



# Provisions

One who is on the Quest needs provisions for the journey; such are these. We hope some are also visions-forward.

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## Interfaith Dialogue

*This article discussing the importance of pluralism in our world today was written by Dilip Lakhani of the Vivekananda Centre, London, an independent organization devoted to the teachings of Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Vedanta and Hinduism. In the spirit of interfaith dialogue, the image to the right is the seal of the Vedanta Society of St. Louis. The original artwork hangs at the Society. It pictorially emphasizes that "Truth is one: sages call it by various names," from the Rig Veda – which is also quoted on the sign at the front of our property. A poster of this image hangs in our library.*

Recently, I was invited to speak on the theme of "Interfaith" at quite a few meetings held in London. Let me share my thoughts on some of the key issues I touched on.

In the last century, we witnessed strife in the name of political ideology. We had two World Wars, with millions of people killed. The challenge we face in the new century is perhaps even more worrying. This time, we are seeing strife in the name of religion. This is a far more contentious issue. Religions are far more emotive subjects and can generate much stronger passions. There is a reason why this happens. Religions have a habit of telling us, "Carry out this much finite activity here on earth, and we offer you infinite rewards in the hereafter." The risk/reward ratio is skewed to the extreme. If we kill in the name of religion, or be killed in the name of religion, surely, that is a small price to pay for an infinite reward in the hereafter! One can see how the emotive aspects of religion enter the arena. How can we diffuse the situation?

We see the politicians and diplomats working away frantically. We may say, "Surely these issues will be

resolved by diplomatic maneuvering, or by a bit of political haggling! Surely, all this is a matter of economics and the control of the oil fields! Or maybe we need to show greater justice to some disadvantaged people." Our American friends think that the situation can be resolved through military action.



Vedanta Society of St. Louis Seal  
Reproduced by permission

We know in our heart of hearts that all these approaches – political, diplomatic, economic, judicial or military – are at best mere patchwork solutions. The resolution of a problem that arises in the name of religion lies firmly in the field of religion. It is wholesome spirituality that can tackle the issues thrown up in the name of religion.

I suggest that the reason these problems have arisen in the first place is not because the world is somehow becoming more religious and hence tensions are showing up as the world religions are forced to interact with each other. The reason I suggest is precisely the opposite. It is because we are becoming less religious that these problems surface. We forget

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that we just cannot afford to ignore religions. Even for those believing that all religions are erroneous, these issues must be tackled and contained.

In the highly secular world we live in, the role of religions in society is not very clear. As society no longer relates to religions, two things begin to happen. On one side, we see society adopting a more materialistic stance, and at the other end, religions increasingly falling into the hands of simpletons. As the mainstream aspirants are no longer there to underpin religions, the rational and tolerant elements of religions are pushed aside in favor of the more fanatic elements within religions. What is the solution?

The solution is to become more spiritual. Not to be religious only in name but in the real sense of the word. The problems facing us are the symptoms of a society that needs religion and yet has difficulty in relating to it. The religion that I come from has important contributions to make in addressing these issues.

The issue is this: How can many exclusivist religions co-exist in a single society? We do not have the luxury of living in isolation, practicing our own exclusive religion. We live in multi-faith societies, and operating as single faith communities is no longer an option for the modern world. The resolution offered by Hinduism to handle this situation is unique to this faith.

It is called “pluralism,” which says that the same ultimate reality called God can be thought of and approached in different ways. “Why different ways?” “It is because we are different,” comes the answer. The goal may be the same, but as we come from different backgrounds, inspired by different prophets and scriptures, the manner in which we relate to the same Ultimate will necessarily be different. This proposal suggests that however relevant our prophets and scriptures are to us, they only have contextual validity, and not absolute validity. They relate to us,

and only to that extent can they be considered absolute, but not for the rest of mankind. The simple example I give is this: Imagine two children in the playground. One says to the other, “My mom is best.” The other says, “No, my mom is best in the world.” They both have tremendous love for their mothers and cannot tolerate the statement from the other, so they fight. A wise man comes along and says to both of them, “Why don’t you change your statements and instead of saying, ‘My mom is best,’ add two little words at the end – ‘for me’ – so now say: ‘My mom is best for me.’ Then you are both right and there will be no reason to fight.”

**As society no longer relates to religions, two things begin to happen. On one side, we see society adopting a more materialistic stance, and at the other end, religions increasingly falling into the hands of simpletons. . . . The solution is to become more spiritual.**

The children would perhaps take this advice easily, but many of my interfaith colleagues have great difficulty with this proposal. The advice suggests that their prophets and scriptures are no longer absolute, but only have contextual validity. Sounds blasphemous! The best resolution the mainstream religions have been able to come up with so far is to use phrases such as, “We tolerate other religions,” meaning, “We hold the monopoly on the Absolute – the others somehow exist on the fringes.” As we can see, we still have a long way to go!

I often wonder how any religion can claim to hold the Absolute within its framework of prophets, scriptures, doctrines and dogmas. By the very definition of Absolute, if anything can encapsulate it, then it is no longer Absolute, as the religion that has captured it has now become bigger than the Absolute! Hindu teachings on this matter are very clear, saying, “At best even the most esoteric religions can only offer a ‘perception of the Absolute,’ but never the Absolute.”

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As one can see, if the mainstream religions adopt this idea, the sharp edges dividing the major religions disappear. This simple idea says, “Your prophet and scriptures suit you and are best for you, my prophets and scriptures are fine for my purposes, so why threaten or feel threatened by each other?” This is the Hindu concept of pluralism.

Many of my Christian friends shudder at this proposal as it suggests to them that the prophets or the scriptures they hold so dear are a “perception” rather than the real thing. But what makes them shudder? I believe the reason is that we human beings exhibit serious weakness in spiritual matters. The Absolute is elusive in all religions; we try very hard to grasp it but fail. So in our weakness, we ascribe absolute stature to what we can grasp in religions: the prophets, the scriptures, the doctrines and the dogmas. This is the source of our problem. We are not brave enough to recognize the necessary limitations of what we perceive as absolute. This is the transition I advocate when I suggest: “We need to be truly religious in order to resolve the issue of religious strife.”

Some interfaith colleagues asked what is involved in being a “pluralist.” First, pluralism suggests that we do not have to water down our own faith or beliefs. In fact, pluralism suggests that our faith is perhaps the most suited to our requirements so there is no need to shop around or change direction. We do not have to emulate other faiths, as that may not be our way. We should hang on to our own path with full confidence and greater vigor. We can see what pluralism thinks of conversion from one faith to another. It is best described as “perversion.”

Second, pluralism says that the validity of other faiths should not be taken as a compromise of our own faith. Do we not know that God is infinite? If he is present in other faiths, that does not reduce his presence in our own faith!

In a way, pluralism already exists in an apologetic manner in all the mainstream religions. Each of these accepts a variety of approaches within its own religion. A vast number of denominations and

approaches are grudgingly accommodated within these faiths. Pluralism gives all these denominations full dignity to exist side by side and promotes the idea of extending this dignity to cover other faiths, as well. Pluralism has never promoted the idea that we take bits of all religions and produce some mix of all faiths called “pluralism.” What a grotesque idea!

One Christian colleague said quite candidly, “No doubt, we are nervous about taking on this idea of pluralism, but in a way we are relieved that it is being put across. Thank God for that!” One of my interfaith colleagues suggested that even though pluralism sounds like a good idea, it will not be easy for the theologians of mainstream faiths to adopt it so easily. Why not be practical and focus on the common ground of humanity and develop interfaith ideals based on shared human values rather than through religious teachings? My response is that this is precisely what the outcome will be if the secular lobby has its way. It has suggested that religions are responsible for the serious problems we face today, hence, all religions should be toned down. In this scenario, religion loses out to the secular lobby.

A second criticism of pluralism comes from the “main weapon of all philosophers,” i.e., using logic to blow a hole in logic. In the pluralism context, it translates as: “But pluralism, too, is a dogma, hence why should it be given a better footing than the exclusivist agenda?” That sounds wonderful but fails to hit the target. Pluralism by its own admission recognizes its limitations. It never said that its approach in anyway is somehow absolute. It recognizes its own contextual nature. But then why invoke it? Because there is a great “contextual” need for it in the world we live in – a world where many religions promoting exclusivist agendas just cannot co-exist without thumping each other! Hence, we have the need to invoke this Hindu concept of pluralism.

I suggested to one colleague that we have two choices in this matter: Either we adopt the idea of pluralism and quickly incorporate it within all faiths to diffuse the serious situation we face, or we sing the glories of pluralism only after some serious catastrophes.

*– Reprinted by permission of the author.*

## **On Being Content Not to Be Lucky or Clever**

The only time I won anything was  
Once in a raffle to buy the town a new ambulance.  
I won a fishing pole but I don't fish.  
I was told it was worth eighty dollars but even with "will accept best offer"  
I couldn't sell it.  
When I order something from a mail order catalog  
and the winner of a million dollars **COULD BE YOU**  
it never is.

I'm no better at the brainy games.  
Anyone can outmaneuver me at chess.  
I never win at Scrabble. I can think of words  
but can't plan ahead to get on the high-scoring squares.  
The trouble is that I don't care whether I win or not.  
If winning makes you happy, I say  
go ahead and win. I want you happy.

I used to wonder what it would be like  
to meet Cleopatra or Isolde  
but I don't dream about that any more.  
Antony and Tristan died happy, I guess,  
but I don't want to be **THAT** happy,  
though there was a time when I would have settled  
for Katherine Hepburn.  
Or have a great friendship  
like Hamlet and Horatio or Rumi and Sham-i-Tabriz.  
That didn't happen either  
but it's just as well. As it is  
I have more friends than I deserve.

"Happy seventy-third birthday! Give us some wise words."  
They're kidding me, but I thought of something to tell them anyway.  
Don't be ambitious for ephemeral things.  
Find out who you are, if you can, and be that.  
Grow like a tree without thinking about it,  
a tree planted by flowing waters.

– William B. Buchanan

## REGULARLY SCHEDULED EVENTS

Sunday	10:30 AM 11:00 AM	Chant Service. Discourse.
Tuesday	8 PM	Reading: <i>Holy Mother</i> by Swami Nikhilananda is the text for this one-hour class, which is followed by a half-hour of meditation.
Thursday	8 PM	Reading: The <i>Textbook of Yoga Psychology</i> by Swami Brahmananda Sarasvati is the text. It is a highly regarded work on Samkhya and Yoga by a monk who was also a medical doctor. The meeting begins with a ten-minute meditation.
3rd Fridays	7:30 PM	RAM NAM will be held on June 15 and July 20, location t/b/a.
Daily**	6 PM	Vespers/Arati - A short period of prayer is followed by silent meditation. ** <i>Except Sundays.</i>

## JUNE 2007 DISCOURSE TOPICS &amp; SPECIAL EVENTS

3	11 AM	HOW TO LEAD A HAPPY LIFE - Talk followed by discussion.
10	11 AM	EARTHWISE: A Program by Francie Wallace and Friends on the Environment - Program followed by discussion.*
17	11 AM	KARMA AND REINCARNATION - Talk followed by discussion.
24	11 AM	MIND AND SOUL - Talk followed by discussion.

## JULY 2007 DISCOURSE TOPICS &amp; SPECIAL EVENTS

1	11 AM	THE WHY AND WHAT OF SPIRITUAL PRACTICE - Talk followed by discussion.
4	12 NOON	INDEPENDENCE DAY/ SWAMJI MAHASAMADHI CELEBRATION†
8	11 AM	DEVOTION ACCORDING TO THE <i>BHAGAVAD GITA</i> - Talk followed by discussion.
14	7:30	VINA BENEFIT CONCERT‡
15	11 AM	ACTIVITY ACCORDING TO THE <i>BHAGAVAD GITA</i> - Talk followed by discussion.
22	11 AM	KNOWLEDGE ACCORDING TO THE <i>BHAGAVAD GITA</i> - Talk followed by discussion.
29	11 AM	MEDITATION WORKSHOP.

## ANNOUNCEMENTS

\***Francie Wallace** has sung and spoken to us before, on raising children. This program will include music and much information. You will not want to miss these interesting and delightful guests!

†**Fourth of July's** annual potluck double celebration of **Independence Day** and the **Mahasamadhi of Swami Vivekananda** will be held this year at the home of **Tom and Iris Couch**, 2000 Hollidon Road, Decatur, Georgia.

‡On Saturday July 14, **Priya Chandrasekaran** and her senior students will give a vina concert at the Center to benefit our Building Fund. Admission is \$10 and the program starts at 7:30 p.m. Refreshments will be available.

Our **Annual Retreat** will be Sept. 29-Oct. 1, 2007. **Swami Yogatmananda's** topic will be "Human Being to Divine Being."

## Gautama and the Elephant



The ancients say that God has a way of testing great persons he has taken note of. He can put on any shape he wishes, and you will see how this happens in this story from the *Mahabharata*, India's master-classic.

In a forest hermitage there lived a gentle, self-controlled hermit named Gautama (not Gautama Buddha). One day he found a baby elephant whose mother had been killed. He was very sad. Gautama nursed it, however, until it grew into a large and mighty beast. Now the Lord took notice of this saintly hermit and his elephant, and decided to make an experiment – to put him to the test.

He took the form of the country's king. The king's name was Dhritarashtra (Possibly you cannot even pronounce that, but you should try, because you will see it again when you read the *Bhagavad Gita*.)

The king went to the hermitage, seized the huge elephant and began to lead it away with him. “You are a mighty king, no doubt,” said Gautama, “but this is my source of fuel and water. He guards me too, and is obedient. Do not take him away.”

The king replied, “The elephants are royal animals; they are fit for kings, not common people.” “Even if you go to the land of Yama – Death – I shall take back my elephant,” the hermit said. “Only sinners and unbelievers go to Yama's realm,” answered the king. “But in Yama's land there is truth, and there the weak can overcome the strong,” Gautama shot back. Said Dhritarashtra: “I will be going to a higher plane.” “Even if you go to the heaven where the fairies and fair maidens dwell, I shall take back my elephant.” “I will go even higher,” said the king. “If you go to the summit of Mount Meru, where flowery woods are full of divine musicians, I will come for my elephant.”

So it went, on and on. At every point the king would describe a higher plane of heavenly existence, a rarer world, where he would leave the hermit behind: the groves of Narada, the perfumed land of Soma, the heavens of Indra with his dancers; even to the abode of the rishis, most ancient of sages. Lastly, Brahma-loka. “You will not reach me there,” taunted the king. Said Gautama, “Even there I shall find you and take back my elephant.”

“But now I know who you are: you are God himself, who wanders the universe in disguise, in all these shapes. Pardon me, Lord, for having been so obstinate.”

God was pleased with him and offered him a “boon,” a free choice. Of course Gautama asked to have his beloved elephant returned. “It is so young,” he said, “only ten years old, and I have brought it up as my own child. It has been my dear companion in these woods.” Whereupon the elephant came to the hermit and bowed at his feet.

Do you know the hidden meaning of this story? It is two-fold: Do not be satisfied with the beauties, delights and joys of the higher heavens – stop not till the Lord Himself is reached. And (as Gautama did) study everyone and everything in this world till you see it as Brahman in disguise: discover that, and all will be well with you!

## Reason – The All-Powerful

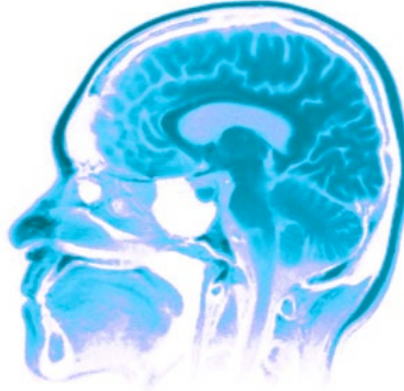
Science tells you that oxygen combines with hydrogen to give water. Ask it what oxygen is and it will tell you it is protons or electrons. But philosophy asks “What are protons?” and to whatever element science pushes back protons, philosophy will always alone be able to deal with its ultimate nature. Hence science must ultimately surrender to philosophy when it wants to push its quest deeply enough.

Common people and primitive minds fall into faulty thinking through certain characteristic fallacies, such as the fallacy of wishing – taking what pleases them as true; the fallacy of fear – taking what you dread as real, such as witches or evil spirits; and the fallacy of simplicity – taking what is apparent, obvious and superficial as true because it is less troublesome.

It is impossible to have a mind which is non-logical, i.e., without some kind of logic. Even insane men try to draw inferences, only they are illogical, i.e., draw wrongly. Every human being thinks logically or illogically, never non-logically. But the West often confounds logic with reason.

Reason is the highest faculty of man, hence, it must be our guide because it will last when other things go. We should not merely imagine things but check them by exercise of reasoned judgment. Thinking power is essential, whether in philosophy, politics, or business. Who is it who gets on in this world? It is the man with intelligence and reason. Similarly, in the pursuit of truth, the same capacity brings success.

Philosophy which has no basis in science is usually religion or a mere catalogue of ignorant opinions; people prefer it because it can be got more easily. Yet such a pseudo-philosophy is worthless from the standpoint of truth. Science is incomplete and inaccurate without philosophy, and vice versa. Science means certain and exact knowledge. Those who limit it to its practical applications, such as making railway engines, are wrong because that is only one aspect of science. Ramakrishna did not learn



any practical science but he did have certain knowledge of truth all the same. He was therefore scientific. Krishna, too, did not learn practical utilization of science, but he had exactness and certitude of knowledge and of truth and therefore possessed scientific knowledge. When you have an exact and certain knowledge of philosophy, you can utilize it for the welfare of mankind; this is the practical side. Science can be applied in two ways, either to make man more miserable or to make him more happy.

The naive people who assume without any proof have untrained minds. There are different degrees of development of reason. A child's reason is feebler than a youth's, a youth's reason is feebler than a mature man's, and an old man's is again feeble at times. Reason to the highest degree sees the whole of humanity in you; among mature men, some are sharp-minded, others less rational. The difference is a matter of degree. Therefore, all people have some growth of reason.

You may dislike science, but you seek it out and avail yourself of its knowledge. When you strike a match – science; when you switch on electricity – science; when you seek out medical attention and go to a doctor – science. On the other hand, there is no such universal necessity for religion. You can do without it if you like. It is a matter of majority opinion or propaganda by sword. Yoga sharpens intelligence only when it is immediately followed by a practice of inquiry, that is, by calm thinking. If the yoga practice is not followed by such inquiry, then one will only become a duffer, because his Yoga will kill his intelligence. “Science,” as I use the term, is not applied science, but the method of getting knowledge in a particular way.

Human reason finds its highest level only when it inquires into Truth. Human reason alone leads to Truth. Ultimate Truth can be known and is known in this world by human reason. Nothing divine, or mystical is needed for that.

– V. Subrahmanya Iyer

## notes and quotes

Life is either a daring adventure or nothing. Security does not exist in nature, nor do the children of men as a whole experience it. Avoiding danger is no safer in the long run than exposure.

– Helen Keller

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Bholaji finds himself in dire trouble. His business has gone bust and he's in serious financial trouble. He's so desperate that he decides to ask Ganesh for help. He goes into the temple and begins to pray.

“Oh Ganesh, please help me, I've lost my business and if I don't get some money, I'm going to lose my house as well. Please let me win the lottery.”

Lotto night comes and somebody else wins it. Bholaji goes back to the temple. “Ganesh please let me win the lotto. I've lost my business, my house and I'm going to lose my car as well.” Lotto night comes and Bholaji still has no luck. Back to the temple he goes. “My Ganesh, why have you forsaken me? I've lost my business, my house, my car, and my wife and children are starving. I don't often ask you for help and I have always been a good servant to you. Why won't you just let me win the lotto this one time so I can get my life back in order?”

Suddenly there is a blinding flash of light as the sky parts open and Bholaji is confronted by the voice of God: “Bholaji, buy a lottery ticket first.”

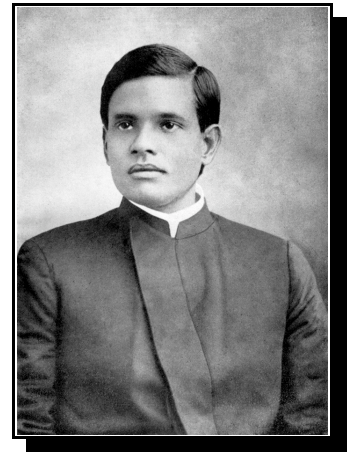
**Although we have finished building our lovely Chapel, and have used it with great appreciation, we borrowed privately and commercially in order to accomplish its completion. Please keep us in mind. Thank you!**

It is better to know some of the questions than all of the answers. Computers are useless. They can only give you answers.

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In the following excerpt, we see what difficulty Swami Vivekananda often had in enlisting the other disciples of Sri Ramakrishna for his work. *Swami Vivekananda in London* is appearing in installments on our website (see “Books”).

Sometimes Swami Saradananda would say sadly, “What, Mohim! I am in London, hearing Swamiji's lectures; now I have to leave and go off to America. And there I shall have to lecture! I know I have not studied anything. Anyway, I shall, as Swamiji has commanded, salute Thakur, stand up and try



Swami Saradananda - 1896

to say something. If it proves all right, I will stay awhile. If not, I run away to Calcutta. Why all this nuisance? I will beg my food some place. How did this lecturing business get into my head? I have never given a lecture in my life, but I will try to stand up and speak. And I am quite used to getting abuse. I will get it again. But when Naren has spoken, let me give it a try.”

\* \* \*

We cannot hear God with these ears. How, then, are we to perceive Him? We can never perceive Him in this way. To go to that One we must throw aside these instruments which take us directly to the creation. We must go beyond our mind and senses, then meditation will come of itself. This is the only way to get inner vision.

– Swami Ramakrishnananda