

# Philosophical and Moral Approaches to Inter-Religious Understanding and Religious Pluralism

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“The religious myth is one of man’s greatest and most significant achievements, giving him the security and inner strength not to be crushed by the monstrosity of the universe.”<sup>1</sup> Similarly, existentialist philosopher Albert Camus points out “A man without ethics (the moral principles of a person) is a wild beast loosed upon this world.”<sup>2</sup> The quotations cited above reveals that religion and morality are unavoidable for all human beings. Our crisis is little hidden, we live when science, technology, economics and GDP have diminished our physical suffering to a remarkable degree and have changed human life at a larger scale. But can the same be true about harmony among civilization, community, and religions? Can the same be said about our psychological, spiritual and social well-being? While our life spans have been prolonged, many diseases eradicated, and per capita income has increased but this has not changed our existential and spiritual predicament.

Although science and technology have so much to offer, there is no app, device, equation, or pharmaceutical drug that can imbue our life with meaning, peace and prosperity. Because Sciences limit and deal with cause and effect and the workings of the natural world only, it struggles when it comes to the issues of humanities. That’s why we propose that religion is still important in global societies because it can provide great opportunities for spiritual and emotional well-being and a sense of belonging also which is essential for the whole world. Carl Jung stated, “It is the role of religious symbols to give meaning to the life of man. The Pueblo Indians believe that they are the sons of Father Sun, and this belief endows their life with a perspective (and a goal) that goes far beyond their limited existence. It gives them ample space for the unfolding of personality and permits them a full life as complete persons. Their plight is more satisfactory than that of a man in our civilization who

knows that he is (and will remain) nothing more than an underdog with no inner meaning to his life.”<sup>3</sup>

If we keep the rigorous analytical and intellectual approach aside for a while and ask an ordinary theistic person about the importance of religion the answer will be full of hopes and meaning. It is one of the most powerful community builders the world has known with its simple values. People often seek a better understanding of the metaphysical and moral world view and religion seeks to answer those questions as well as imbue to give life greater purpose. Since antiquity, with any form or medium, religious beliefs have set into place ideas about how to live a good life, how to treat others and binds societies and nations together. It is a very big argument in the favour of religion that if we wouldn’t have this earlier then so many disciplines like law might not have existed, it was the source of information and inspiration to so many disciplines. It is a different thing that later those discipline excluded from religion. William James penned down, “The highest flights of charity, devotion, trust, patience, bravery to which the wings of human nature have spread themselves, have been flown for religious ideals.”<sup>4</sup> The religion, in other sense, imbibes wisdom of generations past, providing solutions to our shared moral and existential dilemmas and helping unite a culture under a shared umbrella. The crisis is when religion, culture and civilization are an integral part of humanity and we also face clashes and conflicts in the name of them, what can we do about that?<sup>5</sup> In other words, if religion has also driven conflict amongst people and countries just as easily as it can bring harmony, what can communities and thinkers do about it?

## **Interreligious Understanding: A Way Forward to Interfaith Dialogue**

Interreligious dialogue is about people of different faiths and beliefs coming to a mutual understanding and respect that allows them to live and cooperate despite their differences in terms of their social-cultural system

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of designated behaviours, practices, morals, worldviews, texts, and prophecies. The term refers to cooperative and positive interaction among different religious traditions and faiths at both the individual and collective level. Each party remains true to their own beliefs while respecting, accepting and tolerating the rights, beliefs and perspectives of the other. This thing is not possible until we have a proper understanding of others religion and culture. It is prerequisite, we need to have proper understanding and only then can we proceed for any sort of dialogue.

Interfaith dialogue can't be limited to permutation and combination of mere words or talk. It includes human interaction, relationships, and exchanges of the values and virtues, that bring holistic well-being in the heart of different religious, cultural followers and bridge the gaps of misunderstanding about one another. There are some facts which need to be brought out as the foundation of any inter-religious understanding, and only then the inter-faith dialogue can take place. No religion or culture has an ethical right to impose its superiority and exclusivity over others or to absolutize it. Every religion, like an individual, deserves the same dignity and integrity. The present time requires interreligious understanding, and we do not have so many options regarding this; either we can erase religion from society which is quite hard because it is an essential part of humanity or we can seek pacific approaches like tolerance or interreligious understanding so that everyone can flourish.

### **Transcendental Unity of All Religion: A Way Forward to Interreligious Understanding**

How could we know that there is something transcendental when nothing of this world (logic, epistemology, etc.) applies to that transcendental world? We may say that the existence of a transcendental world is a matter of religious belief. But then there are religious beliefs which deny transcendental unity of all religions. What is the ground for admitting the former religious belief and rejecting the latter? What is the logic behind this equity or parity of all religions? This is the main question which arises when we discuss the idea of transcendental unity. To be clear, we are not proclaiming that everyone believes in transcendental unity, but simply propose that all (theists) believe in an Absolute Being whatever we call it Allah, God, Brahman, etc. On this common ground (absolute reality), we can seek transcendental unity. The followers of the transcendental approaches in religious freedom maintain that the Truth or Essence of all religions is the same divine reality, all religions are equal. All religions lead to the same truth; they are just the various paths. It also represents the democratic nature of this approach.

"Our starting point is the acknowledgement of the fact that there are diverse religions which exclude each other. This could mean either that one religion is right and that all the others are false; or that all religions have elements of falsehood. In reality, however, all religions are right, not in their dogmatic exclusivism, but in their unanimous inner signification, which coincides with pure metaphysics, or in other terms, with the *philosophia perennis*."<sup>6</sup>

To answer sceptics and opponents of this transcendent axiom, like Science, which always asks for evidence and apply natural laws on everything and philosophy which asks for logical consistency and arguments. But when causality, contradiction and inconsistency etc. are limited to time and space only then how are we going to apply these on something which are beyond of them. The limitation seems to be that, for the Infinite-cannot be defined in any any human language: Formal languages don't express concepts of plenums, continuity, infinity, and transcendental very well. Formal languages also don't express concepts of nothingness, void, and emptiness very well. Whether this is true of any and every logic, or just the ones we know of and can express, is an open question. Thus, transcendental unity of all religion is possible because every religion has some metaphysical entity or goal which helps us to plan the concept of transcendent unity. To better understand this argument, let us resort to the 'streetlight effect' story. A man sees a drunken man searching for something under a streetlight and asks what he had lost. The drunken man says that he had lost his keys and they both look under the streetlight together. After some time, a policeman asks the drunkern man if he was sure he lost them here, and the drunken man now replies that he had lost them in the park. The policeman asks why he was searching here, and the drunken man replies, "This is where the light is."

Even so, we have to be a little careful. What is meant by the terms transcendent, transcendental, immanent, etc.? In some cases, God is said to be entirely unknowable and in some accounts, we know him partially and analogically. There is much debate about religious language and religious experience and it's relation to our ordinary language and experience.<sup>7</sup> Frithjof Schuon points out that "We wish to state clearly that this is never with the intention of convincing opponents whose minds are already made up, but to enable those who wish to understand to get a glimpse of certain aspects of reality; it is for the latter alone that we are writing, and we decline to enter into polemics that would have no interest for our eventual contradictors or our self."<sup>8</sup> These words were penned by the author while working with certain very controversial axioms (e.g. absolute reality) since we are

also dealing with such axioms so we also propose the same thing before moving further.

Let's get back to our point, the transcendent unity of religions fundamental premise is that all major religions share a common ground one can be metaphysical and another moral. This is the crux of the school of thought known as Perennial Philosophy or hermeticist spiritualism. For an instance, the duality between the platonic world of ideas and the world of appearances, the essence of religions is that it represents also the same but in multiple forms and adapted to the relative cultures. As for Plato, Ideas are transcendental, while their reflections are transitory. Although many ideas are distinct, they may be the shadows of the same idea from which they originated. With this analogy, how should someone explore the essential unity of all religious ideologies? It is possible by distinguishing between exoterism and esoterism. It needs a philosophical mode. While the exoteric knowledge may depend on the relative grounds, we can consider the exoteric one transcendent. It would be like saying that there's only one human emotion, called "emotion," that is then translated into anger, fear, joy, ecstasy, love, etc.

It is in Vedas that we find propagated the concept that the Reality is one called by many names — "*Ekam Sat Vipra Bahuda Vadanti*" and supported by the ethical and moral narrative '*Vasudeva Kutambhekam*': We are all one family. As various rivers head towards to one ocean in the same way the end of all religions is the same. All lead to salvation or liberation. Now if all the religions lead to the same truth and they are just the different pathways to that then there remains no reason for the disparity. There is parity among all religions, all religions are equally true or equally related to the truth, no religion can impose its superiority over others, as all are related to the truth.

As Swami Vivekananda advocated, "The unity of religions is based on direct perception of ultimate reality. The paths are unique but the goal remains the same. Even if the entire world becomes convened to either, it will not enhance the cause of unity. Unity in diversity is the plan of the universe."<sup>9</sup>

Exclusivity must be replaced with unity in diversity since peace and prosperity exists no less in diversity than in likeness if only the same fundamental govern both parts. As *Ramakrishna Paramahansa* said regarding Harmony of Religions, "I have practised all religions—Hinduism, Islam, Christianity—and I have also followed the paths of the different Hindu sects. I have found that it is the same God toward whom all are directing their steps, though along different paths. You must try all beliefs and traverse all the different ways once. Wherever I look, I see men quarrelling in the name of religion—Hindus, Mohammedans, *Brahmos*, *Vaishnavas*, and the

rest. But they never reflect that He who is called Krishna is also called Siva, and bears the name of the Primal Energy, Jesus, and Allah as well—the same Rama with a thousand names..."<sup>10</sup>

An open-ended question which needs to be explored is discussed by Jacques Dupuis, "In the first case, the plurality of religions... is seen as a factor to be reckoned with, rather than welcomed... In the other case, the same plurality is welcomed as a positive factor which witnesses at once to the superabundant generosity with which God has manifested himself to humankind in manifold ways and to the pluriform response which human beings of diverse cultures have given to the Divine self-disclosure. Seen from God's side, the question is whether religious pluralism is only permitted by God or, on the contrary, positively willed by Him. Or rather—if one prefers to avoid both these terms—the question is whether theology can assign to the plurality of religious traditions a positive meaning in God's overall design for humankind or not".<sup>11</sup>

Let us take the above problem from the perspective of Philosophy of religion taking an analytical approach. It is said that in order that some truths be manifest for human beings which are not directly known by intellect or sense, God chooses Revelation. Sacred books of all religions often claim to be revealed, be it the holy *Koran*, the *Bible* or even the *Veda* (sought by our seer and sages known as *rishi*). Now there is conflict about how do we understand the significance of the Revelation? Who will decide? Who is eligible to decide? How do we decide? There are multiple interpretations of the same text and there are of course different claims in texts. Some complain if the Good God wanted us all to know why he did not create a more transparent method like the shining of the sun where it is evident to all in transparent communication. Here we have different theologies. Some argue God did not create perfect beings; the world is a place for soul-making. Humans are tested for their efforts to struggle in knowing the truth and following the path of virtue. We need to use our intellect and with the steadfastness of good conduct we will rise to our full humanity and in some cases to out superhumanity or divinity. One may still wonder why this trial, what about weak will and flesh, what about moral weakness? What about interpersonal inter-group hatred, violence and conflict. The answer in the form of Lila for cosmic play offers little consolation.

The other claim is of individual faiths saying we have it and you do not so convert; it belongs to fanatics and bigots. The third view is that we are all saying the same thing, let us be virtuous and kind. Now this is very attractive but some consider that this third position has many problems: is every one saying the same thing in their metaphysics, epistemology and ethics factually? If

we are asked to selectively choose common elements, we are accepting non-religious criteria for which there has to be an agreement. This global ethical criterion would be most welcome on the secular ground. However, if there is a firm believer of a faith who sees a close connection between his faith in his God and his ethics, he would feel he is cheating God. Freedom of conscience in most constitutions guarantees him his belief in a liberal framework. So here is a genuine problem of religious pluralism in a liberal frame where reason and dialogue are important. Many religious practices and many philosophers like Kierkegaard consider reason to be antithetical to true religion.

### Ethics and Morality of World Religions: Bridging the Gaps of Differences

Although religious and philosophical ethics may not derive their moral standards from the same authority, we still ought to find some ways to establish harmony between them; otherwise, we're condemning ourselves to live amidst moral and global discord and division. "When ethics and religion collide, nobody wins; when religion and ethics find room for robust discussion and agreement, we maximize the prospects for constructive choices in our society."<sup>12</sup>

Every religion offers philosophical insights, observations, and instructions through their ethics and morality. These ethical commonalities become apparent when different sacred texts, concerning basic philosophy, are compared. The golden principle of ethics and morality, prayer, *bhakti*, character development, faith, love, and compassion. No religion in an actual sense would promote the violation, destruction, and disharmony; it is just the misinterpretation of those prescriptions and values which some bigot and eccentric people use for their selfish gains. Despite the resistance from a few bigoted people, most of the religions and their implicit ethics preach techniques, methodologies, values and virtues which can help the whole humanity and world to attain universal well-being.

Each religion has captured some essential aspects of the Great Truth and each has made some important contribution to the overall march of humanity towards holistic prosperity. Each religion with a different attitude and language, directly or indirectly, accepts the concept of the golden principle of morality: Treat others as you would like to be treated. The golden rule prescribes that what hurts us hurts others and that what heals us, heals others. This moral law is almost equal or comparable to other religion can help us to build up a good interreligious understanding due to its emphatic characteristic. All

major religions' moral standard begins with this simple golden rule: Treat others as you would like to be treated:

"*Atmanah pratikulaniparesham Nasamacharet* (What is not good for me cannot be meted out by me to others. What is not good for me would not be good for others also, because others are like me in every respect.)" (*Mahabharata* 5.15.17)

"Not one of you is a believer until he desires for his brother what he desires for himself" (40 *Hadith of an-Nawawi* 13, Islam).

"Wound not others, do no one injury by thought or deed, utter no word to pain thy fellow-creatures" (*The Law Code of Manu*, Hinduism).

"Do not do to others what you would not like yourself" (*The Analects* 12:2, Confucianism).

"If you do not wish to be mistreated by others, do not mistreat anyone yourself" (*Counsels of Adurbad* 92, Zoroastrianism).

"We get salvation by loving our fellow man and God" (*Granth Japji* 21, Sikhism).

"Having made oneself the example, one should neither slay nor cause to slay. . . . As I am, so are other beings; thus let one not strike another, nor get another struck. That is the meaning" (*Dhammapada*, Buddhism).

"One should not behave towards others in a way which is disagreeable to oneself. This is the essence of morality. All other activities are due to selfish desire" (*Anusansana Parva* 113.8, Hinduism).

"Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself" (*Leviticus* 19:18, Judaism).

"Therefore, all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do you even so to them." (*Matthew* 7:12, Christianity)."<sup>13</sup>

### Religious Pluralism: Reevaluation of the Virtue of Toleration and Justice

The idea of "[r]eligious pluralism holds that various world religions are limited by their distinctive historical and cultural contexts and thus there is no single, true religion. There are only many equally valid religions. Each religion is a direct result of humanity's attempt to grasp and understand the incomprehensible divine reality. Therefore, each religion has an authentic but ultimately inadequate perception of divine reality, producing a partial understanding of the universal truth, which requires syncretism to achieve a complete understanding as well as a path towards salvation or spiritual enlightenment."<sup>14</sup> Here perennial thinking helps us, suggesting that the absolute reality is what allows the absolute and universal truth to be understood and argues for universalism, the idea that all religions, underneath seeming differences, point to the same Truth.<sup>15</sup>

When the world is moving towards the democratisation of individual and public life in all areas of life including social, political, ethical and economical aspect then it would not be possible to impose one's ideology and faith on others. We will have to adopt the pacific approaches like the path of positive ethics and morality in which everyone can flourish with dignity and integrity. Any form of exclusivity and fundamentalism can be evil in such a world. The richness of any religion and culture lies in the fact that it ought to provide democratic domain to all religions where every faith has an equal right to flourish and grow. A truly free society and culture protect all faiths and vice-versa. So if we move forward with intellectual humility, our ideas of religious pluralism, religious tolerance, and interreligious understanding can easily achieve success.

“The only business of the church is the salvation of souls, and it is of no concern to the Commonwealth or any member in it whether this ceremony or that is part of that celebration.” These are strong words from John Locke's “Letter Concerning Toleration”. The exclusion crisis is the immediate context for Locke's “Letter Concerning Toleration”. But we get a better understanding of this work when we think about the 150-year history of religious persecution and retribution and infighting that is one of the motifs that this exhibition has documented.”<sup>16</sup> Is it good to convince people to change their beliefs by force? John Locke revolts this approach. People might say they believe in your faith to save themselves from torture or being burnt at the stake, but their actual beliefs can't change like that. Persecution and punishment would never secure consent to the state religion, so it is in the best interest of the State to let people practice religion as they like. Locke's observations can be helpful to get a sense of what movements were forcing open the question and need for religious toleration.

Toleration and acceptance is a response to the fact of pluralism, whether religious, ethical or social. Just to complicate things a little we could think about pluralism itself as a kind of moral principle. So if one says one is a pluralist, one recognises the diversity of moral and ethical views out there and one's attitude, therefore, tolerance or toleration in negative sense and acceptance in the positive sense. So in that sense pluralism sounds like it's also a moral position and ethical responsibility too. In the idea of religious pluralism, the concept of toleration plays a major role. Another way can be that if we consider pluralism as a condition and toleration as a response to it. We acknowledge that there is a plurality of multiple approaches and opinions on the world of ethical views and so on, and the integrity we opt is that we accept or tolerate these differences. We think that we should try to explore them and should open our mind for a new

perspective. At some point it can be critical because we may have some issues, very strong views and may not be willing to tolerate or accept certain forms of diversity. It should not be, tolerance shouldn't mean accepting lower moral standards since we have a rational self, we should have dialogue and explore those standards which seems conflicting.

To conclude, we can say that it is important to realise that peace, prosperity and harmony are not easily achieved and maintained. It is a herculean task. Peace and prosperity do not occur in a day, there are obstacles as intrepid travellers struggle up the path to heights where the human spirit may struggle. Philosophical and moral approaches which bring numerous ways to tackle any possible obstacle are always there to help us in the formation of understanding and clarity. Now that the world has attached itself with a communicational unity, we are moving towards a new era in which it becomes both possible and appropriate for socio-religious thinking to transcend the fundamental and exclusive cultural-historical barriers; it is a time to exchange the values and virtues. We need to search for the universalistic or universalizable values which must be less bind up with culturally determined forms. Philosophical and moral maturity ensures giant strides for masses, to rediscover the understanding and new way of living in which everyone can flourish. Those who say religion is opium or religion is corrupt need to ask themselves whether religion corrupts man or it is the man who corrupts religion with an analogy that if dirty politics is actually dirty or is it megalomaniac politician who makes it dirty. Similarly, no culture and civilization are intrinsically bad, it is the people who shape them, and it is up to them as to what kind of form do they want to give it, good or bad. So blaming is just an excuse, we need to get out of it positively.

## Notes

1. *Collected Works of C.G. Jung: Symbols of Transformation*, Vol 5 “. Princeton University Press. Retrieved 2014-01-18.p-18
2. Camus Albert. Albert Camus Quotes Create Space Independent Publishing Platform, 13 July 2016, p. 31 .
3. *Collected Works of C.G. Jung, Volume 5: Symbols of Transformation* “. Princeton University Press. Retrieved 2014-01-18.p-89
4. James, William *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, New York: The Modern Library, (1902), p. 254
5. Some historians and thinkers argue that what is termed “religious wars” is a largely “Western dichotomy” and a modern invention from the past few centuries, arguing that all wars that are classed as “religious” have secular (economic or political) ramifications. See Cavanaugh, William T. *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology*

- and the Roots of Modern Conflict*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. Similarly, an American historian and religious studies scholar, Jeffrey Burton Russell, states that numerous cases of supposed acts of religious wars such as the Thirty Years' War, the French Wars of Religion, the Sri Lankan Civil War, 9/11 and other terrorist attacks, the Bosnian War, and the Rwandan Civil War were all primarily motivated by social, political, and economic issues rather than religion; see Russell, Jeffrey Burton *Exposing Myths about Christianity*. Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Books, 2012, p. 56
6. Schuon, Frithjof, *From the Divine to the Human*. USA: World Wisdom Books. 1982, coverpage
  7. William James stresses that the word *divine* in his perspective leaves open what one shall consider divine. It could be a god or any other metaphysical entity but it also could be nature, moral principle, social contract, the unknown or any number of things. See James, William, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, Longmans, Green & Co, 1902, p. 17
  8. Smith, Huston. "Introduction." in Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, New York 1975, p. 94
  9. Vivekananda, Swami. *India's Mission*, 1896
  10. Rolland, Romain. "The Return to Man". *The Life of Ramakrishna*. Vedanta Press & Bookshop, 1929. pp. 49–62.
  11. Jacques Dupuis, S. J., *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, New York 1997, p. 386.
  12. Donahue James A. *Does Ethics Require Religion?* March 1, 2006, [https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/does\\_ethics\\_require\\_religion](https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/does_ethics_require_religion)
  13. *Exploring Religious Ethics in Daily Life*, by Rabbi Marc Gellman, Monsignor Thomas Hartman, <https://www.dummies.com/religion/exploring-religious-ethics-in-daily-life/>
  14. Livingston, James. "Religious Pluralism and the Question of Religious Truth in Wilfred C. Smith." *The Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory*, vol. 4, no. 3, 2003, pp. 58-65.
  15. Huxley states that "the Perennial Philosophy is expressed most succinctly in the Sanskrit formula, *tat tvamasi* ('That thou art'); the Atman, or immanent eternal Self, is one with Brahman, the Absolute Principle of all existence; and the last end of every human being, is to discover the fact for himself, to find out who he really is." See Huxley, Aldous, *The Perennial Philosophy* (1st ed.), New York: Harper & Brothers, 1945, introduction.
  16. John Locke. *A Letter Concerning Toleration*. <https://www.britannica.com/video/185965/look-John-Locke-A-Letter-Concerning-Toleration>