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Coexistence in a Pluralistic World: Exploring Interreligious Understanding in India and the West

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This article compares two approaches to interreligious understanding: a civic, secular-humanist orientation emphasizing equal respect, dialogue, and cooperation, and a spiritually grounded humanism interpreted through Swami Vivekananda's account of religious plurality. **Methodology:** Using qualitative textual and conceptual analysis of philosophical writings and scholarship on interreligious dialogue, the study examines their assumptions, practical implications, and limitations. It asks whether these approaches can be brought into constructive relation without obscuring the distinctive claims of religious traditions.

Findings: The analysis argues that civic mechanisms provide indispensable conditions for peaceful coexistence, whereas Vivekananda's spiritual universalism offers additional resources for reflection on shared human aspirations. Neither approach, taken alone, resolves all tensions of religious pluralism.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy: Their qualified complementarity may support dialogue that protects public equality while allowing participants to explore spiritual meaning without presupposing metaphysical agreement. This is a conceptual proposal rather than an empirically tested model of conflict reduction.

Keywords: *Interreligious Understanding, Secular Humanism, Spiritual Humanism, Swami Vivekananda, Religious Pluralism*

Introduction

Living in an increasingly globalized and culturally interconnected world, religious pluralism has become a defining feature of contemporary societies, presenting both opportunities and challenges for peaceful coexistence (Eck, 2007). Various religious beliefs and practices have shown the growing need for concepts promoting interreligious understanding, conflict reduction, and harmony in multicultural environments. Two major models of this discourse are particularly secular humanism and spiritual humanism. Secular humanism is dominant in the West in regards to their approach in interfaith engagement and the spiritual model, because it is deeply rooted in Indian philosophical background, can be considered primarily as an Indian model (Vivekananda, 2005; Cornille, 2013). These are the specific ways of thinking about how to deal with religious diversity with differences in their philosophical basis and ramifications in terms of the experience of dealing with the multicultural realities of pluralism.

In this article, "secular humanism" and "spiritual humanism" are comparative analytical categories rather than exhaustive descriptions of Western and Indian traditions. The former refers here to a civic and non-confessional orientation toward interreligious coexistence; it should not be equated with every Western theory or practice of religious pluralism. The latter designates the interpretation developed in this article of Swami Vivekananda's universal spirituality, inspired by Sri Ramakrishna; it is not presented as Vivekananda's own historical label. These distinctions also acknowledge the existence of spiritually oriented Western approaches and civic approaches within India.

In secular humanism, as commonly articulated in the modern West, religious differences are generally regarded as historical and cultural variations rather than as differences of ultimate truth. Just as individuals speak different languages or observe different customs, so too they adhere to different religious traditions (Sharpe, 1975). Geertz's understanding of religion as a cultural system provides an important theoretical foundation for such an interpretation (Geertz, 1973). Similarly, Smart's multidimensional model of religion supports the view that religious traditions are historically and culturally constituted while encompassing diverse doctrinal, ritual, ethical, experiential, social, and material dimensions (Smart, 1996). Such an approach, based on Enlightenment ideals, emphasizes tolerance, mutual respect, and equality. This emphasis also resonates with UNESCO's Declaration of Principles on Tolerance, which defines tolerance as an active ethical commitment rather than passive acceptance (UNESCO, 1995). Practical tools for fostering harmonious coexistence include interfaith dialogue, educational programmes, and community outreach activities (Eck, 2007; Hick, 1989; Swidler, 1984). Positioning religions as different forms of human culture, secular humanism attempts to establish a level ground in which disparities co-exist as well as are honoured without devaluing one religion in relation to another. This is a rather popular model in the Western multicultural societies where there is often a need

to split religion and the state, thus a secular form of accommodating interreligious harmony has been adopted.

Spiritual humanism, by contrast, maintains that, despite their diverse manifestations, all religions embody a common spiritual quest for the Infinite. This perspective was famously articulated by Swami Vivekananda in his address at the World's Parliament of Religions, Chicago, in 1893 (Vivekananda, 2005). Drawing upon the teachings of his guru, Sri Ramakrishna, Vivekananda developed the idea of a universal religion, not as a homogenized faith, but as the recognition of a common spiritual reality manifested through diverse religious traditions (Vivekananda, 2005). This paradigm, which may be termed spiritual humanism, regards spirituality as an inherent dimension of human consciousness, rooted in the very core of human nature. It seeks to foster unity by placing the particularities of religious customs, doctrines, and practices within the broader recognition of a shared spiritual reality, thereby providing a philosophical framework that transcends cultural and historical differences (Īśā Upaniṣad 6–7, translated in Olivelle, 1996; Bhagavad Gītā 6.29, translated in Radhakrishnan, 1948; Vivekananda, 2005; Radhakrishnan, 1927).

The tension between these two paradigms—secular humanism, which seeks peaceful coexistence through practical and civic mechanisms, and spiritual humanism, which emphasizes an underlying spiritual unity among religions—raises important questions about their respective capacities to address the complexities of contemporary religious pluralism. These questions are further intensified by global developments such as religious extremism, increasing cultural integration, and the growing prevalence of individualized forms of spirituality (Cabezón, 2006). For instance, the increasing tendency of individuals to identify as spiritual but not religious reflects a movement toward a non-sectarian understanding of spirituality, one that resonates in significant ways with Vivekananda's conception of the universal spiritual basis of religion (Pew Research Center, 2023; Vivekananda, 2005). Nevertheless, contemporary Western responses to religious diversity continue to be shaped predominantly by the practical ethos of secular humanism, with organized interfaith dialogue, educational initiatives, and community outreach programmes remaining the principal means of fostering mutual understanding and peaceful coexistence.

This article compares the secular and spiritual humanistic approaches to interreligious understanding by examining their philosophical foundations, practical applications, and respective contributions to fostering harmony in religiously plural societies. Drawing upon historical sources, contemporary interfaith practices, and emerging patterns of individual religious and spiritual identity, it critically evaluates the strengths and limitations of each paradigm in addressing the multidimensional challenges of religious pluralism. The article further explores whether a constructive synthesis of the two approaches may offer a more effective framework for promoting interreligious understanding. It argues that the pragmatic

orientation of secular humanism can be meaningfully enriched by the unifying vision of spiritual humanism, thereby providing a more comprehensive response to the increasing religious diversity and evolving patterns of religious and spiritual self-identification that characterize contemporary societies.

Literature Review

Recent scholarship on interreligious dialogue has increasingly emphasized that meaningful engagement requires more than tolerance. Cornille (2013) argues that authentic dialogue depends upon disciplined openness to learning from religious others while remaining rooted in one's own tradition. Similarly, Swidler (2013) regards contemporary interreligious dialogue as a global movement directed toward mutual transformation rather than theological compromise. Against the backdrop of increasing religious diversity, globalization, and intercultural interaction, scholars have sought conceptual frameworks capable of promoting peaceful coexistence without erasing religious differences (Eck, 2007).

One approach considered here is a civic, secular-humanist orientation that seeks coexistence through tolerance, dialogue, education, and equal participation (Sharpe, 1975; Eck, 2007). This is an analytical grouping, not a claim that all Western interreligious dialogue is secular-humanist: Hick's philosophical theology, for example, makes substantive claims about religious truth (Hick, 1989), while Eck emphasizes active engagement across enduring differences (Eck, 2007). Smart's account of the multiple dimensions of religion helps explain why a purely cultural description would be incomplete (Smart, 1996).

The second paradigm, spiritual humanism, derives primarily from the Vedāntic tradition and was systematized in modern times by Swami Vivekananda. While acknowledging the diversity of religious traditions, it maintains that all religions express a common spiritual aspiration grounded in the deeper unity of human consciousness (Vivekananda, 2005). Inspired by the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna, Vivekananda's conception of universal religion did not advocate a homogenized faith but affirmed the plurality of religious paths as diverse expressions of the same ultimate spiritual reality. I characterize this approach as spiritual humanism, emphasizing spirituality as an inherent dimension of human nature rather than merely a feature of particular religious institutions. This vision continues to influence Indian approaches to interreligious understanding, particularly through the work of the Ramakrishna Mission.

Although both paradigms seek to promote harmony, they differ significantly in their philosophical assumptions. Secular humanism prioritizes practical coexistence through institutional dialogue, civic engagement, and educational initiatives, whereas spiritual humanism seeks a deeper basis for harmony by emphasizing the spiritual unity underlying religious diversity. The distinction reflects two different understandings of pluralism: one grounded in civic accommodation and the other in metaphysical unity.

Historically, these paradigms have also developed along different trajectories. Sharpe (1975) traces the emergence of the modern Western interfaith movement to the late nineteenth century, particularly following the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893. Although Vivekananda's addresses introduced a vision of universal spirituality that profoundly influenced perceptions of Hinduism in the West, Western interfaith initiatives gradually developed along more secular and pragmatic lines. After the interruption caused by the World Wars, interreligious dialogue re-emerged with renewed emphasis on multiculturalism, democratic coexistence, and practical cooperation (Eck, 2007; Knitter, 2013). In India, by contrast, interreligious initiatives have often drawn inspiration from Vivekananda's universalism while combining dialogue with broader commitments to social service and religious harmony.

Recent developments have further complicated these discussions. The presence of individuals identifying as "spiritual but not religious" and the emergence of multiple religious identities challenge conventional understandings of religious affiliation. Pew Research Center (2023) documents the presence in individuals describing themselves as spiritual without belonging to organized religion, while Cabezón (2006) observes that many contemporary scholars and practitioners increasingly engage more than one religious tradition simultaneously. These developments suggest a growing openness to non-sectarian forms of spirituality that, in certain respects, resonate with Vivekananda's conception of a shared spiritual foundation underlying religious diversity.

The scholarship reviewed above provides substantial accounts of dialogue, civic pluralism, and theological engagement (Eck, 2007; Cornille, 2013; Swidler, 2013), alongside accounts of religious diversity and spiritual universality (Hick, 1989; Vivekananda, 2005). The specific question pursued here is how a civic orientation toward coexistence and Vivekananda’s spiritual vision might be compared without conflating their distinct premises. This is a focused conceptual question rather than a claim that previous scholarship has neglected spirituality altogether.

This study seeks to address that gap by offering a comparative analysis of secular and spiritual humanism. It argues that the practical mechanisms of secular humanism and the integrative vision of spiritual humanism need not be regarded as competing alternatives but may together provide a more comprehensive framework for fostering interreligious understanding in increasingly diverse societies

Aim and Scope of the Study

Building upon recent scholarship that relates interreligious dialogue to collaborative responses to shared ethical and social concerns rather than merely doctrinal reconciliation (Knitter, 2013), this article undertakes a comparative examination of secular humanism and spiritual humanism as two influential paradigms of interreligious understanding. It analyzes their philosophical foundations, historical development, and practical applications in both Western and Indian contexts. Particular attention is given to their respective capacities to respond to contemporary

challenges arising from religious pluralism, including the emergence of individualized forms of spirituality. Finally, the article explores whether a constructive synthesis of the pragmatic orientation of secular humanism and the integrative vision of spiritual humanism can provide a more comprehensive framework for fostering interreligious understanding in increasingly diverse societies.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative comparative and interpretive approach to examine two influential paradigms of interreligious understanding: secular humanism and spiritual humanism. Rather than treating these paradigms as mutually exclusive, the study compares their philosophical foundations, historical development, practical expressions, and responses to the contemporary challenges of religious pluralism. The objective is to identify their respective strengths and limitations and to assess whether they may be understood as complementary approaches to fostering interreligious harmony.

The analysis relies on close reading and conceptual comparison of published texts, not interviews, questionnaires, or original fieldwork. Sources were selected purposively for their relevance to the two interpretive orientations, their historical or philosophical importance, and their contribution to scholarship on religious plurality. Vivekananda's writings and the cited scriptural passages provide primary material for the spiritual orientation; published scholarship on civic pluralism and interreligious dialogue supplies comparative arguments and contextual interpretation. Because the unit of analysis is a body of texts and concepts rather than a human population, target-population sampling, participant recruitment, and validation of survey instruments are not applicable. Interpretations are assessed through textual consistency, explicit comparison of competing claims, and engagement with the cited literature.

The comparison is organized around four analytical dimensions: (1) philosophical foundations, (2) conceptions of religious pluralism, (3) practical approaches to interreligious engagement, and (4) implications for contemporary multicultural societies. Through a systematic comparison of these dimensions, the study seeks to identify areas of convergence and divergence between the two paradigms and to evaluate the possibility of integrating their complementary strengths into a more comprehensive framework for interreligious understanding.

The discussion is guided by the following research questions:

What philosophical assumptions underlie secular humanism and spiritual humanism as models of interreligious understanding?

How do these paradigms differ in their approaches to religious pluralism and interfaith engagement?

What are their respective strengths and limitations in responding to contemporary religious diversity?

Can a constructive synthesis of secular and spiritual humanism provide a more effective framework for promoting interreligious harmony?

Sources of Analysis

The study draws upon a range of primary and secondary sources to compare the philosophical foundations and practical expressions of secular and spiritual humanism. Primary sources include The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda (2005), particularly the lectures and essays on universal religion and religious pluralism. These are examined alongside influential studies of Western interreligious dialogue and pluralism, including the works of Sharpe (1975), Eck (2007), Cornille (2013), Knitter (2013), Swidler (2013), and Cabezón (2006).

To illustrate the practical dimensions of the two paradigms, the study also considers publications and reports produced by selected interfaith organizations in India and the West, together with recent survey findings on changing patterns of religious identity, particularly the growth of individuals identifying as "spiritual but not religious" (Pew Research Center, 2023). These materials provide contemporary contexts for evaluating the continuing relevance of the two models.

The principal sources used in the study are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Principal Sources Used in the Study

Category	Principal Sources	Purpose
Primary Sources	Swami Vivekananda, The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda (Vols. 2 & 5); Bhagavad Gītā; Īśā Upaniṣad	To examine the philosophical foundations of spiritual humanism and universal religion.
Comparative Religion & Religious Pluralism	Sharpe (1975); Eck (2007); Hick (1989); Smart (1996); Geertz (1973)	To analyse Western approaches to religious pluralism, secular humanism, and comparative religion.
Interreligious Dialogue	Cornille (2013); Swidler (2013); Knitter (2013); Swidler (1984)	To examine theoretical and practical models of interreligious dialogue and cooperation.
Contemporary Religious Trends	Cabezón (2006); Pew Research Center (2023)	To assess emerging patterns of spirituality, multiple religious identities, and changing forms of religious affiliation.
Institutional & Policy Sources	UNESCO (1995); selected publications of interfaith organizations	To evaluate normative principles of tolerance and contemporary interfaith initiatives.

Comparative Framework

To facilitate a systematic comparison, the study employs an analytical framework based on four dimensions that are central to interreligious understanding: philosophical foundations, practical applications, societal implications, and contextual relevance. These dimensions provide a consistent basis for examining the convergences and divergences between secular humanism and spiritual humanism and for assessing their respective contributions to religious pluralism.

Table 2. Comparative Framework for Secular and Spiritual Humanism

Dimension	Secular Humanism	Spiritual Humanism
Philosophical Foundation	Religion understood primarily as a historical and cultural phenomenon	Religion understood as diverse expressions of a shared spiritual reality
View of Religious Diversity	Religious plurality as a natural feature of cultural diversity	Religious plurality as multiple paths to the same ultimate spiritual truth
Primary Objective	Peaceful coexistence through tolerance, equality, and civic engagement	Spiritual unity through recognition of humanity's common spiritual nature
Principal Means	Interfaith dialogue, education, democratic participation, and community cooperation	Spiritual education, philosophical reflection, ethical service, and dialogue grounded in shared spirituality
Strengths	Provides practical mechanisms for managing religious diversity in secular and multicultural societies	Offers a deeper philosophical basis for empathy, spiritual solidarity, and interreligious harmony
Limitations	May underemphasize the spiritual and existential dimensions of religion	Provides fewer institutional mechanisms for implementation in secular public contexts
Contemporary Relevance	Supports civic pluralism and democratic coexistence	Responds to growing interest in individualized spirituality and non-sectarian religious identity

This framework enables the two paradigms to be examined according to common analytical criteria while recognizing their distinct philosophical orientations. It also provides a basis for evaluating their respective strengths, limitations, and potential complementarity in responding to contemporary religious pluralism.

Limitations

This study is limited by its reliance on published primary and secondary sources rather than original empirical fieldwork. It also focuses primarily on Western and Indian approaches to

interreligious understanding and therefore does not examine other regional or religious contexts in detail. Consequently, the findings should be understood as a conceptual contribution intended to stimulate further comparative and empirical research rather than as a comprehensive account of global interreligious practice.

Comparative Analysis

The comparative analysis demonstrates that secular humanism and spiritual humanism represent two distinct yet potentially complementary approaches to interreligious understanding. While both seek to foster peaceful coexistence in religiously plural societies, they differ fundamentally in their philosophical assumptions, practical orientations, and conceptions of religious diversity. Drawing upon historical texts, contemporary interfaith practices, and recent developments in patterns of religious identity, the analysis identifies both convergences and divergences between the two paradigms. The discussion is organized around three interrelated themes: philosophical foundations, practical applications, and societal implications. Together, these observations suggest that the strengths of one paradigm may compensate for the limitations of the other, indicating the possibility of a more integrated framework for interreligious understanding.

Philosophical Foundations

The analysis reveals that secular humanism and spiritual humanism are founded upon two distinct conceptions of religion and religious diversity. Influenced by Enlightenment thought, secular humanism interprets religions primarily as products of historical and cultural development (Sharpe, 1975; Eck, 2007). Religious diversity is therefore understood as a natural consequence of human cultural plurality, comparable to differences in language, customs, or social traditions. Within this framework, interreligious understanding is promoted through rational dialogue, mutual respect, civic equality, and educational engagement rather than through theological agreement.

Spiritual humanism, by contrast, approaches religious diversity from a metaphysical perspective. Drawing upon the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda argued that the world's religions represent diverse expressions of a common spiritual reality rather than competing systems of belief (Vivekananda, 2005). His conception of universal religion does not advocate a homogenized faith but affirms the plurality of religious traditions as distinct paths leading toward the same ultimate truth. Spiritual humanism therefore regards spirituality as an inherent dimension of human consciousness and locates the basis of interreligious harmony in the recognition of this shared spiritual foundation.

The principal philosophical distinctions between the two paradigms are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Philosophical Foundations of Secular and Spiritual Humanism

Framework	Philosophical Foundation	View of Religion	Primary Concern	Key Thinkers
Secular Humanism	Religion is understood primarily as a historical and cultural phenomenon shaped by human experience.	Religious traditions are culturally conditioned and historically developed expressions of human life.	Tolerance, mutual respect, equality, and peaceful coexistence in plural societies.	Sharpe (1975); Hick (1989); Geertz (1973); Smart (1996); Eck (2007)
Spiritual Humanism	Religion is understood as diverse manifestations of a common spiritual reality rooted in the universal quest for the Infinite.	Different religions represent distinct paths to the same ultimate spiritual truth.	Spiritual unity, inner transformation, and interreligious harmony grounded in shared spiritual aspirations.	Vivekananda (2005); Cornille (2013)

Practical Applications

The comparative analysis demonstrates that the two paradigms also differ significantly in their practical expression. Contemporary Western interfaith initiatives generally reflect the principles of secular humanism by emphasizing dialogue, education, civic cooperation, and collaborative responses to shared ethical and social concerns (Eck, 2007; Knitter, 2013). Their primary objective is not theological reconciliation but the cultivation of mutual understanding and peaceful coexistence among religious communities while respecting their distinct identities.

In India, interreligious engagement has often been shaped by the spiritual universalism articulated by Swami Vivekananda and embodied in institutions such as the Ramakrishna Mission. Here, interreligious dialogue is commonly integrated with spiritual education, ethical service, and the cultivation of an awareness of the shared spiritual aspirations underlying diverse religious traditions. Although formal interfaith initiatives have expanded in recent decades, particularly in response to episodes of communal tension, they generally remain less institutionalized than many Western models and continue to draw substantially upon philosophical and spiritual ideals.

The comparison therefore suggests that the two paradigms pursue similar goals through different means. Secular humanism emphasizes practical cooperation and civic engagement as the

foundations of peaceful coexistence, whereas spiritual humanism seeks to cultivate harmony by fostering awareness of the deeper spiritual unity that transcends religious diversity.

Societal Implications

The analysis further indicates that each paradigm responds differently to the challenges of contemporary religious pluralism. Secular humanism has proved particularly effective in providing institutional mechanisms for dialogue and cooperation within multicultural and religiously diverse societies. By emphasizing equal citizenship, mutual respect, and democratic participation, it offers practical strategies for managing religious differences without requiring theological consensus.

Spiritual humanism, on the other hand, addresses dimensions of religious experience that extend beyond institutional coexistence. By affirming a shared spiritual reality underlying diverse religious traditions, it seeks to cultivate an inner disposition of empathy, openness, and spiritual solidarity. This orientation may be particularly relevant in societies where religion continues to shape personal identity and moral imagination.

Rather than viewing the two paradigms as mutually exclusive, the analysis suggests that they may be understood as complementary. The institutional strengths of secular humanism can provide practical mechanisms for dialogue and cooperation, while the integrative vision of spiritual humanism offers a deeper philosophical and spiritual basis for mutual understanding. Together they present a more comprehensive response to the challenges posed by contemporary religious pluralism.

Emerging Trends in Religious Identity

Recent developments in patterns of religious identity further illuminate the relevance of this comparison. The substantial proportion of individuals identifying as "spiritual but not religious" and the existence of multiple religious affiliations illustrate forms of identity beyond exclusive institutional affiliation toward more individualized forms of spirituality (Pew Research Center, 2023; Cabezón, 2006). Although these developments arise within social and cultural contexts quite different from those of Vivekananda, they nevertheless exhibit important affinities with his vision of a spirituality that transcends sectarian boundaries while respecting religious diversity.

These emerging trends suggest that contemporary religious pluralism cannot be addressed solely through institutional dialogue or civic accommodation. Equally important is the cultivation of forms of spirituality capable of nurturing deeper mutual understanding across religious traditions. In this respect, spiritual humanism offers valuable insights that may complement the practical achievements of secular humanism.

Comparative Synthesis

The comparative analysis demonstrates that neither secular humanism nor spiritual humanism alone provides a complete response to the complexities of contemporary religious pluralism. Secular humanism contributes effective mechanisms for peaceful coexistence through dialogue, education, and civic cooperation but may underemphasize the spiritual dimensions of religious life. Spiritual humanism, conversely, offers a compelling vision of the unity underlying religious diversity but often provides fewer concrete institutional mechanisms for implementing this vision within pluralistic societies.

Taken together, the two paradigms should therefore be understood as complementary rather than competing approaches. Integrating the practical strengths of secular humanism with the unifying vision of spiritual humanism offers a more comprehensive framework for promoting interreligious understanding, one that is capable of responding to both the institutional and the existential dimensions of religious pluralism in the contemporary world. The comparative analysis indicates that the two paradigms differ not only in their philosophical orientation but also in their societal implications. While secular humanism primarily promotes peaceful coexistence through civic and institutional mechanisms, spiritual humanism seeks to cultivate a deeper sense of unity by emphasizing the shared spiritual nature of humanity. These contrasting contributions are summarized in Table 4.

Table 4. Comparative Societal Implications of Secular and Spiritual Humanism

Dimension	Secular Humanism	Spiritual Humanism
Primary Social Goal	Peaceful coexistence through tolerance, equality, and civic engagement	Interreligious harmony through recognition of a shared spiritual foundation
Approach to Religious Diversity	Accepts diversity as a natural feature of multicultural societies	Affirms diversity as multiple expressions of the same spiritual reality
Major Strength	Provides practical mechanisms for dialogue, conflict management, and democratic coexistence	Encourages spiritual solidarity, empathy, and inner transformation across religious boundaries
Principal Limitation	May overlook the existential and spiritual dimensions of religious life	May be difficult to institutionalize within secular public frameworks
Contemporary Relevance	Supports pluralistic democracies and intercultural cooperation	Responds to increasing interest in individualized spirituality and non-sectarian religious identity
Potential Contribution	Strengthens civic peace and social cohesion	Strengthens spiritual understanding and long-term interreligious harmony

As Table 4 indicates, the strengths of one paradigm correspond closely to the limitations of the other, suggesting that a constructive integration of their respective insights may provide a more comprehensive framework for interreligious understanding.

Discussion

A qualification is necessary when proposing integration. Civic equality can be affirmed by participants who disagree about whether religions share an ultimate spiritual reality. Vivekananda's universalism may deepen dialogue for those who find its metaphysical account persuasive, but it cannot be imposed as a prerequisite for participation. The proposed synthesis is therefore procedural and dialogical rather than a claim that all traditions must accept a single theology: civic institutions safeguard difference, while spiritual reflection remains a voluntary resource for mutual understanding (Eck, 2007; Cornille, 2013; Vivekananda, 2005).

The comparison undertaken in this study suggests that secular humanism and spiritual humanism should not be understood as mutually exclusive approaches to interreligious understanding. Rather, they address different dimensions of religious pluralism. Secular humanism provides institutional and civic mechanisms for peaceful coexistence through dialogue, education, and democratic engagement, whereas spiritual humanism offers a philosophical and existential basis for recognizing the unity that underlies religious diversity. Their apparent opposition therefore reflects differing priorities rather than incompatible worldviews.

Secular Humanism and Spiritual Humanism: A Comparative Assessment

One of the principal strengths of secular humanism lies in its practical orientation toward managing religious diversity within multicultural and secular societies. By treating religions as historically and culturally conditioned traditions rather than competing claims to absolute truth, it establishes a neutral civic framework in which individuals and communities can coexist despite profound religious differences (Sharpe, 1975). Its emphasis on dialogue, education, democratic participation, and mutual respect has significantly influenced contemporary interfaith initiatives in the West, providing practical mechanisms for reducing prejudice, encouraging cooperation, and fostering peaceful coexistence (Eck, 2007; Knitter, 2013). Because it does not privilege any particular religious tradition, secular humanism is particularly well suited to pluralistic societies where institutional neutrality is essential.

At the same time, secular humanism has important limitations. Its tendency to interpret religion primarily as a cultural or historical phenomenon may understate the existential and spiritual dimensions of religious life. While effective in promoting external coexistence, it offers comparatively limited resources for addressing the deeper spiritual aspirations that motivate religious commitment and shape personal identity. The presence of individuals identifying as "spiritual but not religious" suggests that many people continue to seek forms of meaning and transcendence that extend beyond institutional or civic models of coexistence (Pew Research

Center, 2023). This indicates that practical tolerance alone may not be sufficient to sustain deeper forms of interreligious understanding.

Spiritual humanism, as articulated by Swami Vivekananda, approaches religious diversity from a fundamentally different perspective. Rather than emphasizing coexistence among distinct traditions, it seeks to cultivate an awareness of the common spiritual reality that underlies them (Vivekananda, 2005). Inspired by the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna, Vivekananda's conception of universal religion affirms the plurality of religious paths while recognizing their shared orientation toward the Infinite. This perspective resonates with contemporary developments in individualized spirituality and the willingness of some individuals to engage more than one religious tradition without exclusive institutional affiliation (Cabezón, 2006).

The enduring influence of this approach is evident in institutions such as the Ramakrishna Mission, where interreligious understanding is pursued through spiritual education, ethical service, and the cultivation of universal values. By emphasizing the spiritual unity of humanity, spiritual humanism provides a deeper philosophical basis for empathy, mutual respect, and interreligious harmony than approaches founded solely on civic accommodation.

Nevertheless, spiritual humanism also faces important challenges. Its emphasis on metaphysical unity may appear too abstract for societies seeking immediate institutional responses to religious conflict. Unlike secular humanism, it offers relatively few structured mechanisms for implementing its philosophical vision in diverse public settings. Consequently, while it provides a compelling normative ideal, its practical application often depends upon existing religious and cultural institutions rather than universally applicable civic frameworks. For this reason, spiritual humanism alone may be insufficient to address the complex political and institutional dimensions of contemporary religious pluralism.

Contemporary patterns of religious identity provide an important context for evaluating the continuing relevance of the two paradigms. The growing number of individuals who identify as "spiritual but not religious" illustrates contemporary individualized forms of spirituality that place greater emphasis on personal experience than on institutional religious affiliation (Pew Research Center, 2023). Although this phenomenon differs significantly from Vivekananda's Vedāntic universalism, it nevertheless exhibits important affinities with his vision of a spirituality that transcends sectarian boundaries while recognizing the value of diverse religious traditions (Vivekananda, 2005). Similarly, Cabezón (2006) notes the willingness of some scholars and practitioners to engage multiple religious traditions simultaneously, giving rise to complex religious identities such as Confucian-Christian or Vedāntist-Catholic. These developments suggest that contemporary religious life is becoming receptive to perspectives that acknowledge both religious diversity and shared spiritual aspirations.

At the same time, secular humanism continues to play an indispensable role in the institutional management of religious diversity. Its emphasis on dialogue, education, civic equality, and

democratic engagement provides practical mechanisms for fostering peaceful coexistence within multicultural societies (Eck, 2007). While these mechanisms are effective in addressing social and institutional dimensions of religious pluralism, they do not necessarily engage the deeper spiritual and existential concerns that increasingly characterize contemporary religious experience. The coexistence of these trends suggests that neither paradigm alone adequately addresses the complexities of modern religious pluralism. Rather, the practical strengths of secular humanism and the integrative vision of spiritual humanism may together offer a more balanced and comprehensive framework for promoting interreligious understanding.

Toward an Integrative Framework

The comparative analysis suggests that secular humanism and spiritual humanism should not be regarded as competing paradigms but as complementary approaches to interreligious understanding. Secular humanism contributes well-developed institutional mechanisms—such as dialogue, education, and civic engagement—that are effective in fostering peaceful coexistence within religiously diverse societies. Spiritual humanism, by contrast, provides a deeper philosophical foundation by affirming the spiritual unity that underlies religious diversity (Vivekananda, 2005). Together, these paradigms address different dimensions of the same challenge: one primarily institutional and social, the other existential and spiritual.

An integrative framework could therefore combine the practical strengths of secular humanism with the philosophical insights of spiritual humanism. Interfaith dialogue, for example, need not be limited to promoting tolerance and mutual understanding but may also encourage reflection on the shared ethical and spiritual aspirations of different religious traditions. Similarly, educational programmes may combine the study of religious diversity with philosophical reflection on the common values and spiritual concerns that unite humanity. Such an approach would preserve religious diversity while fostering a deeper sense of shared human identity.

Although examples of such integration remain limited, certain contemporary interfaith initiatives illustrate its potential. In India, organizations influenced by the teachings of Swami Vivekananda have combined dialogue with spiritual education and social service, while many Western interfaith initiatives increasingly recognize the importance of shared ethical commitments alongside theological diversity (Knitter, 2013). These developments suggest that practical cooperation and spiritual dialogue need not be pursued as separate objectives but may reinforce one another within a broader framework of interreligious understanding.

The findings of this study have broader implications for contemporary pluralistic societies. Secular humanism remains indispensable for creating institutional conditions that enable people of different faiths to live together peacefully. Its emphasis on civic equality, democratic participation, and dialogue provides effective mechanisms for managing religious diversity within secular states.

At the same time, contemporary patterns of religious identity indicate that many individuals continue to seek forms of meaning that extend beyond institutional coexistence. In this context, spiritual humanism offers an important reminder that enduring interreligious harmony depends not only upon external tolerance but also upon the cultivation of empathy, mutual recognition, and an appreciation of humanity's shared spiritual aspirations. Rather than replacing secular humanism, it complements it by addressing dimensions of religious life that civic approaches alone cannot fully encompass.

The proposed integrative framework is a philosophical recommendation, not a finding of measured effectiveness. Future research could examine its application through documented interfaith programmes and participant-based studies.

Conclusion

This study has argued that secular humanism and spiritual humanism represent two distinct yet complementary paradigms of interreligious understanding. Secular humanism provides practical mechanisms for managing religious diversity through dialogue, education, civic engagement, and mutual respect, making it particularly effective within multicultural and secular societies (Sharpe, 1975; Eck, 2007). Spiritual humanism, as articulated by Swami Vivekananda, approaches religious diversity from a different perspective by affirming the common spiritual reality underlying diverse religious traditions. Rather than seeking theological uniformity, it offers a philosophical vision of unity that recognizes religious plurality as the expression of a shared human aspiration toward the Infinite (Vivekananda, 2005).

The comparison demonstrates that neither paradigm, considered in isolation, offers a complete response to the challenges of contemporary religious pluralism. While secular humanism excels in creating institutional conditions for peaceful coexistence, it may not fully address the deeper spiritual and existential dimensions of religious life. Spiritual humanism, conversely, provides a compelling vision of spiritual unity but offers comparatively fewer practical mechanisms for implementing that vision within diverse public contexts. Contemporary developments, including the contemporary interest in individualized forms of spirituality and multiple religious identities, further suggest that religious pluralism increasingly involves both institutional and existential dimensions that cannot be adequately understood through either paradigm alone (Cabezón, 2006; Pew Research Center, 2023).

The principal contribution of this article lies in proposing that these two paradigms need not be regarded as competing alternatives. Instead, the practical strengths of secular humanism and the philosophical depth of spiritual humanism may be understood as mutually complementary. An approach that combines civic dialogue and educational engagement with a recognition of humanity's shared spiritual aspirations offers a more comprehensive framework for promoting interreligious understanding in increasingly diverse societies.

The study therefore invites a reconsideration of contemporary approaches to religious pluralism. Rather than choosing between secular and spiritual models, future scholarship and interfaith practice may benefit from exploring how the complementary insights of both paradigms can contribute to a more inclusive, sustainable, and intellectually grounded vision of interreligious harmony.

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