THE HARMONY OF RELIGIONS

“There have always been parties of men, philosophers, students of comparative religion, who have tried and are still trying to bring about harmony in the midst of all these jarring and discordant sects.”
- Swami Vivekananda (“The Way to the Realization of Universal Religion”)

“To bring harmony into religion must always be difficult. Yet we shall consider this problem of the harmony of religions.” - Swami Vivekananda (“The Ideal of a Universal Religion”)

“Religion” is a problematic term [stigmatized; “Spiritual but not Religious” and “Religious Nones”]

| Sanskrit: धर्म (dharma) – cosmic order and ethical duty |
| योग (yoga) – yoke, union |
| Greek: εὐσέβεια (eusebia) – piety [reverence and esteem] |
| μυώ (myo) – mystery requiring initiation |
| γνώσις (gnosis) – esoteric truth greater than intellectual cogitation |
| Latin: religare – bind tightly together |
| religere – give close or careful attention |


“Religious perspective” - 1) symbols that induce dispositions |
2) discourse about dispositions in a cosmological frame

Is interreligious dialogue and action a historical anomaly?

ANCIENT: King Ashoka, Greco-Roman Initiatory Schools, Medieval Spain, Akbar the Great
MODERN: Religious Freedom and Liberty of Conscience
Rhode Island = refuge for religious minorities, improve relations with Native Americans
Thomas Jefferson = Virginia Statue for Religious Freedom; Bill of Rights Article I
Ralph Waldo Emerson, Keshub Chandra Sen, Annie Besant, Gandhi, MLK Jr., Thomas Merton, Thomas Keating, Dalai Lama, Pope Francis

Dr. Deanna Ferree Womack of the Candler School of Theology at Emory University gave the Religion Communicators Council a presentation entitled “Interreligious Communication: How Does It Look, How Should It Look – Models from the 19th, 20th, and 21st Centuries.” She made a distinction between interfaith relations and interfaith dialogue, suggested reasons why interfaith dialogue is not the norm in the U.S., and provided historical examples that showed misrepresentation by outsiders and authentic characterizations by women writers. She also gave a chronology and envisioned opportunities for growth.

Recently, the global Islamic community vowed to protect the rights of religious minorities in Muslim majority countries. 400 leaders from the Abrahamic tradition, including Evangelicals, formed an "Alliance of Virtue" for the common good and religious freedom. The State Department also held a summit to advance religious freedom (see the Potomac Declaration and Plan of Action).
Pope Francis has not only advocated for interfaith dialogue, but also attended an interreligious meeting of over 500 faith leaders and welcomed Buddhist leaders and representatives of Indian traditions at the Vatican. He also greeted a delegation of indigenous leaders demanding the disavowal of the Doctrine of Discovery and supported the Lakota Sioux in their opposition to the Dakota Access Pipeline.

The Interfaith Center for Sustainable Development held their tenth conference focusing on climate change and renewable energy including scientists and leaders of all three Abrahamic faiths, promoted in the Jerusalem Post with the headline "A Rabbi, A Priest, and an Imam walk into an Environmental Conference"). They also co-sponsored (with the Henry Luce Foundation) a symposium at Columbia Theological Seminary with a panel of interfaith speakers, "Cultivating Eco-Consciousness Within Various Communities of Faith." Here is a summary of their remarks:

2. Islam - Imam Arshad Anwar: Action in social issues is justified by scriptures, which advise harmony, not harm. Even if we see all the signs of the end-of-the-world, plant a seed. The Prophet Muhammad was a treehugger. Water and feed all living beings. In the pursuit of Truth, consult experts.
3. Judaism - Rabbi Lydia Medwin: The world is good as-it-is, its order reflects God's wisdom. Human beings have intrinsic value, equality and uniqueness, freedom and will. According to Genesis, we were given dominion as stewards. Do not cut down trees, and do not cause physical or emotional harm to animals. Species extinction is an ethical violation. Indifference to wickedness causes the destruction of the world. This is a natural consequence, not divine punishment. We are partners with God; even if we see the Messiah, we must plant a tree.
4. Hinduism - Dr. Ranga Rao Sunkara: The Vedas include prayers for the environment and the health of its inhabitants. The Puranas explain the relationship between humans and the animals and plants. The Dharma ("duty") requires us to plant trees; karma is unselfish action, service.
5. Buddhism - Dr. Abraham Zablocki: the emphasis of the tradition has moved from "ultimate salvation" through personal effort for liberation from the cycle of death-and-rebirth to an understanding of the interrelation and interdependence of all forms.

Rev. Fletcher Harper, the Executive Director of GreenFaith is also on the steering committee for the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative and a member of the Parliament of World’s Religions Climate Action Task Force. He will appear in workshops at Grace Cathedral in association with the Global Climate Action Summit. (see also: Climate Land Challenge)

THE RELIGIOUS OTHER

Diversity evolved from isolation/assimilation to encounter/engagement and exhibition of positive difference; the trend in America is toward multiple religious belonging (fluid memberships and affiliations) and hybridity.

The definition of pluralism according to the Pluralism Project at Harvard Divinity School is engagement and active seeking of understanding across lines of difference to create relationships of
trust and cooperation. This is also similar to the definition of pluralism as advanced by the Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC) which recognizes diversity as a fact through respect for others, friendly conversation, and civic action for the common good. Both these definitions imply a political end and public ethic through bridge-building to disrupt conflict and prevent violence.

In contrast, Kate McCarthy’s concept of pluralism is primarily theological. She argues that beyond the surface appearance of phenomenal differences, the object of all religious seeking is the attainment of a noumenous Real. Vedantists say एक अ सदाप्रभु विप्रा बहुधा वदनि (ekam sat vipra bahudha vadanti = Truth is One; sages call it by various names). McCarthy uses the analogy of a mountain, which has various paths that lead to a peak, which is the same end for all paths. This is problematic for some scholars, like Stephen Prothero, and also exclusivists who believe their path is the only legitimate way to reach Truth. Feminists object to a “violence of abstraction” based on metaphysical dogma that erases the complexity of religious experience. Critics also insist that such a pluralist position requires a radical reinterpretation of religious truth-claims that undermines traditional authority.

A recent podcast on Radio Atlantic featured Editor-in-Chief Jeffrey Goldberg, Executive Editor Matt Thompson, Contributing Editor Alice Wagner, and Religion and Politics Reporter Emma Green. On the segment titled "America — Indivisible or Divided by Faith?" they ask, how much religious diversity do Americans really support? The suggested range is intolerant pluralism to tough pluralism. The former is defined as diversity within boxes and rejection of exclusivism and extremism. Tough pluralism allows polite exclusivist claims to truth.


THE IDEAL OF UNIVERSAL RELIGION

“Any attempt to bring all humanity to one method of thinking in spiritual things has been a failure and always will be a failure… Variation is the sign of life, and it must be there. I pray that sects may multiply so that at last there will be as many sects as human beings and each one will have his own method, his individual method of thought, in religion… Our watchword, then, will be acceptance and not exclusion.” - Swami Vivekananda (“The Way to the Realization of Universal Religion”)

Universal Religion – What Does It Mean? (Arvind Sharma)

1) Philosophical Approach – what is the relation of the universal to the particulars?
   a) Nominalism – the particular does not imply the universal
   b) Conceptualism – abstract: general idea of what is common among a particular class; abstracted: concrete evidence of universal property
   c) Realist – extreme Platonic: universal exists as a separate entity, or particular as imperfect reflection; moderate Aristotelian: universal element in all particulars, not separate but in them.
2) History of Religions Approach  
   Depth Psychology – Jung: archetypes in the collective unconscious, primordial image or recurring pattern; consistency = universal concept

3) Definitional Approach – what is religion?  
   Social solidarity = functional variable -or- total cultural system  
   a) Theocentric – belief in a god  
   b) Sacracentric – what is holy  
   c) Ultimocentric – absolute concern

4) Missiological Approach  
   Universal Religion = One World Religion  
   (active or passive proselytizing)

5) Denominational Approach  
   Exclusivism → toleration  
   inclusivism – plurality  
   hybridity

6) Dialogical Approach - “the possibility of perfection”  
   One World Religion = displacement, synthesis, reconception  
   collective religious inheritance and common inspiration

“The Parliament will teach people that there is a Universal Religion. This must have its teachers, and it will have its churches. This universal religion is not made up of the shreds and tatters of other religions. It is not a patchwork of pieces cut out of other faiths, but it is founded on those things which all religions hold in common.” -Rev. Dr. Jenkins Llloyd Jones, secretary of 1893 Parliament of Religions

• Curiosities, Comparativists, and Counterculture

Migration of a European concept into an American ethos – The widespread circulation of Sanskrit texts in translation after 1776 led to the comparative studies of religions [representations of “traditions”]. Reflecting Enlightenment-era Deist privileging of reason, Hannah Adams published an account in 1784 of “Gentoo” beliefs and a history of theological disputes arguing that the original “Vidam” doctrine of monotheism declined into priestcraft and idolatry. In later editions, she claimed religious diversity would end in a global moment of Christian unity. This idea was amplified by Thomas Maurice who proposed in 1800 that similarities between the Bible and the Vedas was due to the shared origin of humanity described in Genesis. This thesis was popular among Protestants like Joseph Priestley, who located the beginning of “Hindoo” culture at the Biblical flood but emphasized licentious superstition and violence to inspire missionary zeal.

New England evangelicals regarded Hindoo religion as obscene and depraved. Liberal Christians rejected Trinitarian prejudice and promoted the writing of Indian reformist Rammohun Roy, whose refutation of Calvinist conversion aims in Asia pulled him into a debate about Christian theology and identity in America. Unitarians accepted Roy as one of their own and funded a project in India that became the Brahmo Samaj. Early Transcendentalists respected Hindoo religion as a metaphysical philosophy and contemplative mysticism that satisfied a need for sacred experience lacking in anemic Protestantism. Henry David Thoreau read and quoted from Roy’s translation of Vedic texts and exposition of Vedanta. “Brahmanism” as conceived by the Transcendentalists was the prehistoric spiritual ancestor of Euro-America.

Madame Helena P. Blavatsky presented her Theosophical Society as the custodians of ageless wisdom from India and champions of a universal religion and perennial philosophy not exclusive to Hindus.
Her comparative survey, which she called the Secret Doctrine, focused on the esoteric similarities between India, Babylon, Egypt, and elsewhere (including Rosicrucianism and Freemasonry). She claimed to receive orders from Mahatmas (“great souls”) who communicated through telepathy from a remote location in the Himalayas. According to Michael Altman, “The Mahatmas paved the way for later images of Hindu holy men in American culture and for gurus who would come to the United States in the flesh at the end of the century” (114). The “Oriental Monk” represented the future salvation of the West from capitalist greed, brute totalitarianism, and technological idolatry.

In the twentieth century, the philosopher Oswald Spengler foresaw an overthrow of science and revival of ancient religions in the twenty-first century. Arnold Toynbee also predicted renewal of religious experience and an advance of interfaith dialogue due to the breakdown and dissolution of society caused by technological idolatry. The Orientalist view of history imagines the world united by a rebirth of the Vedic tradition in the West.

- **Dawn of a New Age**

*Parliament of World’s Religions (1893)* - The organizing committee imagined religion as belief in a monotheistic god that inspires a social order of good works. Some voices, like Mormons and Native Americans, were excluded from the earliest planning stages and main event. Some regard it as a Christian forum to which non-Christians were also invited. Charles Carroll Bonney, a member of the Swedenborgian church, represented the liberal wing that saw truth in all religions, and the Presbyterian minister Rev. John Henry Barrows represented the conservative wing that envisioned the triumph of Christianity over all religions. In 1895, Pope Leo XII officially censured Catholic participation in any ‘future promiscuous convention.’ On the opening day, a replica Liberty Bell was struck ten times for ten world’s religions: Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Zoroastrian, Taoism, Confucianism, Shintoism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The most popular speaker was Swami Vivekananda, whose opening remarks on September 11, 1893, have been the guiding light of subsequent events in 1993 in Chicago, 1999 in Capetown, South Africa, 2004 in Barcelona, Spain, 2009 in Melbourne, Australia, and 2015 in Salt Lake City, Utah:

> “Sectarianism, bigotry, and its horrible descendant, fanaticism, have long possessed this beautiful earth. They have filled the earth with violence, drenched it often and often with human blood, destroyed civilization and sent whole nations to despair. Had it not been for these horrible demons, human society would be far more advanced than it is now.”

> “But their time is come; and I fervently hope that the bell that tolled this morning in honour of this convention may be the death-knell of all fanaticism, of all persecutions with the sword or with the pen, and of all uncharitable feelings between persons wending their way to the same goal.”
National Council of Churches (1908) – an ecumenical partnership of 38 Christian faith groups in the United States. Its member communions include Mainline Protestant, Orthodox, African American, Evangelical, and other churches. Together, they encompass more than 100,000 local congregations and 40 million adherents.

World Council of Churches (1948) – global network representing 600 million people in about 150 countries, including 520,000 local congregations served by 493,000 pastors and priests, in addition to elders, teachers, members of parish councils and others, including the Assyrian Church of the East, the Oriental Orthodox Churches, most jurisdictions of the Eastern Orthodox Church, the Old Catholic Church, Anglican Communion, most mainline Protestant churches (such as the Lutheran, Mennonite, Methodist) and some evangelical Protestant churches (such as the Baptist and Pentecostal).

Vatican II (1962-5) - “The Catholic Church rejects nothing of those things which are true and holy in these religions. It regards with respect those ways of acting and living and those precepts and teachings, which though often at variance with what [the Catholic Church] holds and expounds, frequently reflect a ray of truth which enlightens everyone.”

“The Church, therefore, exhorts her children, that through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, carried out with prudence and love and in witness to the Christian faith and life, they recognize, preserve and promote the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found among these people.”

From Nostra Aetate Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions Proclaimed by Pope Paul VI on October 28, 1965

United Religions Initiative (2000) – United Nations non-governmental organization and worldwide grassroots interfaith network of more than 900 cooperation circles in over 100 countries engaged in conflict resolution and reconciliation, environmental sustainability, education, women’s and youth programs, and advocacy for human rights.

- Common Ethic for Civic Culture

"Of all the forces that have worked and are still working to mould the destinies of the human race, none, certainly, is more potent than that, the manifestation of which we call religion. All social organisations have as a background, somewhere, the workings of that peculiar force, and the greatest cohesive impulse ever brought into play amongst human units has been derived from this power.”

- Swami Vivekananda (“The Necessity of Religion”)

Social conscience - A global moral consensus has emerged which rejects discrimination, persecution, and killing in an ethic of shared responsibility for freedom, peace, and just prosperity.

The art of interfaith leadership (vision, knowledge, skill set) is fostering reconciliation and new relationships of peace, respect, trust, and cooperation for the common good; reduces prejudice, strengthens social cohesion, emphasis on shared values and mutually beneficial goals.

Typology of Encounters – Engagement happens in dialogue groups, encounter centers, interreligious organizations, academic and popular journals, and academic programs (where possibilities of
Interreligious dialogue are studied). Participants include lay people, religious leaders, theologians, and monks. The structure varies, sometimes local, sometimes international. The scale also varies from small to large. Themes include everyday concerns and ethical challenges in addition to doctrinal issues and spiritual confession. The forms include joint emancipation projects, diplomatic consultations, ethical action plans and coalitions, and Scriptural Reasoning.

Marianne Moyeart writes, “Dialogue is connected deep down with the search for truth and striving for wisdom. It excludes fanaticism. A fanatic is a person who, convinced that he is absolutely right, locks himself up in his own position and refuses any critical testing or challenge… Understanding begins when we are addressed and challenged by something that interrupts and suspends our own prejudices… [and to become] receptive to what does not meet our expectations (anticipations).” She proposes that in interreligious dialogue, a practitioner’s faith community of origin becomes a point of departure and the place of return to share stories and through reflection on encounters, receive feedback and gain new insights on traditional perspectives.

1) Life Dialogue: interaction in context of daily interactions and coexistence
2) Practical Dialogue of Action: collaboration in humanitarian, social, economic, or political field toward the external challenges that affect all people
3) Discourse Dialogue: theological topic for mutual understanding and questions of Truth
4) Experience Dialogue: friendship in prayer and meditation, and exploration of the ideal
5) Diplomatic Dialogue: symbolic gestures from religious leaders

**Principles of Dialogue** – Create a safe space; agree that the purpose is learning; use appropriate communication skills; focus on the relationship; stay through the hard places; surface what is hidden; be willing to be changed.
Obstacles to Dialogue - Nicholas Adams identifies obstacles to thinking clearly about interreligious dialogue in the public sphere, including: 1) American geographical and political focus, 2) false opposition of Church and State, 3) issues of religious freedom, 4) stories of conflict and violence promoted while stories of accommodation, transformation, understanding, and cooperation remain invisible, 5) Islamophobia, 6) lack of social science case studies, 7) theoretical assumptions in liberal models of dialogue are concealed, 8) religious conservatives are not attracted to dialogue, and 9) religious truth-claims must be translated into a language that others understand.

- Contemplative Core – Eternal Truth, Ageless Wisdom, Perennial Philosophy

“Look here. I never felt that [Sri Ramakrishna] practiced all the religions with the intention of teaching the harmony of all religions. He was always immersed in God-consciousness.” - Sri Sarada Devi (The Gospel of the Holy Mother)

Swami Vivekananda suggests that all religions feature a combination of principles, mythology, and ritual. His ideal religion unites science, philosophy, and poetry. He praised variation and individuality and said, “Our watchword, then, will be acceptance and not exclusion…We take in all that has been in the past, enjoy the light of the present, and open every window of the heart for all that will come in the future.” He outlined a plan of deliberate spiritual development when he wrote, “Each soul is potentially divine. The goal is to manifest this divinity by controlling nature, external and internal. Do this either by work, or worship, or psychic control, or philosophy – by one, or more, or all of these – and be free. This is the whole of religion. Doctrines, or dogmas, or rituals, or books, or temples, or forms, are but secondary details.”

Aldous Huxley emphasized the Vedantic concepts in a Minimum Working Hypothesis: there is a Godhead which is the unmanifest principle of all manifestation; it is simultaneously transcendent and immanent; it is possible for humans to love, know, and become identical to Godhead; unity with Godhead is the final end and purpose of human life; there is a law to obey if this end is to be reached.

“A we take in all that has been in the past, enjoy the light of the present, and open every window of the heart for all that will come in the future. Salutation to all the prophets of the past, to all the great ones of the present, and to all that are to come in the future!” - Swami Vivekananda (“The Way to the Realization of Universal Religion”)

![Diagram](compiled by Hunter Smith (graphic layout courtesy of Brad Reynolds).)
UNITE THE FACTIONS IN INTERFAITH ACTIONS

- ATLANTA INTERFAITH ENGAGEMENT

Pictured: (1) Atlanta Interfaith Leaders Forum "Taste of Faith" at Unity Atlanta Church. (2) Faith Alliance of Metro Atlanta President Haley Hart and American Vedanta Coordinating Editor Br. Shankara at Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. (3) Faith in Public Life "Justice Day" at Georgia State Capitol. (4) "Cultivating Eco-Consciousness Within Communities of Faith" with David Miron-Wapner, Board Chair of The Interfaith Center for Sustainable Development at Columbia Theological Seminary. I also attend the interspiritual dialogue circles organized by Steven Gold on the second Sunday at Shamballa Center and the fourth Sunday at the Vedanta Center of Atlanta.

- UNITED RELIGIONS INITIATIVE (URI) LOGISTICS WORKING GROUP

The URI North American Regional Coordinator Sari Heidenreich (above left) visited Atlanta, and I arranged with Br. Shankara to host a lunch at the Vedanta Center including members of Faith Alliance of Metro Atlanta, Interfaith Community Initiatives, and Compassionate Atlanta. Sari invited me to join the Logistics Working Group for the upcoming URI Regional Assembly (pictured at right). Our committee includes a representative from the Silicon Valley Interreligious Council (bottom right of screenshot).

Pictured below: Delegates to the North American Regional Assembly in Baltimore, the Planning Team, the Logistics Working Group, and members of the Religion Communicators Council (RCC), founded in 1929, an association of professionals who work for and with a diverse group of faith-based organizations in the areas of communications, public relations, advertising and development. Members represent a variety of communications disciplines, including: editors, writers and designers, photographers, videographers, broadcast, social media, web developers, marketers, fundraisers, project managers, and students.

Pictured Above: Greeting URI delegates at airport; URI Regional Assembly in session & breakroom; Executive Director Victor Kazanjian in San Francisco.
Building an interfaith community that doesn't flatten differences; advocates of moral values and the voice of praise and critique in a fragmented and dysfunctional society. Read a synopsis here.

Multiple organizations with different constituents:
Collegiality → Coordination → Cooperation → Collaboration → Consistency → Collective Impact toward Common Goals

- NATIONAL COUNCIL OF CHURCHES INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

Gwynne Guibord (pictured above center, with the Guibord Center staff) and the Associate General Secretary of the National Council of Churches Tony Kireopoulos (pictured in green) develop and launch a Christian dialogue with Hindus and Buddhists.

- INTERFAITH AWARENESS WEEK / TOWARD ECOLOGICAL CIVILIZATION / SHARING OUR STORIES
In 2018, the work of the Task Force will include:

- Encouraging and supporting actions by individuals and communities, governments at all levels, religious congregations, and for-profit and not-for-profit entities to reduce and eliminate greenhouse gas emissions by reforming patterns of production and consumption, decreasing reliance on fossil fuels, promoting renewable energy and energy efficiency, and promoting the sustainability of natural systems.

- Advocating aggressive action by the National Governments, International Agencies and Financial Institutions, and Corporations and business entities in implementing and supporting the Paris Agreement of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.

- Promoting and support the transition to clean, safe and affordable renewable energy in all countries, and the realization of a post-carbon global economy with fair and affordable access to energy for all.