

Swami Vivekananda's Philosophy of Universal Religion

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ABSTRACT

One of the Swami Vivekananda's greatest contributions to mankind is 'Universal religion' – a new religious ideology. It is not a new religion with a new scripture, but it is a new approach to religion, a new spiritual temper. It not only enjoins tolerance, it urges acceptance of other religions as true there by making religions a principle of human unity. Universal religion is a discovery of universality in all religions excluding the particularities of creed, dogma, beliefs, rituals and convention of them (religions). A believer in universal religion has an enlightened understanding of and respect for all the religions without losing the sense of belonging to his own religion with its belief and practices. In his Chicago Addresses in 1893 Swami Vivekananda gave importance on the validity and universality of all religions. He mentioned that every religion is able to create purity, sacredness and kindness in human mind. So, he accepted the validity of all religions. He appealed to all that everyman must keep up his oneness in the sphere of religion and accept all that is good in other religions. To him, a religion which is capable of giving satisfaction and comfort to every religious sect can be granted as universal religion.

KEY WORDS: Universal Religion, religious ideology, Hinduism, Vedanta.

Introduction

Swami Vivekananda's contribution in the domain of religion was immeasurable. He rejuvenated Hinduism and Vedanta as his religion. He found that, in Hinduism, which was, to him the Advaita Vedanta Philosophy of religion, the approach to the highest truth was psychological. According to him, the different philosophies of Dualism, Qualified Monism and Monism represent the same truth from different angles according to the temperament and capacity of their aspirants. There is no contradiction among them. Each religion expresses

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the highest truth in its own way. Here we do not get the truth from error but from truth to truth. We reach higher truth from lower truth. So, there is no need for fanatical quarrel over religion. The harmony of all religions was the central theme of his teachings.

According to Swamiji, real religion is the realization of the Divine within by every soul. This divinity is latent within each one of us and the religious practices only bring it to our conscious level. When one has realized one's Divinity as a direct experience one has no fear of anything not even death itself. He must realise this divinity in his thought and selfless actions. Religion is not the matter of imagination; we must apply religion to our practical world and life.¹

The great master, Sri Ramakrishna taught men to transcend the barriers of his own little self and to live for enlivening the life of others, knowing that all are but that one in many forms. The religious orientation and realization of Sri Ramakrishna found its finest expression in the life of Swami Vivekananda.

Like his master, Vivekananda also cherished the world-view based on Advaita Vedanta view of unity-in difference. As a Karma-Yogi, he did not stand for any abstract religion but for the religion of work with detachment or work for impersonal ends as the highest expression of the religious life.

Swami Vivekananda learnt from the life and saying of Sri Ramakrishna that true religion is universal religion. He got support of his master's teachings from the 11th verse of the 7th chapter of the Bhagavad-Gita "ye yatha mann prapadyante tamstathaira bhajamyaham/mama vartma-nuvartante manushyah partha sarvashah" (who ever comes to me, through whatever form, I reach him; all men are struggling through paths which in the end lead to me).²

In all his addresses and writings, Vivekananda aimed at the establishment of universal religion for the betterment of the universe as a whole. But Vivekananda made his surviving statements on the idea of universal religion in his first address at Chicago Parliament of Religion on 11th September, 1893 of the many statements we may remember only two for the present purpose:

- (a) "I am proud to belong to a religion which has taught the world both tolerance and universal acceptance".
- (b) "We believe not only in universal tolerance but we accept all religions to be true".³

Though he was proud to belong to Hindu religion, he accepted all religions as true. This is his universalism of religions. So we see his address on Hinduism on 19th September 1893 at the same place he presented his idea of Universal religion. The one watch word for universal religion is acceptance. Acceptance is not just tolerance. Tolerance is negative in its import. It implies that something is being allowed in spite of its being wrong. Swamiji recommends positive acceptance.

Swamiji said, there have been many religions. They have been quarrelling among themselves, each religion claiming that it is superior. In spite of the conflicts the major religions have managed to survive.

The conflicts instead of weakening them have added vitality to them. The new thoughts arise only through that conflict. In a stagnant water there are no whirlpools. These are seen in a living running stream. In the same manner conflicts awaken new thoughts.⁴

‘Universal Religion’ as suggested by Swami Vivekananda, is not a new addition to the existing list of known religions like Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, Hebraism, Hinduism, Islam, Laninism, Sikhism, Taoism and Zoroastrianism. It is neither a separate religion nor an alternative caption suggested for any particular religion. Normally one may expect that as a Hindu and religious preacher he has glorified his own religion by claiming it to be a universal religion. But it is clear that while talking about universal religion Swamiji’s intention has not been concentrated in glorifying his own religion, rather the emphasis seems to have been concentrated the universality aspect of any religion so that bad effects of the religiosities can be avoided.

As we have learnt that universal religion is not a new religion, it is important to make it more specific, what is meant by universal religion. Here it can be pointed out that something can be treated to be universal when it keeps its gate open to every individual one might born from parents of a particular religion but he must have the choice to adopt any one. The choice of the individual is of prime importance. It is the mark of universality. Further a religion if capable of giving satisfaction and comfort to every religious sect can be treated to be universal. The religion should appear reasonable to the people of other religious sects in order to be universal. When we shall throw away the narrow out-looks, non-humanitarian considerations from the religions, they all will become universal by nature. So, every religion is potentially a universal religion.

According to Swamiji, diversity or plurality is a fact of life. Truth maybe expressed in a hundred, thousand ways and each of these ways is true. The same thing can be viewed from a hundred different stand points and yet be the same thing. If one man belonging to one religion does not think of himself superior to other men belonging to other religions, then the diversity of religion will not lead to any conflict. Religion never contradicts with one another. They are really supplementary. All religions are directed towards the same good through different paths. So harmony should be the basic feature of religions. Suppose a man is undertaking a journey towards the sun and as he advances he takes a photograph of the sun at every stage. When he comes back, he has many photographs of the sun which he places before us. We see that not two are alike but we cannot deny all these photographs of the same sun. Because these photographs are real photographs of the same sun.⁵

Swamiji said, truth may be expressed in a hundred ways and that each of these ways is true. Suppose we all go with vessels in our hands to fetch water from a lake. One has a cup, another jar, another a bucket, and so forth, and we all fill our vessels. The water in each case naturally takes the form of the vessel carried by each one of us. The goal of all religions is also the same in essence. The goal of all religions and all mankind is re-union with God or with the divinity which is every man's true nature.⁶

Harmony is the keynote of Swamiji's religious teachings. He explores that amidst the chaos there is a note of concord and he who is prepared to listen it will catch the tone. By harmony Swamiji meant unity and not uniformity. Harmony cannot be obtained by a combination of different views about God. We cannot make all conform to the same ideas. If we all thought alike we would be like Egyptian mummies in a museum looking vacantly at one another's faces. When religions are dead, there will be no more sects; it will be the perfect peace and harmony of the grave. But in reality, sects and variation of thought is the sign of life and it must be there. So, one of the natural characteristics of the universal religion is based on universal toleration. The universal sympathy humanizes one sect of religious activity with the other in spite of their internal and external conflicts. It adds vitality to them and enables them to expand and to live.

By Universal Religion he did not mean any one Universal philosophy or any one universal mythology or any one universal ritual held alike by all. Because he knew that this world must go on working wheel within wheel, this intricate mass of machinery, most complex, most wonderful. We can only make it run smoothly, we can lessen the friction, and we can

grease the wheels as it were. We must recognize the natural necessity of variation. Variety is the first principle of life. Perfect balance would be our destruction. The unity of sameness can come only when this universe is destroyed otherwise such a thing is impossible.

From his spiritual point of view Sri Ramakrishna realized that there is no existence of more than one religion. Only the one infinite religion exists. This religion expresses itself through different forms in the different countries i.e. Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism in India, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam in western countries, Taoism, Confucianism of China, and Shintoism of Japan. So, we must respect all religions. We must try to accept all of them. This establishes the philosophy of universal religion.⁷

Vivekananda's universalism is essentially a creative religious tolerance which accepts all religions. Vivekananda's ideal of universal religion does not mean a universal church and a universal scripture. He never thought that Hinduism had achieved the universality. But he thought that it had the potentiality to mature into such a broad and catholic faith. He looked upon religion as a growing, dynamic spirit, unfettered by any sectarian injunction. This capacity to expand gives a religion its universality and makes it friendly to other religions. Religions must be inclusive, and not to look down with contempt upon one another, because their particular ideals of God are different. So 'Religion' for Vivekananda is synonymous with 'universalism' of the spirit.⁸

Religion is universal. Individual religion is particular. Universal includes particular. In other words, particular exists in universal. Vivekananda realized truth of universal religion and truth ultimately lead to man's spiritual life. He practiced both Christianity and Islam without renouncing his ancestral faith. Individual religion varies one form of expression to other form of expression. But universal religion co-ordinates or unites varied sects of religion and declares that the philosophy of universal religion is based on the philosophy of humanism. It is above the identity-in and through difference.

Universal religion 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 inner likes and choice. In this sense by individualizing religion we really universalize it.

The universal religion must honour to every religious sect. A really universal religion must be able to give satisfaction and comfort to every religious sect. So, universal religion has a

broader perspective. One religion should pay due honour to other religion. That is good. But, better is to harmonize one religion with other through spiritual interaction. Vivekananda believed in a plurality of religions. Humanity, sympathy, tolerance and other related terms are the distinguished religious segments for catering the universal religion.

Universal religion would consist in various ways of approach to the religious objects. It gives perfect liberty to the individual in this regard. Religion comes out of life. It can never be divorced from it. The purpose of life is to realize God. That is to say, religion is based on realization. It cannot be hypothetical in outlook. One cannot prove it in a laboratory. So, Vivekananda wanted to establish a unity of religion. Good God is the ultimate unity of the universe. Realization of this unity is God. This may be said to represent the ideal of Universal Religion.

Universal Religion is a search for power to overcome the evil side of life even more than its concern for understanding what life as its centre or depth means. Religion has an element of feeling with its rich overtones. It is all pervading. It is all comprehensive. It pleads for unity of humanity. It makes a happy harmony between religion and religion. It needs universal service. It is a human activity. It believes the fundamental of all living faiths. Universal religion is basis for universal peace and co-existence. It brings up a sense of socio-cultural relation in the world; and keeps the humanitarian service for living and leading a peaceful co-existence in the human society of the world.

Swamiji has also a practical plan of realizing harmony of religions. According to him, in first place he would ask mankind to recognise this maxim that do not destroy humanity and secondly take man where he stands and from there give him a lift. All religions are directed towards the same goal along different paths. He uses the metaphor of different radii leading to the same centre. And at the centre, where all radii meet, all the differences will cease. Each of us is naturally growing and developing according to his own nature, each will in time come to know the highest truth. Your duty is to afford opportunities and to remove obstacles and there your duty ends. Each man's master is his own soul. Each has to learn for himself. Each has to make himself. Therefore help, if you can, but do not destroy.⁹

One common element of the universal religion is God. There is a unity in all things. We see man and woman are different but they are human beings. Different religious talk of different aspects of truth still they are one. Truth is God. Every religion is struggling towards the realization of the ultimate unity or God. This is the ideal of the universal Religion.

A religion is universal religion when it is universally accepted by all. It is above the caste, creed, sex and nationality. The universal religion must open its gates to every individual. It must honour to every religious sect. It gives satisfaction and comfort to every religious sect. So, universal religion has a broader perspective. One religion should pay due honour to other religion.

Swamiji, wants to establish a religion that will be equally acceptable to all minds. It must be equally philosophic, equally emotional, equally mystic and equally conducive to action. This combination will be the ideal of the nearest approach to a universal religion to become harmoniously balanced in all these four directions in his ideal of religion. And this religion is attained by Yoga or union with God. 'Yoga' means "Yoke" to join, that is, to join the soul of man with the supreme soul or God. Swamiji wanted a total development of all the four Yogas. Hence he advocated a combination of all the four Yogas. To the worker it is union between the men and the whole of unity. To the mystic, it is union between his lover and higher self. To the lover, it is union between himself and the God of love. To the philosopher, it is the union of all existence.

The ultimate goal of each Yoga is the same that is realization of the supreme self. Each of four Yogas represents the development of one particular mental faculty that is reason, emotion or will. The spiritual practices prescribed by these Yogas build up character.

Universal religion is a discovery of universality in all religion. Swamiji thinks of the possibility of bringing together all religions of the world under one umbrella. The dream of Vivekananda was to propagate a universal religion based on the spiritual synthesis. The aim of the universal religion of Swami Vivekananda is to glorify the universe with peace and harmony by overcoming the apparent contradictions and fictitious differences among the different religious faiths.

The main aim of Universal Religion is just to teach us the knowledge of the divinity of the soul, the non-duality of God-head, the unity of existence and one greater thing, that is, universality or harmony of all different religions. "All religions are true". The important thing is to reach to roof. One can reach it by stone stairs. One can reach it by wooden stairs. One can reach it by bamboo steps. One can reach it by a rope. One can also climb up by a bamboo pole. It depends upon one's sincerity and earnestness of faith on God. It is God alone who is called 'Satchidananda Brahma' in the Vedas, 'Satchidananda Krishna' in the Puranas, and

‘Satchidananda Shiva’ in the Tantras. It is one and the same Satchidananda. One can realize it after a long period of earnest quest. Where it comes, it shakes the very foundation of the personality of the seeker. It is like a huge elephant entering a small hut. The house shakes to its foundation. Perhaps it falls to pieces. It is the question of state of realization. The state of Brahman – realization is not Philosophy. It is a matter of spiritual attainment.

Vivekananda is an Advaitavadin. His philosophy of Universal Religion teaches us that to love God and realized the Ever-living God and feel that “All are one” is the true spiritual mark of understanding religion. It regulates the human life. If there is no inner life there is no religion either. Religion is a matter of the inner life. Religion intervenes human conduct. One should not make any distinction between a Bihari, Bengali and Keralite, Protestants and Catholics. He should realize his oneness with other followers of various other religions. All distinctions differences and dualism will be blotted out. Man cannot live without religion. It is rational and very deeply intellectual. This is all about what Swami Vivekananda’s philosophy of Universal Religion. It has great socio-philosophic relevance to built up the world peace in the modern times. In other words, religion will be prominent enough to guide the scientific world.

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