



The Religion of Vivekananda: An Appraisal

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ABSTRACT

Swami Vivekananda was a great spiritual leader and thinker, contributing in various ways to the enrichment of the Indian religious culture. The deepest influence upon his thought is ancient Hindu philosophy- particularly of the Vedanta. His idea of spirituality was not restricted to any particular facet of life, but it clinched the whole of it. He embodied the very soul of Hinduism and its spiritual splendour. His message of spiritualism contributed amazingly towards strengthening Hindu religion. He revived Hindu spiritualism and established its superiority over other religions of the world. He also pointed out the weaknesses of Hindu religion and society. He made the Hindus realize the degraded position to which they had fallen and inspired them to regain their past glory. His contributions covered almost all aspects of religious life of Indian culture. He was chiefly concerned with the spiritual Renaissance of mankind. The present paper focuses on the study of the religion of Vivekananda, which is for the good of the masses.

KEYWORDS: *Hinduism, Spirituality, Religion, Vedanta, Life, etc.*

INTRODUCTION

Vivekananda asserts that religion is a necessity of life. Ordinarily, only those things are regarded as necessary for life which satisfies the daily and the outward needs of it. Food, clothing, shelter, etc. are examples of, what can be called, physical or materialistic needs. But, they are not the only needs of life. This is clearly proved from the fact that they alone do not fully satisfy a man, even in the midst of comfort and luxury man craves for something higher something better. This craving is his religious craving, without seeking satisfaction for which he cannot live. Vivekananda exhibits in a number of ways how religion has to be regarded as a necessary aspect of life. Those who do not consider this as necessary do so because they identify religion with some of its expressions which appear to them as unnecessary. But the fact that there is a longing of a higher kind- a longing for something that the physical environment cannot satisfy- shows that religion is a necessary aspect of life. Secondly, there appears to be an element of inevitability in religion, it cannot be given up. Trying to give up religion will itself become a religion. That also proves its necessity. Thirdly, the historical fact of the survival of religion itself is an evidence of its necessary character. Political or social organizations remain prominent for some time, and then they pass out; but religions have continued to live through all circumstances – even adverse and hostile ones. Religion has never been vanquished. Whenever it appears that religion is being suppressed, it reappears in some form or the other.

Vivekananda is aware that no description of religion can be exact. The various definitions that have been given are not wrong, but they invariably miss one or the other aspect of religion. Therefore, the best way to appreciate the nature of religion is not to try to define it, but to highlight such aspects of religion, without which it would be difficult to call a religious act religious. He says, “**Our religion is not based upon persons, but on principles.**” (*Works* III: 249) At the very outset, two aspects of religion have to be distinguished: the inner and the external. The external is not superficial or entirely

redundant, but it has a value in a particular way. But, even this becomes truly religious when it gets the sanction of the inner aspect of religion. Therefore, the essence of religion can be discovered not so much in the external nature of religion as its inner aspects. Religion, according to Vivekananda, is a growth from within, it is inherent in the very constitution of man, and therefore, the nature of religion can be known by analyzing the religious sense. Vivekananda describes this sense, more or less, in the manner of a psychologist. He says, first, that this is universally present – even the atheist has it – and secondly, that like all other mental aspects, it has all the three elements in it, the cognitive elements, the feeling elements and the co-native elements. It is true that these elements are never present in equal proportion or degree, but the nature of religion is determined by the preponderance of this element or that. For example, where there is a preponderance of feeling, religion tends to be mystical or emotional, where emphasis is laid on knowledge, religion becomes intellectual and abstract, and where volitional elements become prominent, religion becomes practical and ritualistic. But, the true religious consciousness tries to harmonize all these aspects by organizing them into a unity. **Religion is ever a practical science, and there never was nor be any theological religion.** (*Works II: 317*)

A very important characteristic of religion, according to Vivekananda, is that it invariably has a supernatural content. This element of supernaturalism gives to it, uniqueness and distinguishes it from all other forms of intellectual discipline. What is the nature of the supernatural content? It may be anything a personal God or the Absolute or a supernatural Law or anything of this kind. This element, however, is the object of religious aspiration and hence represents the core of religion. It has been said the religion is an attempt to transcend the limitations of the senses. Vivekananda adds further that religion transcends not only the limitations of the senses, but also the power of reasoning or of pure intellectual deliberation. It is only when one goes beyond these that he comes face to face with facts which senses could never have apprehended and intellect could never have reasoned out. That is why religion at times is described as trans-empirical and trans-rational. This brings us to consider a very interesting fact regarding the nature of the contents of religion. Religious facts are not like concrete facts discovered by the sciences, they are more or less, abstractions, Vivekananda says:

In all the highly organized religions, they take the purest form of Unit abstractions, either in the form of an Abstracted Presence, as an Omnipresent Being, as an Abstract Personality called God, a moral Law, or the form of an Abstract Essence underlying every existence. (*Jnana 8*)

Even in those religions where attempts are made to preach religion without referring to the super-sensuous abstractions, these have been used and given different names like ‘the Moral Law,’ ‘the Ideal Unity,’ ‘The Ideal of Humanity.’ All these concepts are abstractions, we nowhere come across the ideal humanity, but we are asked to believe in it otherwise progress will become impossible. Therefore, Vivekananda says:

Thus, this one fact stands out from all these different religions, that there is an ideal Unit Abstraction, which is put before us, either in the form of a person or an impersonal Being, or a Law, or a Presence, or an Essence. (*Jnana 9*)

The Religion of Vivekananda: Vivekananda clearly says that religion is the awakening of spirituality in man, or that it is the realization of Divinity. Both the expressions ‘Divinity’ and ‘Spiritually’ are used in a broad sense. The word ‘Spirituality’ comprehends everything that transcends the sensuous and the intellectual. Therefore, to say that religion is a spiritual pursuit is just to emphasize that it begins with an awareness of the inadequacy of sense and reason. Man finds himself unable to tackle many of the things he comes across; he fails to understand some of the ‘mysteries’ of nature. This produces in him a consciousness of his own limitation and imperfection. In an attempt to supersede this sense he

starts leaning on some super-natural element. He says, **“Religion is above reason, supernatural.”** (*Works VII: 60*) What is the nature of this supernatural element? Vivekananda is broad minded enough to say that it can be anything – a God, or an impersonal principle, or the Absolute Reality, or the Destiny, or the Law, or anything of this sort. There is yet another characteristic of religion that appears to Vivekananda as important. Religion does have a value and significance for the individual, but it has a social content also. Usually, a distinction is made between morality and religion by saying that morality serves a social purpose and religion has a value that transcends it. Vivekananda feels that religion provides a secure foundation and an ultimate sanction to morality. Without this sanction, ethics will ever remain blind and chaotic. Doing good is all right, but sooner or later we must come across the question, ‘why should we do good?’ There must be an ideal, and the ideal must be somehow universal, otherwise, there will not remain any ethics, as the ethics of one group will conflict with that of the other. Religion provides that universal ideal, and thus is able to justify ethics. Moreover, a religious sense which somehow bases itself on an awareness of the unity of everything makes ethical practice both convenient and easy. Vivekananda feels that Religion has a value in a different way also. It is the greatest and the healthiest exercise of the human mind. This struggle to get beyond the limitation of the senses and reason, this pursuit of the Infinite is the pure pursuit that man can imagine. It brings satisfaction. It enables the individual to rise above the ordinary evils and ills of the world, and to enjoy peace and bliss. That is why religion appears to be the greatest motive force that moves the human mind. No other ideal can captivate the human mind as religion does. But, it is necessary to distinguish between the true religion and what may be called, institutional religions. In fact, the objections against religion arise because people identify religion with institutions. Sects and institutions set unnecessary limits to religion. Vivekananda says that true religion must be above these separative and disruptive tendencies. True love must be universal this, according to Vivekananda, represents the essence of true religion. He says:

When we come to the real, spiritual, universal concept, then, and then alone, religion will become real and living, it will come into our very nature, live in our every movement, penetrate every pore of our society and be infinitely more a power of good than it has never been before. (*Jnana 19*)

But, before explaining this further, let us first try to determine the contents of religion, because religion has to be universal in all its contents.

According to Vivekananda there are three aspects or continents of religion: Philosophy, Mythology and Ritual. Every religion has these three contents. Philosophy seeks to represent the whole scope of that religion, ‘setting forth its basic principles, the goal and the means for reaching it.’ Mythology consists of legends relating to the moral and spiritual adventures of men and supermen. Vivekananda says that the mythology concretizes philosophy by making the imaginary lives of men and supermen the mode or vehicle for conveying the philosophical ideas. Ritual is made up of forms and ceremonies that serve the function of both keeping men engaged religiously and of organizing them in powerful religious organizations. It is true that every religion has its own philosophy, mythology and ritual, this also is true that conflicts of religions arise on account of the fact that different religions have different philosophy, mythology and ritual. The truly universal religion must rise above these petty differences, and must seek to have universality even with respect to these three basic contents of religion. Vivekananda admits that sects and conflicts have to be there. If everybody thinks the same thought, there remains actually nothing to be thought. **“It is the clashes of thought, the differentiation of thought that awakes thought... whirls and eddies occur only in a rushing, living stream. There are no whirlpools in stagnant, dead water, variation is the sign of life, it must be there”** (*Jnana 379*). But then, a question arises, ‘how can all these varieties be true? How can opposite opinions be true at the same time?’ On an answer to a question like this would depend the fate of a universal religion? A universal religion, if really universal, must satisfy at least two conditions; first, it must open its gates to every individual, it must admit that nobody is born with this

or that religion; whether he takes to one religion or the other must ultimately be left to his choice. In this sense, by individualizing religion, we really universalize it. Secondly, a really universal religion must be able to give satisfaction and comfort to every religious sect. After all, the universal religion has to supersede the conflicts of these sects, and, therefore, must appear satisfying and reasonable to them all. **Religion is not in books, nor in theories, nor in dogmas, nor in talking, not even in reasoning. It is being and becoming.** (*Works III: 253*) We have seen that variation is inevitable, that all these various minds and attitudes have to be there. Therefore, if there is going to be an ideal religion – a really universal religion, it must be broad and large enough to supply food to all these minds. Vivekananda believes that such a religion is already there. We are lost so much in the external conflicts of religion that we fail to notice its presence. **Every religion is only evolving God out of the material man, and the same God is the inspirer of all of them.** (*Works I: 18*) Vivekananda demonstrates this in a very clear manner. He says, first, that a simple insight into the natures of different religious will show that they are not actually contradictory to each other. They are, in fact, supplementary to each other. The Truth of religion is so comprehensive that different religions concentrate only on one aspect or on a few aspects of religion and develops it. Therefore, every religion is added to the rich variety that religion is capable of generating, and it is also adding to the development of religion in its own way. Its interpretation may be partial, but, as Vivekananda says, man never progresses from error to truth, but from truth to truth, from lesser truth to higher truth. Secondly, Vivekananda wishes to make it clear that there may be contradictory points of view of the same thing. If we take photographs of the same object from different angles, no two photographs will be alike – they may even give opposite impressions; but they are photographs of the same object. **Therefore, Religions will have to broaden.** (*Works II: 68*) Likewise, we view truth in our own ways, colour them from our own points of views, understand and grasp them in our own peculiar ways of understanding. This, then, will make a difference between man and man, and this explains the contradictory character of the different views. But, all the same, they are essentially the notions of the same reality, and hence supplementary to each other. Thus, the universal religion already exists, just as the universal brotherhood of man is there, although some men fail to notice it, so universal religion is there, although some of us are not aware of it. **Religions must also be inclusive.** (*Works II: 67*) By universal religion, he does not mean a religion that will have one universal philosophy, or one universal mythology or one universal ritual. They may all differ from sect to sect, or even from individual to individual, and yet the universal religion is there. The one watchword for Universal religion, according to Vivekananda, is acceptance. That is why he says that he can worship in any form with any individual or sect. He says that he can enter and offer his prayers anywhere, in a temple, or a church, or a mosque, or any other place. The believer in the universal religion has to be broad-minded and open-hearted, he would be prepared to learn from the scriptures of all religions, and keep his heart open for what may come in the future. Such an attitude enables Vivekananda to discover at least one such element which can be said to be common to all religions in a general way, and which, consequently, may represent the essence of universal religion. This common point is God. Even things that are apparently different may be similar in a particular sense. Man and woman are different, but as human beings, they are alike. In this way, although different religions talk of different aspects of the Truth, as aspects of the same Truth, they are all one. According to Vivekananda, that Truth is God. In Him we are all one. Every religion, consciously or unconsciously is struggling towards the realization of this unity of God. Therefore, this may be said to represent the Ideal of Universal Religion. Another characteristic of universal religion is that it has to be acceptable to all minds. Therefore, Vivekananda says:

The ideal religion must harmoniously balance all the aspects of religion, namely philosophy, emotion, work, and mysticism. And this religion is attained by what we, in India, call Yoga – union. To the worker, it is union between men and the whole of humanity, to the mystic, between his lower and Higher Self, to the lover, the union of all existence. This is what is meant by Yoga. (*Works III: 419*)

Swami Vivekananda's contribution in the domain of religion was immeasurable. He rejuvenated Hinduism, or Vedant, as he preferred to call it. Through the help of his Master, he saw perfect order in the apparent wilderness of its scriptures. Swami Madhavananda writes:

To put the Hindu ideas into English and then make out of dry philosophy and intricate mythology and queer, startling psychology a religion which shall be easy, simple, popular, and at the same time meet the requirements of the highest minds-is a task only those can understand who have attempted it. (Spiritual 9)

Swami Vivekananda was an embodiment of the Advaita philosophy that he preached. He was a breaker of bondage par excellence. Believing in the omnipotence of the Spirit, he wanted to see it applied in every sphere of life, so that an all-round development might result. All that was necessary was to supply the deficiencies, and the best way to do this was by removing the barriers. Then the infinite potentialities of the Soul would automatically manifest themselves. Swami's beautiful summing up of what religion means is:

Each soul is potentially divine. The goal is to manifest this Divinity within by controlling nature, external and internal. Do this either by work, or worship, or psychic control, or philosophy – by one or more or all of these – and be free. This is the whole of religion. (Works I: 257)

But by religion, he did not understand creeds and rituals, but the essentials of Hindu religion. He gave very popular exposition of this in his lecture on "Hinduism" in the Parliament of Religions on 19 September, 1893, a few lines may be quoted:

From the high spiritual flights of the Vedanta philosophy, of which the latest discoveries of science seem like echoes, to the low ideas of idolatry with its multifarious mythology, the agnosticism of the Buddhists, and the atheism of the Jains, each and all have a place in the Hindu's religion. (Historical 90)

The Hindus have received their religion through the revelation of the Vedas. They hold that the Vedas are without beginning and without end. It may sound ludicrous, how a book can be without beginning or end. But by the Vedas no books are meant. They mean the accumulated treasury of spiritual laws discovered by different persons in different times. Just as the law of gravitation existed before its discovery and would exist if all humanity forgot it, so is it with the laws that govern the spiritual world. The moral, ethical, and spiritual relations between soul and soul and between individual spirits and the Father of all spirits were there before their discovery, and would remain even if we forgot them.

In the Parliament of Religions, Vivekananda left no stone unturned to bring all religions on one platform, so that a consensus on a universal religion could be arrived at – that could bring 'lilacs out of the dead land' and salvage the East and the West alike from what Eliot calls, 'the brown fog of a winter dawn' and at the same time 'that could wipe the tears of the widow,' that could give material welfare as an aid to spiritual growth to the Asiatic countries, to the needy ones. "And such a religion exists," writes Romain Rolland:

It is the Advaita of India, Non-Dualism, Unity, the idea of the Absolute, of the Impersonal God, 'the only religion that can have any hold on intellectual people. (259)

Swamiji points out that this, the Advaitavad of Vedanta, is in full accordance with science which is nothing but the finding of unity. Swamiji then descends from the enunciation of Hindu philosophy to

the religion of the ignorant Hindu. He first defends worship of images against hostile criticism. Majumdar writes:

By the law of association, the material image calls up the mental ideas and vice versa. This why the Hindu uses an external symbol when he worships. He will tell you, it helps to keep his mind fixed on the Being to whom he prays. He knows as well as you do that the image is not God, is not omnipresent. (Historical 92)

Swamiji emphasizes the catholicity of Hinduism which accepts every religion as only evolving a God out of the material man and the same God is the inspirer of all of them. Swamiji concludes with a vision of the universal religion. The Hindu may have failed to carry out all his plans, but if there is ever to be a universal religion, it must be one which will have no location in place or time; which will be infinite like the god it will preach, and whose sun will shine upon the followers of Krishna and of Christ, on saints and sinners alike; which will not be Brahmanic or Buddhist, Christian or Mohammedan, but the sum total of all these, and still have infinite space for development; which in its catholicity will embrace in its infinite arms, and find a place for, every human being from the lowest groveling savage not far removed from the brute to the highest man towering by the virtues of his head and heart almost above humanity, making society stand in awe of him and doubt his human nature. It will be a religion which will have no place for persecution or intolerance in its polity, which will recognize divinity in every man and woman, and whose whole scope, whose whole force will be centered in aiding humanity to realize its own true, divine nature.

CONCLUSION

A great deal of Vivekananda's writings, lectures and discourses concentrate on the subject religion. The elements of Vedanta can be traced in his letters, informal talk and his replies to several queries. Religion turns out to be the only motto of his lifelong endeavour. And his religion was universal, all-inclusive and practical. It involved the worship of Daridranarayana and wiping the tears of the suffering ones all over the world without discriminating among religious institutions, continental boundaries and races. Indeed, Swamiji worked all his life to harmonize the seemingly divergent paths of religion. In his Advaita philosophy, he assimilates the vitals of Hinduism, Christianity, Buddhism and Islam. That is why his Advaita is indestructible. He accepts all religions as truth and criticizes the superstitions in them. He was bold enough to proclaim that if the Sermon on the Mount is truly understood, man would immediately become God. In fact, he understood the teachings of Christ and Buddha better than the Christians and the Buddhists. He claimed, as has been referred before, that Christ was Advaitin. Though there are innumerable types of human beings, they can be classified into four types according to their nature. 1) The active 2) the mystic 3) the philosophic 4) the devotional. This classification is based on the predominance of one or the other of the three aspects of the human mind-will, intellect and emotions. And the paths of spiritual endeavour for these four types are called Karma Yoga, Raja Yoga, Jnana Yoga and Bhakti Yoga. Karma Yoga and Raja Yoga are the application of the will in the internal and external world respectively, while Jnana and Bhakti Yogas are based on the intellect and emotions respectively. At the present time, many people consider these paths as either opposites or as exclusive. A philosopher who indulges in ratiocination will consider Bhaktas as weak, effeminate and sentimental beings, while Bhaktas will look upon the philosopher as a vain, hair-splitting talker. The worker will consider both of them as impractical men who waste life overshadows.

Thus, Vivekananda's religion is not shadow, but it is the terra firma on which human life rests. It is the reality of life which is indispensable. Vivekananda's views on religion are ever-growing in their relevance. They are the part of the cultural heritage of the world. Humanity will continue to be

benefited from these views forever. His precious views can never be allowed to fall a victim to oblivion.

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