1987), 66.

3B. M. K. R. Sundararajan, ed. *Hindu Spirituality: Postclassical and Modern*, 1 ed. (USA: Crossroad Publishing Co.,1997), 314.

4John Clayton, *Reasons and Gods: Essays in Cross-Cultural Philosophy of Religion* (UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 44-45.

5K. R. Sundararajan, ed. *Hindu Spirituality: Postclassical and Modern*, 314.

6Olav Hammer James R. Lewis, ed. *Handbook of Religion and the Authority of Science* (Netherland: Koninklijke,2010), 210.

7Bob Robinson, *Christians Meeting Hindus: An Analysis and Theological Critique of the Hindu-Christian Encountering in India* (UK: Regnum Books International, 2004), 75.

The nature of Vivekananda's pluralism could be explored by addressing his concept of religion. In the first volume of *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* defines religion as realization of God. According to him religion is neither following a specific doctrine, nor an intellectual or rational evaluation. He equates religion with freedom as he sees man's perfection in his perfect freedom. He further adds that this desire of man to attain freedom rotates around the Absolute Being (God) who is beyond all restrictions and bonds.¹

He identifies strengths with religion.² In another place he writes: "my religion means expansion, and expansion means realization and perception in the highest sense — no mumbling words or genuflections. Man is to become divine, realizing the divine more and more from day to day in an endless progress."³ Vivekananda also defined religion as true selfless services by making intense self-sacrificing for the betterment of others.⁴

While describing the importance of sacred text in a religion, he denies that the sacred books constitute religion rather he believes that religion constitutes books.⁵ He believes that manifestation of the divine potentiality of all souls is the aim of religion.⁶ He categorizes religions into two categories in the pluralistic Bengali society. Firstly, those religions that proceed from God to man and this type of religions include all Semitic religions which he thinks place the idea of God above without showing any concern to the soul. Secondly, the other

1Swami Vivekananda, *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 9 vols., vol. 2, 270-71.

2Kalpana Mohapatra, *Political Philosophy of Swami Vivekananda* (New Delhi: Northern Book Centre, 1996), X.

3Vivekananda, *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 269.

4Ibid., 72.

5Ibid., 263.

6M.G. Chitkara & Girdhari Sharma, *Religion 21st Century* (New Delhi: S. B. Nangia, 2002), 91.

type takes the course from man to God; this includes particularly Aryan religions.¹

The topic of religious diversity makes its appearance at Vivekananda's work with a question that he asks: Are all the religions of the world contradictory to each other? He replies this question in negation meaning that all world religions are not contradictory rather the apparent contradictions lie in external forms, language, buildings, rituals and books. He accepts that all religions have their individual internal souls that apparently constitute the diversity of religions. But in actuality, these internal souls are part of great universal truth (Soul) and he arranges these souls into an evolutionary order.² Vedanta attains the crowning position of his evolutionary ordering. While discussing the internal individual souls of each religion in term of evolution, he violates the basic principle of religious pluralism; different religions are different paths that are leading towards the same goal (realization of God).

He places internal individual souls of the few religions (Christianity and Islam) at the lower rungs of the evolutionary ladder. This placement according to him is based on his claimed "great universal truth", which he identifies with "transcendental spiritual consciousness, man's struggle to attain that consciousness and his experience of it."³ His claim is that the great universal religion has the capacity to accommodate other world religions inside it. This schematization puts a question mark on the consistency of his theory of religious pluralism.

1Swami Vivekananda, *Complete Work of Swami Vivekananda*, 9 vols., vol. 3, 5.

2Vivekananda, *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 295-96.

3Swami Bhajanananda, "Harmony of Religions from the Standpoint of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda – Iii," *Bulletin of the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture* (2012): 253.

1.2 Vivekananda Doctrines of Pluralism

His doctrine of religious pluralism can be traced from a hymn and a quotation from the Gita which he quoted at the world's parliament of religion on 11th September, 1893. The words of that hymn are as follows: "as the different streams having their sources in different places all mingle their water in the sea, so, O Lord, the different paths which men take through different tendencies, various though they appear, crooked or straight, all lead to Thee."¹

The first doctrine of Vivekananda's pluralist approach is found in the following words: "Whosoever comes to Me, through whatsoever form, I reach him; all men are struggling through paths which in the end lead to me."² In the context of Bhagavad-Gita these different paths of God realization refer to the different path within Hinduism like *jnana marga*, *bhagtimarga* and *karma marga*. Apparently, he is reinterpreting the text by equating the term 'different paths' with different religions. The central pole of Vivekananda's religious pluralism is his teacher Ramakrishna's claimed experience of unity in diverse religious experiences which led the latter to proclaim truth in all religions. On the footsteps of his teacher, he also believes that different religions are no more than the different paths leading towards the same goal (the realization of God).³

The second element of his doctrine of pluralism can be seen in his claim of abandoning the dogmatic religious approach and adoption of common sense approach.⁴ However, his own approach of pluralism sometimes appears to be dogmatic due to his conglomeration of friendly and hostile attitudes towards other religions. The friendly attitude can be seen where there is agreement

¹Vivekananda, *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 4.

²Ibid., 4-5.

³Ronald Neufeldt, "Reflections on Swami Vivekananda's Speeches at the World Parliament of Religions, 1893," *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies* 6(1993): 1.

⁴Vivekananda, *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 292.

between his Practical *Vedanta* and other religion. While in the inverse situation his inclination towards his own religion sometime becomes evident.¹

The third element of his doctrine of pluralism is quite complex due to its composition from three different but complementary concepts. These concepts are missionary activities, assimilation of good from other religions and maintenance of individual identity of different religions. Here he opines about the missionary activities of religion that they were pointless. He maintains that instead of converting assimilation of the good elements of the other religions and maintenance of the individual faith should be preferred. In the words of Vivekananda: “the Christian is not to become a Hindu or a Buddhist, nor a Hindu or a Buddhist to become a Christian. But each must assimilate the spirit of the others and yet preserve his individuality and grow according to his own law of growth.”² Assimilation is the opposition of individuality and these both cannot walk together, if one wants to preserve his/her religious individuality then it demands strong measure to stop assimilation. And if one wants to assimilate then she or he has to forgo the idea of preservation.

1.3- Vivekananda's Notion of Universal religion

Vivekananda puts the foundation of his universal religion by ignoring the apparent differences of all religions by searching out the single common essence of diverse religions, that is, the realization of God in the soul. He considers that “the end of all religions is the realizing of God in the soul.”³ And for him this realization of God is the key that enables humanity to recognize divinity in every man and woman⁴ through *atman*. He equates this universal religion of

1P. L. John Panicker, *Gandhi on Pluralism and Communalism* (Delhi: Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2006), 43.

2Vivekananda, *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 24.

3Swami Adiswarananda, ed. *Vivekananda, World Teacher: His Teachings on the Spiritual Unity of Humankind* (Woodstock: Skylight Path Publishing, 2006), 68.

4Mohapatra, *Political Philosophy of Swami Vivekananda*, 49.

realizing God with *Vedanta* as according to him no other religion is fully acquired to perform that role.¹

While describing the characteristics of universal religion he says that the very basic and fundamental characteristic of the universal religion is that universal religion should be so extensive that its inclusive nature should not only satisfy but also fulfill the spiritual hunger of all types of people.² He believes that due to the above mentioned characteristics of the universal religion it is wholly impossible that universal religion contains one set of doctrines for all humanity.³

He claims that Vedanta is a universal religion because “it is inclusive enough; it is broad enough to include all ideals.”⁴ For justifying his Vedanta as the universal religion, he supports his proposal with arguments. He justifies Vedanta as a universal maintaining that it not only fulfills the scientific experiential approach, but also justifies all challenges of materialist sciences due to its rationalism. This is the reason why he placed internal experiential aspect of the religion superior in authority than sacred books and rituals. While describing the fundamental character of universal religion, he criticizes the ritualism forms of religion because he considers ritualism as the basic reason of fundamentalism. His claims that tolerant universal religious demands the abolition of ritualism, but his writing reveals that he himself could not break out of the traditional attitude of the *Advaita Vedantins*.⁵ *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* are replete with the presentation of *jnana*, *bhagti*, *karma* and *raja*

1Heiko Frese and Ulrike Schröder Michael Bergunder, ed. *Ritual, Caste and Religion in Colonial South India* (Germany: Franckeshe Stiftungen zu Halle, 2010), 57.

2Vivekananda, *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 302-03.

3Ibid., 308.

4Michael Bergunder, ed. *Ritual, Caste and Religion in Colonial South India*, 57.

5Ibid., 58-59.

yogas as the ways of salvation, but one could hardly find any name of the religious ritual or practices of other religions as a source of salvation. His universal religion rejects the authority of religious texts, but one can find the quotations of Hindu sacred texts in his *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* for supporting his arguments. Though a few quotations of the Bible could also be seen in his writings that are utilized by him to support his *Vedantic* teachings one can hardly find any citation from the Holy Qur'ān.

His universal religion was not designed for conversion of non-Hindus to Hinduism rather his intention was the assimilation of other religions in neo-Vedanta. He said: "in this Oneness [*Advaita*Vedanta] is included all faiths, all dogmas. Each of them has its own place in the world. We must recognize this. Though this Oneness' is the ideal of the universal religion realized..... Let us hope for the day when this ideal of universal religion will shine upon mankind."¹

One can conclude that his promulgation of *Advaita*Vedanta as a universal religion is a good attempt to reconstruct received Hindu tradition philosophically. However, at certain points he is negating his own prescribed criteria of universal religion by violating the basic principle of universal religion; by equating *Advaita*Vedanta to universal philosophy, *Advaita* myths as Universal myths and *Vedantic* rituals as realizing God through different *margas* as universal ritual.

He describes the three developmental stages of his universal religion.

1.3.1 - Developmental Phases of the Universal religion

¹Ibid., 55.

His universal religion consists of three phases, firstly as eternal religion, secondly, as a religion where co-existence of all religions could be seen and thirdly, it attains transcendental phase of religion.

1.3.1.1: The First Phase: The Eternal Religion

Vivekananda describes eternal religion as *Sanatana Dharma* that in his writings are equivalent to *Advaita Vedanta*.

He based his universal religion on the infinite and eternal principle of realization of eternal God within the soul that also shares eternity as its basic characteristic with God. Eternal religion solely relies on internal experiential methods and claims limitlessness by negating external creed, doctrine or rituals.¹

Vivekananda puts *Advaita Vedanta* at the apex of his proposed evolutionary religious order, while he places *Dvaita Vedanta* at the bottom of this evolutionary ladder and *Vishist Advaita* in the center between *Advaita* and *Dvaita Vedanta*. He opines that Christianity and Islam coincide with *Dvaita Vedanta* in sharing the same belief which completely demarcates the nature of God and man. Here God is the creator and man His creation.²

After framing Islam and Christianity in his scheme of universal religion, he adjusts Buddhism and Jainism. He adopts the approach of submerging and the individual unique religious characteristics of Buddhism and Jainism to make these religions the part and parcel of his eternal religion. He claims that Buddhism and Jainism do not depend on God rather these religions proposed a system of evolving God out of man [*Advaita Vedanta*].³

¹Robert Neil Minor, *Radhakrishnan: A Religious Biography* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 13.

²Panicker, *Gandhi on Pluralism and Communalism* 43-50.

³Vivekananda, *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 18.

The second character of his eternal religion is its harmonious frame that supposedly unifies all sects and all religions. Thus, he places his eternal religion as the mother of all religions. In other words, all religions inherit the basic principle of eternal religion.¹

The third characteristic of the eternal religion is its infiniteness. He claims that infinite, eternal religion is the final destination where every religion of world merges into *Sanatana Dharma* by assimilating its eternal spirit. His eternal religion aims to assimilate others in its eternity.² One can say that eternal religion is nothing short of Hindu exclusivism when he emphasizes the superiority of *Sanatana Dharma* over other religions, and a kind of inclusivism when he claims that all world religions find their fulfillment in *Sanatana Dharma*.

Fourthly, for him there are some eternal constituents of the eternal religion. These eternal constituents that he lists are eternal God, eternal soul and eternal law of *karma*. He further claims that the seat of the realization of the eternal God in man is the soul. He also stresses that the concept of the eternity of the soul is shared by all religions. According to him, all religions believe that the lustrous nature of the soul is dimmed by failure of God's realization, while its primitive shine could be regained by the realization of God.³ From eternal religion the principles of truth, loveliness, kindness, integrity and equality emerge that free man from ignorance, jealousy, and narrow mindedness. He believes that eternal religion makes man the living embodiment of God.⁴

The brief description and analysis of his eternal religion reveals inclusive rather than a pluralistic approach. His eternal religion is nothing more and nothing less

1 Wilhelm Halbfass, *Tradition and Reflection: Explorations in Indian Thought* (Albany: State University of New York, 1991), 51.

2 Karin Preisendanz Eli Franco, ed. *Beyond Orientalism: The Work of Wilhelm Halbfass and Its Impact on Indian and Cross-Cultural Studies*, 1 ed. (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2007), 508.

3 Vivekananda, *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 261.

4 Mohit Chakarabarti, *Swami Vivekananda, a Study on Aesthetics* (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 1993), 261.

than Hinduism with its absorptive nature. He supports his claimed eternal religion by saying that “in India this [Buddhism] gigantic child was absorbed, in the long run, by the mother that gave it birth.”¹ Here he singles out absorptive and inclusive nature of Hinduism to explain the extinction of Buddhism from Indian soil and ignores other historical and geographical factors that played a decisive role in this case.

He links his eternal religion with the source of love, equality and truth. One can point out that in making such claims he is probably ignoring the fact that other religions too stand for ideals like equality of all humanity, sincere love, and truth on the bases of their peculiar metaphysical and moral systems. Therefore, it can be said that his eternal religion is portrayed superiority of Hinduism over other world religions by utilizing approaches of Hindu exclusivism and Hindu inclusivism.

1.3.1.2 - The Second Phase: Co-existence of all Religions

Whereas in the first phase Vivekananda was envisaging the emergence of the individuality of each religion in one eternal religion (*Advaita* Vedanta), in the second phase he describes the coexistence of individuality of each religion. Apparently, the two phases seem to be mutually contradictory.

It appears that certain religious and scientific philosophies lie behind his proposed phase of co-existence of all religions. While describing the religious scheme, he claims that the existence of these diverse world religions is the will of all merciful and all Wise Creator. Otherwise, all world religions would have died except that one which was considered true by Him to rule the whole world. He justifies the existence of all religions as a stimulus that keeps and promotes the development of thoughts because he believes that the survival of one single

¹Eli Franco, ed. *Beyond Orientalism: The Work of Wilhelm Halbfass and Its Impact on Indian and Cross-Cultural Studies*, 507.

religion would result in the stagnation and decay of religion intellectually.¹ For supporting his claim of co-existence of religions scientifically he quotes the central idea of the theory of Darwinism: the survival of the fittest. He maintains that all the existing religions still survive because these are the fittest in the eyes of their followers.²

After explaining the religious and scientific reasons of religious diversity and coexistence of different religions, he tries to explain the link between the individual existence of these religions and his claimed universal religion. He considers that all religions are depicting the different angles of one truth. The apparent differences are due to culture and society in which one grows up and is educated. These factors allow one to color truth according to one's heart, intellectuality, and mind. However, for him in spite of many apparent differences all religions belong to one universal religion.³

He further adds; "all these religions are different forces in the economy of God, working for the good of mankind; and that not one can become dead, not one can be killed. Just as you cannot kill any force in nature, so you cannot kill any one of these spiritual forces."⁴

He suggests that the approaches of mutual respects for each religion can facilitate the practical existence of these religions as a universal religion. On the other hand universality of the aggregate religion is disturbed by the missionary activities of those priests who embark on preaching of one specific religion as their religious duty. He proposes that instead of this religious preaching that aims to get converts from other religions should be replaced by the friendly

¹Vivekananda, *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 293-94.

²Ibid., 293.

³Ibid., 296.

⁴Ibid.

interreligious dialogue for mutual awareness and betterment of humanity with the spirit of acceptance.¹

1.3.1.3 - The Third Phase: Transcending the Limitations

The third phase of universal religion moves beyond the boundaries of individual religions and culminates in transcendental consciousness. This phase involves all humanity without categorizing them into different religions and castes by the fulfillment of the ever urging, desire of man to attain absolute freedom from all his limitations.²

He describes transcendental consciousness as a superior state of mind. He categorizes this state of mind into different stages, one leading to another. The first state of mind was the production of instincts that was followed by a more advanced state of reasoning. Reason got maturity into the third most advanced state of transcendental consciousness.³ He equates transcendental consciousness with a *samadhi* that can be achieved when the mind goes beyond the line of self-consciousness,⁴ a state that can be attained only through meditative experience. He further adds that this meditative state is the highest state of existence. In other words, his first state of mind represents the instinctive or animal stage. The second state of consciousness is equal to man's intellect while the third stage signifies spiritually contemplated the state of mind with the realization of God. And, the stage of transcendental consciousness represents the final state of divinity of man.⁵

He believes that transcendental consciousness is experienced by the saints, prophets and *rishis* that illuminate their lives. However, the problem of diversity surfaces again with regard to this transcendental consciousness, as the source of

1Bhajananda, "Harmony of Religions from the Standpoint of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda – Iii," 453-54.

2Ibid.: 554.

3Mahendra Kulasrestha, ed. *Learn Rajayoga from Vivekananda* (New Delhi: Lotus Press,2006), 92.

4Vivekananda, *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 148.

5Ibid., 153.

this transcendental consciousness is a spiritual experience which is colored by cultural and historical factors as admitted by Vivekananda himself. Some claim to attain this transcendental consciousness through an angel, the other claims the blessedness through *deva* and another claims to have a direct encounter with God. Now, he sees that these differences arise because of different interpretations, educations, and belief systems. Interestingly, he rejects many claims of transcendental consciousness by considering these experiences as the stumbling of the experientialist.¹

As an example of such stumbled experience, he mentions the name of Muḥammad, peace be upon him. According to him, Prophet Muḥammad was not a trained *yogi* and he did not know what he was doing? He even declares that the book revealed onto Muḥammad, peace be upon him, contained truth with superstitions due to stumbling of Muḥammad, peace be upon him, during this experience. So, Muhammad, peace be upon him, brought good to mankind, but he also brought evil of fanaticism.² While making such criticism did Vivekananda fulfill the criteria of his claimed transcendental consciousness or his criticism reveals his religious prejudice. He said if a person is claiming inspiration while no difference is found in him before and after *samadhi*, then his claim cannot be considered as correct. He elaborates further that even if a fool enters the *samadhi* he would become sage after experiencing true inspiration.³ He further adds that when you hear someone claiming that "I am inspired and then talks irrationally, reject it."⁴

The third standard of Vivekananda is interwoven with the personality of the claimant to inspire. He thinks that such a person will be devoid of personal

¹Ibid., 150.

³Anantanand Rambachan, *The Limits of Scripture: Vivekananda's Reinterpretation of the Vedas* (USA: University of Hawaii Press, 1994), 99-100.

⁴Vivekananda, *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 151.

interests and longing for fame, rather the content of this inspiration will be beneficial for humanity.¹ It is hard to see how his own prescribed criteria could nullify the religious experiences of Muḥammad, peace be upon him. He rejects the ascension of Muḥammad as a superstition because it cannot be proved “scientifically”. In such context his whole scheme of universal religion becomes superstitious because his metaphysical schemes of the *neo-Vedanta* along with the idea of an eternal soul, *karma*, and God realization cannot be proved “scientifically” either. This might be the reason that he uses the term soul and mind alternately to give a scientific touch to his dogmatic notion of *atman*.

Alternate usage of soul and mind, enhance the problems for him when these two terms appear to conflict in the context of religious experience *insamadhi*. He believes that all the sages and unselfish people of every religion experiences truth in *samadhi* that they declare to be higher than those experiences that result from the senses.² These experiential truths of *samadhi* are beyond the senses. And the mind is the nerve, organ which belongs to the senses, then how could he equate the term soul with mind, and at the same time define the sense as the nerve centers of the brain?³

The same disagreement could be noticed when he considers the mind to be an instrument in the hands of the soul.⁴ He tries to demarcate between the soul and mind by telling a story about a god and a demon. They went to a sage to gain knowledge of the self. The demon distracted due to his failure to realize the reality of the soul, while the god succeeded in exploring the reality of the soul. That made a god to conclude that the self is neither body nor mind it is beyond all these.⁵

1Rambachan, *The Limits of Scripture: Vivekananda's Reinterpretation of the Vedas*, 100.

2Vivekananda, *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 105.

3Ibid., 111.

4Ibid., 110.

5Ibid., 115-16.

Then, how can the mystery of the mind, soul and transcendental consciousness be solved from the writings of Vivekananda? He identifies transcendental consciousness in *Samadhi* when the mind becomes free from the thoughts that mark the complete destruction of thought in the mind.¹ This destruction will awaken the soul that constitutes his perfect transcendental consciousness. The one who experiences this transcendental consciousness would be able to preserve the soul beyond mind, thoughts and matter.² In the formulation of his transcendental scheme his fondness and affection for science become apparent when he argues that his prescribed *samadhi* satisfies the criteria of scientific method. Because he believes it could be achieved through *raja yoga*. But how did he explain the scientific nature of his *raja yoga*?

He calls *raja yoga* the scientific *yoga* because it does not require any faith or belief rather it motivates to find out truth first and to believe later.³ He declares that like all sciences *raja yoga* also utilizes scientific method to cultivate reason. His *raja yoga's* first scientific step is based on observation. And without these observations *yogi* cannot understand inner thoughts, internal nature of man and knowledge of mind. The instrument utilized by the *yogi* for this observation is mind.⁴ The next step that further employs mind to know and reveal the secrets of the internal world is concentration. This concentration of the mind yields to *yogi* the perception of analysis that helps him in deriving conclusions that either the *yogi* has a realization of his soul or he is experiencing the permeation of the Absolute in the empirical world.⁵

The critical evaluation of the above mentioned scientific *raja yoga* poses many questions. Firstly, it appears to be a combination of contradictory statements in

1Ibid., 174.

2Ibid., 172.

3Ibid., 108.

4Ibid., 106.

5Ibid., 107-08.

his writings. At one place, he tries to validate his transcendental consciousness as a universal religion being experienced by the *rishis* and prophets through this *raja yoga*. On the other hand, he tries to interpret this *raja yoga* as scientific *yoga* as it justifies the criteria of reason by omitting superstitions. Apparently, the implementation of the principle of scientific verification is limited to sense organs and empirical world while he claims to utilize it in metaphysics. That seems problematic.

The next point that appears objectionable is that he claims himself to be *AdvaitaVedantin* and at the same time he stands apart from Shankaracharya's concept of *Brahmajnana* (*Brahman* can be experienced in *atman* through *jnana marga*). He accepts the superiority of the experiential perception of God in *samadhi*, while Shankaracharya authenticates the knowledge of *Brahman* from the Vedas.¹

Conclusion

In the light of the above discussion, it can be said that his universal religion (realization of the God in soul) on one hand makes religion the individual endeavor and on the other hand he restricts the authenticity of this realization to Hindu context and reject or downplay all other religious experiences. His different phases of universal religion sometime depicts him exclusivist and sometime inclusivist. His eternal religion represents his exclusivist *AdvaitaVedantin* stance. While his proposed second phase of the co-existence of all religions reveals his inclusivist approach. And the final phase of transcending the limits represents the scientific justification of *AdvaitaVedanta*. The above discussion discloses that his universal religion is heavily entangled in cultural and dogmatic framework of Hinduism

¹Rambachan, *The Limits of Scripture: Vivekananda's Reinterpretation of the Vedas*, 106.

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