

Is Vedanta a Religion? An Analytical Study

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ABSTRACT

The Vedanta Philosophy, specially, the Advaita Vedanta has a profound role in the field of philosophy. The Advaita Vedanta is not only a philosophy, it is also a religion. There is true foundation of universal religion in Advaita Vedanta. The universal religion as presented by the Vedantins is neither dogma nor creed of any kind. Vedanta does not believe any kind of critical attitude towards other religions. Rather it shows its assimilative attitude to all the special religions, such as Buddhism, Jainism, christianism, zorartrianism etc. Vedanta, with its universal attitude, binds all the special religions just like a thread that weaves them together into a garland of flowers. According to Swami Abhedananda, like an impartial judge, the religion of Vedanta gives the proper place to each of these sectarian religions in the grand evolution of the spiritual thoughts and systems of the world.

KEY WORDS: Universal religion, Dharma, Superstructure, Unsectarian

It is the accepted truth that the Advaita Vedanta is the main tradition of the vedantic thoughts which declared clearly and distinctly that only Brahamana is the reality. The Advaita Vedanta is the non dualistic tradition. Besides this non-dualistic tradition of Samkara there are other traditions also.

All the different Vedanta systems have one common psychology, and that is the psychology of the sankhya system. The Vedanta and the Sankhya philosophy are very little opposed to each other. The Vedanta God developed out of the Sankhyay's Purusha. All the systems take up the psychology of the Sankhya. Both the Vedanta and the Sankhya believe in the infinite soul; only the Sankhya believes there are may souls. According to the Sankhya, this universe does not require any explanation from outside. The Vedana believes that there is the one soul, which appears as many. ¹

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In this chapter I am going to explain the nature of the Vedanta as religion. Educated people have found in Vedanta the true foundations of universal religion. The universal religion as presented by the Vedantins is neither dogma nor creed of any kind. And at the same time it does not criticize any sect of religions, rather it shows its assimilative attitude to all the special religions, such as Buddhism, Jainism, christianism, zoratrianism etc. Vedanta, with its universal attitude, binds all the special religions just like a thread that weaves them together into a garland of flowers. According to Swami Abhedananda, like an impartial judge, the religion of Vedanta gives the proper place to each of these sectarian religions in the grand evolution of the spiritual thoughts and systems of the world.² He again says that having no particular founder, it Hands upon the eternal spiritual laws that have various sages and seers of Truth of all countries and of all ages and which have been described in the different scriptures of the world.³

From the above excerpt it is proved that Vedanta is a religion. It has the criteria to be a universal religion. Before discussing the nature of Vedanta as religion, I want to give a short description of religion pointing to its definition. The word 'religion' is derived from the Latin word 'religio' which means the respect for what is scared, reverence for the gods, obligations, the bond between man and the gods.⁴

In the ancient and medieval age the word 'religion' was used to designated only to individual virtue of worship. The concept of doctrine or institutional framework was completely absent from the ancient medieval usage.

But in the modern age the concept of religion has changed its sphere and elevated from individual sphere to the sphere of abstraction. It appeared, in the modern age as sets of beliefs. In this way it has become doctrine. Particularly, from the 17th century the concept of modern religion received its modern shape. It is also said that in the 19th century the term 'Buddhism', 'Hinduism', 'Taoism', and 'Confucianism' emerged.⁵

'Religion' is defined by thinkers keeping focus on various things. That is why it is not possible to offer a universal definition of religion. Hegel defined religion as "the Divine spirit becoming conscious of Himself through the finite spirit"⁶ Edward Burnett Tyler defined religion as "the belief in spiritual beings"⁷ Willam Janes defined religion as "the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so for as they ampersand themselves to

stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine.”⁸ Durkheim defined religion as “unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred thing”⁹

Clifford Geertz defined religion as “[~ ~] system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order or existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic”¹⁰

According to the MacMillan Encyclopedia of Religion, “[...] almost every known culture [has] a depth dimension in cultural experiences [...] toward some sort of ultimacy and transcendence that will provide harms and power for the rest of life. When more or less distinct patterns of behavior are built around this depth dimension in a culture, this structure constitutes religion in its historically reorganization of life around the depth dimension of experience—varied in form, completeness, and clarity in accordance with the enviroing culture”¹¹ In all these definition we find a sense of superpower except the last one. Hegel, Edward Burnett and Durkheim offered the definition of religion from the superpower angel and they find the basis of religion on the belief of super consciousness without any justification of the beliefs prevailed in the society from the very beginning.

Anthropologist, Clifford Geertz also defined religion like the above mentioned thinkers. There he gave some importance on moods and motivation by which the concept of religion has been shaped. The last definition given by the Macmillan Encyclopedia of religions offered the definition of religion from the base of culture.

The concept of religion has been presented in Indian philosophy from a difference angel. The word ‘Dharma’ is used in Indian philosophy instead of religion. The word ‘Dharma’ comes from ‘Dhri’ dhatu after the unification of the Praty ‘Man’. Its meaning is ‘which Contains’. Dharma contains the life of individual; it also contains the whole society and also contains the whole cosmos.

The etymological meaning of ‘Dharma’ has three dimensions. In the life of individual it plays a profound role to him or her to lead a spiritual life with morality. Three are some general principles to be followed by an individual to manifest his inner qualities, so that he or she can prepare the mselves to be a social being. Socialization of Dharma is the next phase. There is Barnashram Dharma to bind the society in a systematic manner. The order of the

society is based on Dharma. I am not here going to explain the above said aspects of Dharma as I have to do the other job.

The third ideal of Dharma is cosmic ideal. The whole cosmos is based on Dharma. There is an invisible order that binds the cosmos. Here, again we can say that it is Dharma who binds the whole cosmos like a thread to offer a rhythmic sense. It is the universal aspect of the concept of Dharma. In contemporary Indian philosophy this aspect of Dharma has been described by the modern thinkers with a humanistic flavor. Swami Vivekananda, one of the greatest modern thinkers rightly pointed out the universal nature of Dharma or religion. He presented the concept of the universal religion keeping in centre the Vedanta philosophy. So, it may be called the Vedantic universal religion.

Now I am going to explain the concept of universal religion. Universal religion is different from that the special religious. Special religious have a founder and have scriptures. As for example, there is the 'Tripitak' for Buddhist, the Zend-Avesta for the Parsees, the old Testament for the Jews, the Bible for the Christians, the Quran for the Mahammedans etc. But the Vedanta is not like them. Having no particular founder, it stands upon the eternal spiritual laws that have been discover by various stages and seers of Truth of all counties and of all ages and which have been described in the different scriptures of the world.¹²

Specifically, it can be said that universal religion is one which is structured out of universals. As Plato perceived it, universals are purged of the specification and limitation of particulars and particulars participate in the universals. The universal religion involves no specifics and does not suffer from limitations of particulars.¹³ Keeping focus on the concept of universal it can be said that a universal religion is universal as it has no limitations like any other specific religions and it is more than them. In this sense Vedanta can surely be called a universal religion. All the special religions are embraced in it and all the spiritual laws of different scriptures of different specific religions are there in the religion of Vedanta. So, it can be said that the Vedanta is the true foundation of universal religion.

According to Swami Abhedananda, The religion of Vedanta is like a huge structure, the foundation of which is laid, not upon the quicksand of the authority of any particular booker personality, but upon the solid rock of logical and scientific reasoning, and the walls of which are not made up of the clay of superstitious dogmas, but are built with the stones of spiritual

experiences, placed one upon another by the artistic hands of the great seers of Truth of ancient and modern times.¹⁴

He again says that the roof of this superb structure is not confined within the celestial domain of the another pomorphic God of a personal religion, but it extends beyond all the heavens of different religion, and, rising above all the various planes of relativity, reaches that infinite and eternal abode of being, intelligence, love and everlasting bliss.¹⁵

The nature of God as expressed in Vedanta is also a prove for its universality, God, according to the Vedanta does not exist outside our inner world. God is the soul of our souls, life of our lives. We live, more and die within God. Those who feel this and those realize that we are children of had, that souls are inseparable parts of that one stupendous whole, the infinity Being, worship on the second floor of this superstructure of the religions of Vedanta.¹⁶

The God of Vedanta is beyond all limitations; through it has may names and aspects without any particular form. The God of Vedanta is personal without confinement to any particular personality. The God, at the same line persona and impersonal and beyond both. In this way the God of Vedanta goes beyond any kind of limitations life the God of other particular or specific religions.

God in Vedanta is sexless, and the moment we rise above the ideas of any sex and personality we have become divine and will be able to understand the sexless entity of God. In this way carefully and scientifically Vedanta transcends itself from any kind of dualism. Dualism resides in specific religion and that is why no specific religion has the capability to be a universal religion. The highest truth remains us under certain of dualism in specific religions. But in Vedanta, in universal religion, dualism has nothing to do the highest truth, the absolute truth manifests itself.

The concept of absolute spirit is also a mark of universal religion. The structure of the Vedanta is beyond to all relativity. It is transcendent in nature. According to Swami Abhadananda, those who have gone beyond relativity, who have transcended phenomenal existence, and who have reached that state of divine communion which manifests the eternal, absolute oneness of the supreme spirit can realize the universal character of the religion of Vedanta.¹⁷

Indivisibility is the character of that absolute spirit. Abhadananda says “That Being cannot be divided into parts, but He is one stupendous whole, indivisible. He is finer than space, and as space cannot be divided, so God cannot be divided into parts. That is the absolute spirit, the infinite Being.”¹⁸

That infinite Being is addressed by various have by various thinkers. According to Abhadananda, “In Vedanta it is called the Brahamana, parematmana or over soul; but it is the same as the Good of Plato, the substantia of Spinoza, the transcendental thing-in-itself of Kant, the will of Schopenhauer, the unknown and unknowable of Herbert Spencer. The substance of Ernst Haeckel, the Science of Matter of the Materialists, the Real Entity or Spirit of the Spiritualists. It is also the same as Christ. He is also the same as Buddha and other prophets.”¹⁹

He again says, “The religion of Vedanta is inseparable from true science and from true philosophy. Why? Because all sciences and all philosophies are nothing but so many attempts of human minds to grasp some particular phase of the eternal Truth or the infinity Reality. As Truth is the goal of all sciences and all philosophies, the same truth is the goal of Vedanta; and as Vedanta attempts to lead all human minds to the realization of that absolute truth of oneness, so, it embraces all the philosophies of the world.”²⁰

So, it can be said that the Vedanta as religion is absolutely unsectarian and universal in nature. The concept of universal religion preached by our great Swamiji is based on the structure of Vedanta.

Before going to discuss the concept of universal religion as depicted by Swami Vivekananda, I want to explain the definition of religion as given by Swamiji. Swamiji says “Religion is the manifestation of the divinity already in man.”²¹ From the metaphysical point of view this definition can be described as the presupposition of the divinity in man. Each soul is potentially divine—is the main metaphysical assertion. The nature of the soul is to manifest. The manifestation of the potentially divine soul depends on human being. One who is able to transcend the—external nature as well as the internal nature is capable for the manifestation. So, divinity is there in man and this divinity is not unknown and unknowable like Komte, rather there is possibility of manifestation. Why is there divinity in human being? From metaphysical point of view it can be said that we all are nothing but the manifestation of the highest soul, i.e.

Paramatma. So, from the very beginning of the existence of our soul, it is divine. To manifests this divinity is the aim of religion. This assertion goes beyond sectarianism, fundamentalism, and any kind of ism. All residing souls have the tendency to manifest. That is why this definition is called the definition secular universal religion.

There is another side of the definition, i.e. practical side. How can this manifestation be possible? To answer this question it said that the possibility of the manifestation of the divinity already in man is possible through controlling the outer and inner nature. Here again a question may arise. It is possible to control the outer world and inner world nature? The answer of this question is affirmative. There is every possibility to control them. They can be controlled either by work or by worship or by psychic control philosophy or applying any two or all of them simultaneously. So, with these two sides, i.e. Metaphysical and practical sides Vivekananda presented a comprehensive definition of religion.

You must bear in mind that religion does not consist in talk or doctrine or books, but in realization; it is not learning, but being'²² It is our culture to have a faith in true religion , to have proper realization, to be a true learner so that the process of spiritualization be inspired.

In this sense that India understood religion; and it is this idea of religion that Swami Vivekananda expounded in the west and East through his powerful voice. The end and aim of religion, as our ancient teachers put it, is the experience, anubhava of God, through the steady growth in man's spiritual awareness. That is the touchstone of religion. There is such a thing as the spiritual growth of the individual, step by step. We experience this growth, just as we see a plant growing, or a building rising up step by step, brick by brick.

When we live the life of religion, strength comes to us, consciousness becomes expanded, sympathies grow and widen, and we feel that we are growing into better men and women. A religious man alone has the strength and wisdom to convert the chaos of life into a pattern of peace and happiness and general welfare. If religion is taken away from human society what will remain? It is simple barbarism. And today this barbarism in religions rules this society. We have to fight against this barbarism with a strong and powerful weapon. This weapon is nothing but the concept of Universal religion of Swami Vivekananda or the science of values.

He further says that religion is a form a life. A true religious man must have a head to think,

a heart to feel and hands to work. In other words, a religious man should have a vision of unity among the diversities, feeling of love and compassion for other. Cardinal values like unity, tolerance, compassion and love etc. must be inculcated in this life. Swamiji thinks of the possibility of bringing together all religions of the world under one umbrella. The dream of Vivekananda was to propagate universal religion which must be the spiritual synthesis. For him, the vedantic Since he was a rationalist, he was emphasizing on the glorified universe with peace and harmony so that the apparent contradictions and fictitious differences among the religions must vanish.

So, the Vedanta as universal religion offers a broad concept of religion itself . I think that the Vedanta with its assimilative nature wants to sweep away all the sectarianism resides in particular religion. Truly it wants to articulate the concept of religion as the religion of all with the essence of religion. The so called religions are fighting with each other to have supremacy over others as they are on the wrong conception of the religion. The Vedanta, as universal religion, will appear as true remedy of all kinds of sectarianism and miss conceptions.

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