



## Religious Pluralism and the Claims of Metaphysical Truth: An Analysis in the Light of Sri Ramakrishna's Thoughts

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### Abstract

The genesis of all religious conflicts lies at the level of Metaphysical claims. Though attempts have been made to reconcile the differences, most of these endeavours have followed the Hermeneutics of Western tradition. The paper attempts to develop a paradigm of looking at different claims in the light of cross-cultural Hermeneutics. It works with the hypothesis that if philosophical conflicts within a school can be resolved by a proper interpretation, the same principle could be applied to resolve all inter-religious conflicts. For that purpose, it analyzes the thoughts of Sri Ramakrishna in the light of the *Upaniṣads* and attempts to resolve the conflicts within *Vedānta*; as a model.

It claims that even without resorting to so-called reconciliation, religious conflicts could be resolved if one can realize that all the theories, at par, are representations of the same Truth. It further challenges undue reliance on the Western model of Logic and argues that Sri Ramakrishna's discourse on the Ultimate Reality opens up the possibility of such an understanding. In lieu of creating intellectual models to create harmony, the ability to transcend intellectual meaning perhaps would be a better way to preserve Religious Pluralism.

**Keywords:** Pluralism, Conflict, Resolution, Hermeneutics, Transcendence.

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## Introduction:

Though there is a discourse, attempted in the secular world, stating that all religions essentially teach the same Truth, we know that essence does not make religions. At no cost can one overlook the fact that different religions have different metaphysical positions. For instance, different religions have answered the question regarding the nature of the self differently. For the Jains, the self is an extended substance co-extensive with the body it resides in (Sharma, 2003, p.63). On the contrary, Buddhists claim that there is no self; as an eternal and unchanging substance, it is only an aggregate of *skandhas* (Sharma, 2003, p.77).

Within the Hindu religion and sometimes even in the same school of philosophy evolving within Hinduism, there are different claims on the nature of the Metaphysical Truth. The *Vedānta* Philosophy, for instance, has been explained in many different ways by the interpreters. Therefore, the challenge for any thinking mind is understanding how to make sense of these different and sometimes even contradictory positions, assuming that Truth is One. There is perhaps a need, at least a need to attempt to identify a paradigm of reconciliation; that would possibly help us reduce interreligious conflicts.

If one can reconcile the differences within a particular school of Philosophy, the same principle could also be applied to resolve interreligious conflicts. There have already been many attempts to create such paradigms in different schools. This write-up would make one more attempt to identify a paradigm of looking at radically different schools of Vedanta Philosophy like Śaṅkara's *Advaita*, Rāmānuja's *Viśiṣṭādvaita* and Madhva's *Dvaita* etc.; in the light of Sri Ramakrishna thoughts on the *Vedānta* and their implications, who belonged to the Bengal of the nineteenth century.

## Mapping the Issue

In order to understand the issue, let us take up the example of the *Brahmasūtras*. This basic text, being one of the *prasthānatrayīs* of *Vedānta*, has been explained in various ways by the commentators. The differences among the interpreters are so profound that it has become virtually impossible to know what Bādarāyaṇa, the author of the base text, possibly had in his mind. Yet, it would perhaps be correct to assume that there must have been 'something' in the

author's mind, which might or might not have been precisely captured by any of the commentaries.

It sounds illogical to say that he was simultaneously a non-dualist, a realist, a qualified non-dualist, a subjective idealist, a dualist etc. But the question remains: Do we have a way to harmoniously understand these varieties of interpretations? One of the possible ways to create this concordance is to see them in some kind of a *hierarchy*, assigning superior status to some works; putting others in a descending order of the degrees of Truth.

Prof. Chandradhar Sharma applies this model in order to count the contribution of Buddhism and *Vedānta* to Indian Philosophy in a harmonized way. He notes, "Buddhism and *Vedānta* should not be viewed as two opposed systems but only as different stages in the development of same central thought which starts with the *Upaniṣads*, finds its indirect support in Buddha, its elaboration in Mahāyāna Buddhism, its open revival in Gauḍapāda, which reaches its zenith in Śaṅkara and culminates in the post-Śaṅkarites." (Sharma, 2003, p.318)

The same model could perhaps be applied to the commentaries on the *Brahmasūtra*; where one of the interpretations is treated as the best followed by the others in a descending order of accuracy. Though this model seems to make a sensible attempt to reconcile the differences, it has a serious defect. How can one decide the order? Moreover, the implicit assumption that there is only One form of knowledge of the Ultimate Truth might also be questioned. Therefore, this paradigm will lead to more conflicts than resolutions in a pluralistic society.

But Prof. Sharma's attribution of the higher status to *Vedānta* acquires a different dimension when he further adds -

The fundamental philosophical doctrine which Buddha borrowed from the *Upaniṣads* is that the intellect, being essentially rational, involves itself in insoluble antinomies and in order to be one with Reality, has to get itself transformed into immediate spiritual experience (*bodhi* or *prajñā*). Intellect, as a matter of fact, is Pure Knowledge itself; it appears to be intellect only on account of ignorance. Reality is not to be philosophized; it is to be directly realized. The

Unborn, Uncreated and Imperishable Reality which is throughout implied by all changing phenomena as their background and which, at the same time, transcends all phenomena, all dualism (ubho ante) of the intellect, as well as the trinity of knower, known and knowledge, is Pure Consciousness and is to be directly realized by the wise. People are surrounded by the darkness of ignorance; they have to look for the lamp of knowledge. And Buddha bequeathes the Lamp of *Dharma* to them - the lamp which he borrowed from the Upanisads (Sharma, 2003, pp.318-319).

We can see that though a *hierarchy* is admitted between the two systems, there is an emphasis on the experiential side of the philosophies, which involves subjectivity. This can be extended to religious doctrines as well, since religions also ultimately stand on religious experiences and not simply on the dogmas. Keeping these prospects and problems in mind, we will explore the possibility of a paradigm shift in the light of Sri Ramakrishna's thoughts on *Vedānta* Philosophy; since *Vedānta* stands on *śrūti* (code)-*yukti* (reason)-*anubhūti* (experience) model like any religion of the world.

### **Hermeneutics: The Indian Context**

It is important to understand the concept of Hermeneutics in the Indian context in order to count Sri Ramakrishna's contribution to the discourse on Religious Pluralism. The genesis of Hermeneutics, as a discipline, is usually traced to Judeo-Abrahamic religious studies; since the term, 'Hermeneutics' had originated in a Western context. However, *Mīmāṃsā*, i.e. the Vedic Hermeneutics, had been developed much before even the coinage of the term 'Hermeneutics'. Both *Mīmāṃsakas* and the *Naiyāīkas* have contributed immensely to determining the context and meaning of scriptural passages.

However, by and large, the discipline of Hermeneutics could not engage with the Indian schools of Hermeneutics, most probably on account of the vast differences between the contexts of Eastern and Western Hermeneutics. For this reason, some thinkers have argued for the need for a "pluralistic Hindu cross-cultural hermeneutics." (Long, 2008, p.179) This kind of approach leads to a fruitful dialogue in the Gadamerian sense of a "fusion of Horizons." (Gadamer, 2004,

p.305) In this way, one better understands the text; by understanding the tradition and decoding the context.

In this regard, Leena Taneja notes, "There is always a danger, of course, in over-simplifying this binary between East and West; between insider/outsider; between self/other. Genuine hermeneutical dialogue - both East and West - transcends these polarizations...and insists upon honest critique and understanding." (Taneja, 2008, p.212) Though the evolution of modern Hermeneutics and the inception of Anglophone academic learning of Hinduism were virtually parallel events; unfortunately, the scholars have, by and large, neglected what R. D. Sherma puts as "the rich possibilities inherent in a dialectical encounter between the theories of modern and post-modern hermeneutics, and those of Hindu hermeneutical traditions." (Sherma, 2008, p.1)

In order to attain this 'dialectical encounter', one should critically examine the Indian methodologies vis-a-vis their Western counterparts; by means of a dialogue between the Indian traditionalists and the Western hermeneutical scholars. Otherwise, S. H. Phillip notes, "centuries of understanding ...by astute classical thinkers would be closed." (Phillips, 2008, p.170) Therefore, it becomes imperative to evolve a new tradition of Hermeneutics which would not be centred in a particular context. It should be a real form of "Integrative Differentiation" (Tilak, 2008, p.95) encompassing the pluralism of the traditions and contexts.

### **Indian Hermeneutics: Few Further Thoughts**

K. Klostermaier, in his essay 'The Hermeneutic Circle and the Hermeneutic Centre', observes,

While scriptures and their interpretation are major elements of India's intellectual and cultural tradition, it was always understood that they were not ends in themselves. Besides the scholastic endeavour to preserve what was considered words of revelation and to find their meanings as it applied to life, there has always been a major effort towards word-less intuition of truth and theory-free direct contact with the reality through art, worship, meditation and yogic trance." (Klostermaier, 2008, p.82).

Therefore, though Indian scholars have engaged with the hardcore effort of interpretation, the final aim of the whole exercise of Hermeneutics is the realisation of Reality, which transcends all kinds of intellectual meanings. This fact has led many scholars to conclude that Indian Hermeneutics is only Theology. Perhaps this is one reason to engage with the subtle aspects of Indian Hermeneutics. Billimoria observes, “Mimāṃsā never did condescend to a faith-based theology over and above (or against) one rooted in reasoning - albeit ritual thinking - jurisprudence, reflection, linguistic analysis, and argumentative logic (*nyāya*).” (Bilimoria, 2008, p.46)

As regards the “misconception of the scholars holding the view that there is no ethics in Hindu thought”; (Rukmani, 2008, p.152), T. Rukmani notes, “We have to be sensitive to differing worldviews and not expect an ordering of values or concepts to fit only a Western paradigm. No society can survive without a sense of right and wrong, and there is no moral neutrality in any society.” (Rukmani, 2008, p.152) She essentially argues that, in spite of the presence of a robust system of philosophical ethics spreading over the vast range of Indian literature, the misconception has its genesis in the undue dependence upon Western Methodology.

The blinkered understanding of Indian ethics and religion might also have its matrix in entirely different notions of religion prevailing in some Oriental and Occidental traditions. Sighting some of the probable causes which might have led to a forceful infliction of the occidental paradigm on the Oriental traditions, Arvind Sharma notes,

1. That the Western hermeneutics of the word religion is conceptually foreign to India;
2. That its foreignness consists in the double implication of the word religion -
  - a. that one may adhere to only one religion at a time or what may be called or unilateral religious participation, and
  - b. that religion is separate from and separable from culture;

3. That this foreign concept of religion was institutionalized in India during the colonial period;
4. That the introduction of this foreign concept met with both acceptance and resistance in India (Sharma, 2008, p.23).

In order to Understand Indian texts outside the occidental paradigm, one is required to trace the life of such works. It becomes essential, Duraisingh notes,

... to observe the life of religious texts in India. Religious texts as they come to us in our context come with a life of their own. A text moves through history, through a rich traditioning process of a community of interpretation, acquiring new dimension of meaning as it speaks ...in new contexts...Therefore to reify a text and to give exclusive importance to it without its life within the traditioning process is to confuse the text with the dynamic and complex events out of which the text arises and within which the text has its life. To treat a text as all important in itself is to give it a centrality which it just does not possess. It is only when we locate the text within its historical process out of which the text arose and within which it has continued to be alive and the reality of which the text mediates that we can adequately come to know the subject matter which is referred to by the text, that is what it really stands for beyond the sense of words, phrases and sentences that constitute it." (Duraisingh, 1982, p.261).

### **Sri Ramakrishna's Thoughts in the light of the Upaniṣads**

We shall read some of the passages from Sri Ramakrishna, with reference to the *Upaniṣads*, in order to count his contribution towards preserving religious pluralism. Being a devotee of the Divine Mother, on many occasions, he sounds like a perfect exponent of *Dvaita Vedānta*, similar to that of Madhva's position. Ramakrishna says - What is knowledge and who am I? God is the doer and rest all is non-doer - This is called knowledge. I am not a doer. I am an instrument in the Divine-hand. That is why I say - Mother Divine, you are instrumentalist, I am instrument; you are householder, I am house; I am vehicle, you are engineer. I move in the way you

make me move; I act in the way you make me act; I talk in the way you make me talk; I am not, I am not; only you are, only you are<sup>1</sup> (Ma, 2007, p.38).

Many Upaniṣaidic passages extend support to the dualistic position of Madhva, maintaining the entire disparateness of the individual self and the Universal Self. *Munḍaka Upaniṣad* says, “There are two birds, companions and friends, both sitting on the same tree, of which one partakes, of sweet fruit of the tree, while the other without eating merely looks on.” (Ranade, 1968, p.151) The noteworthy in the passage is – how can we regard the Universal Self as enjoying the fruit of action?

The suffering or enjoyment of the consequences of action could be predicated only on the individual self and not on the Universal Self, which must be treated as beyond such enjoyment. Hence, it was probable that *Munḍaka Upaniṣad* did not want to attach the Universal Self to the enjoyment of the fruits of such activities and attached the fact of enjoyment to the existence of the individual soul. In any case, the most noteworthy point is that the individual self is, in the above passage, spoken of as being entirely distinct from the Universal Self.

During his introduction to Mahendranath Gupta, Sri Ramakrishna says,

That is the one pastime of people from Kolkata - giving talks and making others enlightened. Nobody is concerned about his own enlightenment. Who are you to enlighten others? One who has created the Universe will enlighten. One who has created the universe; who has created the moon, sun, man and animals; who has arranged fodder for them; who has mothers and fathers and their affection will teach (Ma, 2007, p.18).

Here we get a vivid picture of Sri Ramakrishna’s belief in a creator God.

Similarly, when Upaniṣads talk about the existence of a Supreme Being, the agent of creation, preservation and destruction of the universe, who exists as a personal being and as overlord of all the selves who are his servants, they extend sufficient support to the dualists. The passages from *Śvetāśvatara* tell us, “There is a single God, who is hidden in all beings, who pervades all and who is the inner



Soul of all souls”, (Ranade, 1968, p.151) justifies Madhva’s position only. The same *Upaniṣad* further reads, “Beyond this *Puruṣa* there exists nothing, than whom there is nothing subtler or greater, who stands motionless, like a tree in the sky and fills every nook and cranny of the universe” (Ranade, 1968, p.151)

Interestingly, while talking on the path to attaining God, Sri Ramakrishna appears to talk like a supporter of Rāmānuja. He maintains,

In the *kali yuga* life is reliant on food, the body-consciousness does not disappear. In this condition, it is not appropriate to assert ‘*soham*. While we are doing every worldly act, it is not fine to say that I am Brahman. Those who are not able to get rid of the worldliness, those who are not able to give up the ego at all, let them have the ego of being a devotee or that of being a servant. One can attain Him through devotion as well” (Ma, 2007, p.53). For Sri Ramakrishna, though God is all-pervading, He manifests most clearly in the devotees.

Rāmānuja’s theory of threefold unity finds full justification in the passage from the *Śvetāśvatara*, which tells us that there are “Three ultimate existences, all of them eternal and all together constituting the Absolute, namely, the powerless unknowing soul, the powerful knowing Brahman, and the eternal *prakṛti*, which exists for the enjoyment of the individual, and from which he receives recompense for his works.” (Ranade, 1968, p.153) Thus we see that the Absolute consists of *cit* (soul), *acit* (nature) and *ātman* in Rāmānuja’s Philosophy, and there is support for it; coming from the Upaniṣadic texts. Rāmānuja’s account of *ātman*’s relation to *acit* or nature seems to find little support from *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* as well.

*The Bṛhadāraṇyaka reads,*

In fire, in the intermundia, in air, in the heavens, in the sun, in the quarters, in the moon, in the stars, in space, in darkness, in light, in all beings, in *prāna*, in all things and within all things, whom these things do not know, whose body these things are, who controls all these things from within. He is thy soul, the inner controller, the immortal. He is the unseen seer, the unheard hearer, the unthought, the understood

understander; other than Him, there is no seer, other than Him there is no hearer, other than Him there is no thinker, other than Him there is no understander; He is thy soul, the inner controller, the immortal. Everything besides them is naught (Ranade, 1968, p.153).

So, Supreme Being is the *antaryāmin*, the all-knower of the universe. He lives inside and governs the Universe from within. This doctrine of the *antaryāmin*, which is advanced in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* in the conversation between Uddālaka Āruni and Yajñavalkya supports the fundamental position of Rāmānuja's philosophy when he calls *Ātman* the soul of *acit*. 'What is the thread by which this world and the other world and all the things therein are held together?' and 'Who is the controller of the thread of this world and other world and all the things therein?' are the two celebrated questions which are discussed.

Yajñavalkya answered the first question by saying that Air might be regarded as the thread by which this world, the other world, and all other things are held together. The second question was answered by saying *Brahman* is the pervade of that ether "That, O Gārgi, which is above heaven and below the earth, which is this heaven and earth and as well as between them, and which they say was, is and will be, is pervaded by the unmanifested ether alone" (Madhavananda, 2009, p.359) In this way Yajñavalkya declares the Principle within, the inner controller of this universe as the all-pervading *Ātman*.

Of course, on many occasions, Sri Ramakrishna talks like a complete *Advaita Vedāntin*. He maintains,

Brahman cannot be expressed in terms of words. Everything has been spoken of. Veda, Purāṇa, Tantra, six systems of Philosophy - everything has been tasted - they have been read, pronounced - therefore they have been tasted. But one thing has not been tasted, and that is Brahman. No one has been able to tell exactly what Brahman is (Ma, 2007, p.49).

Thereby it has been claimed that He is *avānmanasagocara*.

For Sri Ramakrishna, *Brahmajñāna* is attained in the state of *samādhi*. In that state, man becomes silent. He loses the ability to express what Brahman is. He says, "A puppet of salt went to measure the ocean's

depth. He wanted to let others know about the depth. But he could not come back with the information. He got dissolved as soon as he entered the water. Who will come back to give the news?" (Ma, 2007, p.50). The story symbolizes the dissolution of the individual self in the Universal Self with the attainment of the highest knowledge. This position is similar to that of Śaṅkara's explanation of the *mahāvākya - aham brahmāsmi*.

The *Upaniṣads*, of course, extend support to the monistic position of Śaṅkara. The fundamental proposition of Śaṅkara's Philosophy is that the universe is One. There is no difference within Brahman or without it. From death to death goes one, says *Kāthopaniṣad*, who sees the difference in this universe; non-difference can be conceived only by the highly trained intellect. It reads like this, "What is indeed here is there; what is there is here likewise. He who sees as though there is difference here, goes from death to death" (Gambhirananda, 1998, Vol.1, p.190)

*Brahman* is the same throughout its constitution, and the cognition of any part of it is cognition of the whole. *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* reads,

Just as by the knowledge of a lump of earth, everything that is made of earth comes to be known, all this being merely a word, a modification and a name; the ultimate substratum of it all being the earth; that just as by the knowledge of a piece of iron everything made of iron becomes known, all this being merely a word, a modification and a name, the ultimate substratum of it all being iron; that just as by the knowledge of a pair of nail-scissors, everything made of steel becomes known, all this being merely a word, a modification and a name, the ultimate substratum of it all being steel (Ranade, 1968, p.157).

The *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* says, "...While he who worships another god thinking, 'He is one and I am another', does not know. He is like an animal to the gods" (Madhavananda, 2009, p.100) and finally the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* describes the identity of the soul, residing in the recess of the human heart with the supreme person, and identifies both with the Universe. It goes like, "The *Puruṣa* is alone is all this - (comprising) *Karma* and Knowledge. He who knows this supreme, immortal *Brahman*, existing in the heart destroys here the knot of

ignorance, O good – looking one.” (Gambhirananda, 1998, p.120) These passages are verily a crux to the *advaitic* interpreters of the *Upaniṣads*.

In one passage of *Bṛhadārṇyaka*, during one conversation with Maitreyi, Yājñavalkya says,

All this brāhmanhood, all these Kṣtriyahood, all these worlds, all these *devas*, all these beings, in fact all that exists is *Ātman*. Just as when a drum is being beaten, one is not able to grasp the external sound, but by grasping the drum or the beater of the drum, the sound become grasped; just as when a conch-shell is being blown, one is unable to grasp the external sound, but by grasping the conch-shell or the blower of the conch-shell, the sound become grasped; that just as when a lute is being played, one is not able to grasp the external sound, but by grasping the lute or the player of the lute, the sound becomes grasped” (Radhakrishnan, 1953, pp.198-199).

Similarly, in the case of the knowledge of the external world, if one cannot grasp the external world as it is in itself, by grasping the mind or the *Atman*, the external world becomes grasped. This later statement is, of course, implied and not explicitly expressed.

In another passage of the same *Upaniṣad*, Yājñavalkya tells Maitreyi that *Ātman* is the only knower and that it could not be known by anyone except itself. The passage goes like this -

It is only when there seems to be a duality that one smells the other, that one sees the other, that one hears the other, that one speaks about the other, that one imagines about the other, that one thinks about the other; but where the *Ātman* alone is, what and whereby may one smell, what and whereby may one perceive, what and whereby may one hear, what and whereby may one speak, what and whereby may one imagine, what and whereby may one think. He who knows all this, by what may anybody know Him? He is the eternal knower, by what may he be known?” (Radhakrishnan, 1953, p.201)

This passage seems to have some kind of a monistic import extending support to Absolutism. Again, the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* describes Absolute as

neither gross nor fine, neither short nor long, nether glowing red (like fire) nor adhesive (like water). It is neither shadow nor darkness, neither air nor space, unattached, without taste, without smell, without eyes, without ears, without voice, without mind, without radiance, without breath, without a mouth, without measure, having no within and no without. It eats nothing and no one eats it" (Radhakrishnan, 1953, p.232),

and to this, *Kaṭha* adds that *Brahman* is "sound-less, touch-less, colourless, undiminishing, and also tasteless, eternal, odourless, without beginning and without end, distinct from *Mahat*, and ever constant." (Gambhirananda, 1998, Vol.1, p.176)

*Muṇḍaka* further says that *Brahman* is "Unpointable, ungraspable, without family and without caste, without eye and without ear, without hands and without feet, eternal, all-pervading and omnipresent, extremely subtle, imperishable, and the source of all-beings" (Ranade, 1968, p.160) These passages seem to go towards the famous '*neti neti*' of the Advaitins.

### **Sri Ramakrishna's Hermeneutics Through Synthesis**

From the above discussion, we can perhaps easily draw that Sri Ramakrishna's extremely simple yet highly profound discourse on the Ultimate Reality presents a case of jargon-free hermeneutics that strives to transcend mere meaning and embrace an all-inclusive, pluralistic, cross-cultural interpretation that is free of all binaries and brings in a 'fusion of horizons'. And this he does primarily by retelling the wisdom contained in the *Upaniṣads*. He adopts the paradigm of 'harmony' and not 'hierarchy' based on his, as quoted from Prof. C.D. Sharma, *bodhi* or *prajñā*.

There seems to be some reconciliation of *Advaita*, *viśiṣṭādvaita* and *dvaita* in Sri Ramakrishna's thoughts. He narrates, "The path of knowledge is also a path. The path of knowledge combined with devotion is also a path. Again devotion is also a path. *Jñānayoga* is also true, and the path of *bhakti* is also true - One can reach Him

through all paths. So long as He keeps the sense of 'I', the path of devotion is the *easiest*." (Ma, 2007, p.51). And further adds, "*Vijñāni* sees that Brahman is motionless, passive, like the north-pole. This world is composed of his rajas, tamas and sattva. He is unattached." (Ma, 2007, p.51)

By introducing the new term *vijñāna*, in addition to *jñāna*, he dissolves *many* of the differences of opinions regarding the Ultimate Reality; among various schools of *Vedānta*. He observes,

*Jñāni* gives up worldliness by means of following '*neti neti*', thereby he comes to know Brahman. It is like reaching the terrace by means of the staircase. But *Vijñāni*, who has more intimate conversation with God, gets more exposure. He observes that the same materials, like bricks etc., has been used to construct both the terrace and the staircase. The Brahman, who is known through the method of negation, has Himself become the living-world. *Vijñāni* sees that One who is formless, also has form" (Ma, 2007, pp.50-51).

Sri Ramakrishna further notes, "*Vijñāni* sees God and Brahman are same; One who is beyond all the qualities, He only is the proprietor of six grandeurs. This living-world, mind-intellect, devotion-dispassion-knowledge, these are all His grandeurs." (Ma, 2007, p.51) Most religious conflicts grow around the claims of their superiority over others. Sri Ramakrishna presents a paradigm of minimizing such conflicts through harmonization.

### The Concluding Remarks

The most important contribution of Sri Ramakrishna, however, in interreligious dialogue, is not the harmonization he has done; instead, it is the differences he has left unresolved, but putting all of them on the same plane. In spite of talking like an *Advaita vedāntin*, as already quoted, he does not hesitate to declare that God is eternal in some form (*nitya sākāra*) for some devotees. Though it sounds illogical, perhaps this sense of Logic has been induced unconsciously in us by the Western paradigm.

Sri Ramakrishna's emphasis on religion as a means to know the Ultimate Reality beyond all religions inspires us to transcend our intellectual limitations and become intellectual-meaning-free. It might be true that as an author of *Brahmasūtra*, Bādarāyaṇa could not

be a non-dualist, a dualist, a qualified non-dualist, a realist etc., at the same time. So, given many interpretations, we are virtually compelled to accept that, theoretically, there are many *vedānta* doctrines.

But it could possibly be a fact that all these doctrines represent the same Reality. Sri Ramakrishna's open-ended position, similar to that of the *Upaniṣads*, as already narrated in the previous section, helps us to hypothesize this possibility. This possibility surfaces due to the fluidity of meaning Sri Ramakrishna has accepted without settling for any fixed meaning. The Truth could be such that it presents itself multi-dimensionally. The same principle could be applied to understanding religious differences.

This could be the reason even behind Upaniṣads representation of the Truth, in contradictory terms, without creating any kind of hierarchy among them or even attempting any reconciliation. The *Kena Upaniṣad* reads, "It is known to him to whom It is unknown; he does not know to whom It is known. It is unknown to those who know well, and known to those who do not know." (Gambhirananda, 1998, Vol.1 p.65). Therefore, to summarize the discussion, let a passage be quoted from Sri Ramakrishna which reads -

We are all calling on the same God. Jealousy and malice need not be. Some say that God is formless, and some say that God has form. In the author's opinion, let one man meditate on God with form, and let another meditate on formless deity if he does not believe in form. What I mean is that dogmatism is not good. It is not good to feel that my religion alone is true and that other religions are false. The correct attitude is this: My religion is right, but I do not know whether other religions are right or wrong, true or false. I say this because one cannot know the true nature of God unless one realises Him" (Nikhilananda, 2002, p.558).

## Endnote

1. The translation from the Bengali text is done by the author.

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