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## Religion and Swami Vivekananda

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### Abstract

Swami Vivekananda was one of the most outstanding contemporary Indian philosophers. He dedicated his whole life for the upliftment of the downtrodden mass of India. Swami Vivekananda very well understood the social role of religion. As a matter of fact the tools that Vivekananda used to uplift the common masses from poverty, ignorance etc. were religion and education. His concept of religion is that religion is the manifestation of the divinity already in man. This means that man is already divine. This divinity is not restricted to people of any particular religion. As a human being everyone possesses this divinity irrespective of one's religion, caste, sex etc. This is not a new form of religion. Every existing religion of the world is preaching this ideal from time immemorial. Every religion in this sense is a complement to each other. And this is the religion what Vivekananda called universal religion. Every form of religion is universal in the true sense of the term.

**Key-words:** Divinity, Man, Manifestation, New, Religion, Universal Religion.

### Introduction:

In a broad sense religion consists of ideas, aims, activities and experiences of human beings that pass from generation to generation. Religion can be rightly said to be the most important power, moulding and regulating human lives. If we take a comprehensive survey of human experiences then it will be found that religion has from the earliest times and throughout the ages occupied an important place in life and history of human civilization.

Swami Vivekananda very well understood the social role of religion. As a matter of fact the tools that Vivekananda used to uplift the common masses from poverty, ignorance etc. were religion and education. He used religion for spiritual growth and education for material prosperity of the individuals. But he always gave more importance on the spiritual aspect of human being. Vivekananda was mostly influenced by Sankara's monistic tendency. Sankara emphasized the monistic tendency of Upanishads and develops it into a systematic 'Advaitavada'. He emphasized the reality of the unconditioned and unqualified (nirguna) Brahman, and regards God (Iswara), the individual souls (Jiva) and the world (Jagat) as appearance due to an indefinable principle called Maya (cosmic nescience). Maya is neither real nor unreal. The central doctrine of Advaita is that



Brahman is the only Reality, all else being an illusory appearance. Sankara himself expresses the quintessence of his philosophy in half a verse – ‘Brahman Satyam Jagatmithya

### **Jivabrahmaivanaparah.**

The meaning of this verse is that Brahman is the only ultimate reality, the world of multiplicity is false and ultimately the Atman and the Brahman are not different. This is the central theme of Advaita Vedanta. The non- duality of Brahman the non-reality of the world and the non-difference of the soul from Brahman-these three constitute the essential teaching of Advaita.

Vivekananda accepts Sankara’s Advaita Vedanta with little modification. Like Advaita, Vivekananda says that reality is one. This only reality is the absolute Brahman or infinite Brahman. Vivekananda accepts in Vedantic line that all souls are part of Brahman. “What is meant by part of the infinite? The infinite is indivisible; there cannot be part of the infinite. The absolute cannot be divided. What is meant, therefore, by saying that all these sparks are from Him?”<sup>1</sup> Vivekananda raised such avarices from his part. His resolution is, there is but one Infinite Being in the universe and that Infinite Being appears as many. But the appearance of division is due to delusion, it is not real. Brahman has not been divided, but only appears to be divided. He is one Infinite Being of the universe. All others are not parts, but whole of it.

The essence of religion is derived by Vivekananda from the above Vedantic repercussion. As all being is one with Brahman and hence, each soul is divine. But this divinity remains latent in human and other beings. The goal of religion or essence of religion is to realize this divinity, that is realization of the God in the self and to manifest it. Vivekananda believes that religion is not the outcome of the weakness of human nature. It is never because we fear. Religion is law which is upholding expanding aspect of human potential divinity. Every individual has to realize its divinity. He says that individual beings are like the sparks of Brahman and therefore divinity is potentially inherent in it. This divinity is termed as ‘God’. According to him, it is the realization and manifestation of such divinity in the soul, which form the essence of religion. So he says “Religion is the manifestation of the Divinity already in man.”<sup>2</sup>

### **Objective of the study:**

The present study aims at analyzing Vivekananda’s concept of religion and to show (a) that religion in the true sense of the term is universal in nature and (b) that Vivekananda in no way tried to establish the precedence of Hinduism over other religions.

**Methodology:** For this study analytical method has been applied.



**Vivekananda's concept of religion:**

According to Vivekananda, religion is the manifestation of the Divinity already in man. It is Vivekananda's conviction that man is already divine. Man's goal is to manifest this divinity. To Vivekananda religion is that search of human heart which brings the light of eternal to the finite creature. Man is conscious about his limited existence and hence wanted to get something higher and mightier than him. Religion is the expedition which expands human self and knots finite self with infinite eternal one. It is the search of human destiny, realization of man's basic divine nature, through the search of God. He writes "Man has wanted to look beyond , wanted to expand of himself ,and that we call progress , evolution , has been always measured by that one search , the search for human destiny, the search for God"<sup>3</sup>.

Human mind wants to soar higher and higher to go beyond itself to catch some glimpses of the eternal light. Religion is an attempt to transcend this limit of phenomenal world. Vivekananda regards religion as the attempt to exercise perfect freedom from the part of human self. He distinguishes between the living and the dead. He asked "How can we make the distinction between the living and the dead? In the living there is freedom, there is intelligence, in the dead all is bound and no freedom is possible, because there is no intelligence"<sup>4</sup>. A small worm is a majestic being compared to a huge powerful engine which may be thousand-fold larger than the worm. It is because the worm has more freedom than the engine. In living creature there is freedom, there is intelligence. This freedom distinguishes us from mere machine. We are part of Infinite Ocean of consciousness, intelligence and freedom.

From the above situation, Vivekananda shows us the point that as human being who has the intelligence, is striving for more freedom. With the help of his intelligence human being realized that he is a limited creature with limited freedom and absolute freedom yet to be realized. Religion is such effort from mankind to realize absolute freedom. It is an attempt to be free. That is why religion and freedom both go hand in hand, both are related terms. Human intelligence starts a ceaseless inquiry from the dawn of its consciousness, about the meaning and mystery of life. There is always a universal dissatisfaction which is associated with man. We struggle hard to attach to some goal and then discover that we do not want that. He writes "It is because freedom is every man's goal. He seeks it ever. His whole life is a struggle after it. The child rebels against law as soon as it is born. Its first utterance is a cry, a protest against the bondage in which it finds itself. This longing for freedom produces the idea of a Being who is absolutely free. The concept of God is a fundamental element in the human constitution."<sup>5</sup>. Thus there is always an unconscious struggle of the human with the spiritual, of the lower with the higher mind to break bondage and to be free.

For the spiritual and rational justification of all issues Vivekananda took his stand on Vedanta, especially on the non-dualistic Vedanta philosophy of Sankara. He explained it on his own way in accordance with the light he had received from his great master Ramakrishna. Vedanta says that all is Brahman. Brahman is the source of freedom and every moment men assert freedom. Individual attains freedom only when all the distinction of thine and mine disappears, when individual is one with



Brahman. This is self-realization. In other words, according to Vivekananda, the search which starts to break the limitation to actualize perfection ends, when the individual becomes one with the absolutely free being which is called 'Brahman' in Vedanta philosophy. That is the end or ultimate goal of religion.

The concept of freedom brings with it a perfectly free being which is called God. According to Vivekananda, the whole of nature is worship of God. Wherever there is life there is this search for freedom and that freedom is the same as God. Necessarily this freedom gives us mastery over all nature, but it is impossible without knowledge. The more we are knowing the more we are becoming master of nature. He says "Mastery alone is making us strong and if there be some being entirely free and master of nature, that being must have a perfect knowledge of nature, must be omnipresent and omniscient. Freedom must go hand in hand with these, and that being alone who has acquired these will be beyond nature."<sup>6</sup>

Vivekananda's conception of religion is linked with Vedantic principle of feeling oneness of the universe. He emphasizes that the knowledge which brings the feeling of sameness towards mankind leads to the fruit of religion, that is freedom. He further says "In what sense you are pure? The God in you is God in all. If you have not known this you have known nothing. How can there be difference? It is all one. Every being is the temple of the most high; if you can see that, good, if not spirituality has yet to come to you."<sup>7</sup> He again says "..... See God in every person-working through every all hands, walking through all feet, and eating through every mouth. In every being He lives, through all minds He thinks. He is self-evident, nearer unto us than ourselves. To know this is religion is faith, and may it please the Lord to give us this faith! When we shall feel that oneness, we shall be immortal."<sup>8</sup>

Thus Vivekananda's conception of religion is necessarily based on transcendental oneness of all creatures. It is based on equality, which is key-note of Vedanta. This equality leads him to potential divinity of all souls as part or reflection of same ultimate reality namely 'Brahman'.

While delivering his religious lectures, he always had social aim in his mind. He was sad to have seen the miserable condition of the Indian poor masses. He asked us to serve man as God by realizing the Oneness. So according to Vivekananda it is in love that religion consists and not in ceremonies. He says that unless a man is pure in body and mind, his coming into a temple and worshipping the Deity are useless. External worship is only a symbol of internal worship, and for internal worship purity is essential. Vivekananda again says that he who sees God in the poor in the weak and in the diseased really worships God, and if he sees God only in the image, his worship is but preliminary. Perception of oneness is the mother of true service. But minimum people perceive oneness.

To Vivekananda the ultimate goal of all mankind, the aim and end of all religions, is but one-reunion with God or with the divinity which is every man's true nature. But while the aim is one, the method of attaining may vary with the different temperaments of men. Vivekananda opines that every



man must develop according to his own nature. And the ideal way of religion is called by Vivekananda 'Yoga'. There are four kinds of yoga according to nature and temperaments of man. These are karma, bhakti, raja and jnana yoga. Karma yoga is the manner in which a man realizes his own divinity through works and duty. Bhakti yoga is the realization of the divinity through devotion to, and love of a personal God. Raja yoga is the realization of the divinity through the control of the mind. Jnana yoga is the realization of the divinity through knowledge. According to Vivekananda these are all different roads leading to the same Centre- God.

The outcome of our deep realization of divinity in everything according to Vivekananda is religious experience. Religions experience is the experience of oneness with all creatures. It is an attitude of oneness with all life and beyond that with the universe along with awareness of the unique entity of the self. The religious consciousness is closely related to the religious experience of breaking down individual and feeling one with the all.

For Vivekananda, religion has to be scientific. According to him religion to be put in a more concrete form, has to be justified itself by the discoveries of reason through which every other science justify itself. The same methods of investigation, which we apply to sciences is to be applied to religion. He says that if a religion destroyed by such investigations, it was then all the time useless unworthy, superstition. He was thoroughly convinced that its destruction would be the best thing that could happen. According to him, all that is lost will be taken off, but the essential parts of religion will emerge triumphant out of this investigation.

Another very significant point to be noted in Vivekananda's concept of religion is that he believed in the equal validity of all religions. If there is one Universal Truth, in all religions, according to Vivekananda, it is the realizing God. Ideals and methods may differ, but this is the main point to be noted. He 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; we have to understand them to be mutually complementary. For Swami Vivekananda, religion is a total concept. All the religions of the world together constitute one whole.

#### **Vivekananda's concept of universal religion:**

Swami Vivekananda's concept of religion is essentially associated with his idea of universal religion. As a matter of fact his concept of religion and his concept of universal religion are not two different ideas. In his religious lectures we find universal element and that is God. Yet the phrase 'universal religion' sometimes creates controversy as some people think that Vivekananda tries to establish Hinduism as universal. But this is wrong at all.

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 of the world. 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. Swami Vivekananda believes that universal religion exists. Just as universal brotherhood of man is there, so also universal religion is there.

Different religions have come out of different traditions and against different backgrounds. Therefore, differences are bound to be present in them. But if we make a comparative study of the religions we clearly find that there are certain striking similarities among the different religions of the world. Realization of self as God in all is the principal teaching of all religions. It is the belief in all religions that service to all living beings is the service to God and this is the way of attaining perfection in life. All religions believe in supernatural being, transcendental but not indifferent to his creatures. Comparative study of all major religions of the world shows that except certain differences in regard to non-essential or superficial elements, all religions teach the same fundamental truth. All religious practices are the expression of the inward desire for realizing the supreme. The founders of different religion agree in holding that underlying differences there is essential unity. To Vivekananda, religion gets expression through different nations, languages, and their points of similarity and unity are intrinsic. The language of the soul is one for all men.

Amidst the variety of religions, Vivekananda found the universal element in God conceived as a generalized entity. He said that through a generalized entity called 'man' we can see one as a man or woman. So, universal religion runs through all religions of the world in the form of God. This God may be attained as personal, omnipotent or it may be described as the universal existence or the ultimate reality of the universe.

True religion is a direct, transcendental experience of the Ultimate Reality. This idea of direct realization is common to all religions. 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, it is the realizing God. Ideals and methods may differ, but this is the main point to be noted. 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.

Diversity in all fields of life is an obvious fact. In religion also it is so. In fact it is necessarily too. It is a sign of life. When all diversities are eliminated, we get only the peace and uniformity of graveyard. The law of life is therefore unity in diversity. For example, all man are different from one another, but there is an abstract humanity which is common to all. Though we do not see it, yet we are certain it is there. For it is through this generalized humanity that we see and recognize individual men. So is the universal element running as a thread through all individual religions. This universal element is the idea of God, and it exists through eternity. God is the universal existence, the ultimate unity in the universe. In Him we are all one. To put Vivekananda "Unity in variety is the plan of the universe. If it be true that God is the Centre of all religions, and that each of us is moving towards him along one of these radii, then it is certain that all of us must reach that Centre. And at the Centre,



where all the radii meet all our differences will cease.”<sup>9</sup> So if by universal religion any one means that a set of doctrines should be believed in by all mankind, or there should be one universally accepted system of mythology or rituals, it is an impossibility.

Now the question is if variety, the basic law of life has to be recognized and conceded, in what sense can we propound the ideal of universal religion? Vivekananda's answer to this question is that we must learn that truth may be expressed in a hundred thousand ways and each one of these ways is true as far as it goes. We must also learn that the same thing may be viewed from a hundred different standpoints, yet is the same thing. Accordingly, through high philosophy or low, through the most exalted mythology or the grossest, through the most refined ritualism or arrant fetishism, every sect, every soul, every nation, every religion, is consciously or unconsciously struggling upward towards God. It is like men going to the ocean to fetch water in different vessels. The water gets into each vessel according to its shape and capacity. God is like that water, filling these different vessels, and in each vessel the vision of God comes in the form of the vessel. He is God in every case. According to Vivekananda this is the only recognition of universality we can get.

So far as the possibility of Universal religion is concerned, according to Vivekananda it is possible only to the extent of having a conception of universalism in which there is a place for all religions suited to different types of humanity. There are various types of mind (man). These various types of man can be classified into four types according to their nature. These are active type, mystic type, philosophic type and devotional type. Swami Vivekananda wants to propagate that religion which 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 approach to a universal religion. In the words of Swami Vivekananda, “Would to God that all men were so constituted that in their minds all these elements of philosophy, mysticism, emotion and of work were equally present in full. That is the ideal, my ideal of perfect man.....To become harmoniously balanced in all these four directions is my ideal of religion.”<sup>10</sup> And according to Vivekananda 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, union between himself and the God of Love; and to the philosopher, it is the union of all existence. This is what is meant by Yoga.

When Vivekananda pleads for universal religion, he does not mean a new religion. He calls for a new attitude towards all religions. And he speaks on behalf of, not his own religion, Hinduism, but of all religions without any exception. This religion recognizes divinity in every man and woman and has no room for persecution and intolerance. The one watchword for universal religion, according to Vivekananda is acceptance. It is not just tolerance. He says “Our watchword, then, 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 Buddhist temple where I shall take refuge in the Buddha



and in the Law. I shall go into the forest and sit down in meditation with the Hindu who is trying to see the light that enlightens the heart of everyone.”<sup>11</sup>

### **Conclusion:**

From the above discussion it has been seen that to Vivekananda, religion is not just a talk and doctrines or theories, nor is it sectarianism. Religion cannot live in sects and societies. It is a relationship between soul and God. He explains that religion does not consist in erecting temples or building churches or attending public worship. As well as it cannot find in the books or in words or in lectures or in organizations. Religion does not consist in subscribing to a particular creed or faith but in spiritual realization. Therefore, spiritual realization is religion. Religion is inseparable with man and his life. Another thing is that, it is within the man. Each and every one should understand God within their soul. Since religion is the manifestation of the divinity already within man, therefore, it is not necessary to have doctrines or dogmas and intellectual argumentation. It is realization in the heart of our hearts.

From the discussion of his concept of universal religion it has been surveyed that Vivekananda's concept of universal religion is not any newly originated independent religion. 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. There are various religions in the world and Swami Vivekananda has taken all these religions as true. All the religions of the world may vary from each other's in their philosophy, mythology and rituals. There is no universally accepted philosophy, mythology and ritual. But with the help of their philosophies, mythologies or rituals all are struggling towards God. And this is the main teaching of all the religions of the world. The essential unity of all religions lies in realization of God. God is the Centre of all religions. Though the end of all religions is the same, but the means of arriving at the same goal may vary from religion to religion.

Universal religion would consist in recognizing that there may be various and different ways of approach to the religious object. It gives perfect liberty to the individual in this regard. But at the same time, the spirit of universal religion demands that every approach must be large hearted enough to have a respect for the other ones. The one watch word for universal religion, according to Vivekananda is 'acceptance'. 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 then religion will play its real role in the society by uniting the peoples. Practically viewing, such an environment may highly be beneficial for the world people and so it may be highly desirable. Vivekananda's concept of universal religion is, therefore, not a new religion with a new Scripture and new liturgy; it is a new approach to religion, a new spiritual and moral ideal. It not merely prescribes tolerance, it stresses on acceptance of other religions as true thereby making religion a principle of human harmony.

The professed religions irrespective of time and nation have generally degenerated into sectarian groups fostering rivalry and internal hindrance which divide and antagonize men. The so-



called religious sects staying away from extending love and holiness are out to create a lot of narrow walls around them and common hate among innocent followers. According to each and every religion, God has offered his exclusive expression to his own prophet, Buddha, Krishna, Christ or Muhammad with the hope that all others would follow blindly his steps, or suffer spiritual privation. Religion with its 'Thou shalt renounce' is the direct opposite of the new commandment, 'thou enjoy', on which all our major and minor prophets have agreed. Religion cannot be accepted as signifying a particular creed or faith but in a state of spiritual realization. Each and every religion should cultivate the divinity within to the perpetual level. It is neither blind faith nor mere intellectual understanding but being and becoming are more significant in regard to a spiritual life. All the religions of the world must understand that this building of life and character and spiritual transformation is the essence of religion. We can see in Vivekananda's philosophy that spirituality gets prime importance through which he does not mean the changing manners and customs but the idea of oneness of all. The more the religions of the world rise to spiritual realization the more conflicting or quarrelling forms and clear cut differences are bound to vanish. The different religions of the world must come together, walk together and work out some common criteria to avoid mutual conflicts, misunderstanding, misconceptions, prejudices, superstitious beliefs. And if they are not to continue the position of conflict or competition, they should develop a spirit of comprehension which will break down superstition, misunderstanding and bind them together as various representations of a single truth. The reality is one and all pervasive by nature, underlying as the immanent core of each and every religion of the world. This unique reality has been being interpreted by different ways in different languages.

In conclusion we can say that religion has come to mean something very narrow in recent times. But when we speak of religion in connection with Swami Vivekananda, there is nothing narrow or exclusive about it, nothing negative about it; it is pure spirituality. He offered us a religion which is very simple and at the same time problem solving. It is simple because it is nothing except realizing our divinity. Again it may be called problem solving because it will solve the problems which arise out of the religious rituals, dogmas etc. Again if we realize oneness with the whole universe there is maximum chance of helping the helpless by avoiding our selfishness. So far as India is concerned, this has been the teaching of her great masters, the sages of the Upanishads and the teacher of the Bhagavad Gita. They taught us to view religion as a matter of anubhava or spiritual realization. Again Vivekananda did not try to establish Hinduism as a universal religion. He did not say that peoples belong to other religions should avoid their own religion for merging in Hinduism. Every religion in its pure form i.e. in spiritual realization is universal. And this spiritual realization is nothing but realization of the identity of the individual soul with the universal soul and that universal soul is either Brahman or Allah or God or any name we may ascribe.



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