

Swami Vivekananda: Theism as Belief in Oneself

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ABSTRACT

Swami Vivekananda, at the historic Chicago address talks of religious tolerance. He is generally hailed as the prophet of universal religion. This religion does not profess any particular religion, rather it glorifies man himself. From this point of view, this paper will attempt to show how the concept of universal religion can help to remove societal evils like suicide amongst others and help to develop a person's faith in himself. Swamiji's teaching that one cannot believe in God unless one believes in himself, is I think one of the finest teachings for man. It helps to shape a man's destiny.

Key Words : Swami Vivekananda, Religion, God, Vedanta

INTRODUCTION

Religion is as old as human civilization itself. The word 'religion' is derived from the word *religare* which means 'to bind.' Religion is a relation between man and man and between man and some higher power. Belief in the supernatural power is what generally defines religion. John Macquarrie says: that the most basic characteristic of religion is the impinging of God or Holy Being upon man's existence¹. Swami Vivekananda chose to give a new dimension to religion which is not unconnected with daily life. At the historic World Summit of Religions, 1893, Swamiji spoke of the Universal Religion, of accepting all religions as true. He became the central attraction with his talk and garnered immense applause. Romain Rolland was the first person from the west to hail Swamiji as the prophet of Universal Religion. Swamiji stressed on the basic unity of religious thought, of one-ness. This is the starting point of his Universal Religion. This concept of Universal Religion has become even more important in today's world with man fighting his brethren. Swamiji was appalled by human suffering in the name of religion. He dreamt of a unified religion which glorifies not any superhuman entity but man himself. At the same time, he was aware that religion by itself has fostered hatred amongst humanity like no other. Yet religion represents a binding force among men.

Section 1 : The Practical Vedanta :

The Practical Vedanta of Swami Vivekananda was not confined to mere theoretical

discourse. Swamiji learned from his master Sri Ramakrishna, the unification of knowledge and devotion, the worship of God in human beings as the real essence of all religion. He tried to reflect all of this in his doctrine of monism. Swamiji preached that there is one Absolute Reality in the universe and everyone is not merely a part of that Absolute Reality but he is that Absolute Reality. The God that we worship is *saguna* but it is not different from the absolute. Another distinctive feature of Vivekananda's concept of Vedanta is that apart from the generally recognized four methods of attainment of the Truth, he gives emphasis on the emotional side that is, on feelings.

Swamiji's philosophy which interpreters have considered as neo-Vedanta is practical philosophy. Swamiji pointed out that monism, dualism, qualified dualism was not opposed to each other but dualism and qualified dualism were stepping stones towards monism. Swamiji finds the true meaning of attachment in the application of Vedanta to the practical life. For him, God lives in each one of us and each one of us are the Absolute Truth. So, religion should be nothing but service to all sentient beings. From this perspective social interactions between man and man can take a different standing. We can learn not to disrespect anybody and anything which also includes the environment. This side of Vivekananda's practical philosophy will certainly help to foster harmony between man and man. Swami Vivekananda has said that he does not believe in a God who cannot give us bread here, but can give eternal bliss in heaven. He said nations are good because its citizens are good and not because the nation has some great policies. Religion means self – realization. He laid emphasis on believing in oneself. The one who does not, is an atheist. So, an atheist is not one who disbelieves in God but in himself. Theism is belief in one's own self and creating one's own destiny as opposed to someone who thinks he cannot. Swami Vivekananda says:

...true religion never changes. Religion is realization; not talk, nor doctrine, nor theories, however beautiful they may be. It is being and becoming, not hearing or acknowledging; it is the whole soul becoming changed into what it believes. That is religion².

Section 2: The God of Vivekananda:

God is generally understood as a supra human entity. At the same time, he is looked upon as the creator, preserver and one who upkeeps this not so supra human world. Swami Vivekananda was a firm believer in the self. One must believe in oneself first in order to believe in God. So, unless one believes in oneself, he cannot believe in God. God is present in each one of us. Man is the highest symbol of God and his worship is the greatest form of worship. Hence one who serves humanity is serving God. God does not exist over and above human beings.

God is the primal concept of religion. In the background of the other faiths, Swamiji's God comes with a new dimension. All living beings are an embodiment of God. God is immanent in every living being. Man is divine. Man is an essential constituent of the universal self. All faiths profess love for one's fellow being. Vivekananda was repulsive to the belief that man is a sinner. He refuses to start with the original sin of man. Swamiji says: Say not man is a sinner, tell him that he is God; it is a sin to call man a sinner. Man cannot be a sinner because his essential nature is divine. So Swamiji's concept of God is not antagonistic to any

faith. This religion of humanism is based on the practical Vedanta. Vivekananda says first is food and then religion. Without food nothing can be accomplished. He says, so long as even a single dog in my country is without food, my whole religion will be to feed it.

Swamiji emphasizes the need for a universal religion. He believed his universal religion could bring about a new order. He appealed for unity among all religions in the name of human welfare. This unity is the foundation of his universal religion. For him religion is not theory, is not concepts, is not doctrines. Rather it is practice. Just as Weber says religion is a way of life, Swamiji says this practice of religion should be integrated in our daily lives. It will help to rise above evils and enjoy peace and happiness. We should begin by respecting every living thing. Religion cannot be adherence to any particular creed or faith, but rather in the dignity of all things living. It is a process, a process of becoming, till one realizes his own self, the power within. That is God, that is religion. Swamiji's identification of God in all things, in all work, in all our fellow beings, is divinity which transcends all religions. It makes man God who is no longer jealous of his brothers, purifies his soul and in the process realizes his own true supreme self, the *atma*.

Section 3 : Unification of Pluralism in Religion :

Swami Vivekananda felt the need to put forward religion as something which should not espouse hatred. He writes:

There is nothing that has brought to man more blessings than religion, yet at the same time, there is nothing that has brought more horror than religion. Nothing has made more for peace and love than religion; nothing has engendered fiercer hatred than religion. Nothing has made the brotherhood of man more tangible than religion; nothing has bred more bitter enmity between man and man than religion. Nothing has built more charitable institutions, more hospitals for men, and even for animals, than religion; nothing has deluged the world with more blood than religion³."

Swami Vivekananda learnt from his Master Ramakrishna, that true religion consists in universal religion. At the Chicago Parliament of Religions, Swamiji had famously said: I am proud to belong to a religion which has taught the world both tolerance and universal acceptance. He further said we believe not only in universal tolerance but we accept all religions to be true.

Harmony and brotherhood are the main features of religion. The key to this harmony lies in tolerance, for Swamiji. It is universalism in religion which can help us get out of the segregation that religion has caused. It respects every person, no matter what religion he practices. For Swamiji humanism is not only love for fellow beings, but also belief in man. So, Vivekananda accepted pluralism at this level but recommended universalism for all practical purposes. Universalism means acceptance by all. All religions will come under one umbrella. All religions are true.

Swamiji says: Our watchword, there will be acceptance and not exclusion. Not only toleration, but acceptance. I accept all religions that were in the past and worship with them all; I worship God with every one of them, in whatever form they worship Him. I shall go to the mosque of the Mohammedan; I shall enter the Christian's church and kneel before the crucifix; I shall enter the Buddhists temple where I shall take refuge in the Buddha I

shall go to the forest and sit down in meditation with the Hindu who is trying to see the light that enlightens the heart of everyone⁴.

The philosophy of Swami Vivekananda is the result of both Shankaracharya's Mayavada and Buddha's universal love. The former he considered scientific while the latter had a lasting impact on him. Buddha's deep love for all creatures, great or small touched him deeply. Swami Vivekananda lays emphasis on the practical side of Vedanta. The primary characteristic of this lies in his concept of universal goodness (kalyan) or dedication to others. Sympathy, empathy, kindness is at its heart. From this arises his universal religion. All living creatures are expressions of God. So, we must serve them. All creatures are my own. God is here amongst us, not over and above. The Vedanta philosophy lays down what is present in all religions, that man is divine and everything else around us is merely an expression of the divine.

Swamij in one of his very first addresses in Chicago said:

.... Holiness, purity, and charity are not the exclusive possession of any church in the world, and.... every system has produced men and women of the most exalted character. In the face of this evidence, if anybody dreams of the exclusive survival of his own religion and the destruction of the others. I pity him from the bottom of my heart, and point out to him that upon the banner of every religion will soon be written, in spite of resistance: 'Help and not Fight,' 'Assimilation and not Destruction', 'Harmony and Peace and not Dissension'⁵.

This he learnt from his Master, Sri Ramakrishna. Religion, to help mankind must be ready and able to help him in whatever condition he is, in servitude or in freedom, in the depths of degradation or in the heights of purity; everywhere it should be able to come to his aid. The principles of Vedanta, or the ideal of religion, or whatever we may call it, will be fulfilled by its capacity for performing this great function. Swamiji said: We must understand all of those religions have proved their strength, their worth, and their necessity for mankind⁶.

The practical Vedanta is the highest religion for any human society. In his epoch-making Chicago address, Swamiji said, this universal religion says no to intolerance and persecution. It recognizes divinity in every man and woman. Its whole scope and focus will be in aiding humanity to realize its own true divine nature. Vivekananda says if you can offer such a religion than all nations will follow. This is an effort on his part to instill in man his own dignity, fostering happiness, empathy, love and freedom. His vision of a universal religion for a new world order would certainly have far reaching consequences.

Swamiji understood the need for a universal religion without converting followers of any particular religion. This universal religion would encompass all commonality of particular religions centering around the welfare of man. The ultimate goal of all religions being realization of God and the soul, universal religion would strive to achieve this through service to humanity. Vivekananda continues: my idea, therefore, is that all these religions are different forces in the economy of God, working for the good of mankind⁷.

Section 4 : Faith in Ourselves :

One of the greatest teachings of Swamiji's practical Vedanta lies in the concept of faith in oneself. This he equates with belief in God. Faith in oneself is a power like no other. If a

child is taught about this right from the very beginning, then desperation, bitter experiences which are an inevitable part of life, can be overcome. Suicidal tendencies can also be curbed if a person believes that belief in oneself is the highest, akin to belief in God. This belief becomes motivational in life making one realize his goals. Self – satisfaction which arises from this could be a major key to removal of evils and miseries. Belief in oneself leads a person to work harder in order to reach his goals. A person becomes strong as the belief in himself increases. No matter what a person faces, if he believes that at the end of the day, he is a winner because God is going to see him overcome his obstacles, he is already a winner. This belief is crucial in achieving success. This could give rise to less hatred and jealousy. Believing in oneself is loving oneself. Loving oneself is loving God. Abiding faith in one's own self helps to be in control of problems faced. If each one of us follow this as much as possible surely there will be less wars among nations, less fights between man and his fellow beings. Love is the single most important factor for harmony. Love leads to tolerance, to empathy, to kindness and a sense of satisfaction. Above all, this belief will lead men to acquire a self – dignity for themselves, leading to the inevitable conclusion that life is precious and valuable.

For Vivekananda, an atheist is one who does not believe in himself. The atheist can be ushered onto the path of theism because it is not belief about a third entity. Believing in oneself is one of the highest, it sets the path for self – improvement, to set up goals for oneself and achieving them. Swamiji says: Faith, faith, faith in ourselves, faith, faith in God, this is the secret of greatness. If, you have faith in all the three hundred and thirty millions of your mythological Gods, and in all the Gods which foreigners have now and again introduced into your midst, and still have no faith in yourselves, there is no salvation for you. Have faith in yourselves and stand up on that faith. That faith comes when you remind yourself that you are the infinite power and knowledge⁸.

God, we see everywhere around us, an omnipresent God, in all creatures great or small. This is a practical God, a God not outside us. He is the reality of all existence. Potentially each of us are God, whether we know it or not. If you are not God, there never was any God, and never will be. Only know it.

Conclusion:

Swamiji says you cannot believe in God unless you believe in yourself. This teaching I think is one of the first teachings that man needs to learn. No man can be successful unless he believes in himself. This belief becomes a strength if one equates it to belief in God. So, on the practical side, the practical Vedanta helps to build a persons' character. The negative forces of hatred and destruction can take a backseat and the power of love and tolerance can come to the forefront, if this path is followed. Intolerant imperialism in the name of religion can be destroyed and there will be a spirit of fulfilment and happiness among all. To love man means to love God. This can pave the way for peace and prosperity in the world.

For Vivekananda religion should be a part of our practical lives and not something over and above it. Yet it is religion alone that may help us achieve how to overcome our practical lives and move over to the spiritual. The poor and downtrodden need to be served. Service to humanity and other creatures should become a way of life. 'If a religion cannot help man

wherever he may be, wherever it stands it is not of much use. It will remain only a theory for the chosen few⁹. Religion may speak in different voices, in different languages. Yet the main aim is the awakening of human values and humanity. I conclude with a quote from Swamiji: All power is within you; you can do anything and everything. Believe in that, do not believe that you are weak; do not believe that you are half – crazy lunatics, as most of us do nowadays. You can do anything and everything, without even the guidance of anyone. Stand up and express the divinity within you¹⁰.

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