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Re-imagining Universalism: Contextualizing Religious Diversity and the Concept of Harmony in the Philosophy of Swami Vivekananda

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Abstract

Swami Vivekananda's philosophy has largely been misinterpreted as a radical exposition of Hinduism. However, a close examination of his writings reveal that we championed the cause of world peace and propagated the notion of "sarva dharma sambhav." He had a great understanding of all the diverse religions of the world and firmly believed in the co-existence of all religious groups. He opined that "if there were not different religions, different worldviews, no one religion would survive."¹ He was critical of some religious traditions but he never outrightly rejected them. He completely accepted all the different religious traditions of the world and believed in celebrating their uniqueness. This paper aims at examining the notions of diversity and universalism in the philosophy of Swami Vivekananda.

Introduction

Swami Vivekananda's ideas on the Hindu dharma and his articulation of the superiority of the civilizational values of the East over the West have been firmly established in the annals of philosophy. Scholars in the past have analyzed the philosophical connotations of Swami Vivekananda's works and have tried to establish without doubt that he espoused the superiority of the Hindu dharma. What, however, has not been studied in-depth are his views on other religions of the world. A detailed study of his lectures and narrations lends credence to the fact that Swami Vivekananda had a deep understanding about all the religions of the world and spoke eloquently about the co-existence and synthesis of all religious systems.

The ideas of Swami Vivekananda on the civilizational superiority of Bharat have led to his thoughts being misinterpreted by scholars who have sought to project him as a champion of the Hindu dharma. Swami Vivekananda was indeed a champion of the Hindu dharma, however, what needs to be also understood is that he was also an unequivocal supporter of world peace and peaceful co-existence of all religions of the world.

¹ Ibid, p. 482



In this paper, an attempt will be made to analyze the views of Swamiji on the various religious systems. His views on the necessity of religious diversity and the synthesis between various forms of faith will be scrutinized in-depth in order to put forth a comprehensive argument about the necessity of viewing Swamiji not only as a champion of the Hindu dharma but also as a torch-bearer of universalism, religious diversity and harmony.

The necessity of religion

In order to understand the conception of world religions and their necessity in the philosophical outlook of Swami Vivekananda, it is imperative to first explain how Swamiji viewed religion. According to Swami Vivekananda, religion was an important instrument in the social order, and without religion it would be impossible for civilizations to thrive. In a lecture delivered in London on 'The Necessity of Religion,' Swami Vivekananda, articulated that "Of all the forces that have worked and are still working to mould the destinies of the human race, none, certainly is more potent than that, the manifestation of which we call religion."² He also articulated that "In very many cases, the bonds of religion have proved stronger than the bonds of race, or climate or even of descent. Persons worshipping the same God, believing in the same religion, have stood by each other, with much greater strength and constancy, than people with much the same descent or even brothers."³ According to Swami Vivekananda, "Religion, as a science, as a study, is the greatest and healthiest exercise that the human mind can have. Thus religion, as a study, seems to me to be absolutely necessary."⁴

In another lecture delivered in the Universalist Church, Pasadena, California on 28th January 1900, Swami Vivekananda, defined religion as a "realization, not talk nor doctrine, nor theories. It is being and becoming, not hearing or acknowledging. It is the whole soul becoming changed into what it believes. That is religion."⁵ Swami Vivekananda spoke about religions having a 'life power.'⁶ He conceived religions as being alive and thriving. He explained his position on the necessity of religion by elaborating on the longevity of all the religious orders. According to him, "Not one of the great religions of the world has died. Not only so, each one of them is progressive. Christians are multiplying, Mohemmadans are multiplying, the Hindus are gaining ground, and the Jews also are increasing in number. Only one religion of the world – an ancient, great religion – had dwindled away and that is the religion of Zoroastrianism, the religion of the ancient Persians. All the other great religions are living, spreading and increasing. If what the modern scientists say is true, that the survival of the fittest is the test, these religions prove by their still living that they are yet fit for some people."⁷ He gave the example of some of the existing religions like Hinduism, Christianity,

² Op cit, Swami Vivekananda, Vol. II, p. 57

³ Ibid, Vol. II, p. 57

⁴ Ibid, Vol. II, p. 66

⁵ Ibid, Vol. II, p. 396

⁶ Ibid, Vol. II, p. 360

⁷ Op cit, Swami Vivekananda, Vol. II, p. 361



Buddhism, and Islam which were not only existing but also spreading at a rapid pace all over the world, and hence the ever-expanding nature of religion was highlighted by the great monk.

Therefore, from a reading of the public lectures and speeches delivered by one of the greatest venerable mystics of Bharat, it becomes evident that he articulated the necessity of religion and its efflorescence in a very strong and cogent manner. To Swami Vivekananda, religion was an absolute necessity and by virtue of religions having survived for thousands of years, there can be no attempt to nullify the purpose of religion in the world.

Celebrating diversity

“The Bible, the Vedas, the Koran and all other sacred books are but so many pages, and an infinite number of pages remain yet to unfolded. Salutation to all the great prophets of the past, to all the great ones of the present, and to all that are to come in the future!”⁸

-Swami Vivekananda

Swami Vivekananda developed a practical theory of religion in which he traced three distinct parts which formed the core of all religious orders in the world. First, there is the philosophy which presents the whole scope of that religion, setting forth its basic principles, the goal and the means of reaching it. Second, is mythology, which is philosophy made concrete. It consists of legends relating to the lives of men or of supernatural beings. The third part is the ritual. This is still more concrete and is made up of forms and ceremonies, various physical attitudes, flowers and incense, and many other things that appeal to the senses. All recognized religions have these three elements. Some lay more stress on one, some on another. There is no one universal philosophy.⁹ He also articulated that there can be no mythological harmony. All religions have their own mythologies. Even as far as rituals are concerned, there is no similarity.¹⁰

To point out the differences in the ritualism within religions, Swami Vivekananda gave an example of the differences between Christianity and Hinduism. He put forth the disregard for the phallus symbol among the Christians and utter contempt for the Christian sacrament among the Hindus.¹¹ Hence, there was no universally accepted ritual, philosophy or mythology. Each religion had its own uniqueness. He however, postulated that the differences in each religion need to be understood and respected, and instead of despising each other, followers of different religious orders must accept variation and diversity. In a lecture on the Ideal of a Universal Religion, Swamiji intelligibly articulated the necessity of recognizing variation. He pronounced that “I do not mean any one universal philosophy or universal mythology or universal ritual. This world must go on working,

⁸ Ibid, Vol. II, p. 374

⁹ Ibid, Vol. II, p. 377

¹⁰ Ibid, Vol. II, p. 374

¹¹ Swami Vivekananda, *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Mayavati Memorial Edition, Vol. II, Advaita Ashram, Calcutta, Twentieth Reprint, 2002, p. 379



wheel within wheel, this intricate mass of machinery, most complex, most wonderful. What can we do then? We can make it run smoothly, we can lessen the friction, we can grease the wheels. How? By recognizing the natural necessity of variation. Just as we have recognized unity by our very nature, so we must accept diversity.”¹²

He expressed that it is imperative for people to learn that truth may be expressed in a hundred thousand ways, and that each of these ways is true. Same thing can be viewed from hundred different standpoints. Swamiji presented a delightful example to elaborate his views. He spoke about a man who has to start from earth and reach the sun and at each stage, he has to take photographs of his journey and how he perceives the sun on the way. When he returns he gets different angles, different kinds of photographs of the same sun.¹³ According to Swamiji, religions were also similar.

The equal greatness of all religions

“Variation is the sign of life and it must be there. I pray that they may multiply so that at last there will be as many sects as human being, and each one will have his own method, his individual method of thought in religion”¹⁴

-Swami Vivekananda

All religions of the world have been in a constant tussle over gaining superior status. Each of these religions has claimed to be the sole path to reaching the supreme divine. However, according to Swamiji, there is no one religion in the world which can satisfy all of humanity. That only one religion possesses the knowledge of the infinite is wrong. He gave an illustrative example of Islam which was propagated with the sword in one hand and the Koran in another, and all those who did not agree to submit to Islam were killed. For the initial six hundred years they got phenomenal success and then there came a time when they had to halt.¹⁵ According to Swamiji, if religions worked in this manner, they would meet with a roadblock at some point of time as is evident in the case of Islam.

Hence, Swami Vivekananda presented a critique of this approach. He postulated a very important question—If the claims of a religion that it has all the truth and that God has given it all this truth in a certain book were true, why are there so many sects?¹⁶ He gave the example of the Bible, the holy book of the Christians. Swamiji explained that it is same holy book but different sects within

¹² Ibid, Vol. II, p. 383

¹³ Ibid, Vol. II, p. 383

¹⁴ Ibid, Vol. II, p. 363

¹⁵ Op cit, Swami Vivekananda, Vol. II, p. 369-70

¹⁶ Ibid, Vol. II, p. 362-63



Christianity have interpreted it differently, and each says that it alone understands that text and all the rest are wrong. This, according to Swamiji, was the case with all religions.¹⁷

There are many sects among the Mohammedans, among the Buddhists and among the Hindus, and according to Swamiji, all these sects could not be made to believe in one standard idea or tenet of faith. Swami Vivekananda expressed great pleasure at the existence of various sects. He said that "I am glad that sects exist, and I only wish that they may go on multiplying more and more. Why? Simply because of this: if you and I and all who are present here were to think exactly the same thoughts, there would be no thoughts for us to think. We know that two or more forces must come into collision in order to produce motion. It is the clash of thoughts, the differentiation of thoughts that awakens thought."¹⁸ Swamiji articulated that so long as mankind thinks, there will be sects.

Swami Vivekananda believed that although many divergent views existed and not all were in harmony, they were not essentially contradictory in nature. He explained his position by stating that though the external forms of each religious order was different than the other in terms of the places of worship, languages, rituals, books, etc, the internal soul of every religion was not in contradiction to the other. According to him, "Every religion has a soul behind it, and that soul may differ from the soul of another religion; but are they really contradictory? Do they contradict or supplement each other? I believe that they are not contradictory, they are supplementary. 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, addition not exclusion. System after system arises, each one embodying a great idea, and ideals must be added to ideals. And this is the march of humanity."¹⁹

Therefore, Swamiji stated "That all these religions are different forces in the economy of God, working for the good of mankind; and that not one can become dead, not one can be killed. Each religion is living. From time to time it may retrograde or go forward, but the soul is ever there, it cannot be lost."²⁰ He further stated that "The ideal which every religion represents is never lost, and so every religion is intelligently on the march."²¹

According to Swamiji, religions needed to be accepted as they were, and instead of trying to establish one-upmanship, he put forth a scheme wherein all the divergent religious creeds could co-exist and supplement each other. Swami Vivekananda was of the firm belief that a distinction needed to be made between "diverse" and "contradictory" and diversity was to be celebrated and contradiction was to be replaced by supplementation. Swamiji detested the word toleration.

¹⁷ Ibid, Vol. II, p. 363

¹⁸ Ibid, Vol. II, p. 363

¹⁹ Op cit, Swami Vivekananda, Vol. II, p. 365

²⁰ Ibid, Vol. II, p. 365

²¹ Ibid, Vol. II, p. 366-67



According to him, toleration meant that "I think that you are wrong and I am just allowing you to live."²²

An inclusionary religious creed

"Our watchword must be acceptance and not exclusion"²³

-Swami Vivekananda

Swami Vivekananda not only spoke about celebrating diversity, he also vehemently supported the objective of attaining a harmonious religious creed. Although many attempts had been made in the past to formulate a harmonious creed, nothing comprehensive was put forth by people who spoke only from one standpoint. According to Swami Vivekananda all these attempts at establishing harmony among religions had failed because they did not have a practical plan.²⁴ He propounded a plan in which he urged the fellow citizens of the world to not destroy, not break, not pull down anything but to build together.²⁵

Although Swamiji greatly supported the idea of religious diversity, he also hypothesized about an ideal religion, and according to him "If there is ever going to be an ideal religion, it must be broad and large enough to supply food for all the minds. It must supply the strength of philosophy to the philosopher, the devotee's heart to the worshipper, to the ritualist, it will give all that the most marvelous symbolism can convey; to the poet, it will give as much of heart as he can take in. To make such a broad religion, we shall have to go back to the time when religions began and take them all in."²⁶

Swamiji propagated a religion which could be acceptable to all minds. Such a religion would be equally philosophical, equally emotional, equally mystic, and equally conducive to action.²⁷ The ideal religion propagated by Swamiji was to combine four elements of philosophy, mysticism, emotion, and work.²⁸ He aimed harmoniously balancing all the four elements in order to establish an ideal religion. According to him, this religion could be attained by Yoga or union.

Conclusion

Swami Vivekananda stood for elevating religion to a higher pedestal by studying it on a broader basis. He espoused that all narrow, limited, fighting ideas of religion must be eliminated. He elucidated that religious ideals of the future must embrace all that exists in the world and is good and

²² Ibid, Vol. II, p. 374

²³ Op cit, Swami Vivekananda, Vol. II, p. 373-74

²⁴ Ibid, Vol. II, p. 384

²⁵ Ibid, Vol. II, p. 384

²⁶ Ibid, Vol. II, p. 385

²⁷ Ibid, Vol. II, p. 387

²⁸ Ibid, Vol. II, p. 388



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great and at the same time, have infinite scope for future development. Religions must also be inclusive, and not look down with contempt upon another.

Swamiji was a great patron of religious diversity, and not once did he articulate the superiority of one over another. He was a firm believer in the principle of peaceful co-existence, and had immense faith in the survival of all religious orders. He was of the opinion that religions must be allowed to flourish in an environment of harmony and peace. Therefore, contrary to popular imagination, Swami Vivekananda was not only a champion of the Hindu dharma but also a great reveler in the beauty and bounty of all religious orders in the world.