

Harmony in Pluralistic Religious Indian Society: Lessons from Vivekananda's Principles of Inter-religious Dialogue

Antony SUSAIRAJ

Abstract

In Indian society today, there are many instances of division, dissension, discord, and bloodshed in the name of religion. However, the believers of all religions are convinced that true religion does not preach violence, but peace and harmony. In order to establish peace and harmony among the people of different religions, inter-religious dialogue is the key to build a harmonious and peaceful Indian society. One of the eminent thinkers and religious leaders of India, Vivekananda, has contributed valuable ideas toward the realization of this dialogue. This paper deals with the contributions of Vivekananda toward inter-religious dialogue and harmony with specific reference to the World's Parliament of Religions, 1893, in Chicago.

Introduction

India is a land of many religions, where Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, Jains, Sikhs, Parsees, as well as several tribal communities, have lived together for centuries in India. Indeed, religious pluralism is the law in theory and reality in the present Indian context. Pluralism is a human existential problem in the midst of so many religions. In India today, we find hundreds of instances of divisions, dissensions, discords and bloodshed in the name of religion; communal violence has persecuted and massacred hundreds of thousands of innocents. Though the causes of violence can be found in economic, political, or social reasons, religion is often used to justify communal violence. On the other hand, believers of all religions are convinced that true religion does not preach violence, but peace and harmony. All religions are committed to building a new humanity of freedom and justice, fellowship and peace. Inter-religious dialogue is urgently necessary in the context of religious plurality of India. Dialogue is a means to collaborate and co-operate to build a harmonious and peaceful India.¹ Inter-religious dialogue is not just an academic exercise, but will determine whether people of different religions are able to live harmoniously in the same community. Dialogue reduces inter-religious misunderstandings, prejudices, and bigotry. Moreover, in the Indian context, religious and cultural identities represent some of the most sensitive spheres of human life,

¹ Edmund Chia, "Intra-Religious Dialogue", in *Dialogue: Resource Manual for Catholics in Asia*, ed. by Edmund Chia (Delhi: ISPCK, 2002), pp. 320–321.

making mutual respect and tolerance an imperative.² Through dialogue, not only can traditional and cultural values be upheld but also society can be transformed by identifying dehumanizing elements. This paper deals with the contributions of Vivekananda on inter-religious dialogue and harmony with specific reference to the World's Parliament of Religions, 1893.

A Brief Biography of Vivekananda

Vivekananda was born on January 12, 1863, to Vishwanath Datta and Bhuvaneshwari Devi in the city of Kolkata in India.³ His given name was 'Vivekananda.' *Viveka* is a Sanskrit word meaning discrimination, more particularly in the philosophic sense of discrimination between the real (God) and unreal (the phenomena recognized by our sense-perceptions). *Ananda* means divine bliss or the peace which is obtained through enlightenment.⁴ The young Vivekananda developed a special fancy for wandering monks. During his college studies, Vivekananda mastered Western logic and specialized in Western philosophy and the ancient and modern history of the different European nations. Not only in his intellectual capacities, but also in qualities of the heart, like resourcefulness, courage, and self-confidence, he showed striking signs of excellence even in his boyhood.⁵ Though of a deeply devotional nature, as a young man he was assailed by doubts about the existence of God. Questions about the ultimate reality began to trouble his soul. His intellectual achievements and deep grasp of Western philosophy and literature could not satisfy his thirst for the ultimate truth. In order to seek answers to the fundamental questions of life, he began to frequent great men of his time. To every such person, he would pose the question, "Sir, have you seen God?" and would be disappointed. At last, he got the answer to this question from the saint, Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa, who was then staying at the Dakshineswar temple-garden. Ramakrishna replied, "God can be realised. One can see and talk to Him as I am doing with you."⁶ In this seemingly simple exchange, we find the first rumblings of a mighty spiritual wave which was to later engulf human society and change its course. This event was a major turning-point of his life. As a result of his association with Sri Ramakrishna, his innate spiritual yearning was aroused, and he began to feel the transitoriness of the world and the futility of academic education.⁷ By the end of 1884, Vivekananda ultimately decided to renounce the world for good. He was initiated into an order of monks by his master, Sri Ramakrishna. As a monk, he undertook a long journey to different parts of India. He came to face to face with the poverty and misery of the masses. He could see the misery of India in all its reality.⁸ He resolved to

² J. Russell Chandran, "The Importance of Inter-religious Dialogue Today", in *Dialogue in India: Multi-religious Perspective and Practice*, ed. by K. P. Aleaz (Calcutta: Bishop's College, 1991), p. 3.

³ Swami Nikhilananda, *Vivekananda: A Biography* (1964; repr., Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2013), p. 10.

⁴ Vidyatmananda, S. *What Religion is: In the Words of Swami Vivekananda* (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 1972), p. 20.

⁵ Swami Tapasyananda, *Swami Vivekananda: His Life and Legacy* (Chennai: Ramakrishna Math, 2008), p. 8.

⁶ Swami Shuddhidananda, ed. *Vivekananda as the Turning Point: The Rise of a New Spiritual Wave* (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2013), p. 3.

⁷ Swami Nikhilananda, *Vivekananda*, p. 20.

⁸ J. B. Goyal, *Swami Vivekananda: His Human Bonds* (Jalandhar: Falcon Books, 2004), pp. 6-11.

alleviate the sufferings of his motherland and provide selfless sympathy and love to the masses.

In the middle of 1885, Ramakrishna showed the first symptom of throat trouble which ultimately became terminal cancer. Before passing away on August 16, 1886, Ramakrishna transferred his spiritual responsibilities to Vivekananda and commissioned him for a global mission. He also entrusted Vivekananda with the task of caring for and leading his other disciples, turning the core group into a unique monastic brotherhood.⁹ In this way he laid the foundation of the great monastic order to which he later gave a formal shape. After his master's passing, Vivekananda became a *sannyasin* (monk). Hinduism describes four stages of life (*ashramas*): student (*brahmacharya*), householder (*grhastha*), forest dweller (*vanaprashtha*), and renouncer (*sannyasa*). Swami Vivekananda lived for only 40 years, yet within this short span of life he bequeathed to mankind a rich legacy of spectacular achievements in the religious and cultural history of the world.

Contributions of Vivekananda towards Inter-religious Dialogue

This part of the paper attempts to identify the contributions of Vivekananda towards the principles of Inter-religious dialogue and harmony. First, we analyze the significance of the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions, Chicago, and the contributions of Swami Vivekananda towards the principles of inter-religious dialogue and harmony.

The Significance of the World's Parliament of Religions, Chicago, 1893

The World's Parliament of Religions, Chicago, 1893, is now regarded as the beginning of the inter-faith movement.¹⁰ The Parliament discussed the relationship of religions to each other. The quest for inter-religious understanding and co-operation has steadily increased since as witnessed by the increasing study of world religions, the growth of inter-faith organizations, the common search of religious people for peace, and the development of dialogue between people of living faiths.¹¹ It has not confined itself to mere inter-religious intellectual talks only but also is taking practical measures for better understanding among people of diverse faiths. In a multi-religion community, ethical cooperation for common improvement of "quality of life" in addition to comprehension of one another's beliefs can bring people of diverse convictions and histories closer. The study of comparative religions has become practice-oriented.¹² Today, we see that religious leaders are in favor of dialogue with the other religious traditions. The 1893 World's Parliament of Religions will help us understand the background of Vivekananda's strong impact on inter-religious dialogue and harmony.

⁹ Swami Shuddhidananda, ed. *Vivekananda as the Turning Point*, p. 8.

¹⁰ Marcus Braybrooke, "The Inter-faith Movement: The Present Reality," *Vidyajyoti, Journal of Theological Reflection*, vol. 56, no. 4 (April 1992), p. 182.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 183-190.

¹² Swami Prabhananda, "Swami Vivekananda's Contribution to the Parliament of Religions in Retrospect" in *Vivekananda as the Turning Point: The Rise of a New Spiritual Wave* (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2013), p. 55.

The Objective of the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions

Organizing for the Parliament began in 1891 after Charles Carroll Bonney, a layman in the Swedenborgian Church and the president of the World's Congress Auxiliary, appointed John Henry Barrows, an American clergyman of Presbyterian Church, to administer the General Committee on World's Parliament of Religions. The committee consisted of sixteen persons from different religious backgrounds but mostly from Christian mainline denominations. In June 1891, more than three thousand copies of the Preliminary Address were sent out to the world, informing of the plan and the objectives of the Parliament and inviting religious leaders from all over the world to attend.¹³ Establishing harmony and dialogue among religions is the guiding principle of the objectives of the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions.

1. To bring together in conference, for the first time in history, the leading representatives of the great historic religions of the world.
2. To show to humankind, in the most impressive way, what and how many important truths the various religions hold and teach in common.
3. To promote and deepen the spirit of human brotherhood among religious men of diverse faiths, through friendly converse and mutual good understanding, while not seeking to foster the temper of indifferentism, and not striving to achieve any formal and outward unity.
4. To inquire what light each religion has afforded, or may afford, to the other religions of the world.
5. To discover, from competent men, what light religion has to throw on the great problems of the present age, especially the important questions connected with temperance, labor, education, wealth and poverty.
6. To bring the nations of the earth into a more friendly fellowship, in the hope of securing permanent international peace.¹⁴

Further, the address of president Bonney clearly shows that the Parliament aims at peace through dialogue and harmony. Charles Carroll Bonney was a sitting judge on the Supreme Court of Illinois. He is best known for serving as president of the World Congresses at the World's Parliament of Religions.

1. If this Congress shall faithfully execute the duties with which it has been charged, it will become a joy of the whole earth, and stand in human history. It would be the actual beginning of a new epoch of brotherhood and peace.
2. When the religious faiths of the world recognize each other as brothers, children of one Father, whom all profess to love and serve, then, and not till then, will the nations of earth yield to the spirit of concord and learn war no more.
3. In this congress the word "Religion" means the love and worship of God and the love and service of man. We believe the scripture that "of a truth God is no respecter of persons, but

¹³ John H. Barrows, ed. *The World's Parliament of Religions: An Illustrated and Popular Story of the World's First Parliament of Religions, 1893*, vol. 1 (Chicago: The Parliament Publishing Company, 1893), p. 5.

¹⁴ Asim Chaudhuri, *Swami Vivekananda in Chicago: New Findings*, 2nd ed. (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2005), p. 83.

- in every nation he that fears God and works righteousness is accepted of him.” We come together in mutual confidence and respect, without the least surrender or compromise of anything which we respectively believe to be truth or duty, with the hope that mutual acquaintance and a free and sincere interchange of views on the great questions of eternal life and human conduct will be mutually beneficial.
4. As the finite can never fully comprehend the infinite, nor perfectly express its own view of the divine, it necessarily follows that individual opinions of the divine nature and attributes will differ. But properly understood, these varieties of view are not causes of discord and strife, but rather incentives to deeper interest and examination. Necessarily God reveals himself differently to a child than to a man; to a philosopher than to one who cannot read. Each must behold him through colored glasses of his own nature. Each one must receive him according to his own capacity of reception. The fraternal union of the religions of the world will come when each seeks truly to know how God has revealed himself in the other.
 5. The religious faiths of the world have most seriously misunderstood and misjudged each other from those which they were intended to bear, and from a disregard of the distinctions between appearances and facts; between signs and symbols and the things signified and represented. Such errors it is hoped that this Congress will do much to correct and to render hereafter impossible.¹⁵

The Parliament stresses the importance of tolerance and peace among religions. This atmosphere of openness towards other religions was very conducive for Vivekananda to express his views on the importance of accepting other religions.

Vivekananda's Key Ideas for Inter-religious Dialogue

Vivekananda was not an armchair philosopher who wrote academically on this subject. He promoted the principles and values of inter-religious dialogue and harmony through his lectures and talks. First, let us look at his contributions at the World's Parliament of Religions on the principles of inter-religious dialogue and harmony. These contributions were so influential that there was always a report on his talks in the newspapers of America. For instance, *The Boston Evening Transcript* of September 30, 1893, said that Vivekananda's address before the Parliament was broad as the heavens, embracing the best in all religions, as the ultimate universal religion. It promoted charity to all humankind to develop harmony through dialogue and tolerance, and only through tolerance and dialogue is one able to live in peace and harmony with others.¹⁶ Roman Rolland, a French novelist and a literature Nobel Prize winner, was present at the World's Parliament of Religions. He opined that Vivekananda was one of the charismatic personalities at the Parliament. His words easily touched the hearts of the vast audience listening to his fervid expositions with rapture. His address persuaded receptive minds to enter into dialogue with other religions and establish interfaith harmony. He became

¹⁵ Lakshmi Niwas Jhunjunwala, *The World's Parliament of Religions, 1893* (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2010), pp. 59–60.

¹⁶ *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, vol. 3 (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 1993), p. 472.

a world figure, with even life-size portraits placed on the roadside in Chicago.¹⁷ The next sections detail the principles of Vivekananda.

Acceptance of Other Religions

In the present context of India, many conflicts and confusions are conducted in the name of religion. National unity depends very much on religious unity. In order to bring unity among religions, the people of different religions need to accept and assimilate the good qualities of other religions. It is one of the essential requisites for dialogue among religions. Vivekananda's address at the final session of the Parliament on September 27, 1893, was a significant one. On the question of the common ground of religious unity he said that unity does not come by the triumph of any one religion and the destruction of others. Holiness, purity, and charity are not the exclusive possessions of any one religion and so there are good elements in all religions.¹⁸ Therefore, there is a need to accept the good elements of other religions during dialogue. He prophesized that "upon the banner of every religion will soon be written, in spite of resistance: 'Help and not Fight,' 'Assimilation and not Destruction,' 'Harmony and Peace and not Dissension.'"¹⁹ If one accepts and assimilates the qualities of other religions, it is not necessary to change one's own religion and become the member of other religions. In this matter, Vivekananda pointed out that the Christian is not to become a Hindu or a Buddhist, nor a Hindu or a Buddhist to become a Christian, but rather "each must assimilate the spirit of the other and yet preserve his individuality and grow according to his own law of growth."²⁰ To help society to keep itself free from sectarianism, bigotry, and fanaticism, the practitioners of different faiths should have not only toleration, but also acceptance of other faiths as true.²¹ He invites us to be rooted in our own religion and be open to other religions, being necessary qualities for dialogue. In his words, "I do not come to convert you to a new belief," he said, "I want you to keep your own belief; I want to make the Methodist a better Methodist; the Presbyterian a better Presbyterian; the Unitarian a better Unitarian. I want to teach you to live the truth, to reveal the light within your own soul."²² Thus, Vivekananda emphasized the need to have an open mind to accept and assimilate the good elements of other religions, which are the important principles for inter-religious dialogue and harmony.

¹⁷ Swami Prabhananda, "Swami Vivekananda's Contribution to the Parliament of Religions in Retrospect" in *Vivekananda as the Turning Point: The Rise of a New Spiritual Wave*, pp. 48-49.

¹⁸ *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, vol. 2, p. 24.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Swami Prabhananda, "Swami Vivekananda's Contribution to the Parliament of Religions in Retrospect" in *Vivekananda as the Turning Point: The Rise of a New Spiritual Wave*, p. 53.

²² Swami Tathagatananda, *Celebrating Swami Vivekananda: Essays for the 150th Birth Anniversary of Swami Vivekananda* (New York: Vedānta Society of New York, 2013), p. 33.

Unity in a Pluralistic Context

India is the cradle of many religions where religious pluralism is the reality today. On the one hand, religious pluralism enriches India with a variety of cultures and values. On the other hand, it is the cause of tribalism and violence among religions. In this context, Vivekananda has offered a profound message on inter-religious harmony and unity of all religions to the religiously pluralistic situation in India. He mentions that differentiation is the law of life, and religious differences are bound to persist, but it does not mean that we should hate each other. Harmony can be achieved only by the acceptance of the richness of religious pluralism through dialogue among the other religions.²³ He believes that the main cause of division among religions arises from the differences in dogmas and ritual practices, while faith in the Supreme Reality brings unity among them. The doctrines and dogmas are various paths that call upon their followers to pray to the one and the same God. But because the paths are divergent, differences arise, leading adherents of the respective faiths to lay stress on the non-essential details and thus triggering quarrels.²⁴ Further he says that human beings, instead of adhering to and understanding their faith's fundamentals and the true import of its essentials, accentuate only the differences among the non-essential constituents of religion, namely, ritual and mythology.²⁵ It is one of the obstacles for the inter-religious dialogue. Vivekananda considers that stressing the non-essentials of religions brings discord and disharmony.

All forms of religion have an essential and non-essential part. If we strip from the latter, there remains the real basis of all religions, which all forms of religion possess in common. Unity is behind them all. We may call it God, Allah, Jehovah, the Spirit, Love; it is the same unity that animates all life, from lowest form to its noblest manifestation in man. It is on this unity we need to lay stress, whereas, it is on the non-essential that men are apt to lay stress. They will fight and kill each other for these forms, to make their fellows conform.²⁶

In the ultimate analysis, Vivekananda's position maintains that the fact of religious pluralism is only an apparent pluralism, since the truth to be experienced lies in the essential elements of religions. The essentials of other religions could be understood and learnt through dialogue among various religions.²⁷ The emphasis of Vivekananda on the essential elements of religions is a necessary quality for the fruitful dialogue among religions.

²³ Swami Tapasyananda, *The Nationalistic and Religious Lectures of Swami Vivekananda* (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 1990), p. 17.

²⁴ Swami Lokeshwarananda, "Vivekananda: His New Orientation of Monasticism," in *Vivekananda: The Great Spiritual Teacher* (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 1995), p. 174.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ *The Complete Works of Vivekananda*, vol. 5, p. 197.

²⁷ Panjikaran, *Swami Vivekananda's Understanding of Religious Pluralism* (Rome: Gregorian University, 1992), p. 4.

Broad Look at Other Religions

A necessary quality for dialogue is to have a broader outlook on all religions and to avoid a narrow mentality towards other religions. Concerning this aspect, Vivekananda pleaded at the World's Parliament of Religions to overcome "the frog in the well" attitude. He narrates the story as given below.

The story goes that the frog in the well happened to meet a frog from the sea, and it tried to estimate and understand from the latter the size of the sea in terms of the distance it could cover by taking leaps in the well. When the sea frog said that it was nonsense to compare the sea with the well, the frog of the well retorted that the former must be a liar, as nothing could be bigger than his well. The trouble with us is very much similar. Each religionist sits in the small well of his religion and thinks that the spiritual truth is exhausted by the conceptions of his religion. They forget that the spiritual truth relates to God, the Infinite Being, who cannot be measured by any of our humanly restricted standards.²⁸

Through the story of frog in the well, he explained the narrow-mindedness of people of different religions. "I am Hindu. I am sitting in my own little well and thinking that the whole world is my little well. The Christian sits in his little well and thinks the whole world is his well. The Mohammedan sits in his little well and thinks that it is the whole world."²⁹ Vivekananda thanked the convention for breaking down the barriers of these little world-wells and moving towards unity. When the followers of different religions quarrel and fight among themselves because of their narrow mindedness towards other religions, they fail to understand that the Supreme Being is infinite and one and the same reality.

Vivekananda considers that the religious ideals of the future must embrace all that exists in the world and is good and great, and at the same time, have infinite scope for future development. All that was good in the past must be preserved; and the doors must be kept open for future additions to the already existing store.³⁰ Thus, Vivekananda admonishes that during the course of dialogue, one needs to avoid a narrow and closed mentality and be more broad-minded to accept the good principles of other religions.

Common Elements in All Religions

During the course of inter-religious dialogue, it is important to consider the common elements that bring religions together for a fruitful dialogue, which would further lead to harmony among religions. Vivekananda's talks and lectures present a good number of elements which are common to all religions.

²⁸ Swami Tapasyananda, *The Nationalistic and Religious Lectures of Swami Vivekananda*, pp. 1-2.

²⁹ Lakshmi Niwas Jhunjunwala, *The World's Parliament of Religions 1893* (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2010), p. 82.

³⁰ *The Complete Works of Vivekananda*, vol. 2, p. 67.

The first common element among religions according to Vivekananda is that the one ultimate reality is manifested in different forms. He says that there are several gods in India, but it is realized early in the Vedic times itself that Truth or God is one, but sages call Him differently. This idea became the bedrock of the great Indian ideal of universal acceptance. In the light of Indian tradition, it is the same God that different cults worship under different names and forms.³¹ Though the ultimate reality is one, there are differences in their manifestations. The reason for differences and contradictions among religions according to Vivekananda is that the same truth adapts itself to the varying circumstances of the different natures of people and cultures. It is the same light coming through glasses of different colors.³² One needs to keep this aspect in mind during the dialogue among religions. Further, he says that the difference between the religions of the world is one of expression and not of substance; their points of similarity and unity are of the soul, being intrinsic, as the language of the soul is one in whatever peoples and under whatever circumstances it manifests itself.³³ This understanding would help people of different religions during dialogue not to quarrel on differences among them but to understand each other well. Vivekananda considers that religious differences are only due to the different manifestations of the one ultimate reality. All religions try to define the one and the same indefinable reality. Vivekananda affirms that religions are all alike in that their ultimate purpose is the same.³⁴

During the dialogue among religions, it is essential to understand that the goal of all religions is the same in essence. Vivekananda considers that the ultimate goal of all mankind, the aim of all religions, is but one: reunion with God or what amounts to the same, with divinity, which is every man's true nature.³⁵ In other words, he says that each soul is potentially divine. The goal is to manifest this divinity within. This principle forms the foundation of Vivekananda's thought. He looked upon human evolution and progress as the unfolding of the inner spirit. It is the manifestation of the inherent divinity in human beings that Vivekananda called religion. In popular usage religion is always associated with creeds, rituals, customs, festivals, and so on. But Vivekananda regarded these only as secondary details of religion. The core essence of religion is the realization of the true self of the human being, which is divine.³⁶ Vivekananda emphasizes that religion is neither in books, nor in intellectual theories, nor in reasoning. Reasoning, theories, documents, doctrines, books, and religious ceremonies are all aids to religion; religion itself consists of attaining realization.³⁷ This understanding of

³¹ Swami Tapasyananda, *The Nationalistic and Religious Lectures of Swami Vivekananda*, p. 16.

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 9–10.

³³ Swami Lokeshwarananda, "Vivekananda: His New Orientation of Monasticism," in *Vivekananda: The Great Spiritual Teacher*, p. 144.

³⁴ A. R. Mahapatra, "Vivekananda and National Integration," in *Vivekananda: The Great Spiritual Teacher* (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 1995), p. 480.

³⁵ Swami Lokeshwarananda, "Vivekananda: His New Orientation of Monasticism," in *Vivekananda: The Great Spiritual Teacher*, p. 171.

³⁶ Swami Atmasthananda, "Swami Vivekananda: The Man" in *Vivekananda: The Great Spiritual Teacher* (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 1995), p. 215.

³⁷ Swami Vivekananda, *Religion of Love*, 18th ed. (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2010), p. 4.

religion will enhance the people of different religions to aim at the realization of the ultimate reality and have a meaningful dialogue.

During the process of dialogue, it is necessary to acknowledge the essential oneness of human beings despite the differences in religion, which will enhance the dialogue in a positive way. Usual people see only the differences everywhere dividing humanity into so many races, so many religions and linguistic communities, so many castes, political parties, and so on. Vivekananda's vision cut through all these barriers. He saw unity everywhere. Further, wherever possible he strove to create unity by breaking down barriers, by building bridges, by clearing the clouds of misunderstanding and suspicion, by strengthening the bonds of love and trust. One common factor which brings humanity together is spirituality. Therefore, Swami Vivekananda denounced dogmas, sects, churches, temples, etc., for they count for little compared with the essence of existence in each man, which is spirituality. Religion has to manifest the spirituality lying dormant in every man.³⁸ For him, dogmas, doctrines, rites, rituals are external accoutrements. These externals are helpful at the elementary stage of religion, which stage man must soon graduate to step onto a higher stage when he realizes his inner self as spirit.³⁹ Thus Vivekananda's view of religion is not theological, but rather it is spiritual. The emphasis on the spirituality of religion during dialogue would enable the people of different religions to appreciate the values of other religions.

Vivekananda did not find any fundamental difference between one section of humanity and another, between one religion and another. Without the recognition of the spiritual oneness of humankind there cannot be any unification of the world. It is the common ground where religious, racial, social, economic, political, and cultural differences can be met. And this unification of the world was one of Vivekananda's greatest dreams.⁴⁰ When we acknowledge and accept that spirituality is the common and uniting element of human beings, there is mutual understanding and appreciation of the values of other religions during dialogue.

Vivekananda considers that so long as religion is in the hands of the priests and confined within the temples, churches, and the holy books, religious differences may appear to be insurmountable and may pose serious problems. He says, "But when we come to the real, spiritual, universal concept, then, and then alone, religion will become real and living; it will come into our very nature, live in our every movement, penetrate every core of our society, and be infinitely more a power for good than it has ever been before."⁴¹ Thus, Vivekananda believes that the manipulation of religion by a few chosen people will not create an atmosphere conducive for a dialogue among religions. Vivekananda's highlighting of the common elements in all religions is an invitation to the people of different religions to look for the unifying elements and involve themselves in dialogue to promote harmony and peace in the religious pluralistic society of India.

³⁸ Swami Prabhananda, "Swami Vivekananda's Contribution to the Parliament of Religions in Retrospect" in *Vivekananda as the Turning Point: The Rise of a New Spiritual Wave*, p. 50.

³⁹ Santwana Dasgupta, *Social Philosophy of Swami Vivekananda*, 3rd print (Kolkata: The Ramakrishna Mission, 1991), p. 40.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

⁴¹ *The Complete Works of Vivekananda*, vol. 2, p. 68.

Conclusion

Many scholars emphasize the knowledge and understanding of other religions are important to enter into dialogue with them. However, Vivekananda takes a step further and emphasizes the importance of accepting and assimilating the good elements in other religions. Vivekananda emphasizes that the spirituality, which is the heart of every religion, should be given importance during the inter-religious dialogue. These are the notable contributions of Vivekananda in the field of Inter-religious dialogue. Though Vivekananda has contributed much to the principles of inter-religious dialogue and harmony among religions, Vivekananda did consider Hinduism as superior to other religions. This point is very vivid in his speech on September 11, 1893 in the World's Parliament of Religions held in Chicago. He said that he is proud to belong to a religion which has taught the world both tolerance and universal acceptance. Hinduism as a universal religion not only believes in universal toleration, but also accepts all religions as true.⁴² Considering Hinduism as superior to other religions, is one of the criticisms against Vivekananda. When we look at the contributions of Vivekananda holistically, we find that Vivekananda has commendably played a significant role by promoting the principles that enhance inter-religious dialogue and harmony among religions.

⁴² *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, vol. 1, p. 3.