The present research work entitled “The Idea of Universal Religion in Modern Indian Thought (with special reference to Swami Vivekananda and Maulana Abul Kalam Azad) is divided into five chapters including Introduction and Conclusion.

The first chapter is Introduction in which an attempt has first been made to clear the meaning of universal religion. Universal religion as against particular religions is conceived as a kind of religion that may be universally acceptable. It is apart from political barriers and cuts across the racial, national, geographical boundaries. It seeks to construct man’s faith upon his true human identity and it promotes such higher values as truth, beauty, justice, love, peace, progress etc. It gives attention to the basic spiritual identity of man. It provides common platform to all religious faiths. Different religions get together with the spirit of co-operation.

The essence of universal religion can be summarized in the form of following ten imperatives. These are the ten commandments of higher spiritual fulfillment of the individual even as they derive from the most basic structure of life the central truth of which is that the individual is an integral part of the whole world.

1. Oneness of God: that Supreme Being who is one without a second and whom different religions call by different names.

2. Equality of founders: Respect the founders of all great religions as messengers of one common message.

3. Love of humanity as the visible manifestation of the Supreme.
4. Tolerance: Tolerate and try to understand different view-points, even
the viewpoints of enemies, heretics, atheists and agnostics.

5. Know thyself, realize the full potential of your existence, and offer your
best in the service of society.

6. Follow the middle path, practice moderation, and steer clear of opposite
extremes.

7. Love nature as the visible language of the Supreme, and intelligently
follow her guidance.

8. Recognize truth wherever you find it, drawing spiritual nourishment
from all available sources.

9. Cultivate devotion to higher values and function as a creative channel
thereof.

10. Participate in the evolutionary being of the world in conscious union
with the eternal.

The idea of universal religion found Indian soil to be very germane for
its nourishment and growth. In medieval India its chief exponents were
Ramananda, Kabir and Dara Shukoh. Kabir compares the relation of man with
God as the relation of sea-waves with sea itself. He uses the same example to
present the relation between oneness of universe and the Absolute.

The mission of Kabir was to preach a religion of love which unites all
people. He rejects those features of Hinduism and Islam which are against this
true spirit. He rejected those religions which gave no importance to the real
spiritual welfare of the mankind. He selected from both religions their common elements, and the similarities between them.

Dara Shukoh’s is the second greatest name in the history of Indian syncratic thought. He was of the firm belief that the Absolute in the final analysis was one and merely expressed in different forms in different religions. Each religion has its own language. There is only the difference of languages not of absolute.

Dara Shukoh identified Allah with Sanskrit ‘Om’, Huwa (He) with Sah, firishta (angles) with divata, and the Mazhar-i Atam (Perfect Manifestation) with Avatara. Through avatara, according to Dara Shukoh, Qudra (power of God) was manifested in such a way as would not have been manifested otherwise.

Ramakrishna Paramhansa was the pioneer of the modern universalist spirit in Hinduism. He was a true Hindu, and was ready at any moment to defend the whole of Hinduism. The system of philosophy he followed was the monistic Vedanta as taught by Shankaracharya. But he also said that the doctrines of dualism, qualified monism and monism are stages of spiritual progress. They were not contradictory to each other.

He further said that religion is a matter of realization. It concerns with realizing the unity that exists between God and man. He desired to attain the Vaishnava ideal of love for God. After that he desired to know and understand about other religions like Islam and Christianity. After much study and reflection he came to conclusion that all religions were true. All religions are simply various paths leading to the same goal.
The second chapter deals with the idea of Universal Religion as it found its expression in modern Indian thought. The first and greatest name in this context is of Rabindranath Tagore. He was a monotheist and humanist. He says that for the realization of true religion it is not important that we perform rituals like going to mosque, temple or churches, or follow priests. He said that to be religious meant to cultivate the feelings of universal love for mankind. Tagore believed in the religion of man. The conflict takes place in religion because man takes up particular forms of religion. He does not see the holistic aspects although that alone is the essence of true religion. According to Tagore, the true religion of man is free from all such types of particular forms and should never be confused with the “institutional religion”.

After Tagore, Gandhi too sought to present a universalistic version of Hindu religion. Religion, he said, is a way to purify the nature of man’s character. It means religion has the capacity to develop the sense of spirituality in man. When the sense of spirituality had developed in man, man achieves power which helps him to understand the difference between right and wrong, good and bad, moral and nonmoral, ethical and unethical, true and false etc. It develops the feeling of love and search for truth. Religion is the way to develop morality in man, because morality is the essence of true religion.

Gandhi says that every man is born in a family and each family has its own culture and traditions. That tradition is important for him. I am born in a Hindu family and therefore Hindu tradition and culture suit me. So I adopt Hinduism. In that sense birth is an accident. It is not a matter of human choice.
But in case of the choice of tradition, culture, way of life and religion, everyone is free to choose his way which gives him satisfaction and suits him.

Gandhi was also impressed by Christianity and Judaism. He says that Christianity is one of great religions, which gives emphasis on absolute love. Love is the most important virtue in Christianity. No other religion gives attention to such pure love with God and universal love for whole humanity. Similarly, he also praised Islam for laying great emphasis on purity, morality and equality.

Like Tagore and Gandhi, for Radhakrishnan also Hinduism has universalistic approach. It is not bound up with a creed or a book, a prophet or a founder. Hinduism always searches for truth. In Hinduism there is no end of prophecy and no limits of religious scripture. It always welcomes new experiences and new expressions of truth. “Hinduism has no common creed and its system of worship has no fixed form. It has bound together multitudinous sects and devotion into a common scheme”.

Hinduism has rationalistic approach. It studies the facts of human life in scientific spirit. But Hinduism is not only to study the facts but also try to obtain victory over facts. In Hinduism experience is self-certifying. Hinduism is the religion of spiritual progress. According to Hinduism, religious progress is possible through tradition, logic and enrichment of life. There has been a continuous development of new forms and ideas through racial and religious interactions that happened in the course of India’s chequered history. It started in most ancient times and continues up to modern era.
Sir Syed’s religious outlook was liberal and free from all types of sectarian conflict. He defined religion as that valid principle which decides all intentional deeds, emotional impulse and spiritual sensivities of man. True religion is based on absolute truth so true religion should be free from any fault. Religion conforms to law of nature. Nature is the best teacher to guide us for true conduct. Nature itself is the creation of creator who is ultimate truth or reality.

Coming to Islamic religion itself, Islam was not a new religion started by Muhammad in Arabia. Islam had laid emphasis on the singleness of God but multiplicity of prophets and scriptures. Sir Syed tried to demonstrate the truth of Islam, because Islam has had universal guidance, appeal to peace and universal brotherhood for whole humanity. Concept of God is the common idea of all religions, since God is the creator and the sustainer of whole world or whole humanity. All people had equal rights to salvation.

The aim of Iqbal’s life was the renaissance of Islam and to achieve the salvation of whole mankind. He gave message for Muslim community in particular and to all mankind in general. He tried to make man conscious of his power, improve his personality and make a peaceful living in this world. He tried to transform the life of people of his own nation and mankind when he perceived that whole mankind has gone on wrong path. Iqbal has laid greatest emphasis on the realization of one’s self.

The third chapter is titled as “Vivekananda’s Concept of Universal Religion”. Religion, according to Vivekananda, is in essence man’s way of
living in the name of truth. Religions promote peace, love, humanity, tolerance, blessing and brotherhood in the whole world. But, at the same time, it is also a fact that the religions breed hatred, bloodshed, enmity between man and man. Religions become a cause of conflict when someone claims that only his religion is true and God has given certain truths only to him. If all the truths are given in one book, why would there be so many sects? And why will they be quarrelling with each other? What is the main cause of this difference? Answer is very clear that we have failed to understand the essence of religion. One may continue to believe in one’s own religion but only under the realization that it is a part of universal religion. Universal religion is all-pervasive. It gives the essential unity of all great religions of the world. Vivekananda uses the one watchword for universal religion, that is ‘acceptance’. Acceptance does not mean tolerance. He recommended positive acceptance.

Vivekananda recognized that Hinduism is a progressive spiritualistic religion. But he used the term Hinduism in a very wide sense. He did not mean by it the creed or rituals but the fundamentals of Hinduism. He says that Hinduism as religion is neither creed nor doctrine. It is only realization and its perfect manifestation is in Advaita Vedanta.

The one supreme being is the substratum of all religions. God is the common source of inspiration. It is ultimate reality in so far as it is known and comprehended by the human mind. But since being is multidimensional and multifaceted, truth may be described as one infinite light that shines in various forms and colours.
Vivekananda tried to present the practical aspects and implications of Vedanta philosophy. He gave emphasis on the fact that a man can seek salvation not only in the traditional way or in forest. A man can attain salvation without renouncing the world and taking to the life of a hermit. Every human being can attain salvation by service to humanity and serving God in man.

Vivekananda recognizes three stages in spiritual growth: Dvaita (dualism), Visistadvaita (qualified non-dualism) and Advaita (non-dualism). The spiritual growth of a man consists of a movement from lower to higher religious ideas. These stages of spiritual growth are progressive and depend upon one’s subjective abilities. Each individual is not having same power. The religious progress of different individuals is not equal. They are at different stages of growth and they are all ultimately to reach the same goal of Advaita.

Vivekananda said that Hinduism and Buddhism are not separate with each other because Hinduism cannot live without Buddhism, nor Buddhism live without Hinduism. Contradiction of thought exists in only the Buddhists and Brahmans. Buddha understood the harmony of religions. He himself did not introduce the sectarianism. Modern Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism have branched off at the same time.

Vivekananda said that, like Christ, Buddha too taught the universal brotherhood of man but while Buddhists practice this principle, the Christians only preach it but do not practice it. He respected the teaching of Lord Jesus, but complained that Christians do not know about Hindus and do not appreciate the teachings of Hinduism.
Like in the case of Christianity, Vivekananda’s attitude towards Islam was also that of appreciation of many of its good points. He was especially attracted by the message of equality and brotherhood in Islam.

In the fourth chapter “Azad’s Theory of Religious Universalism” Azad’s views on how Islam agrees with the idea of religious pluralism is extensively discussed. Maulana Azad tried to demonstrate that Islam which was presented to Arabs was, in essence, a rational and universal religion acceptable to all communities of the world.

With his scientific and historical outlook, Azad wrote his famous commentary on the Qur’an known as Tarjuman-ul-Qur’an. One of the distinctive features of this commentary was to show that Islam emphasized not so much on dogma and law but on the spiritual elevation of whole humanity.

All religions teach the same universal truth for the welfare of mankind. Eternal truth of all religions is something common to all. The object of religion is well being of mankind, but the condition of mankind varies from age to age and country to country. Essence of religion lies in the worship of one God and right conduct. All religions teach brotherhood of people so do not divide yourself, worship Him only.

According to Azad, it is clear that the racial and religious distinctions are man-made. In the eyes of God all human beings are one. Regardless of their community or nation, if all human beings resolve their internal differences and serve to the God, all differences will be banished. We will all feel that entire world is our home and entire humanity is same. Once the hearts are united the existence of differences will completely vanish from this world.
Azad says that “all religions as originally delivered are true” but this point has been forgotten by the followers of all religions. Each one claims that religions of others are false. This element of falsehood in religion comes from the human mind because humanity divided itself into separate groups in the name of language, nation and community.

Azad says that Qur’an does not negate the faith of others but removes the superiority over others’ faiths. Qur’an emphasizes the unity of human being and brotherhood which is based on the unity of God. Qur’an believes in the unity of religion. That means it rejects every form of groupism which gives emphasis on one’s own religion as the only true one.

The most controversial issue in any discussion of Islam is its conception of jihad. It is generally interpreted as holy war. In Islamic tradition jihad does not mean holy war. It is wrongly associated with the idea of holy war against the unbelievers.

The word jihad in Arabic is used with a wider meaning in Qur’an and Hadith. It is derived from the root ‘jhd’ which means ‘to strive’ or ‘to exert oneself’. Jihad is then to exert in the way of doing what is good and avoiding what is evil.

Azad gave the wider ethical meaning of jihad to make a forceful case for fighting injustice. According to Azad, an ethical concept of life entailed love, service and respect for humanity, irrespective of any religion or racial differences.
For Azad, the spirit of nationalism implied the unity of religion as based on the unity of God and the unity of whole humanity. It means that in the multifarious diversity of mankind is hidden its unity. His ideas of the unity of religion was the basis of national integration.

Islam’s destination was humanism and its goal was perfection of humanity in its evolutionary progression. Islam did not recognize the artificial affiliations of race, country, nation, colour and language. It called man to the one and only relationship of the natural bonds of brotherhood among humans.

In Conclusion it is seen that both Vivekananda and Azad emphasized the essential unity of all religions. As a corollary to it they also laid emphasis on the unity of mankind. If we go beyond the ritual and legal aspects of the religions, all of them will be seen to propagate the message of peace and love and brotherhood among the different communities. Belief in one God is the common core of all religions even though the conceptualization of this idea and the modes of reaching the goal may be different. The difference between Vivekananda and Azad is on the point that while for the former there was nothing like heresy and deviation from the one straight path, Azad, following Islam, admitted the possibility of deviation in the form of worship of multiple gods and advised return to religion in its pristine purity.