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**UNIVERSAL RELIGION IN THE VISION OF SWAMI
VIVEKANANDA**

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Abstract

Swami Vivekananda is one of the most inspiring personalities of India, who did a lot to make India a better place to live in. Within a short span of time, he achieved a lot and went a long way in serving humans. Religion for him is a practical activity concerned with the transformation of life. He was mainly concerned with spiritual truths, not with physical discoveries. He took religion as a necessity of life and asserted that it was the most potent force guiding the destiny of human race from the beginning of civilization. Explaining the meaning of religion, Vivekananda said that it was an attempt to transcend the limitations imposed by the senses. Religion is awakening of the spirit in man. The philosophical aspects of every religion represent the basic principles, which are common to all religions. Vivekananda asked men of all religions to unite on the basis of essential common principles. Over and above this, he put forward the idea of universal religion, which rose above all limitations and divisions. Vivekananda put special emphasis upon the unity of various religions of the world. He regarded the different religions to be supplementary to one another. They are not mutually cancelling systems. On account of external differences we do not notice the universal in religion. A deeper insight into the essentials of all religions reveals that the differences are only superficial and not fundamental. With the spirit of tolerance, Vivekananda called upon men of all religions to develop an attitude of understanding, open – heartedness, tolerance, mutual respect and

broad mindedness. God is one and He is truth. According to Vivekananda, in enlightened religious understanding there could be no possibility of religious clashes. His conception of universal religion was based on the belief that God manifests Himself through all living beings. Vivekananda often used to say, if you want to find God, serve man. He expressed his desire to be born again and suffer thousands of miseries so that he could worship only God, the sum total of all souls. This is not only the highest expression of religion but also the clearest statement of humanism.

INTRODUCTION

Swami Vivekananda was a great social reformer and a very inspiring personality. He made an immense contribution to purify the souls of people. Vivekananda's vision in his philosophy is integral in kind and quality. The main aim of his philosophy is to create a consciousness of world civilization, from the integration of all the essential insights now carried within the various cultures of the world. Today this philosophy is of immense significance in creating global harmony. Vivekananda dedicated his whole life towards real upliftment of humanity. In his dynamism of thought, humanism is the prime factor to be served. The central theme of his inspiring speeches for the whole world was man – his growth, development and fulfilment. Vivekananda's life – long mission was to establish spiritual oneness of existence among mankind. His teachings are linked up with spiritual and physical experiences with their stress on cultivation of purity and strength. To him the ideal of all education and training should be man – making and to make the man grow. According to him the same divinity exists behind each and everything. The philosophy of Vivekananda arises from the awareness of the social, religious and economic conditions of the Indian masses. He realised that some of the social evils are due to the orthodoxy and superstitions prevalent in the society. He was of the opinion that this was due to a loss of faith in spiritual values. He aimed at a spiritual awakening and accepted with gratitude whatever he could learn from faiths and disciplines emphasising the ultimacy of spiritual values. Vivekananda's philosophy is deeply influenced by ancient Hindu philosophy – especially of the Vedanta. The main body of his thought is derived from the Hindu scriptures- from the Upanishads and the Vedanta. His basic belief in the essential unity of everything owes its origin to the Vedanta.

VIVEKANANDA'S VIEW ON RELIGION

Vivekananda discussed the concept of religion in a very practical way, not only in individual life but also in social life too. For him religion is not just a talk and doctrines or theories, nor is it sectarianism. Religion for him does not mean any creed, dogma or cult; but realisation of the divineness of one's very self within. Every religion, according to Vivekananda, should cultivate this fundamental principle for world peace and harmony. He explains that religion does not consist in erecting temples or building churches or attending public worship. Religion consists on realization. Religion does not consist in subscribing to a particular faith or creed, but in spiritual realisation. According to Vivekananda, "I shall try to bring before you the Hindu theory that religions do not come from without, but from within. It is my belief that religious thought is in man's very constitution, so much so that it is impossible for him to give up religion until he can give up his mind and body, until he can give up his thought and life."¹ Vivekananda regarded religion as a necessary aspect of life. He says, "Of all the forces that have worked and are still working to mould the destiny of the human race, none certainly is more potent than that, the manifestation of which we call Religion."² A very important characteristic of religion is that it invariably has a super- natural content and according to Vivekananda this element of super- naturality gives religion uniqueness and distinguishes it from all other forms of intellectual discipline. Vivekananda further adds that religion transcends not only the limitations of the senses, but also the power of reasoning or of pure intellectual deliberation. Religion does not have a value and significance for the individual, but it has a social contact also. Religion, Vivekananda says, provides a secure foundation and an ultimate sanction to morality also.

VIVEKANANDA ON UNIVERSAL RELIGION

The great ideal of a Universal Religion was explained by Vivekananda as early as 1893 on the floor of the Parliament of Religions, Chicago. In several of his speeches and writings Vivekananda has spoken of Universal religion as the one Eternal Religion, representing the religious consciousness of humanity, which manifests itself in different places as different religions. He boldly put Advaita, the unity of all existence, as the possible basis of a Universal Religion. Universal Religion is the most general concept

that asserts the oneness of religion for all men. Vivekananda's concept of Universal Religion may be said to be rooted in his Master Sri Ramakrishna Paramhansa. Explaining the Universal character of Religion, Vivekananda said, "Each soul is potentially divine. The goal is to manifest this divine 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."³ This is according to Vivekananda the whole of religion. Universal Religion teaches a religion of humanity based entirely upon ethical laws. It is a religion of self- conquest and of the victory of righteousness over unrighteousness through one ways or style of thinking, willing and feeling irrespective of caste, creed and religion. A very remarkable element in Vivekananda's philosophy of religion is his belief in the unity of existence and the essential unity of all religions. Each religion, according to Vivekananda, is as one pearl on a string of pearls. As they complement each other so in the heart of everything the same truth prevails. Universal Religion may be said to be the most general concept which reveals the very unity and the unique nature of all religions of the world. The very heart underlying all religions of the world is the same. Universal Religion expresses the sameness of the fundamental principles as well as the teachings of each and every religion in the world. Vivekananda believes that Universal Religion exists. Just as the universal brotherhood of man is there, so also Universal Religion is there. Universal Religion is neither the product of discursive understanding nor a synthesis of the vital elements of different religions. It is the realization that the different religions are expressions of one basic truth.

Vivekananda reflected on the necessity of the concept of Universal Religion for the society. He realized the nature of man, according to which mankind in the whole world has been trying to look beyond in the quest of his ultimate destiny or search for God. Therefore the whole of the world community is expecting a religion, which is acceptable to all. Religions represent the spiritual aspirations and struggles of mankind. However it is unpleasant that various world religions have been indulging in mutual criticisms, persecutions. We have seen how some religions in the world, claiming universal empire in the field of religion over all mankind, have engaged themselves in ruthless wars and bloodshed to achieve this end. Vivekananda has observed these two mutually opposing aspects of religion, which he explains in the following words: "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 religion.”⁴ Thus Vivekananda deeply felt the importance of religion as well as its crucial role in the human life. He is of the opinion that to improve this situation and to establish peace among religions, we must understand that all of those religions have proved their strength, their worth and their necessity for mankind. He questioned the thesis of religious plurality. If we say that one religion is true, automatically the rest of other religions become false. According to him, all religions are not really contradictory, but supplementary. He said that, “Each religion as it were, takes up one part of the great universal truth and spends its whole force in embodying and typifying that part of the great truth. It is therefore an addition and not exclusion.”⁵ That was his justification of equal status of all the religions.

Explaining the concept of Universal Religion, Vivekananda said that all religions in the world are looking at truth from different standpoints which may of course vary according to our birth, education, surroundings and so on. His idea was that all religions are different forces in the realm of God; each religion is working for the good of mankind. Universal Religion, for which philosophers are looking for, already exists in every country like universal brotherhood. Every religion has a great mission to fulfil. In Hinduism, we find one idea, i.e. spirituality. Hinduism tries to define the idea of the soul so that no earthly touch can destroy it. Renunciation and spirituality, the great ideals of India are still clinging to these ideas. Referring to Islam he said that Islam makes its followers all equal. It stands to preach to the world the practical brotherhood of all belonging to their faith. The central idea of Christianity is to preach – ‘watch and pray, for the kingdom of Heaven is at hand’- it means that man should purify his heart and should be ready to that spirit that never dies. Vivekananda was ready to accept all religions of the past and hence he uttered- “I worship God with every one of them in whatever form they worship Him. I shall go to the mosque of the Mohammedans, I shall

enter the Christian Church and kneel down before the crucifix, I shall enter the Buddhist temple, where I shall take refuge to Buddha and His law. I shall go to the forest and sit down in meditation with the Hindu who is trying to see the light which enlightens the heart of everyone.”⁶ He was ready not only to accept all the religions but to keep heart open to accept any religion that may come into existence in future also.

Vivekananda questioned the diversity of religious views in explaining the identical phenomena and held that the diversity of the views is due to the fact that what each religion described was only the different phases of the same phenomenon. Each religion has particular ideals that are needed to the society. Thus Vivekananda gave equal importance to all religions in the world. Strengthened by this understanding of religion, Vivekananda identified the need for Universal Religion. Then he searched for the way to form that Universal Religion. He realised that the Universal Religion cannot be established with any one of the world religions, converting the followers of all other religions in to it. Universal Religion is possible only to the extent that there is a conception of universalism in which there is a place for all religions suited to different types of humanity. Therefore he gave due consideration to the phenomenon of diversity among the humanity in the world. There may be different types of people in the world with different mentality, with different habits, rituals and beliefs. Each and everyone have one’s own place in the society. All these various minds and various types of people are needed to the society. That was a fundamental assumption of his Universal Religion. With reference to his concept of Universal Religion Vivekananda says that religion consists neither in doctrines nor in dogmas. It is the direct realisation of the truths of the spiritual world that forms the real essence of religion. True religion is a direct transcendental experience of the ultimate reality. The idea of direct realization is common to all religion. The end of all religions is the realization of God in the Soul, and this is the one Universal Religion. If there is one universal truth in all religions, according to Vivekananda, it is realization of God. Ideals and methods may differ, but this is the main point to be noted.

VIVEKANANDA ON UNITY OF RELIGION

Swami Vivekananda built his theory of the transcendental unity of all religions based on the direct experience of the Ultimate Reality. He spoke on the oneness of all

religions with regard to the transcendental aspect of each religion. Differences among religions would not be the cause of conflict for they are understood to be mutually complementary. All the religions of the world together constitute one whole. For Vivekananda, there existed only one Eternal Religion of which all other religions were only variations. Each religion has a special beat, a unique trait and its own articulation of what is good. By Universal Religion, Vivekananda says, 'I do not mean any one universal philosophy, or any universal mythology, or any one universal ritual, held alike by all; for I know that this world must go on working wheel within wheel, this intricate mass of machinery, most complex, most wonderful.'⁷ Vivekananda pointed out that the language of the soul is one; the languages of the nations are many, their customs and methods of lives are totally different. Religion is of the soul which gets expression through different nations, languages and customs. Hence the differences between the world religions are one of expression and not of substance and their points of similarity are intrinsic.

The diversity of human beings is as much a fact as the unity of the same. Universal Religion will have to tolerate and accept peculiarities internally existent in the individuals. Vivekananda says that the Vedanta understands that and therefore preaches one principle and admits a lot of methods. It merely preaches the principle and the method it leaves to us. Take any path you like to follow, any prophet you like, but have only that method which suits your own nature. Vivekananda called upon us to adore the living God around us- the man, neglected and dispossessed, i.e. the poor, the down – trodden, oppressed and needy people. According to Vivekananda, except service to man in the image of God, we get no other religion. A man inspired by God's blessings gives moulding to all his passions and desires, love and ambition in one single mission of life i.e. offering service to the poor and neglected class of people and uplifting the very spirit of people bound up by slavery to a honourable position with fullness of life and manliness in the highest religion. A very beautiful reflection about universality of religions of the world has been well represented in the following remark of Vivekananda: "A true religion which will give us faith in ourselves, a national self- respect and the power to feed and educate the poor and relieve the misery around me.....if you want to find God, serve man."⁸ To understand the exact nature of Universal Religion, it

follows that we must learn the true nature of the Divine Life within. Vivekananda has said that we must have a pure mind and true realization of the Supreme Reality through right knowledge. So in essence all men are equal and in every man there is the reflection of the same Supreme Reality. Vivekananda emphasised the oneness of soul of all men. Thus it follows that Vivekananda's concept of Universal Religion is rooted in his Vedantism.

Vivekananda's aim was to present the ideal of Universal Religion as the spirit of a universal society that is a new idea of religion for a new humanity. Vivekananda did not mean his Universal Religion to supersede or supplant the existing religions. The concept of a Universal Religion is just an awareness of the 'economy of God' where all religions of the world co-exist forming a grand symphony of man's spiritual aspirations. He adds that Universal Religion already exists in the minds of people who even while sticking to their own religion, their ancestral faith, look upon other religions with sympathy, who can without rejecting their own belief, show a genuine respect for the prophets of the different nations of the world. A believer in Universal Religion possesses a good understanding of and reverence for world religion without losing his sense of belonging to his own religion. According to him, unity in variety is the plan for the universe. Universal Religion as conceived by Vivekananda is, therefore not a new religion with a new scripture and a new liturgy, it can be regarded as a fresh attitude to religion, a fresh spiritual and moral outlook. It commands not merely tolerance; it insists on acceptance of other religions too as true and making religion thereby a principle of human unity. Universal Religion may, thus, be said to be a discovery of universality in all religions. Through his concept of Universal Religion Vivekananda wanted to break down all barriers, chains of servitude along with the message that the manifestation of perfection is already in man so that man can live in a free environment. He showed that truly Universal Religion can even today bring the whole world closer and unite all men into a unit as its aim is to infuse the spirit of oneness. Vivekananda asserts that true religion has its roots in all the inner elements of mankind. That is why he uses the word 'spiritual' to mean the universal character of religion. The concept of religion put forward by Vivekananda is nothing but 'humanism' embracing all religions of the world. He preached this great principle emphasising the selflessness of the individual.

CONCLUSION

Thus it follows that Universal Religion should not be treated as one more religion including the many existing from beforehand, rather it should be treated as the only religion pre-existent by nature all over the world which will be acceptable to and followed by all religious persons alike. This religion will become the religion of all religious men, and it will be not of one specific group or society. In this way Universal Religion will become the universally accepted religion. It has been a matter of feeling that once Universal Religion is realized from within, all bloodshed and enmity in the name of religion will be fully over and the real role of religion then will be played, i.e. the role of uniting all people of the world by one thread of universal brotherhood. Hence Vivekananda's concept of Universal Religion may be a safeguard of decaying morality in the society of ill practices, malice and hatred to other faiths. The concept of Universal Religion which teaches to caste love against hatred and compassion against violence with calm and dignity is highly required in the present day context with a view to reshaping the ideals of man. Vivekananda's philosophy may be regarded as the philosophy of fundamental unity underlying in all religions. He inspired mankind to understand and follow the Universal Religion through religious tolerance and universal acceptance.

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