

1-1-1991

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Recommended Citation

Yogeshananda, Swami (1990) "A Response to Dr. Swidler," *Grand Valley Review*: Vol. 6: Iss. 2, Article 17.
Available at: <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/gvr/vol6/iss2/17>

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A Response to Dr. Swidler

SWAMI YOGESHANANDA

Dr. Swidler has given us a positive program for peace among religions. If we do not have that, we cannot have world peace, says Hans Kung, as do many others. What we have heard this evening is something to which we can only give our hearty cheers. If religion is “the explanation of the ultimate meaning of life and how to live accordingly,” I should like to add to that, “and how to die accordingly”—to me religion means the whole person’s being transformed into what he or she believes. That we would call religion, not affirmations or affiliations. When we become whole persons, living from the very Center of our existence, we cross the barriers of race and nation, age and gender, ideology and faith, and speak from heart to heart. At the level of spiritual fulfillment pettiness disappears and parochialism just does not survive.

Is there not clearly a premise in Dr. Swidler’s presentation: namely, that there *is* a Transcendental Truth? That this Truth can be glimpsed, approached—even realized—by different peoples of the world, in their diverse religions and ideologies? To us it sounds very much like what was said in the Veda, many centuries ago: “Truth is One, though seen in various ways.” And we should be grateful to the speaker that he did not spell out this Ultimate Reality in theistic terms: lest our friends, the Buddhists, be excluded.

Dialogue among religions is surely for “learning, changing, growing,” as he said. One great dialogist, Sri Ramakrishna, told his disciples, “So long as I live I learn.” But I hope that dialogue is also for the enjoying Ramakrishna gave as his reason for practicing other religions: that he might be able to enjoy the Divine in more and varied ways. Dialogue is fine, but I want to say to you that dialogue is *not* enough; we can learn to celebrate our differences, to relish a faith other than our own. If it be true that there is only one Universal Being behind all the gods we worship and the qualified perfections to which we aspire, then why should I not accept every existing creed as one kind of understanding, a revelation to a given people at a critical point in their history? Why should I not be glad to enter temple or church, mosque, synagogue or forum, and discover in that place what way that great Being manifests itself? Why not kneel with the Christian, meditate with the Hindu, bow down beside the Muslim. There are many of us who look forward to the day when Christians will honor the birthday of Buddha and Buddhists celebrate Christmas; when Hindus will want to read the *Torah* and Muslims the *Bhagavad Gita*. This should neither frighten

us nor sound utopian; if you're going to dream, why not dream great dreams for world peace?

On the other hand is there anything wrong in being convinced that you have the truth with you? Not at all: you should be! But to feel that you *alone* have the truth—your religion, your denomination, your group alone has the truth—ah, that's what causes the trouble; then you begin to force your views on others. About this Sri Ramakrishna used to say, "Yes, everyone says his or her watch is correct. The fact is, nobody's watch keeps perfect time." So complex and elusive to the human mind is the nature of this Reality. In Vedanta we admit the imperfection of our system because Reality must lie beyond all system and all labels. The Hindu is convinced that organization spells degradation and, because of the very personal nature of spiritual practice, all men and women, to achieve their goals, must have their personal religion, tailored to their own special needs.

Dr. Swidler has referred to modern critical thought as the *unseen partner* present in every dialogue today, and has shown us nicely the ways of history in bringing about this "relational" attitude in world faiths. There is, therefore, the possibility that before too long religion will be studied openly and freely by all, like any other science. If we are to criticize our own religion, I would hope it will be mainly a constructive criticism; for is the religion ever really at fault? Or is it humankind, trying to represent and interpret it, and failing? Even self-criticism is not always psychologically helpful. Why not be only positive and try rather to see the greatness, not only in one's faith but in the faiths of others as well? At the Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893 Swami Vivekananda expressed this hope, and I repeat it to you today: "that upon the banner of every religion will soon be written, in spite of resistance, 'Help and not Fight,' 'Assimilation and not Destruction,' 'Harmony and Peace and not Dissension.'"

I especially liked the speaker's conclusion for I thought it pointed us in the direction of true maturity.