4.1 Introduction

Religion as Hinduism is popularly known as the Aryan religion. This Aryan religion possesses no particular God, but is based upon the fundamental and spiritual laws that govern and maintain our soul life. It cannot be said to be sectarian, but is universal as it embraces the ideals of all religions of the world. The teachings put forward by the Vedas are wide and limitless in their scope, and all the religions of the world may well be said to be based on the universal ideal of the Vedic religion. Most of the religious principles and teachings of Buddhism are found in the great teachings of the Upanisads, and the ideals of Christianity can also be detected in the teachings of Lord Buddha. Jesus, the Christ, is said to have come to India through Central Asia accompanied by the followers, and studied and learned the Buddhist religious ideals and practised the Yoga-sadhana of Hinduism. In the unknown life of Jesus, the Russian traveller Nicholas Notovitch has given an account of a manuscript preserved in the Hemis monastery of Ladakh, where an authentic account of the unknown life of Jesus, the Christ, is found.

Fanaticism can never be a religion in truer sense, as fanaticism begins its journey from ignorance, and ignorance may be said as the cause of bondage as well as suffering. That is why we should start the removal of ignorance and
nescience with the help of realization of the true ideal of religion. We can see religion into two divisions-essential and non-essential. The essential parts are self-control, self-mastery and above all the realization of the Atman while the non-essential parts are the doctrines, dogmas, blind faith etc. All men should make an attempt to realize their Atman and remove all kinds of limitations. As and when they would be able to realize the essential parts of religion, they all would see a real sense of harmony among the followers of all religions of the world.

The universal religion includes in its domain all the doctrines like dualism, qualified non-dualism and non-dualism, as because the ultimate goal that is God-realization is the same; the names or faiths or sadhanas only differ, but the ultimate aim is one and the same. Now, what is the meaning of the word ‘eternal’ that we try to mean? It is simply an idea of beginningless and endless. Beginninglessness or eternity implies that we all have come to this human world after passing hundreds and thousands of cycles of birth and death, and shall end our journey when we can realize our immortal Atman, the prime source and back ground of the world-process.

The followers of the doctrine of dualism accept the existence of a Creator different from the individuals and the world. The doctrine of qualified non-dualism is different from dualism. It says that God is the biggest whole, whereas the individual souls are the parts. The non-dualism is again different from qualified non-dualism. Because it believes in every soul or everything is non-different from God, the Absolute. It has been revealed that the universal religion
embraces them all. Jesus the Christ too realized this truth and therefore he loved all beings and all creatures of the world.

A question arises – “What do we mean by love”? The notion of love indicates the expression of oneness. Love is nothing but the expression of that oneness. It is the feeling of oneness. If one’s heart overflows with the ideals of Divine love, he will see that Divine Love is revealed in humanity and all human beings are but parts and parcels of one’s true Self.

In fact, universal religion does not consist in following a creed, or in believing in dogmas, doctrines or scriptural writings, nor it can be found in the banner of some particular prophet, by joining a sect or denomination, rather its objective is to upgrade the individual soul above the limitations of senses and bring it in close contact with the Infinite and to make it realize the absolute freedom from the bondage of ignorance, delusion, egoism, pride, ambition and all other imperfections that point out human nature characteristically and keep us down in this world of transitory existence. Truly speaking, universal religion is not only a belief in an aggregate of doctrines or dogmas, or in personal God. This religion does not denote a mere worship of some form of the Divinity and it is only fear of, or reverence for God. It is not depending upon absolute obedience to the Divine commands, but it remains, as Professor Max Muller puts, in the perception of the Infinite through all such revelations as are capable of influencing the moral character of man. The perception of the Infinite or the realization of the Absolute Being, worshipped by different forms and names, is the essential point of all religions.
4.2 Concept of universal religion

The spiritual struggle of man is represented by various religions in the world. These spiritual organizations have been quarrelling constantly with one another. Each religious sect claims the exclusive right to live. It considers its own doctrine and its own organization superior to any other. In spite of the conflicts, most of the major religious sects continue to live. These conflicts rather strengthen the sects to expand and to live instead of weakening them. According to Vivekananda, it is a futile attempt to bring all humanity to one method of thinking on spiritual matters. If all of us think exactly the same thoughts, there will be no more thoughts to think. The sects and conflicts must be there. It is ‘the clash of thought, the differentiation of thought that awakes thought.’ There will be sects so long as mankind thinks. Variation must be there. Variation is the sign of life to Vivekananda. But, then, a question arises, How can all these varieties be true?...... How can contradictory opinions be true at the same time? All the religions of the world are not really contradictory. There is a soul behind every religion. The soul may differ from that of another religion. But the religions are supplementary. According to Vivekananda, man proceeds ‘from truth to truth, from lesser truth to higher truth.’ But, it never proceeds from error to truth. Every religion takes up one part of the great universal truth. The soul of religion can never be lost. The ideal of every religion is never lost. Hence, there is the march of every religion towards truth.
Universal religion may be said to be the most general concept which reveals the very unity and the unique nature of all religions of the world. The very heart underlying all religions in the world is the same. Universal religion expresses the sameness of the fundamental principles as well as the teachings of each and every religion in the world. Vivekananda believes that universal religion exists. Just as the universal brotherhood of man is there, so also universal religion is there. Universal religion is neither the product of discursive understanding nor a synthesis of the vital elements of different religions. It is the realization that the different religions are expressions of one basic truth.

Explaining the concept of universal religion, Vivekananda said that all religions in the world are looking at truth from different standpoints which may of course vary according to our birth, education, surroundings and so on. His idea was that all religions are different forces in the realm of God, each religion is working for the good of mankind. Universal religion for which philosophers are looking for, already exists in every country like universal brotherhood. For him the heart of every form of religion is sound – it is a throbbing or beating of every heart. Every religion has a great mission to fulfil. Referring to Islam he said that Islam makes its followers all equal. It stands to preach to the world the practical brotherhood of all belonging to their faith. In Hinduism, we find one idea i.e., spirituality. Hinduism tries to define the idea of the soul so that no earthly touch can destroy it. Renunciation and spirituality, the great ideals of India, are still clinging to these ideas. The central idea of Christianity is to preach – ‘Watch and
pray, for the kingdom of Heaven is at hand’ – it means that man should purify his heart and should be ready to that spirit that never dies.

Vivekananda was ready to accept all religions of the past and hence he uttered – “I worship God with every one of them in whatever form they worship Him. I shall go to the mosque of the Muhammedans, I shall enter the Christian Church and kneel down before the crucifix, I shall enter the Buddhistic temple, where I shall take refuge to Buddha and in His law. I shall go into the forest and sit down in meditation with the Hindu who is trying to see the light which enlightens the heart of everyone.” He was ready not only to accept all the existing religions but to keep his heart open to accept any religion that may come into existence in future also.

If we look towards the concept of love of humanity of Buddha we can describe him as the greatest combination of heart and brain that ever existed, the greatest soul power ever manifested. Besides conflicts existing between Hinduism and Buddhism it can be accepted that the value of Buddhism has been in its own right. Moreover the relation between Hinduism and Buddhism is only the same as that between Judaism and Christianity. Buddha came to preach nothing new. He too like Jesus came to fulfill and not to destroy. So, when someone says – ‘My prophet is the only true prophet’- he is not correct in saying so. Religion should not be taken as a talk or a theory or an intellectual consent. Religion means true realization of the spirit in relation to the universal spirit. In respect of universal concept of religion, Vivekananda says that religion is
nothing than the realization in the heart that we are spirits in relation to the universal spirit. The mission of life of man should be to apply this truth for the development of man’s life—Physical, mental, aesthetic and spiritual. Each and every man should realize the universal truth that religion should be studied from various standpoints so as to understand the universal nature lying under all religions of the world. All narrow ideas of religion have to go. All sects and differentiation regarding religion must be given up. And everyone should realize the very oneness of all multiplicity. This oneness is the common basis of all metaphysical ideas of all religious doctrines, of all ethical principles, of all scientific truths in the world. This is where ancient and modern and also the East and the West meet. In this view there should be one humanity, neither eastern nor western.

For this purpose each and every people of the world must cultivate the zeal for the reconstruction of humanity on a spiritual ground which consists of universal truths that underlie not only in all religions but all phases of human life. And in accomplishing this mission one should study all great religions of the world and realise them, assimilate them and put them into practice to ensure peace of the world for all time to come. Universal religion, thus, preaches the philosophy of unity and solidarity of all existence ensuring happiness and welfare of all beings. It embraces all paths of spiritual progress and thereby become universal source of harmony of religions.

After a long study and experience Mahatma Gandhi said that all religions with some error in them are true. All religions should be treated as dear as our
Hinduism. In conformity with the great spiritual tradition he declared – “The Allah of Islam is the same as the God of Christian and Isvara of the Hindus.”

Truly speaking there is no difference regarding the essential teachings of the Bhagavad Gita and the Sermon of the Mount. What the Sermon describes in a graphic way, the Bhagavad Gita reduces it to a scientific formulas. Both teach the law of love as the source of world peace and harmony. In Christianity Jesus may be looked as an embodiment of self-sacrifice and self-suffering for the cause of a universal truth that all religions are same. Jesus may be treated as Divine as Ram, Krishna, Muhammad and Zoroaster. There is no fundamental variation among the Bible, the Gita and the Koran. Jesus belongs to all races of the world, not simply to Christian alone. The cross is the symbol of self-sacrifice. This spirit of self-sacrifice of Jesus is the representation of the great heart for a universal religion with the law of love for the peaceful living of the world people.

The concept of universal religion says that each and every people of the world community should practise the religion of love as love may be another name for religion. Religion of love is the keynote of all religious teachings whether it is Christianity, or Zoroastrianism or Judaism, or Islam or Hinduism comprising of Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism etc. or any other religious sect or organization. But in order to bring about this kind of religion the followers of different religions must come out from their narrow area of institutional religion and cultivate the spirit of tolerance for other religions and ready for sacrificing everything at the altar of truth for the welfare of the human race as a whole. The unity of such universal religious spirit can be achieved merely by strong religious
souls whose patriotism knows no limits of geography and History but only of those of justice and truth. The present day world is in dreadful requirement of this heroic spirit. All the great religious philosophers – West and East – tried to infuse this heroic spirit into the minds of the people of the world so that the world might survive peacefully against all sorts of ills practised in the name of religion. Such type of universal religion preaches religion centering round God. Of course, its primary concern is man and man’s wellbeing. Toleration gains its meaning only when religion is regarded purely as a human concern. Universal religion teaches to regard man as living Gods and whom we are to worship as ‘Nara-Narayana’ or ‘Daridra-Narayana’ as put by Vivekananda. Spiritual regeneration is the key note of this religion.

From the above discussion, it follows that universal religion is the most general concept which asserts the very oneness of religion for all men in the world as a whole. Explaining universal religion Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa said that the religions of the world are not contradictory or antagonistic. They are various phases of the one Eternal Religion.

For M.K. Gandhi “It is not Hinduism which I certainly prize above another religion, but the religion that transcends Hinduism which changes one’s very nature, binds one indissolubly to the truth within and ever purifies”. Sri Ramakrishna once stated that ‘there never was my religion or yours, my national or your national religion. There never existed many religions, there is only the one. One infinite religion exists and this religion is expressing itself in various countries, in various ways. Therefore, we must respect all religions, and we must
try to accept them all as far as we can’. This analysis may be treated as beautiful one regarding universal religion.

The history of world religions points out that all the great religions like Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism and Brahmanism have risen in the continent of Asia. These great religious traditions produced by this continent, have different followers in various parts of the world. Simultaneously we mark that each of these religious traditions has been claiming to be universal in nature and character.

Judaism has preached its doctrines among the Jewish people. Zoroastrianism has been preaching the doctrines among the Parsees. The doctrines put forward by Hinduism or Brahmanism were taught and preached within the geographical boundary of India, but its off-spring Buddhism got abroad and was accepted by the people of China, Tibet, Siam, Burma, Ceylon, and other countries. Christianity and Islam are the two springs of Judaism. Christianity has occupied a wide range of space in the west, and made a lot of followers. As a matter of fact, Christianity has become the religion of the Western countries in Europe and America, whereas Islam has been able to attract the people of India, Middle East and large Europe also. Each and every religion of these great religions made attempt to convince the world that the doctrine and teachings of the Prophets concerned were the only ways of attaining liberation.

A few of the followers of religions have been found so earnest and enthusiastic that they made attempt to convert people by force. Some even held swords in one hand and scriptures in the other. Some had proceeded for
demolishing the temples and mosques. The religion of this pattern fails to make the people realize that each one of these religions may be universal. Here, a question may arise in our mind –which one of these great religions may be named as a universal religion?

A Christian missionary in response to such a question will express that his religion is universal, i.e. the religion that asserts the essential unity of all religions in the world. There is no other way of gaining liberation, no way of reaching God. If a Muslim is asked the same, his reply is almost the same thing. A Buddhist’s opinion will be that Buddha is the Saviour of mankind, and whosoever follows the teachings of Buddha will reach Nirvana. But Hinduism was never a proselytising religion. The term Hindu is a misnomer. We cannot have such a religion as Hinduism, neither there is any such religion as Brahmanism. The foreigners have called our religion as Hinduism or Brahminism. It is more appropriate to call it Aryan religion or Arya-dharma instead of Hinduism or Brahminism.

This Aryan religion possesses no specific God, but is based upon the basic spiritual principles and laws that govern our soul-life. It possesses no founder though all other sectarian religions possess their founders. Judaism is based upon the personality of its great Prophet Moses. Christianity comprises of the very personality of Jesus, the Christ. Islam is also built upon the personality of Mohammed though it revolves round Allah. Zoroastrianism is based upon the teachings of Zoroaster. So Buddhism is based on the preaching of the Lord Buddha. Instead the Aryan religion possesses no founder although it may be
named as the oldest religion in the history of the world. Because its scriptures, the Vedas, are the oldest ones and the Rg-Veda is the oldest scripture that we have got through memory. We get its existence long before the art of writing came into existence for the world people.

The followers of different religious traditions have been diversified in their own doctrines, and so are engaged in quarrelling and fighting against each other all through the centuries. Now, the question may generally come to mind – Is there no way of finding unity or harmony amongst these existing religions of the world? This problem must be solved as we can admit nothing blindly. It is already mentioned that no religion based on the personality of its founder, can be called universal. Because the personality of Christ may explain to a particular class of people; while there are classes of people to whom the Mohammedian personality might be more attractive or the Buddha’s personality may be treated as better than that of Jesus, the Christ. Hence, a division will arise and we cannot change the whole world by enforcing the religious beliefs and practices of one religion amongst others. There are fanatics in every age. But we should not become fanatics. Because true religion shuts its doors for fanaticism as fanaticism proceeds from ignorance, and when ignorance becomes strong, the urge for fanaticism also becomes stronger. That is why we should search for another method to see harmony among the existing religions. So long as we discuss the religious beliefs and practices of various religions of the world, no harmony will reach us. But when we take the fundamental principles and the spiritual ideals for granted, we will get required harmony. For this perspective, each and every religion can be divided into two parts. The one is called non-
essential part and the other is the essential part. The former parts are called doctrines, dogmas, beliefs, sentiments and other ethical needs, but the later parts in all religions are the same. The essential parts are self-control, self-mastery, self-renunciation and the knowledge of truth. One will find in every religion the same ideal that the knowledge as to truth, being the ideal common to all religions, is one, as truth is one. Truth for Buddhism is similar to the truth of Islam, the same of the Christians, of the Hindus and of the Jews. Truth can never be many, but is one. The aim of man should be to realize that truth and to gain freedom. Man longs for freedom from all limitations, bondage of the body and environments that have enslaved us. The internal urge for our soul is to become free and to go beyond all limitations. To satisfy that urge all religions prescribe a lots of methods through which that goal can be achieved. The methods may be different as per the requirements of the followers. The requirements for the people living in the desert of Arabia, may not be required by the people living in Europe, or in America or in India, or in China etc. The requirements that people want should proceed hand in hand with their environments, customs and manners. In this way when the essential part of religion is one and while the methods are various in natures, man might put that unity by the different methods and that should be the required ideal of what is called universal religion. The universal religion embraces these different methods to be ways to the same goal. The description of the doctrines, dogmas and beliefs in Judaism is made from the way that leads to God. The God of the Jews again is the same with that of the Christians, and also of Islam, of the Hindus, and of the Buddhists. Names and forms in respect of the Divinity may have slight difference, still the essential part
the truth, which may be called the reality of the universe, is the same. If one studies the Vedas, one will find this ideal: “From Truth we have come into existence, in Truth we live, and unto the Truth we return at the end, and that Truth is one”. Taking it as the base if one goes and examines the fundamental and essential part of all religions, one will, then, gain harmony; but simultaneously we should regard all methods as good. It is not the case that the method of a Christian is better than that of both a Mohammedan or of a Buddhist, because the good for a Christian may not be so for another, and the others should not be persecuted on account of their beliefs. The Christian history has been described in the words written in the blood of its martyrs who were killed during the middle Ages. The innocent men were burnt alive for their faith, because simply they did not believe, as per the concepts of the Churches.

Those times have passed by and today, people are more tolerant and civilized, for truth is the aim of all religions. The ideal of all science is, also the truth. By religion, we should not denote a set of doctrines and dogmas which should be followed blindly, but it should be regarded as the science of the soul and its relation to the universal truth.

Universal religion will have to embrace each and every sectarian religion either monotheistic or dualistic, either qualified non-dualistic, or non-dualistic. This religion should possess three various phases; in the first phase of dualism or monotheism, it will embrace Judaism and Zoroastrianism, Christianity, Islam and other dualistic religions of the world. There is neither east, nor west for the omnipresent God. The true divinity has been existing within all of us. One
should, according to the ideal of universal religion, look into inside instead of outside. One may think that God is sitting overhead above the clouds. But God is the Soul of your souls, the Life of lives, and in Him everyone lives, exists, and without Him there could be nothing. The whole world has been run by the law of karma and causation. In this respect, the Christian Bible puts: “whatsoever thou sowest, that thou shalt reap”. Hence the consequence will be as per the nature of the cause. Every religion describes a separate heaven. There is a Christian heaven, there is a Mohammedan heaven, there is a Buddhist heaven, there is a Hindu heaven. All these heavens are different, because the founders of these religions have put as per the needs of the people concerned. They are all good. There are a lot of ideas regarding heaven according to the different tastes of the people. These heavens and hells are like dreamlands. They are in our minds only. It would be like the hell-fire described in Dante’s Inferno. Punishments in Christianity.

Universal religion should embrace all these various ideals of heavens, and take them for granted as per their relative value. But going to heaven is not the highest aim of life; on the other hand, the highest aim of life is to realize God and to become one with Him. This is the ideal of all religions whether dualistic, qualified-non-dualistic, or monistic, and they all aim at the same goal, which is the realization of the Truth, or the attainment of God consciousness or perfection, although they start from different viewpoints. As two faces are not alike, likewise two minds are not alike. Therefore, if one tries to enforce one set of ideals upon
all, then he will do mistake. All sectarian religionists too make the same mistake, when they say that those who do not believe in their doctrines and dogmas will not attain liberation, but will have to suffer in eternal hell. Here it is important that the idea of this ‘eternal hell’ is senseless as the word ‘eternal’ denotes a hell which has neither end, nor beginning. It is just impossibility. Men are still progressing higher and higher and will continue to rise until man becomes perfect as the Father in Heaven.

Universal religion does not believe in the inheritance of sin, met by one man, Adam, at the starting of creation, as explained in Genesis. Universal religion tells us that all these things are non-essential, and that the highly requirement for man is to know that men are all children of God, that men have come from God, and men are proceeding back to God, and already men are getting experience, and learning to reveal the divine powers latent in man. This is known as the revelation of potentially divinity, i.e., the spiritual life, and that potential divinity is not limited to a certain class of people. It in every soul. Each soul is potential divine though sometimes it appears to be sinful. Because the divine power has been revealing through each one of us, whether low or high in social life. Divine powers are the only powers that exist in the universe. Whatever man demands as own, in fact, belongs to God. If man does not realize it, it is man’s own fault. Therefore, not the scriptures, but the mind, ignorance and selfishness should be blamed.

Each and every wrong act does harm to the doer first, and then harm others as for every act man will have to suffer as per the eternal law of action and
reaction. And all the ethical principles of the world religions are based upon this
eternal law.

Christ was a dualist. He did prayer to his heavenly Father: “Our Father
who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name, etc.” According to the idea of a
dualist, the Father is separate from us as well from this world. He believes in a
Creator different from his creatures and creation. When one rises from that ideal
a little higher, one starts to notice divinity everywhere, and ultimately one
realizes that God is the one stupendous whole, of which men are merely parts.
This conception is advocated by a qualified non-dualist. He sees unity in variety
of revelation. Christ, the qualified non-dualist, put: My Father is the vine and I
am a branch thereof”. Again, there is another higher conception concerned. Here,
a man realizes his non-difference with the Infinite or the Infinite Spirit; he
declares “I and my Father are one”. It is not Jesus the Christ alone said this, but a
Mohammedan Sufi too puts ‘Anal Haq’ means ‘I am He’. Likewise, the Hindu
sages say: ‘aham brahmasmi’, - I am He; I am one with the Infinite Spirit. So,
Christ’s statement: ‘I and my Father are one’ is not an exception, but it is a
statement of the universal truth. The same truth and the same spiritual statement
of realization were meant for each and every seeker. So long as one is not able to
understand the true spiritual sense of these expressions, one may quarrel and
fight and create dissention and discord. After true realization of the meaning
underlying these statements, one will understand that who is worshipped, in
ignorance as sitting in a heaven, is not separate from the Spirit (Atman) within
us. Christ put that the kingdom of Heaven is within mankind, and Vedanta describes the same thing. The Koran and the Zend Avesta, the scriptures of the Mohammedans and Parsees to describe the same truth dwelling everywhere. Men are directly related to God, the infinite Spirit. Man should try to understand this essential point, and realize the oneness of the ideals. Then the differences in our actions, behaviours, amongst our relatives, friends, and neighbours will automatically disappear.

Love must be regarded by universal religion as its base, and that love is love for humanity, nay, love for all. All religions have treated love as the highest ideal, as Love is Heaven, and God is Love. Jesus, the Christ, came and taught the truth: “Love thy neighbour as thyself”. Of course, we do not get the answer, in the Christian Bible, to the question: “Why we should love our neighbours as ourselves? Why should we not cut the throats of others”? Though we do not get the answer in the Christian Bible, but we may find it in the Vedas, which was given out centuries before the birth of the Christ. The answer is this: “Thou shalt love thy neighbour not because thy neighbour has done thee some good, not because thy neighbour has given to thee some rich gifts or a social position or a good girl or some amusement, but because thou art thy neighbour in spirit:’tat tvam-asi’ as it is said in the Vedas. It means: The spirit in you is the spirit of the neighbour”, as per the Vedas spirit is only one. This is realization of love. It is the feeling of oneness. If one’s heart overflows with the ideals of Divine love, one will see that Divine love is revealed in humanity and all human beings are
parts and parcels of one’s true Self. That is why that is the highest criterion of real love.

Christ preached love for enemies. But, in practice, the European nations are not seen to practise Christ’s grand truth ‘love your enemies’. The nations like U.S.A., England and France have shown their anti Christian practices especially at the time of world wars with preaching hatred instead of love and yet they call themselves Christians and followers of Christ.

The world, today, becomes wide awake to admit universal religion that does not believe in bloodshed and commercialism for selfish ends. In the West, most of the people desire material comforts and luxuries. But, now the Westerners are needing a better religion, for a truer understanding of the ideals of love, and are looking towards the East. We, the Indians, must educate our people and supporters in the spiritual line as we are going to show the West that the unity amongst the existing religions should be the ideal, that a Mohammedan and a Hindu are brothers, that a Christian and a Hindu are brothers, that a Buddhist, a Parsee and a Hindu are all brothers, that they are worshiping the same God, and their goal is also the same.

From the above discussion, it is found that the ideal of universal religion is to realize that the different religions of the world are like so many ways which lead to the same goal.

4.3 Is Universal Religion Possible?

The different religions of the world have come from different traditions and against various backgrounds. So, the presence of difference amongst these
religions is bound. Of course, religion, in general, comes in human consciousness owing to some common problems the human beings have to face in the world and as people of various religious traditions have some common feelings, ideas and sentiments, therefore, there must have certain agreements also amongst various religions. Hence, it will be equally untrue to say about similarities alone and avoid differences as it will be to say about differences alone and avoid similarities. With a view to realizing whether universal religion is possible, we should make a comparative analysis amongst the different religions of the world. The scientific study of religions, the aim of a comparative study of them, will have to point out both these similarities and dissimilarities with a balance. Such a balanced comparison can well be considered amongst the religions of the world so far too.

The comparative analysis amongst the different religions of the world shows that the world religions do agree and disagree amongst themselves on several matters. Therefore, it is one-sided and wrong to give much stress either on the affinities or the differences alone. The same people have so frequently given more emphasis on the similarities with a view to promoting understanding as well as goodwill amongst the followers of different religions. On the otherside, those who are fanatics always intend to highlight the differences, speaking from the philosophical or scientific point of view, no one of the approaches is commendable, but keeping a social consideration in view, the former, of course, becomes more sound and desirable than the latter. The intention given by the fanatics creates a cause of much strife and struggle
amongst the world people in the name of religion. We see that the differences amongst the different religions are quite natural. Differences are more apparent in respect of practices than beliefs, and such differences are quite natural for the different social and cultural traditions in the world. But these differences should not be let to create cause for quarrel or fighting. Religion, in one way to understand, is a means to satisfy the hunger of the soul to achieve a position free from the strifes and strains of the temporary existence and no reason is there to fight if people of different religious traditions make endeavour to satisfy this hunger in their own different ways. Yet, it is not an easy task to say that religion has been one of the most striking causes of strain and struggle amongst different persons of the world. It pays no less harm than the good it has generated, or is desired to generate. Our history bears witness to fight in the name of religion and even the present many national and international issues or problems are purely religious in character. So far it is not being clear and distinct regarding the exact nature of this universal religion. Of course, it is seemed as clear from the very nomenclature that universal religion should not be treated as one more religion including the many existing from before hand, rather it should be treated as the only religion pre-existent by nature all over the world which will be acceptable to and followed by all religious persons alike. This religion will become the religion of all religious men, and it will be not of one specific group or society. Universal religion will, in this way, become the universally accepted religion. It has been a matter of feeling that once universal religion is realized from within, all
bloodshed and enmity in the name of religion will be fully over and the real role of religion then will be played, i.e., the role of uniting all people of the world by one thread of universal brotherhood. Practically viewing, such an environment may highly be beneficial for the world people and so it may be highly desirable. Here, a question can be raised- Is such an environment really possible, i.e. is there a real possibility of universal religion? It is doubtless that such a religion is logically possible, because the concept of universal religion does not involve any contradiction. But the real question is whether it is practically possible or not.

To answer this question, we will have to enquire into the meaning of the practical possibility of a universal religion, or, in other words what the possible universal religion will possibly be like. It may perhaps be any one of following three possible forms:

(i) One of the prevailing religions themselves may be taken universally by all people of the world to be their religion instead of one which they have so far been following as their own.

(ii) Or else, common and essential points of all prevailing religions may be drawn out so as to form common set of beliefs and practices to be observed and followed by all religious people of the world.

Or again, a totally fresh religion in a fresh manner may be evolved and people all over the world accept it as their common religion.

It is followed that all the religions of the world possess their own particular beliefs and practices which have been prescribed to their respective
followers. But we see a lot of similarities about these beliefs and practices amongst different religions, including certain dissimilarities also. Each and every religious tradition of the world keeps its distinct nature and character owing to the particular beliefs and practices. These beliefs and practices are being imbibed and prescribed by every religion. In the likewise, every religious person is clearly recognized as a Hindu or a Buddhist or a Christian owing to the specific beliefs and practices entertained and followed by him. One more thing that we may add, as forming the characteristic nature of a particular religion is the presence of certain specific religious stories or myths within it. Braithwaite, analyzing the nature of religious language, has very importantly drawn our attention towards this aspect of the world religions. In accordance with his analysis, each and every religion of the world comprises of two things- (i) a moral way of life and (ii) some specific stories. The former is primary while the latter is merely subsidiary, though they are possessed by every religion of the world. For Braithwaite, each religion means an endeavour for finding out a moral way of life comprised of certain stories. He has, by pointing out the role and importance of stories in religion, taken our attention to a very significant aspect of existing religious traditions. Each religion grows with the light of certain mythical stories. These stories generally are read with reverence, listened and remembered by its followers. These stories, from practical side, make a significant role in religions and the particular nature and character of one religion are separated to a great extent from others through the presence of various stories in them. In this
manner, all the world religions, as per their followers’ observance, possess chiefly of three things – (i) certain beliefs, (ii) certain practices and (iii) certain religious stories. Naturally, therefore, when a man accepting one particular religion than another, means accepting one set of beliefs and practices and he there by ascertains one set of religious stories on his mind rather than another. Now, we can analyse the question of the acceptability of the so-called universal religion in any of the three possible forms above mentioned by all religious traditions of the world alike through this light. Because practical possibility of universal religion in any form mentioned above indicates its acceptability by all people alike.

The acceptability of the beliefs, practices and religious stories of any one of the existing religions by all religious people of the world may be said to be the practical possibility of the universal religion in its first form. As for example, if Hinduism has been regarded as universal religion, it will denote that all religious people of the world start believing alike in the immortality of the soul, karma and rebirth, bondage and liberation etc. and all of them accept the Hindu way of prayer and worship, perform Hindu rituals and observed Hindu moral principles etc. Besides these, all men of the world will start reading, listening and remembering the sacred stories of the Hindus regarding Rama, Krishna and many other Hindu mythical personalities. But the question here is-at what time this can be possible? The answer may perhaps be while the beliefs, practices and religious stories of Hinduism will be recognized as the most religiously satisfying, i.e.,
when these will be proved generally satisfactory to the religious instinct and
hunger of all the people of the world with the highest significant way. Truly
speaking, any religion demands as universal by nature or character, or which is
accepted as the suitable with regard to this purpose, must satisfy this condition,
viz. its beliefs, practices and religious stories are mostly desirable and
satisfactory in nature to all the people of the world. But how can a man prove the
supremacy of the beliefs and practices of one particular religion over all others so
as to establish it to be the best universal religion? The religious beliefs and
practices of each religion are most satisfying to its followers. The followers
accept their beliefs and practices most naturally, agreeably and conveniently.
Now, it will be worthwhile to search for the grounds depending upon which one
may demand with conviction the supremacy for the beliefs and practices of any
one religion over all others. This is perhaps the most vital point to be analysed in
respect of finding out the very universal character of a specific religious tradition.

We can have a lot of endeavours in the thinking of some famous thinkers
with a view to proving implicitly or explicitly the supremacy of their own
religion with regard to the fact that each religion includes elements to make it
most suitable to serve to be a universal religion. As for example, in his book
‘Philosophy of Religion’, George Galloway expresses the view that Christianity
contains within it all such element in the most efficient manner which may make
a religion universal. According to him only that religion may be taken as
universal which touches the inner soul of man which goes beyond all distinctions
of class or group such that the ways of deliverance pointed out by it are applicable to all, and not to only a few of a particular class or group. In accordance with George Galloway, the religions like Buddhism, Christianity and Islam only can make satisfaction with these conditions. But it is only Christianity that has become most satisfactory with the required conditions for the purpose in the most suitable and efficient way. But we well can easily see very open one-sidedness in Galloway’s opinion, and this opinion has been based on an unexpected biasness for his own religion. All religions of the world make attempt on their own way with a view to satisfying the very internal soul of their religious followers and the principles and practices prescribed by them are not meant for any particular group of people only. Not a single religious tradition by original nature becomes sectarian in character. The ways of man’s religious performances are not meant for a particular few, but for all men in the world. It is a fact that, only a few world people truly can follow a particular religion and these people can form a definite religious or social group. The religion of the ‘chosen people’, i.e., Judaism at least at its face looks like a religion advocated for a specific class or group of people. ‘But, as the later prophets like Issaiah clarified, God took the people of Isreal as the chosen people not in the sense that salvation was meant for only them, but in the sense that they were the people whom God has chosen to bear the torchlight and spread his message of the law and the commandments to the people of the world so that all of them might be able to attain their salvation. In this way, we cannot find any religion as really sectarian in its approach. The
message it spreads out is universal in attitude, although, very unfortunately it is
seen that only a few people of the world accept it and try to undergo themselves a
distinct religious group or class. So, we can pass remark that the plea made by
George Galloway cannot make the claim of Christianity stronger than the other
religions to become a universal one.

Universality can be claimed by each and every religion of the world and
there one can get every likelihood of a quarrel in this context regarding which
religion for being a universal religion can make justification in respect of its
claim most.

Dr. S. Radhakrishnan with an implicit bias for Hinduism now and then
seems to attain the possibility of universal religion in the nature and form of
Hinduism. Thus, Dr. S. Radhakrishnan in his book ‘Eastern religions and
Western thought’ puts argument that Hinduism has always been very liberal and
broad-minded by nature and character, and the approaches towards other world
religions has always been seen one of tolerance. Hinduism has always been
keeping belief that all world religions indicate the very same reality or truth.
They all should be regarded just like the various ways leading to the same goal.
If we go through the historical background, we will easily detect certain elements
with regard to this universalistic approach of Hinduism. ‘At times, people of
different religions came to India and settled here. The Hindus quite happily
allowed those people to settle and observe their own religions. But in course of
time, these religions could hardly maintain their identity in face of the liberal and
universalistic outlook of Hinduism and they ultimately merged into it. Buddhism originated in India, spread and survived throughout the universe, but it could hardly maintain its separate identity in India. The liberality of Hinduism absorbed it. Those religions which did not merge into Hinduism were greatly influenced by it and they have hardly been able to maintain their original rigour. All these facts show that Hinduism contains within it qualities of being a universal religion. But the grounds after examination depending upon which Dr. S. Radhakrishnan expects and keeps beliefs in Hinduism to have included within it the practical possibility of a universal religion cannot be treated to be more strong. The beliefs in different religions as to the God or gods and goddess are fundamentally one and the same and that these various religions are nothing but the various pathways leading towards the same goal do not form Hindu religion; rather they construct Hindu philosophy of religion. That is why the practical possibility of universal religion in Hinduism is not depending upon the fact that it treats all other religions with the eyes of sympathy and tolerance in contrast it relies on the reply of the question- how far the beliefs, practices and religious stories of Hinduism possess documents within them through which the head and heart of all the world religious people can be satisfied in an efficient manner. One cannot with certainty put that Hinduism comprises of elements which will be able to make the whole world people satisfied. All the religions of the world, as it is already mentioned above, would possess elements to satisfy their followers to the best in their own manner. The examples of history too can make proof
nothing. ‘The merger of certain religions at a certain time in some other religion or religions may be a sequel to many local factors of the time. There was a time when other religions merged into Hinduism and today there are several Hindus who are daily undergoing conversion into Christianity. Further, if Hinduism has influenced other religions, the influence of other religions upon Hinduism cannot also be denied. Explaining the nature of universal religion, Bhagavan Das in his book “The Essential Unity of All Religions” puts, ‘That is Religion, ‘re’ and ‘legre’, to bind together anew, again, the hearts of all, to each other, and back again to God, from Whom the temptations of the earth cause those hearts to stray away. Vedanta-Tasawwuf-Gnosis is all three; it is a Religion which includes the essentials of Philosophy, Science, Art; or if we prefer it so, it is a Philosophy which synthesizes here, that the latest speculation of the most renowned scientists tends to reduce all matter to atoms and super-atoms, paramanus, electrons, plutons, neutrons, protons, positrons, etc.; these to electrical energy; that, finally to Mind-force; (pp. 15-22 supra)’.4

It has been pointed out here that the new assertion in respect of Universal Religion will have to be maintained on democratic lines, i.e., the lines of ‘majority-rule’, with broad and general attitude. From this point of view, those truths and practices which achieve, not only the greatest number of, but unanimous, support from the living religions, those beliefs and observances on which all are agreed, should obviously be regarded as forming Universal Religion. We may have agreement between the great religions, that all teach the same essential truths; their promulgators themselves are all agreed.
“Indeed only the names, the words, differ. The thing meant is the same. Allah means God, Akbar means greatest; Ishvara or Deva means God, Parama or Maha means greatest; Allah-Akbar literally means Param-Eshwara or Maha-Deva. The Zoroastrian, Ahura Mazda (equivalent to the Sanskrit Asura-Mahad-dha), also means the ‘wisest’ and the ‘greatest’ God. Rahim and Shiva both mean the (passively) Bene-volent and Merciful; Rahman and Sankara both mean the (actively) Beneficent. Dasa and Abd both mean the servant, Qadir and Bhagavan both mean Him who is possessed of Qudrat, Bhaga, Aishvarya, Might, Lordliness; Bhagavan Das is absolutely the same as Abd-ul-Qadir, the Servant of God, the Almighty.”

Here, we get a very simple but very clear and distinct explanation regarding differences between religions are differences merely of words, names, languages; or of non-essential superficial forms; and sometimes emphasis has been given on this aspect of the Truth, or of Virtue, or of Duty, rather than another; never, of Essential Ideas. The Founders of Religions may be named, indeed, the re-proclaimers, in new forms, of the One Universal Religion. They are sometimes seemed to lay great stress, now on this, now on that other, aspect of the One Religion, as per requirement by the special times, places, circumstances, where they have been dwelling.

From the above discussion, we may have an idea that the so-called founders of new religions are, in fact, merely Re-proclaimers of the same Essential Truths, in new expressions of languages, new forms, amidst new
settings, new conditions of life. So, these religious founders may be named Reformers only. Really speaking, we receive no new Religion (in the singular); but always merely the One Eternal Universal Religion, that is the Common Core and Essence of all particular religions. They are new religions (in the plural) in this sense, that, the followers after their Re-proclaiming Re-former, have step by step made up new rites, ceremonies, forms, around that core-teaching, in respect of new situations of new times. Hence, it is seen that each particular religion wears the attire of newness, and the more as because the new rituals slowly overpowers, covers up, hides away fully the Ancient Core; so that the Means swallow the End, and start posing themselves as the end. The so-called new religions possess the sameness with the case of new civilizations that grow up and decay side by side. The language, dress, food, housing, social conventions, manners- and-morals, marriage forms, domestic ways, art forms, recreations, etc., of each, are more or less different from those of others; yet the essential urges, needs, appetites, mental and bodily faculties, which are exercised in, and satisfied by, each, are the same. The God in Man, and in all living Beings, fulfils Him-Self in ever-varying ways; in every way is He Him-Self fulfilled.

The different religions of the world should come together, and if they do not maintain continuity of conflict or competition, they must enhance a spirit of comprehension to break down prejudice and misunderstanding and bind these religions as different representations of a single truth, the essential underlying unity of all the religions of the world. Rg-Veda says, ‘The real is one, the learned
call it by various names, Agni, Yama, Matarisvan’. Ramakrishna declared after going through different faiths that Buddha, Christ, and Krishna were forms of the Supreme and they are not all. Many names have been given to the Absolute by the learned for practical purposes such as Law, Self, Truth. ‘It is called Person by the Samkhya thinkers, Brahman by the Vedantins, pure and simple consciousness by the Vijnanavadins, Sunya by the Nihilists, the illuminator by the worshippers of the Sun. It is also called the Speaker, the Thinkers, the Enjoyer of actions and the Doer of them.’

Thus, each and every form of religion in the world conveys, in fact, the same message and has been bearing a true spirit of unity in diversified forms. We can get this notion of the spirit of harmony amongst different religious traditions in the Bhagavata- ‘Just as one substance with many qualities becomes manifold through the apprehension of the senses working in different ways, even so the one Supreme is conceived in different ways through different scriptural traditions’. There is a common ethical and religious ideal influencing the whole civilized world, and each and every man makes an attempt to detect it in its own religious beliefs and practices, and does detect it there. That is to say, no religion in its present form is final and every religion is seeking for a better expression. Each religion has sat at the feet of teachers that never bowed to its authority, and this process is taking place today on a scale unprecedented in the history of humanity and will have most profound effects upon religion. In their wide environment, religions are assisting each other to find their own souls and grow to their full stature. Owing to a cross fertilization of ideas and insights, behind
which lie centuries of racial and cultural tradition and earnest endeavour, a great unification is taking place in the deeper fabric of man’s thoughts. Unconsciously perhaps, respect for other points of view, appreciation of the treasures of other cultures, confidence in one another’s unselfish motives are growing. We are slowly realizing that believers with different opinions and convictions are; necessary to each other to work out the larger synthesis.

Explaining the very possibility of unity of religions, i.e., the universal religion in disguised form, Dr. S. Radhakrishnan puts that the different religions clothe the one Reality in various images and their visions could embrace and fertilize men so as to give them a manyfold perfection, the spiritualized Hinduism, the faithful obedience of Judaism, the life of beauty of Greek Paganism, the noble compassion of Buddhism, the vision of divine love of Christianity, and the spirit of resignation to the sovereign lord of Islam.

From the above discussion, we may say that the dominance of one existing religion over all others to be acceptable to all religious men of the world alike as their own religion appears not to be practicable. The most significant question is : what is the particular religion which we can treat as competent for the purpose? The answer is none because all religions are only partly true.

We have found from the above analysis, that all religions of the world may possess equal demands and the decision about preference cannot easily be made. Nevertheless, the most fundamental question in this respect may perhaps be, whether the same set of beliefs, practices and religious stories can become capable of satisfying with equal efficiency, the religious feelings of persons from
different religious traditions and living at different places in different times and
different environments. Can we get practical possibility there in the same set?
The answer should perhaps be palpably negative as it is not possible to satisfy, at
the same time, with equal efficiency, all the religious men of the world as they
possess particularly religious feelings being influenced by their own religious
tradition. And, hence the practical possibility of universal religion in the first
form appears to be very doubtful.

Now, we can take up the second possibility that perhaps appears as the
most viable alternative. With a view to forming a common set of beliefs and
practices, the common and the essential points of all the world religions are
drawn out and put together which may perhaps be equally acceptable to all the
religious people of the world ungrudgingly. But it is, on examination and
analysis, not so easily practicable. There we may have similarities amongst the
world religions on a lot of points already seen by us. But whether we, the human
beings, will be able to form a religion in the full sense of the term on the basis of
these similarities is still under consideration. We have been detecting that to
accept a religion by a man commonly denotes accepting a definite set of beliefs,
practices and religious stories forming the essentials of that religion. Now, the
point is that whether we can get any affinities among the mythical stories those
that are present in different religions with a view to taking out the common
characteristics of the mythical stories to form the religious stories of the universal
religion. Can we have any similarity between the stories of Moses and Jehovah
on the one hand and Rama and Krishna on the other? Likewise, is there any
affinity between stories regarding Jesus Christ and others of the Christian
tradition and the different religious stories present in Islam, Buddhism etc? What common mythical stories can be derived from amongst them? In the similar manner, we may see from the level of beliefs that some religions strictly keep belief in merely one God, some in two, some in several gods and goddess and some do not believe in any God or gods at all. Again some religions have taken God as personal, some as impersonal and some as super-personal. What are the common points between them? Again, the central core is the belief in karma and rebirth in one religion, and, there is absolutely no place at all of such belief in another religion. Besides these some religious traditions seemed to accept Moksha or Nirvana as the ultimate destiny of mankind, others accept the attainment of Heaven to be the man’s ultimate destiny. What are the common points in all these religious beliefs through which we can form the belief of the universal religion? These points are not trivial so that they may be left out. In fact, these points are forming and sustaining the very essence of the religions of their own. In the similar way, again, although all religions posses much common features about the ethical virtues and duties, they recognize that they possess very little common points amongst them about the different rites, ceremonies and these rituals of them. However, one may be ready to offer little importance to these rituals and ceremonies from a higher religious attitude, and they consist of indisputably great significance to the common religious people. In this manner, it seems very difficult to find common religious practices in respect of the different religions of the world with a view to forming the rites and rituals of the universal religion. And most of all, is religion something so external that certain beliefs, practices and religious stories chalked out, formulated and constructed in an
artificial manner by taking points from different religions will give real satisfaction to its followers? Religion may be treated as primarily a matter of intrinsic deep thought, and a religious man cannot be artificially pressed upon from without. The way in which the proposed set of common beliefs and practices is to be determined for the universal religion will definitely make it external and artificial which will hardly be able to satisfy the inner heart of the religious man.

The third alternative regarding the practical possibility of universal religion also becomes a matter under consideration. If universal religion becomes a new religion in any form whatever it may be, it is sure and certain that this religion is nothing but one more religion to all other religions existing from beforehand. Each and every founder of a fresh religious tradition has not been wanting his own religion to be limited to a particular group of men; rather he has been wishing the same as the religion of all the people of the world. It has been seen that when a founder makes an attempt to establish a new religion of universal acceptance, it has each and every time resulted only in creating a new trend of religious world besides existing religions from beforehand. We will perhaps have more or less similar picture regarding the so-called universal religion if the same has been taken up to be totally a new religion. The only word ‘universal’ will not be capable of making it universal.

In this manner, we have noticed that the question of the practical possibility regarding universal religion in any form of its possibility seems very cheerless. Truly speaking, such a religion is totally not required. The very
needful things are tolerance, sympathy, compassion, mutual understanding or sharing to the followers of all the religions of the world. To our mind, if there is, in fact, a religion that can be named universal by nature and character in any of the three possible forms mentioned here above, this will create situation to make an end of true religion. Religion will then be merely replaced by fashion, an external clothing. The complete delink situation will be arisen between religion and its root. Religion exists in inner conviction of man’s spiritual nature and its result is the apparent way of life, i.e., man’s outward way of life is nothing but just a reflection of that conviction. Man, from real point of view, is not mere automata. He possesses freedom to differ from one another in their deep thinking and are bound to possess various ways of life with the help of their deep-rooted speculations and determinations. It may be named as the special privilege of man. From this standpoint, if universal religion becomes a thrust upon him from outside in an artificial form, then he lacks that privilege and there we will get neither real man nor real religion. Religion, as already discussed by us above, is a medium of satisfying the hunger of one’s soul which comes out of deficiencies of worldly human life from one point of view. And if we get different ways of satisfying this hunger, then where is the base for quarrel? Each and every person possesses freedom to differ from others from different matters concerning life and the very being. Why then he should be kept away from this privilege in the domain of religion? Each and every man possesses right to differ from others and the evolving of any universal religion seems needless. The world people are only
to learn to accommodate and respect differences regarding religious matters. These differences are quite natural and they must be recognized and tolerated as such. A man cannot become both intolerant and religious simultaneously. The chief ideals of religion should be tolerance and accommodation of the ideas and religious sentiments of other religions of the world. Those who find incapable of doing it, he does not possess freedom to demand himself to be religious.

### 4.4 Vivekananda’s concept of universal religion

The religious concepts of Vivekananda are very much broad in attitude. He puts that religion is not talk or doctrines or theories. It is not sectarianism. It cannot live in sects and societies. Religion is the relation between the soul and God. It does not consist in erecting temples or building churches or attending public worship. Religion is not to be found in books or in words or in lectures or in organizations. It is realization.

To Vivekananda, religion is being and becoming, not hearing or acknowledging. It is the becoming of the whole soul that gets changed as its beliefs. That may be named religion in true sense. He again says, “Do not care for dogmas, or sects, or churches or temples; they count for little compared with the essence of existence in each man, which is spirituality, and the more this is developed in a man the more powerful is he for good. Earn that first, acquire that,
and criticize no one. Show by your lives that religion does not mean words, or names, or sects, but that it means spiritual realization”.

“Temples and churches, books and forms, are simply the kindergarten of religion, to make the spiritual child strong enough to take the higher step. Religion is not in the doctrines or dogmas, nor in intellectual argumentation”.

Religion is the manifestation of the Divinity already in man. According to Vivekananda, man must realize God, feel God, talk to God. That is religion.

Of course, the tide turns and to the rescue has come what? The study of comparative religions may be the answer. We can find through the study of different religions that all the religions of the world, in essence, are one. Vivekananda holds that there are in the study of the different religions of the world, three various stages of ideas with regard to the soul or god. Firstly, each and every religion admits that there is, apart from the body that perishes, a certain part of something that does not change as that of the body, a part which is said to be immutable, eternal, and never dies, i.e., purely immortal by nature. We, the essential part of us did not possess a starting and an end. We can feel the very existence of another eternal Being that possesses no end – God above all of us, above this eternal nature. People generally seem to talk about the beginning of the world, the beginning of man. The term ‘beginning’ simply denotes the starting of the cycle. The beginning indicates the end too, i.e. that which possesses a beginning must possess an end. The beginning of creation means the
beginning of a cycle. Man’s body will one day meet with death, but the soul, never.

With the notions of the soul we may get another set of notions regarding perfection. The soul in itself is complete at the beginning. Man himself makes impure through his own deeds. But he can regain his old nature, his pure nature. Some say these points in all fables, and symbols. But after acute analysis of these statements we get that they all teach that human soul is in its very nature perfect and that man is to regain that original purity. But the question arises – How it would be possible? It is certainly by the knowledge of God.

We have been seeing that all the religions of the world teach the eternal existence of the soul, and its tendencies are dimmed, but its original purity is to be regained by the knowledge of God. Again, a question can be put – what is the idea of God in these various religions? The primary idea about God was not vivid and distinct. We can see that the various deities like the sun, earth, fire, water were believed by the most ancient nations. If we look at the ancient Jews, it follows that many gods with anger fight with each other. Then we get Elohim whom the Jews and the Babylonians worshipped. We have one God standing supreme next. This idea of course, differs from tribe to tribe. Each of them claims their own God to be the greatest. Fight was the medium through which these races made attempt to prove it. The one was able to do the best fighting seemed thereby that its God was the greatest. These races were more or less savage. But the old ones became replaced step by step by better and better ideas. Those old
ideas have been passed by. All those religions existed for the out-growth of centuries, not one fell from the skies. Everyone was found out bit by bit.

We can get the monotheistic ideas next i.e., belief in one God who is omnipotent and omniscient, the one God of the universe. This one God is believed to be extra-cosmic; he has been dwelling in the heavens. He is given the gross notions of his originators: he possessed a right and a left sides, and a bird in his hand etc. But we should notice that the tribal gods disappeared for ever and the one God of the world has taken their place, i.e. the God of gods. Yet he is merely an extra-cosmic God. He is unapproachable; nothing can come near him. In the new Testament it has been taught,' Our Father who art in heaven’ – God in the heaven is separated from men. We have been dwelling on earth while he is in heaven. Later on we, the human beings get the teaching about the immanent nature of God. He is not only God in heaven, but on earth, also. He is the God in us, the human beings.

We can detect a stage of the similar proximity of God to human beings in the philosophy of the Hindus. But let us not stop therein. We, again get the stage of non-dualism where every man can realize that the God he has been worshipping is not merely the Father in heaven and on earth but that ‘I and my Father are one.’ Man starts believing himself as God in his soul. He realizes that he is only a lower representation of God. The reality in me is He; the reality in Him is I. In this way, the gulf that prevailed between God and man has been bridged in the light of non-dualistic philosophy. Thus, men may, by realizing God, have the beautiful kingdom of heaven within them.
The various stages of development are supremely necessary with a view to attaining purity and perfection. The changing systems of religion are at bottom founded on the similar notions. Jesus Christ puts that the kingdom of heaven has been within man. Again he says, ‘Our Father who art in heaven.’ How can one reconcile these two sayings? Thus Christ was talking to them uneducated in religion. To make the masses understand, speaking in their own languages was necessary. The masses looked for such concrete ideas that can be grasped by their sense ability. A great philosopher in the world may remain a child in religion. A man of highly developed state of spirituality can only realize how the kingdom of heaven may exist within him.

In this manner, it is seen that the direct contradictions and perplexities in all religions of the world indicate various stages of development. Therefore, we, the human beings possess no right to blame any one for his religion. We see different stages of development where forms and symbols are very much necessary; the souls can realize these languages in the stage.

Vivekananda gives us the next idea with reference to his concept of universal religion that religion consists neither in doctrines nor in dogmas. The belief in dogmas or doctrines is not an important thing, but what we realize.

The great religious Masters of the world teach that not the external forms but the power that is latent within mankind can bring salvation to light. Man lives and takes movement in God. Creeds and sects play their parts for children, their lasting is purely temporary. Books never make religions, rather religions make
books. This is to be kept well in memory. The end of all religions is the realizing of God in the soul. That is the one universal religion. The one universal truth in all religions, according to Vivekananda, thus, is realizing God within. He asserts that ideals and methods may differ, but that is the central point. When someone stands up with saying that he is right or his church or temple or mosque or gurudwara is right and all others are wrong, he unfortunately misses that upon the roof of all the others depends the proof of his own.

Naturally, a related question may immediately arise. What do we mean by the ideal of a universal religion? In this regard, Vivekananda puts comment: ‘I do not mean any one universal philosophy, or any universal mythology, or any one universal ritual, held alike by all; for I know that this world must go on working wheel within wheel, this intricate mass of machinery, most complex, most wonderful.’

To Vivekananda, the same thing in respect of anything, else can be perceived from a lot of attitudes and corners, nevertheless the thing remains unchanged. We may have, if there is a thorough going study of the essential points of all the religions of the world, similar picture in religion too. Each man is making attempt to arrive at the realization of God. God is One. We, the human beings, can merely have this recognition of universality.

Vivekananda realized that there was much that the East should borrow from the West, and much that the West should do the same from the East. He preached a universal religion, and the thing which he gave more stress was the value and importance of the individual. His creed was that every individual
possesses the spark of the divine. All individuals are alike, because each human
being possesses a divine spark within; that is in fact, the essence of his religion.
The individual according to Vivekananda, can detect God anywhere, whether in
the temple, the church, the mosque or the synagogue. God is omnipresent, and
one does not need to resort to rites or rituals or any particular form of religion
with a view to discovering Him. Thus, the realization of God is the end of all the
men belonging to divergent religious traditions.

Vivekananda says that life is not monochord, variation is essential for the
development of the same. Likewise, variety of beliefs or faiths enriches the world
of spirit and makes it conceivable to each and every aspect of man. As men are
various in their natures, the same method can scarcely be applied to any two of
us in the same manner. Some are found very much emotional by their nature,
some are very much philosophical, rational, others cling to all sorts of ritualistic
forms, want things which are concrete. And, certainly the same method cannot be
applied to all of these things. If there were merely one method to arrive at truth, it
would be death. Both Sri Ramakrishna and Vivekananda gave mere stress on the
necessity of variation. But they simultaneously warned that it should not be
narrowed down to mutual exclusiveness. In fact, all the religions of the world are
not contradictory or antagonistic; they should be treated as different phases of
one Eternal Religion. That one Eternal Religion is applied to various planes of
existence and is applied to the opinion of different minds and different races.

Vivekananda puts: “I do not want to live in a grave-like land: I want to
be a man in the world of man- variation is the sign of life. Difference is the first
sign of thought. I pray that they (sects) may multiply so that at last there will be as many sects as human beings—whirlpool and eddies occur only in a rushing, living thought. Let each have his individual method of thought in religion.”

Here, none will have chance to find out the slightest desire of conversion, the racial or communal conflicts. It withers and has its natural death. A Hindu should try to become a better Hindu, a Muslim a better Muslim or a Christian to become a better Christian.

So, religion that can be claimed as dynamic in nature hopes for man’s absolute sincerity and dedication to our destined aim. Man cannot both walk along the path of the spirit and worship flesh and mammon simultaneously. Likewise, man cannot both serve the spirit within, the spark of conscience and satisfy our ego-desires. One will have to abandon one for the other.

In modern age, the very essence of universal religion has been highlighted by Raja Rammohan Roy, Keshab Chandra Sen, Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Vivekananda, Rabindranath Tagore, Romain Rolland etc. Universal religion does not seem a mere dead conformity or dry dogma as constituted by vain intellect or only product of liberal thought. This concept recognizes and pays significance to the emotional and aesthetic resources of man to divert or sublimate them towards the Para or the Highest.

Vivekananda pointed out that the language of the soul is one, the languages of the nations are many, their customs and methods of lives are totally different. Religion is of the soul which gets expression through different nations, languages and customs. Hence, the difference between the world religions is one
of expression and not of substance, and their points of similarity are intrinsic. Vivekananda says that the so-called doctrines or dogmas, rituals or books, temples or churches are but “secondary details.”

Hinduism was represented by Vivekananda not as a specific belief detected on Puranic idolatory and mythology. He as a proud Hindu explained that Hinduism is a Universal Religion which depends on spiritual truth to be attained in own life. The spiritual realization, according to him is the absolute testing of truth than any authority got from past. This realization is of oneness.

The Advaita philosophy was realized by Vivekananda as the last term in respect of religious ways and this deep realization and conviction made him to synthesise and harmonise all sorts of sects under the banner of Vedanta. Vivekananda was very much aspirant as to the future religion to be free from all racial prejudice or sectarian bias that should be sustained through the spirit of a democratic unified awareness, made realistic and concrete through the highest spiritual ideals.

Vivekananda accepts Vedanta’s true metaphysics and universality. The Vedanta fulfils the objectivity of all religious quests. The great ideas of Vedanta is nothing but the idea of the oneness of all, of the infinite and the impersonal, the wonderful idea of the eternal soul of mankind, of the ceaseless continuity in the march of objects, of the infinity of the universe. Vedanta consists of eternal principles without depending upon the authority of persons. It alone can be regarded as universal Religion as it teaches principles. No religion based on a person can be taken up as a type of universal religion by all the races of
mankind…. The Vedanta approves the eternal nature of man. Reality is one and
eternal but it exists in many forms – “Ekam sat Vipra Vahuda Vadanti”. The
central principle of the universe can be regarded as unity in variety.

The personality of human being should be recognized as an integral and
basic entity on which the whole superstructure of religious life rests. The basis of
universal religion, according to Vivekananda, is the light within each and every
human personality. Human personalities cannot be regarded as articles
manufactured to a type, conforming to mechanical unity. We are but sum total of
personalities and thus are found to be unique.

The diversity of human beings is as much a fact as the unity of the same.
Universal religion will have to tolerate and accept peculiarities internally existent
in the individuals. As per one’s temperament and aptitude, one in his own
manner, may select one symbol and pursue a particular way to reach the
universal source that has been existing behind all manifold ways and various
symbols. Vivekananda says that the Vedanta understands that and therefore
preaches one principle and admits a lot of methods….. It merely preaches the
principle, and the method it leaves to us. Take any path you like to follow, any
prophet you like, but have only that method which suits your own nature.

From the above discussion it has followed that Vivekananda called upon
us to adore the living God around us – the man, neglected and dispossessed, i.e.
the poor, the down-trodden, oppressed and needy people. Except service to man
in the image of God, according to Vivekananda, we get no other religion. This is
the only God that is awake, all other Gods have been found sleeping. This idea of living God in Vivekananda has been seemed to reflect from Lord Buddha’s as the latter, none else, upheld religion as a mode of worship of defied man, i.e., worshipping man as God. Jiva is Siva. A man inspired by God’s blessings gives moulding to all his passions and desires, love and ambition in one single mission of life, i.e. offering service to the poor and neglected class of people and uplifting the very spirit of people bound up by slavery to a honourable position with fullness of life and manliness is the highest religion. A very beautiful reflection about universality of religions of the world has been well represented in the following remark of Vivekananda: “A religion which will give us faith in ourselves, a national self-respect and the power to feed and educate the poor and relieve the misery around me…..if you want to find God, serve man!.”

To understand the exact nature of universal religion, it follows that we must learn the true nature of the Divine Life within. Vivekananda has said that we must have a pure mind and true realization of the Supreme Reality through right knowledge. So, in essence all men are equal and in every man there is the reflection of the same Supreme Reality. Vivekananda emphasized the oneness of soul of all men

Thus, it follows that Vivekananda’s concept of Universal Religion is rooted in his Vedantism. Vivekananda discovered this idea as exemplified in the life and teachings of his Master Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa.

When one makes use of the term ‘universal’ as an adjective of ‘religion’ in English language, what he thereby denotes is not easily comprehensible. We
do not get this notion about universal religion in the Western history of religious thought unless we denote by this the universality that has frequently been utilized for Christianity by some followers of that religion. Islam also was once denoted to be a universal belief. The universal movement of early nineteenth century amongst some Protestant Christians is not in fact, a universal religion-oriented movement. Its aim was to attain a universal Christian unity and Church union through international interdenominational organizations co-operating on matters of mutual concern. Vivekananda does not mean by universal religion a universal Hindu church.

Here, we may ask ourselves a question, how did the concept of universal religion come in the mind of Vivekananda? ‘There was no such idea in the religious literature of the day. When Vivekananda for the first time associated himself with the Sadharan Brahmo Samaj he could not possibly look upon it as an institution standing for the idea of a universal religion. He knew that the Sadharan Brahmo Samaj came into existence in 1878 and the Bharatiya Brahmo Samaj separated from the Adi Brahmo Samaj in 1866. A universal religion cannot have its roots in schisms. Vivekananda got his idea of universal religion from Sri Ramakrishna.

Vivekananda was the only representative in the parliament of religions at Chicago on 11 Sept., 1893 who desired to assert before that assembly that the different religions of the world like Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, different sects of Christianity, Islam etc. were not religions dividing the whole world into disputing sects, but these religions formed a grand federation of kindred faiths.
owing allegiance to some spirit, i.e., universal. The universalism of Vivekananda may be said to be essentially a creative religious tolerance that broadens that liberal principle into a spiritual ideal and accepts all religions as but various expressions of man’s attitude to Truth and God. Vivekananda presents the very notion of universal religion in the sense that it has been dependent on the idea of the universality of the human spirit. His ideal of universal religion does not indicate a universal church and a universal scripture. To Vivekananda, a particular religion, when it becomes a true religion, is called a universal religion.

Vivekananda stressing upon universal religion said towards the end of the memorable and historic third address at the Parliament on 19th Sept., 1893: ‘if there is ever to be a universal religion it must be one which will have no location in place or time; which will be infinite like the God it will preach, and whose sun will shine upon the followers of Krishna and of Christ, on saints and sinners alike, which will not be Brahmanic or Buddhistic, Christian or Mohammedan, but the sum total of all these, and still have infinite space for development; which in its catholicity will embrace in its infinite arms, and find a place for every human being from the lowliest gravelling savage not far removed from the brute, to the highest man towering by the virtues of his head and heart almost above humanity, making society standing in awe of him and doubt his human nature.’

Vivekananda through his conception denoted uplifting his own religion to the high height of a universal religion,. He earnestly believed that the followers of all religions may do the same.
According to him, religion is a growing, dynamic spirit, and not bound by any sectarian command. This capacity to expand gives religion its universality and makes it friendly to other religions. He called on all people of the world to come under one umbrella in respect of realization of life and its destined goal. He, in the last address at the Parliament emphasized 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.” Vivekananda’s aim was to present the ideal of universal religion as the spirit of a universal society, that is a new idea of religion for a new humanity. And that is why Romain Rolland called Vivekananda a universal gospel. He gave a long but beautiful address on ‘The Way to the Realization of a Universal Religion’ at the Universalist Church, Pasadena, on 28 January 1900 and a still longer address, on ‘The Ideal of a Universal Religion.’ The two addresses show how Vivekananda did not mean his universal religion to supersede or supplant the existing religions. The concept of a universal religion then is just an awareness of this ‘economy of God’ where all religions of the world co-exist forming a grand symphony of man’s spiritual aspirations. And he adds that ‘Universal religion is already existing.’ It exists in the minds of people who even while sticking to their own religion, their ancestral faith, look upon other religions with sympathy, who can without rejecting their own belief, show a genuine respect for the prophets of the different nations of the world. He shows himself as an example of such a universal religious mind when he puts: ‘I accept all religions that were in the past, and worship with them all; I worship God with every one of them, in whatever form they worship Him. I shall go to the mosque of the Mohammedan; I shall enter the Christian Church and kneel before the crucifix; I shall enter the
Buddhist temple, where I shall take refuge in Buddha and in his Law. I shall go into the forest and sit down in meditation with the Hindu, who is trying to see the light which enlightens the heart of every one. Thus, a believer in universal religion possesses a good understanding of and reverence for world religion without losing his sense of belonging to his own religion. According to him, ‘unity in variety is the plan of the universe.’ Universal religion as conceived by Vivekananda is, therefore, not a new religion with a new scripture and a new liturgy, it can be regarded as a fresh attitude to religion, a fresh spiritual and moral outlook. It commands not merely tolerance; it insists on acceptance of other religions too as true and making religion thereby a principle of human unity. Universal religion may, thus, be said to be a discovery of universality in all religions.

Vivekananda tells us that this ideal is a step towards universal humanity. As per his thoughts, the concept of universal fraternity has frequently been claimed as the central message of the great religions of the world which is yet to be attained. In fact, the religions have divided the world and have become the cause of unfinished disorders. So, he preferred Hinduism amongst the major religions of the world which could be developed into a universal religion. By Hinduism, Vivekananda denotes Vedantism, and so he does not at all think that it was the creation of a particular prophet like Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam. He says the point is not that Hinduism is identical with Vedantism, rather Vedantism is the fundamental philosophy of Hinduism. He took a religious spirit to prompt one to embrace all religions. Hence, at the time of Vivekananda’s demand of more of universality in Vedantism than in any other religion of the world, he never said of any man rejecting his belief to embrace
Vedantism. While he upheld that Vedanta could become the future religion of the world he did not signify at all that Vedanta was going to substitute all other religions. He merely denoted that Vedanta would yield a fresh horizon and a fresh depthness to all existing religions. Truly speaking, Vedanta was not, then, the Indian religion: it was merely a philosophy originated and brought up in India. And whenever Vivekananda uttered that Vedanta would be the religion of the world in times to come he possessed the religion of India also in his mind. By universal religion Vivekananda denoted the mingling of faiths and he realized about Vedanta, particularly Advaita Vedanta which could bring about this mingling of spiritual voices in one remarkable unity of beliefs.

4.5 Criticism and conclusion

Religion is essentially a relation which is not formed with the objects of senses and not even by intellect as realized by the empirical consciousness. Thus relationship is basically spiritual relationship which brings to us, the subject of the highest expression of love, devotion, beauty and sublimity, holiness and steady light of knowledge to be related with or projected upon certain objects which are also not limited and finite, mundane and temporal but a universal and abiding spiritual reality. The core of religion is or should be spiritual realization. This spiritual realization which can be treated as native to mankind belongs to each and every man. Every man possesses in his essence divinity and so realization can be said to be the birthright of all.
The professed religions irrespective of time and nation have generally degenerated into sectarian groups fostering rivalry and internal hindrance which divide and antagonize men. The Buddhists are atheists for the Hindus; the Hindus are heretic for the Muslims. The so-called religious sects staying away from extending love and holiness are out to create a lot of narrow walls around them and common hate among innocent camp followers. According to each and every religion, God has offered his exclusive expression to his own prophet, Buddha, Krishna, Christ or Muhammad with the hope that all others would follow blindly his steps, or suffer spiritual privation. Religion with its ‘Thou shalt renounce’ is the direct opposite of the new commandment, ‘thou enjoy’, on which all our major and minor prophets have agreed.

Religion cannot be accepted as signifying a particular creed or faith but in a state of spiritual realisation. Each and every religion should cultivate the divinity within to the perpetual level. It is neither blind faith nor mere intellectual understanding but being and becoming are more significant in regard to a spiritual life. All the religions of the world must understand that this building of life and character and spiritual transformation is the essence of religion. We can see in Vivekananda’s philosophy that spirituality gets prime importance through which he does not mean the changing manners and customs but the idea of oneness of all.

The more the religions of the world rise to spiritual realization the more conflicting or quarrelling forms and clear cut differences are bound to vanish. Dr.
Radhakrishnan in this regard, puts that all paths of ascent lead to the top of the hill. Whatever approach we take is immaterial. Like all the birds fly in the air and all the fishes swim in water without any trace behind, the seeker of the spirit too traverses the pathway.

It may be said to be unified total experience which is the goal to be realized and the highest objective of Advaita is to inspire man not to take rest till he realizes that experience. The investigators of truth can be said to be free pilgrims in the domain of spirit. They would not constitute a fresh sect or code, but the fanatic followers, the so-called religious believers with dark and destructive speculation who seem to fail to dive deep into messages delivered by the saints and seer, or get failure in drawing any amicable solution to the apparent diversities of the all religions of the world. Instead these followers have been creating so many dungeons of sects and dogmas never dreamt of nor emphasized by those who originally received them. Paths are many; the men are to choose one of them by virtue of their discrimination and good understanding and so reach the hilltop. “By Karma, Jnana, Bhakti and Yoga, by one or more or all of these the vision of the paramatman is obtained.”

The different religions of the world must come together, walk together and work out some common criteria to avoid mutual conflicts, misunderstanding, misconceptions, prejudices, superstitious beliefs. And if they are not to continue the position of conflict or competition, they should develop a spirit of comprehension which will break down superstition, misunderstanding and bind them together as various representations of a single truth. Such a spirit
characterized the development of Hinduism, which has not been interrupted for nearly fifty centuries. Hinduism has not been based on any racial factor.

We should frankly recognize one thing that the efficiency of a religion has to be judged by the development of religious qualities like quiet confidence, inner calm, gentleness of the spirit, love of neighbour, mercy to all creation, destruction of the tyrannous desires, and the aspiration for spiritual freedom. If we are noble by heart, we must admit the defects in Hindu, the Buddhist, and the Christian societies as they are, and no one can be treated as satisfactory. “If the Hindu chants the Vedas on the banks of the Ganges, if the Chinese meditates on the Analects, if the Japanese worships the image of Buddha, if the European is convinced of Christ’s mediatorship, if the Arab reads the Quran in his mosque, and if the African bows down to a fetish, each of them has exactly the same reason for his particular confidence. Each form of faith appeals in precisely the same way to the inner certitude and devotion of its followers. It is their deepest apprehension of God and God’s fullest revelation to them. The claim of any religion to validity is the fact that only through its followers it has become what they are. They have grown up with it and it has become a part of their being”.

The various creeds are the historical developments of the formless truth while the source is one and inviolable. Every human being is co-related with the society he lives in. If one individual is detached from his traditional roots he becomes abstract.

It is seen that every religion can be regarded as a living movement. No historical religious tradition can have truth absolute and changeless. The reality is
one and all pervasive by nature, underlying as the immanent core of each and every religion of the world. This unique reality has been being interpreted by different ways in different languages.

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