Christian-Muslim interaction in the Prophet's *Sīrah* and its impact on peaceful co-existence with special reference to the Christians of Najrān

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Abstract

"Studying the prophet Muhammad's (peace be on him) history, one comes across several instances when there was Christian-Muslim interaction. Examples begin with the first Muslim migration towards the Christian territory – Abyssinia and ends with sending Muslim preachers to Christian tribes, Prophetic treaties, letters to Christian governors and Emperors and dialogue with delegations like the Christians of Najrān.

The paper will start with a brief introduction of the historical presence of Eastern Christianity with different denominations in the Arabian Peninsula, who had covered the areas of Internal Arab, Bahrain, 'Ammān, Yemen and Iraq. It will discuss the nature ofearlyChristian-Muslim interactions with thembriefly with special reference to the Christians of Najran because itwas the first ever regular interaction between Muslims and Christians. Therefore, this incident has an academic and historic importance; we will explore who were these people- their religious or political status? What brought them to the table of dialogue with Muslims? What issues they had in their minds to discuss with the Holy Prophet? During the discussion, what kind of attitude they showed and how the Holy Prophet and His companions responded to that? Why they signed a peace treaty? What were the clauses of the treaty? Had it an impact on peaceful co-existence? Which model of dialogue can we extract from these events? At end, the paper will present the opinions of some prominent western Christian scholars and historians of

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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

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

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

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1 Ibid., 174.

2 Ibid., 172.

3 Ibid., 108.

4 Ibid., 106.

5 Ibid., 107-08.

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 in *samadhi*. 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]

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

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

3 Ibid., 111.

4 Ibid., 110.

5 Ibid., 115-16.

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

1 Ibid., 150.

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

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

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

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

2 Ibid.: 554.

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

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

5 Ibid., 153.

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

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

2 Ibid., 293.

3 Ibid., 296.

4 Ibid.

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

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

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

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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.

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 *AdvaitaVedanta* at the apex of his proposed evolutionary religious order, while he places *DvaitaVedanta*at the bottom of this evolutionary ladder and *VisistAdvaita* in the center between *Advaita* and *DaviataVedanta*. He opines that Christianity and Islam coincide with *DvaitaVedanta*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]

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

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

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

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

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[1] Ibid., 55.