

Transcendental Unity of Religions: A Brief Exposition

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Abstract

This article endeavours to clarify and demonstrate the false notions of the philosophical thought of transcendentalism, a concept which supposedly asserts that all religions are fundamentally and uniformly valid. It follows its root and spotlights on its spread among religious supporters, especially Muslims. It doubts reality and legitimacy of the thought as engendered by certain eminent modern intellectuals, Muslims or something else, utilizing discerning verifications, classical and modern scholarly opinions and most importantly, documentary evidences. It endeavours to demonstrate how these assets have been abused, and in the process, exposes the deficiencies and abnormalities of the contentions supporting the thought. It additionally looks to help Muslims to be vigilant remember its negative results whenever bought in.

Key Words: Transcendent, unity of religions, transcendentalism, perennial philosophy, pluralism, diversity, esoterism, exoterism

The question of the understanding and interpretation of religion has been a profoundly challenging one for scholars, historians, and philosophers throughout the evolution of human civilisation. Historically speaking, various systems of religions have flourished across the globe at different points of time. Broadly speaking, religions have originated from Asian countries. Judaism, Christianity and Islam have originated from West Asia. Zoroastrianism has originated from Persia. Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, Sikhism

etc have originated from India. Taoism and Confucianism are religions of Chinese origin. Shintoism is the traditional Japanese religion.

All these religions have had vertical historical evolution in different parts of the world. However, with emergence of modern world due to political, scientific and technological dynamics, various religious and cultural traditions have come face to face with each other. In view of this long drawn out interface the basic methodological question of the truth of

these religions was naturally foregrounded. For centuries the votaries and advocates of various religions have struggled to demonstrate the truth of their respective religions. However, such an exclusivist project was fraught with grave methodological difficulties. The enthusiasts of various religions could never come up with logical or scientific grounds with a view to demonstrating or proving the truth of their religions and disproving that of other religions. In course of time, these grave methodological difficulties persuaded philosophers and scholars to look at religions from a new perspective. They came to realise that various religions in terms of their beliefs and values, are not statements of truth but various symbolic interpretations of the mystery of the cosmos. With the development of this understanding and interpretation of religions, an altogether horizontal and pluralistic orientation of thought was appropriated by intellectual and cultural leaders at the global plane. Kant's epistemological, scientific and metaphysical principles and views were a

turning point in the establishment of this new religious hermeneutics.

The idea, the 'transcendent unity of religion' means 'transcendentalism', represents a philosophical idea, a concept, or a theory that attempts to approach the relation of the world's religions in universal terms acceptable to all. It is an analysis of unity and diversity in religion. It basically claims that all religions are alike in essence and differ only in forms. These religions are different because they exist within the world of forms whereas each of them is actually based upon and issued from the same formless one Essence. In other words, externally all religions are different but internally they are the same. Therefore, transcendentalism refers to the experience of unity of religions at this internal, formless, inward and esoteric level, or what is called the transcendent realm. This level is attainable by means of mystical teachings and practices of all religions. This means that all religions ultimately come from one single source: the same sole Absolute, the Real, and the Ultimate Being. The existence of various religions only

constitutes variant conceptions and perceptions of, and responses to, the one Ultimate Divine Reality.

Since each religion comes from the same Absolute, each religion contains within itself a measure of the absolute truth, and at the same time, it is a valid method and means for the attainment of that truth. Therefore, all religions are of equal validity. As such and being true, no one in any particular religion may condemn others as religiously 'less privileged' simply because they have been born into other religions. Transcendentalism teaches that no one's religion is wrong. It affirms religious pluralism without giving any special superior position to any particular religion over the others. It follows that we must consider the variety of the world's religions as alternative ways or means along which men and women can find salvation, liberation, fulfilment and happiness, provided they live and practice their own respective religions wholeheartedly and sincerely.

'To transcend' is to go or lie beyond the limits of experience, knowledge; or to escape inclusion in a category,

classification, etc. or to be beyond the range or grasp of human experience, reason, belief etc. Thus, 'transcendence' means the state of transcending the world of sense and comprehension. When used in the context of religion, it means that regardless of the various forms of religions, all of them are united at a certain level, i.e., at the level of esoterism.

Transcendentalism has been propagated mainly in the West decades before the term 'transcendent unity of religion' was put into writing for the first time in 1957.

It was coined by Frithjof Schuon, a modern master of the discipline of comparative religion, particularly in his book, *The Transcendent Unity of Religion*.

This concept has been deliberated repeatedly in his other works. However, Schuon is not the first author who introduces this idea since it was already discussed before the appearance of his writings, like in the thought and intellectual discourses of Rene Guenon and Ananda K. Coomaraswamy. Guenon is particularly considered as an initiator of the school of thought affiliated with the teaching of sophia perennis or philosophia

perennis, which is called perennial philosophy. The main principle of this school is that all religions ultimate claim the same thing but in a variety of means. In order to understand this universal commonality of substance, one has to shift or come out from the external to the internal aspects of the religions. On the other hand, Coomaraswamy shows his favour in transcendentalism by defending the conception of perennial philosophy in *Christian and Oriental Philosophy of Art* (Coomaraswamy, 1956).

Some may regard Schuon as the best propagator of transcendentalism primarily due to his ability to explain the idea lucidly with considerable excellence. His writings, mainly on religions, have been claimed to have influenced many outstanding scholars of the 20th century and have attracted significant followers from almost all major religions around the globe. Intellectuals who allegedly subscribed to the idea include Titus Burckhardt, Martin Lings, T. S. Eliot, Marco Pallis, Jean-Louis Michon, Jean Cantein, Victor Danner, Joseph E. Brown, William Stoddart, Lord Northbourne, Cai

Eaton, W. N. Perry, Henri Corbin, Huston Smith, G. Durand, E. F. Schumacher, J. Needleman, William C. Chittick, John Hick and many others. Since the 'founder' as well as the majority of notable followers of transcendentalism were from the West, it is perhaps safe for us to say that this part of the world is actually the birthplace, or the place of origin, of the doctrine. It appears that transcendentalism is now gaining wider momentum among followers of world religions and the number of the transcendentalists, or perennialists, keeps increasing.

The doctrine and teachings of transcendentalism was introduced, developed and spread by intellectuals like Guenon, Schuon and some others. It is alarming to our utmost concern to see that transcendentalism is influencing a significant portion of Muslims as well, especially the educated members of the community. This spread has been receiving steady momentum since majority of them were educated in the West. For years they have been directly or indirectly exposed to and influenced by the Western style of thinking, believing

and judging. Through literature and some other means, the idea of transcendentalism subtly penetrates into and resides in their minds. When they return to their people, some of them managed to occupy influential positions in the society they become conscious and unconscious transmitters of this unnecessary confusion. Assessing from the literary works available to us, we can say that perhaps Seyyed Hossein Nasr is one of the most outstanding Muslim figures who seems to accept transcendentalism and propagates the idea and related issues among his fellow Muslims. This inclination, for example, can be seen in Nasr's *The Essential Writings of Frithjof Schuon*. He claims that Schuon's writings have generally made an impact on other Muslim scholars and authors like the late Shaykh 'Abd al-Halim Mahmud, the former Rector of al-Azhar University, Uthman Yahya, A. K. Brohi, Muhammad Ajmal, Yusuf Ibish and others. Nasr seems to believe that the notion of *wahadat al-adyan* is acceptable in Islam through sufism. In fact in his *Sufi Essays*, Nasr considers sufism as the qualified

vehicle to understand and indulge into the unity that underlies the diversity of religious forms. To this effect, he argues in favour of transcendentalism by quoting evidence from Muslim Sufis in the past like Ibn al-'Arabi, Jalal al-Din Rumi, 'Abd al-Karim al-Jili and arguably Dara Shikoh. Nasr's inclination becomes more conspicuous when he reiterates the same ideas in an interview that no religion has the exclusive right to claim the truth absolutely.

It is arduous to establish any concrete reasons why certain scholars or a group of intellectuals embrace *wahadat al-adyan* with much rigour and deliberately endeavour to disseminate its concept and understanding worldwide. Some of the advocates of this doctrine are Muslims or claim to be Muslims. According to Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, the idea of transcendentalism is set forth perhaps for motives other than the truth. These motives could be personal or political. Certain scholars, in their quest for fame and wider acceptance, may simply propound and offer the idea to the multiplicity of world's religious

communities hoping for their applause recognition. This kind of authors may succeed in gaining popularity nationally and internationally, but, especially for Muslims, at the expense of a genuinely true religion, Islam.

The call for a receptive and positive attitude towards transcendentalism, apart from being disseminated through the publication of books and articles in journals and periodicals, also has been echoed through various other intellectual channels like discourses, seminars and interreligious dialogues, organised all over the world. With the current rapid advancement in information and communication technology, the misguided teachings of transcendentalism is further boosted and can be widely transmitted to a great number of people regardless of their religions. In the case of interreligious dialogues, there were even proposals forwarded to the authorities that these interfaith dialogues be broadcasted on radio, television and other electronic media as a means, inter alia, to minimise the problem of moral decadence and crisis that are ravaging all races and nations.

Interreligious dialogue has also been used as a pretext of creating mutual understanding and tolerance, on the basis that all religions are equally right and valid, leading to harmonious living among the followers of various religions, thus resulting in national solidarity, which will ultimately bring peace to the entire mankind of the earth. Under the aforementioned 'noble' objective, many Muslims, most of whom still do not understand their religion well, will be easily influenced and may not be aware that transcendentalism is a serious threat to their belief and faith.

The standpoint of transcendentalism may also appeal to the attention of certain politicians who would exploit and manoeuvre around the theory for their political gains. Politicians garnering support or vying for votes to obtain, maintain and strengthen their positions will waste no time propagating transcendentalism to the masses who may comprise various races, ethnic groups and religions. It is most likely that these politicians will exploit the concept as a slogan and mechanism to establish, for

example, national solidarity in their countries, and thus gaining tremendous support to secure their political interests.

There are at least two areas of vivid similarities in world religions that may seem to justify the transcendentalists' position. Firstly, the recognition of the existence of one supreme god or a superhuman being. The apparent similarity among various religions in recognising the existence of one Supreme Being or entity, which is regarded as the Absolute, the Real, the Ultimate, or what may be termed as God, sounds very persuasive to followers of all religions. It creates the illusion as if all religions come from the same source. But, this is absurd since all religions hold to different views of reality, if not contradictory. Careful investigation of the teachings of major world religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism and Christianity would reveal that the conception, perception and explanation of that Supreme Being are very different from one another. Although the recognition of the existence of a Supreme Being is common to all religions, it does not necessarily lead to the

conclusion that these religions are equally valid or bear the same degree of truth.

Secondly, there are also other similarities in the domain of moral and ethical values, which is actually a necessary consequence that follows the first. If one recognises God and believes in Him, no matter how simple the recognition is, we may say that one belongs to a certain religion. Each religion is supposed to have its own set of rules of conduct forming a value system as guidance to its followers. Though the exponents of transcendentalism tend to justify their position by emphasising more on the theological and metaphysical aspect of religion, the question of moral and ethical values cannot be discarded since it also constitutes another important dimension of religion. No real ethic is possible without religion since no religion teaches evil to its followers. Indeed, all religions enjoin good values to their subjects. In this regard, with willingness, we can enlist a considerable number of meeting points in ethics that are shared and common to all religions.

The above ethical parallelism, however, should not be regarded as another premise

to conclude that all religions are equally valid. The proper attitude to hold is this: the similarities found in two or more entities do not necessarily mean that both of them are of similar status or stature though they belong to the same category. For example, the obvious natural similarities of eating, sleeping, having sexual desires etc. between man and other animals do not necessarily make them equal in stature, regardless of the fact that both species belong to the same genus of animal. While one is rational, the other is not. Among men themselves, their obtrusive physical similarities do not necessarily make them equal. The knowledgeable and the ignorant, the king and his subjects, father and sons, all of them are not equal in terms of position and status though all are human beings.

Despite the striking resemblances among the various religions, namely in the general recognition of the existence of God the Absolute and in the domain of moral and ethical principles, we stress that at the same time there are also other significant fundamental differences among them which enable us to differentiate and

to give them their respective identities. The distinctions lie largely on the conception and perception of the Supreme Being and other realities related to it like prophethood, the Holy Books, life after death etc., which will be discussed later below.

Naturally, the so-called Muslim proponents of transcendentalism may further argue for its validity by referring to a number of Qur'anic verses. Since the Holy Book is the pivot around which the entire life of a believer turns, arguments supported by divine injunctions will be easily taken for granted. Perhaps a Qur'anic injunction fits the framework of the transcendentalists well. It states that God has prescribed a law and a normative way of life to each community. Therefore, each is correct in its own right and context. These transcendentalists would also cite a verse where Allah says that for every nation there is a Prophet. Allah Most Exalted repeats the same message at least in three other places: that He had raised up a prophet within every community; that He would never chastise any nation until He had sent to them a

messenger; and that He would never destroy a population without having first raised in its midst a prophet.

The aforementioned verses clearly show that every community has its own messenger. This finds greater support with a Prophetic Tradition reported by al-Tabari in his *Ta'rikh* and al-Taftazani in *Sharh al-'Aqa'id al-Nasafiyyah* which mentions that there were as many as 124,000 Prophets sent to various nations of the world. This large number of prophets implies that each nation must have been given a divine, based religion respectively. Since these religions were sent by God and conveyed to mankind through a certain prophet, the transcendentalists claim that their call for the Muslims to consider other religions as equally valid is justified. All religions are then, revealed religion.

Several other premises may be used as foundations or justifications for transcendentalism. One of them may be found in the words of al-Attas:

The notion of a plurality of truth of equal validity in the plurality and diversity of religions is perhaps aligned to the

statements and general conclusions of modern philosophy and science arising from the discovery of a plurality and diversity of laws governing the universe having equal validity each in its own cosmological system (Al-Attas, 1995, p.9).

One of the means to comprehend the above is the well known fact that our solar system is not the only system that operates in the universe. By means of scientific observations and discoveries, it has been proved that there are many other operating extra, terrestrial systems and galaxies that are governed by their own peculiar rules and laws. Each of these systems or galaxies is valid and right in its own cosmology. Similarly, with regard to the multiplicity of world religions being originated from the same source though with diversified systems of worship, law, ethics, etc., each religion is right within its own context.

One may also argue in favour of transcendentalism with other logical argumentation. To eliminate hunger, it is neither blameworthy for one to take KFC's bits and pieces nor is it

condemnable for others who prefer to take that of McDonald's for the same purpose. In this case, it is a matter of preference and taste, which ultimately is based upon knowledge leading to certainty, i.e. food will satisfy one's hunger. One should also never say that Paul is wrong to take Christianity as his religion nor is Ahmad mistaken in embracing Islam. Being convinced with something should not deny others the right to behave in the same manner towards other things.

As alluded, the advocates of transcendentalism, in their effort to legitimise and disseminate the ideas among mankind, camouflage themselves in the esoteric practices of all religions. They assume that the universality and transcendence nature of mysticism validates their viewpoints, which they came to realise or discover after being acquainted with the metaphysics of Islam. This is not surprising since almost all main propagators of *wahadat al-adyan* like Guenon, Burckhardt, Schuon, Lings and Nasr, are all Muslims. Briefly, Islamic metaphysics unveils the concept of transcendent unity of existence in the

sense that all existent things originate or derive their existence from the existence of God. If there is such a notion called the 'transcendent unity of existence,' then there is no harm to assume that there is also the idea of the 'transcendent unity of religions.'

Conclusion:

Transcendentalism has become an ideology with its own particular doctrines and teachings that will continue to develop and spread among religious adherents. It may be regarded as synonymous with perennial philosophy. Despite its seeming appeal, this philosophical notion is alien and incompatible with Islam. Muslims must be wary of this ideology as its implications may ruin their foundations of faith. The only thing we have to do is to increase our own spiritual understanding and relate to all people and all beings in that way. To practically see the Divinity of God in all, without judgmental bias or prejudice, is the true way to establish peace and harmony on earth. It is the essence of all religions in which we can all practice and participate. In this spiritual direction, which has been recommended

the world over, other than one's own immature prejudice, there are no superficial differences, such as race, creed, nationality, tradition, sex, age, etc., that can interfere or stop the people of the world from being united and engaged in this process together, for this is the One World Religion.

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