

Swami Srikantananda  
Director, Vivekananda Institute of Human Excellence,  
Ramakrishna Math, Hyderabad.

## Rumi's Message of Universal Harmony

Though Truth is one, and all religions are but different paths to reach that, people quarrel and fight in the name of religion, because of their limited understanding.

Clarity of thinking varies from person to person according to one's inborn nature and attitude, which in Sanskrit is called Prakriti (Sattva, Rajas and Tamas emotions). Sattva leads to clear understanding of objects, whereas Tamas and Rajas always lead to confusion and chaos. Sri Ramakrishna has beautifully explained this idea through many parables.

Four blind people went to see an elephant. They could touch only a part of the elephant. Taking that part to be the whole of the elephant, and out of sheer ignorance born of blindness, they started quarrelling among themselves asserting that the elephant was like what they touched

In another parable, three people saw a chameleon on a branch of a tree in different times. Then, each one argued that the chameleon was of the color the one had seen. This led to a quarrel among them till, another person who was sitting under the tree interfered and said, "Dear friends, I live under this tree and I know the nature of animal. It is capable of changing its colors often. You all have seen same animal, but at different times in different colors, and therefore you are confused."

In one of his addresses at the parliament of Religions in Chicago, Swami Vivekananda observed that such fanaticism has its harmful effects on the society. He compared such people to "the frog in the well". The frog which never came out its small well could not understand the vastness of ocean even when another frog that came from the ocean tried to explain it. We, people of limited understanding are unaware of the Reality and are like that "frog in the well". The attitude that, "My religion alone is true and other religions are false" is fanatic and leads to disharmony and fight among people of different faiths. Only those with right understanding can see the fundamental unity of all religions behind the apparent differences and promote a spirit of tolerance and acceptance.

Mevlana Jalal ai-din Rumi is a Sufi saint with such lofty and noble ideals. His life and teachings are universal and they appeal to the entire humankind. Realizing the universal applicability of Rumi's message, the UNESCO has declared this year as Rumi's year. Indialogue Indialogore – an organization dedicated for establishing peace and harmony among different religions is doing a commendable service to humankind by

organizing Inter-faith dialogue for bringing better understanding among different religious groups.

The Rig Veda declared: 'Ekam sat vipra bahudha vadanti'- Truth is one: sages call it by various names.

Sri Ramakrishna asserted this truth in a remarkable way. He actually practiced various religious disciplines and attained an ultimate God-consciousness through all of them. Sri Ramakrishna later told his disciples: "I have practiced all religions – Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity – and I have also followed the paths of the different Hindu sects. I have found that it is a same God towards whom all are directing their steps, though through different pathways. You should try to experience the paths of all faiths in different ways once. Where ever I look, I see men – Hindus, Muslims, Brahmos, Vaishnavas, and the rest quarreling among themselves in the name of religion. But they never realize that He who is called Krishna is called Siva; Jesus and Allah as well, and bears the name of the same primal Energy with thousand names. A lake has several ghats, At one, the Hindus take water in pinchers and call it "Jal"; at another the Muslim take the water in leather bags and call it "pani" or "water"? How ridiculous if one feels that the water is different because the names are different. The essence of this reference is that everyone is seeking the same substance under different names. It is only the climate, temperature or name that creates differences. Let each man follow his own path. If he sincerely and ardently wishes to know God, peace be unto him! He will surely realize him." (The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna)

The same idea is beautifully expressed in one of the verses of Shiva Mahimna Stotra which Swami Vivekananda quoted in his 'reply to the welcome' speech on 11<sup>th</sup> September, 1893 at the world parliament of religions held at Chicago: "As different streams having their sources in different places mingle their waters in one sea, so, O Lord, the different paths which men take through different tendencies, various though they appear, crooked or straight, all lead to Thee."

Swamiji has beautifully summarized the message of his Master Sri Ramakrishna on this subject in his lecture on 'My Master': "Do not care for doctrines, do not care for dogmas, or sects, or churches, or temples; they count for little compared with essence of existence in each man, which is spiritually; and the more this is developed in man, the more powerful is he for good. Earn that first, acquire that, and criticize no one, for all doctrines and creeds have some good in them. Show by your lives that religion does not mean words, or names, or sects, but that it means spirituality realization. Only those can understand who have felt the experience. Only those who attained spirituality can communicate it to others. They alone can be great teachers of mankind. They are the powers of lights."

Rumi regarded all religions, sects, and nations, as waves of the ocean of unity as God sees all prophets as one, as stated in the Qur'an: "... We make no distinction between one and another of His messages." In the same chapter, He states that He sees some of the prophets as superior above some others. This way, while all religions and sects are one; they have differed in the practices they brought. Rumi touches this aspect in another

part of the Mesnevi when he says: “In this world, there are stairs that stretch to the heavens step by step. For every group there is a separate stair. For every walk (of life) there is a different sky to which they ascend. Each of them is unaware of the others. The destination is an infinite land. It has neither a beginning nor an end. These couplets illustrate this beautiful Prophetic Tradition.” The paths that lead to God are as many as souls of the creatures. The way to see everyone and everything as one (Wahdat al-wujud) and leniency were at their peak in Rumi’s life and teachings.

It is said that one day during a whirling ceremony, while Rumi was whirling in ecstasy, a drunk entered among the whirling dervishes. He could not control himself. During whirling he would lurch and from time to time hit Rumi. Rumi’s friends observed this and scolded him. Upon seeing this, Rumi said, “Friends, he is the one to drink the wine, but you are the ones to get drunk of the divine. Why are you scolding him.” Everyone was amazed at Rumi’s patience, tolerance, and tenderness. He never replied negatively to the slanders and gossip produced by his adversaries, whose spiritual eyes were blind. His manners, gentle ways, and tolerant views helped him to bring the people around him to the right views.

It also is related that one day Rumi said: “I am with seventy two different sects and creeds.” Siraj ai-din of Konya was a man of grudge. To hurt Rumi and to discredit him in the eyes of the public, he sent one of his religious friends to ask Rumi in public whether or not he had actually said that he was with seventy –two sects and creeds. He advises him to insult, curse, and swear at him if Rumi admitted having said those words. The person came and asked Rumi: “It has been claimed that you said: ‘am with seventy –two sects, and creeds. ‘ Is that true?” Rumi did not deny what he has said. He replied: “Yes, that is what I said. That man immediately started to swear and curse at Rumi. Rumi just smiled at him and said: “In spite of all that you are saying, I am also with you.”

Besides being a great scholar and a great saint, Rumi was very modest. He treated everyone – young or old, of high position or of common folk – with modesty. One never found traces of arrogance, pride or haughtiness in Rumi’s life. He did not feel or show any difference between old and young, believer and unbeliever.

As Rumi states, the Muslim who prays in a mosque with open hands, and a Christian who makes the sign of a cross in the church and a Jew who prays in a synagogue – all turn to the same God. If we get stuck in the formalities and are overtaken by appearances, we categorize them as Muslim, Christian and Jew based on their beliefs and the houses of worship they attend. However in the sight of God, no matter to what religion or creed they belong, they all are his servants. Therefore Ziya pasha says, “In the sight of God, the Muslim and the fire – worshipper are one.” that is to say, both are His servants. “Infidelity too, is wisdom in relation to the Creator, (but) when you impute it to u, infidelity is a noxious thing.”

“Do you not see that the moth flies into the flame of candle whether in a mosque, church or synagogue, without making any distinctions in them, God has opened up His table not only to the Muslims, but also to non – Muslims and even to those who deny Him, and He feeds them all generously. He does not distinguish between them as believer

or unbeliever, in terms of keeping them alive.” In one poem, Rumi says, “Know well that belief and unbelief are like the white and yellow of an egg. There is a membrane that separates them. Therefore, they do not mix with each other. With God’s grace and favor, when the mother hen takes her wings, both belief and unbelief vanish and the chick cracks the egg and emerges.”

According to Rumi there are two great enemies that prevent mankind from attaining true humanity. One of them is lust, the other one is anger. “Anger and lust make a man squint – eyed; they change the spirit (so that it departs) from rectitude.” Humankind has been created in the middle level of the three levels. Above them are the angels and below them are the animals. Human beings are close to the angels with their mind and knowledge. They are close to the animals with their anger and lust. Rumi explain that the person who becomes a slave to this selfish desires and lust stays far away from the true path. “If you are taken by lust and desires of the self, let me tell you that you will go empty handed and without any gains in life. If you give up lust, you will see clearly why you came to this world and where you are going.”

One may belong to any religion, what is more important in life is to try and live the religion to which one belongs with authentic religious and to respect the religious beliefs of others whatever they may be. Equally important is to seek the ideal and pursue the religious ideals to rise towards perfection through purification of heart and maturity of the soul. Human life has a higher and nobler purpose and the destiny of a human being is to move higher up in the cosmic order to reach perfection to realize the supreme Bliss and to have a Meta – Physical experience of cosmic vision is knowing and seeing God in His transcendental form. In the context of pluralism of religions, the goals of harmony in world religions, at the esoteric as well as popular level, renders mandatory the imperativeness of interfaith dialogue. There can be no religious peace without religious dialogue. In the face of global terrorism in the name of religion and the risk of a possible use of nuclear weapons which exposes the human race to a probable annihilation, the post – secular western world is now witnessing religion’s return, especially in America.

In this context, should not the great world religions come closer and walk together in the service of global human society with the goal of bringing religious differences and eliminating antagonisms?

Interfaith dialogue should move beyond sharing spiritual experience and discussing theology towards commitment, but should endeavor for promotion of common human and spiritual values, coping with the challenges of our times at the level of popular religion. It should highlight the true essence of religion which is meant to teach man how to walk on this earth like a true human being. In the words of Swami Vivekananda, what is needed is, “to lead mankind to the place where there is neither the Vedas, nor the Bible, nor the Qur’an, yet this has to be done by harmonizing the Vedas, the Bible and the Qur’an.”

\* \* \*