

The Cyclonic Monk- Swami Vivekananda

By Dr. Najmus Saquib

[Author of “Anondo-Bedonay America” and “God’s Facebook: Creating a Friendship of Civilizations in a Terror-ridden World”]

Suprobrhat. Bongo Sammelon-e dariye ami ingrejite boktrita dite didhannito; kintu ekhane torun projonmer o bidehsi bondhuder uposhitite swami vivekanander bani-ke shokoler kache pouche debar manoshe apnader anumoti niye ami ingrejite boktrita shuru korchi. Dhanyabad.

Sisters and Brothers of Canada, America, India, Bangladesh, and all other countries:

We have gathered here today to salute a great Bengali, Swami Vivekananda on his 150th birth anniversary. Is this a MERE SHOW of respect to a renowned bengali or IS HE still relevant today in our current world and in our current lives? These are the primary questions that I will address today.

IT APPEARS that the informed citizenry of our age have surrendered to the gloomy prospects of a “Clash of Civilizations” first proposed by Harvard Professor Samuel Huntington in 1993, EXACTLY 100 YEARS after Vivekananda’s speech in Chicago in 1893 at the first World Parliament of Religions. Today, with the inspiration from Vivekananda, I want to offer an alternative to the grim picture of a CLASH and discuss the idea of a FRIENDSHIP OF CIVILIZATIONS.

WHAT I INTEND TO SHOW TODAY is how Vivekananda’s ideas can help us create a new paradigm in this age of propaganda, where the agents of terror, bigotry, and violence are working hard to create and sustain a Clash of Civilizations. The realists among us may say that this clash is inevitable because of the nature of things as they are. But the poet in us knows that ‘reality’ is in fact a ‘creation’. AGE AFTER AGE, the visionary men and women of religion and science ALIKE proved that their faiths guided them to attain what seemed IMPOSSIBLE by all the evidence of fact.

Today, in a terror-ridden world, we are in need of a greater call of faith, which will say to us: Let us change the course of history by changing our mindsets. AND THIS IS WHERE Vivekananda becomes very relevant because his ideas can change our mindsets and altogether stop our march towards a Clash of Civilizations.

Today, I would like to ask you to join me in an exploratory journey into the mind of Vivekananda. In this process I will tell you THREE stories- stories that will help us understand the common background of humanity. Let me begin my FIRST story.

THOUSANDS OF YEARS AGO, men and women emerged on the vast, lonely theater of time and space on the planet Earth. They knew not the meaning of their destinies, nor were they able to make sense of the furies of the thunderous storms, the devastating floods, and the angry fire.

THEN CAME A TIME when men and women began to feel the mysterious presence of something sublime that baffled them with the joy of elevated thoughts, as they wondered endlessly about the rising and setting of the sun, GAZED WITH BEWILDERMENT at countless stars in the night sky, and pondered the TOSSING AND TURNING of ocean waves. Soon thereafter, men and women started worshipping GOD because doing so gave meaning to their existence and made living valuable and tolerable.

The worshipping of God remained CONSTANT among humans, wherever they went, although VARIATIONS in geography, climate, and human experiences in different parts of the world gave rise to different methods of worship, which they named "RELIGION." For thousands of years, men and women taught their religions to others and preached messages of selfless love, as well as self-preserving retribution. At the same time, they fought many wars over the differences among the religions, and KILLED millions of their own species.

Harvard's Professor Huntington predicted that humankind was inevitably progressing towards a "*Clash of Civilizations*" across the cultural and religious divide. Another Harvard Professor and a great Bengali, Nobel prize winner Amartya Sen, opposed this grim world view and brilliantly argued that men and women hold multiple identities and CLASSIFYING INDIVIDUALS according to a single religious identity is an expression of intellectual confusion that IGNORES THE INHERENT DIVERSITY within each civilization.

AMIDST all these theorizations and disputations, God, in his infinite wisdom, chose few wise men and women to preach the need for peace among religions. These wise men and women began local and global meetings among worshippers of God of all religions, and they called these meetings "INTERFAITH DIALOGUES."

The FIRST SUCH international meeting of religions took place in 1893 in Chicago, USA. That's where my SECOND STORY begins.

On September 11, 1893, EXACTLY one hundred and eight years before the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack in New York, a select audience of 7,000 enlightened people gathered in the lecture hall of the Art Institute of Chicago on 111 South Michigan Avenue. In a rain-swept morning, in the podium of that conference, STOOD a man - 5 feet 9 inches tall and 30 years old, with an orange turban wrapped around his head. He was from Bengal, India. He had an olive complexion and his eyes were large, with prominent, heavy lids. He bowed and said: "Sisters and Brothers of America." Instantly, the magic of his rich and deep voice transformed the

audience's mood to an overwhelming feeling of togetherness. The audience responded with a standing ovation that lasted for more than two minutes.

When silence was restored, the young man from India continued his brief lecture, which focused on religious tolerance. He cited two immensely meaningful quotations. The first was a Sanskrit hymn:

“As the different streams
Having their sources in different places
All mingle their water in the sea,
So O Lord, the different paths which men take,
Through different tendencies,
Various though they appear
Crooked or straight,
All lead to Thee.”

The second was a verse from the Bhagavad Gita:

“Whosoever comes to Me, through whatsoever form, I reach him;
All men are struggling through paths that in the end lead to Me.”

The young man from Bengal was Swami Vivekananda. The US press dubbed him “The Cyclonic Hindu Monk of India” for his oratory. The New York Herald wrote: “Vivekananda is undoubtedly the greatest figure in the Parliament of Religions.” Swami Vivekananda lectured at many other places and won the hearts and minds of America more than 100 years ago.

As we all know, Vivekananda died young, at just 39. But, he left a lasting legacy of philanthropy and spiritual philosophy. Before his death, he wrote to a Western follower: “It may be that I shall find it good to get outside my body, to cast it off like a worn out garment. But I shall not cease to work. I shall inspire men everywhere until the whole world shall know that it is one with God.”

What a prophetic statement! We all know how wide ranging and lasting is Vivekananda's inspiration.

This is where my THIRDS story begins. A story that is yet to unfold, with the help of people like you and me and the rest of the world with the inspiration from Swami Vivekananda. This is the story of future that we need to build.

Swami Vivekananda drove his pluralist views home with calls for a universal religion, without claiming the superiority OR admitting the inferiority of his own religion. Instead, he proposed a genuine togetherness of all religions. He said: "If anybody dreams of the exclusive survival of his own religion and the destruction of the others, I pity him from the bottom of my heart, and point out to him 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."

Here, in this message from Vivekananda, lies the secret to fight the Clash of Civilizations and create a Friendship of Civilizations as I proposed in my book "God's Facebook: Creating a Friendship of Civilizations."

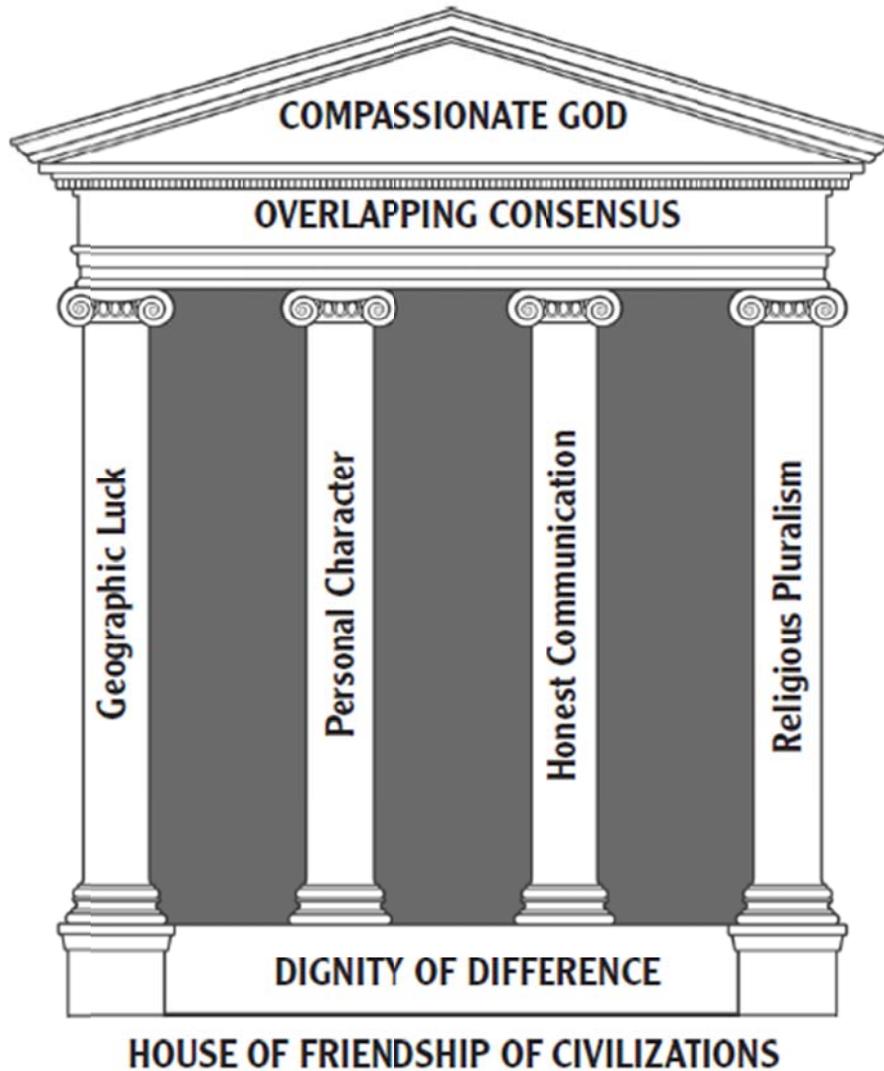
I proposed a new paradigm for interfaith dialogues inspired by Vivekananda.

I called it the HOUSE OF FRIENDSHIP OF CIVILIZATIONS. It stands on FOUR PILLARS and the pillars are

1. GEOGRAPHIC LUCK,
2. PERSONAL CHARACTER,
3. HONEST COMMUNICATIONS, and
4. RELIGIOUS PLURALISM.

This house stands on the foundation of DIGNITY OF DIFFERENCE, and the brace that binds the four pillars is the OVERLAPPING CONSENSUS. The roof of the house is the COMPASSIONATE GOD.

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LET ME FIRST EXPLAIN THE FOUR PILLARS.

PILLAR ONE - GEOGRAPHIC LUCK

The first change in our mindsets is to remind ourselves every day that our God and our religious affiliations are an outcome of geographic luck in more than ninety percent of cases. If we were born in Bangladesh or Pakistan, we would most likely be Muslims; in India, Hindus; in USA or Italy, Christians; in Japan or China, Buddhists, Shintoists, or Confucianists. We should also acknowledge at the same time that this geographic luck is complemented by the accident of birth—the religions of our parents.

In absence of this “geographic luck” mindset, we often tend to compare our religion with the worst of the other religion. This is a mistake that fuels the irrational belief about the superiority of our own religion over the other and causes a lot of trouble. This pillar is consistent with what Vivekananda uttered in his 1893 speech in Chicago.

PILLAR TWO - PERSONAL CHARACTER

The second change that we need to make in our mindsets is to focus on attaining the personal qualities that our religion extols and our God demands from us. It is clear that all religions speak of God’s love for human personal virtue—of good deeds, humility, compassion, charity, love, and tolerance. Why should we call ourselves Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, or Jews, if we are not following the basic tenets of the religions we are proud of? Is being born a Christian or Muslim enough, or is our “true religion” what we actually practice in our personal lives?

It is a truism to say that if we were to achieve only half of the desirable virtues mandated in the religious scriptures, it would take us a lifetime. Even those who do not believe in any God should practice the morality and virtues to which they subscribe. A focus on personal character building, rather than proving who is right and who is not, will move us away from pride and begin our journey to humility.

As Tagore said:

Tumay Pujar Chole Tumay Bhulei Thaki

Kaj Ki Amar Mondirete Anagonay

Patbo Ashon Apon Moner Ekti Konay

Sorol Prane Nirbo Hoye Toamy Daki

PILLAR 3 - HONEST COMMUNICATION

The third change that we need to make in our mindsets is to communicate honestly about our own religions. One of the dangerous tendencies among religious scholars and practitioners alike is to be defensive when objections are raised about a specific element of their religions. In that defensive mode, they often intentionally hide some uncomfortable truths because all religious scriptures contain both benevolent and belligerent views. Therefore, any effort to prove a particular religion as one of all peace or all evil is futile; it only undermines honest communication and provides fodder for attack from other religious camps.

Through an honest communication, we can create an environment of mutual trust and respect.

PILLAR 4 - RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

The fourth change that we need to make in our mindsets is to recognize that the biggest barrier to this friendship is the fear of the “unfamiliar,” fomented by the propaganda machines of religious supremacists and by the acts of terror of religious fundamentalists. However, it would be naïve to assume that all humans will unite under one God. The plurality of religions is as much a reality as the plurality of nations and cultures. Swami Vivekananda said in 1893 when talking about an universal religion: “The Christian is not to become a Hindu or a Buddhist, nor a Hindu or a Buddhist to become a Christian. But each must assimilate the spirit of the others and yet preserve his individuality and grow according to his own law of growth.”

THE FOUNDATION - DIGNITY OF DIFFERENCE

The four changes in our mindsets that are discussed above will also help us build the house of Friendship of Civilizations on a strong foundation of “dignity of difference”, a term coined by American Rabbi Jonathan Sachs. In a globalized world with economic and cultural disparity and discontents, it is not enough to search for values common to all faiths; it is necessary to reframe the way we see the differences among all faiths and cultures AND revel in the dignity of diversity and difference among belief systems.

THE ROOF - OVERLAPPING CONSENSUS

These four changes in our mindsets discussed above will facilitate the building of the “overlapping consensus” among different religions. Harvard Professor John Rawls realized that in a society where citizens are deeply divided by conflicting but well-conceived, comprehensive doctrines, the mere tolerance of each other’s ideology is not sufficient to create a stable and just society. Instead, the citizens must seek an overall consensus and agree to a set of principles, which can be supported on moral grounds from their respective doctrines. This overlapping consensus approach provides a framework for cooperation in a pluralistic society, without compromising its plural character, one of thing that Vivekananda emphasized in his lecture in 1893.

THE ENDING

Swami Vivekananda ended his 1893 speech at the World Parliament of Religions with these words: “I fervently hope that the bell that tolled this morning in honor 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.”

Unfortunately, Swami Vivekananda's hope hadn't materialized in the hundred years following his plea. Instead, fanaticism, an ancient social disease that has killed millions, continued with new fervor in the name of both religion and irreligion, causing untold human misery in the following centuries. HOWEVER, the opportunity is now knocking at the door for us to change the course of history by breaking the tribe mentality of individual religions.

Recall what another great Bengali and Nobel prize winner, Rabindranath Tagore said in a 1930 lecture at Oxford University: "The God of humanity has arrived at the gates of the ruined temple of the tribe. Though he has not yet found his altar, I ask the men of simple faith, wherever they may be in the world, to bring their offering of sacrifice to him, and to believe that it is far better to be wise and worshipful than to be clever and supercilious. I ask them to claim the right of manhood to be friends of men, and not the right of a particular proud race or nation which may boast of the fatal quality of being the rulers of men. We should know for certain that such rulers will no longer be tolerated in the new world, as it basks in the open sunlight of mind and breathes life's free air."

Therefore, I urge all of you to join me in saluting Vivekananda and making a commitment to welcome the God of Humanity and build a House of Friendship of Civilizations for our future generations. Let us REKINDLE the flame that Vivekananda lit more than 100 years ago and carry forward his message to create a brand new world of "harmony of religion" as HE used to say. Each of us has a role to play in our own way by changing our mindsets and let us NOT IGNORE the power of the individual ideas, which is behind the success of North America.

Thank you all for your patient listening.