Universal Religion in the Life and Thought of Swami Vivekānanda (1863–1902)

I

Vivekānanda’s concept of universal religion is characterized by a certain measure of fluidity. Sometimes he uses the term universal religion to emphasize the multiplicity of religions; sometimes the eternity of religion; sometimes the complementarity of religions; at other times, the humanity of religions; yet again, the harmony of religions; and yet again, the unity of religions. Sometimes he even discusses the possibility of Vedānta as a universal religion. Even this description does not exhaust the ways in which Vivekānanda works with the concept of universal religion, for sometimes he proceeds to identify it with his own version of an ideal religion as well.

Before we proceed to explore these seven dimensions of universal religion, as they appear in the works of Swami Vivekānanda, it might be helpful to recognize that Vivekānanda also uses the expression—and the concept it might embody—as it were—as fireflies in his utterances or writings, rather than as a steady point of light. For instance, he declares that ‘the Vedas are the only exponent of the universal religion’¹ and bemoans the ‘scene of almost infernal confusion’ caused by ‘breaking up piecemeal the one Eternal Religion of the Vedas (Sanātana Dharma)’² in India. In these contexts the use is too uncertain to yield theoretical clarity. In certain other contexts its use is more didactic than philosophical, as when he declares that ‘doing good to others is the one great, universal religion’³ or when he urges that students drawn from different religious folds should all be taught together.⁴
Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902)

II

Universal Religion and the Multiplicity of Religions

It would be natural for anyone, thinking in terms of universal religion, to consider the multiplicity of religions as antithetical to such a concept, but Vivekananda thought otherwise. He based his positive assessment of the multiplicity of religions and sects on historical and pragmatic grounds. With the single exception of the Zoroastrians,² he observed: 'This then is a fact in the present history of the human race that all these great religions exist and are spreading and multiplying.'³ 'Christians are multiplying, Mohammedans are multiplying, the Hindus are gaining ground, and the Jews are also increasing...⁴ Should God have wanted only 'one of these religions to exist and the rest should die, it would have become a fact long, long ago'.⁵ This is not merely a historical fact, it is a desirable state of affairs for 'any attempt to bring all humanity to one method of thinking in spiritual things has been a failure and always will be a failure'⁶ because 'variation is the sign of life and it must be there'.⁷ He approved of the growth of sects and even said: 'I pray that they may multiply so that at last there will be as many sects as human beings, and each will have his own method, his individual method of thought in religion.'⁸

It is apparent, then, that universal religion, in the thought of Vivekananda, has nothing to do with uniformity in matters of religion; in fact, if anything, Vivekananda celebrates variety and differentiation. For Vivekananda, therefore, the concept of universal religion is fully consistent not only with the presence of many world religions but also sects which are 'multiplying all the time'.⁹ The greater the number of sects, the more the chance of people getting religion. In the hotel, where there are all sorts of food, everyone has a chance to get his appetite satisfied. So I want sects to multiply in every country, that more people have a chance to be spiritual.¹⁰

Universal Religion and the Eternality of Religion

Vivekananda is not content to celebrate the presence of religious diversity in the present alone. He clearly states: 'I accept all religions that were in the past, and worship with them all...'¹¹ He then goes on to identify with the religions of the present — with Islam, with Christianity, with Buddhism, with Hinduism,¹² and then goes on to declare: