



## A GLIMPSE INTO SWAMI VIVEKANANDA'S PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

□ Bibek Manna\*

### ABSTRACT

Swami Vivekananda's universal religion is based on the *Advaita Vedānta*. It is known as practical Vedanta in the sense that it is grounded on the application of this universal unity of all creatures in practice. This is also the logical ground for inter-religious and intra-religious dialogue for socio-religious harmony. It is based on the Self as universal and religious way of life based on this. This attitude permits any person to have a choice of adhering to any religious faith. It does not preach uniformity. On the contrary, it appeals to universality. No religion obviously can have 'the monopoly to holiness, purity and truth.' Harmony among religions is a necessary condition for peace in society. In the absence of religious harmony and peace in a multi-religious society, there cannot be any sustainable development and in the absence of sustainable development, there cannot be prosperity.

**Keywords :** Advaita Vedānta, Phenomena, Universal Brotherhood, multiculturalism, Existence (*sat*), Consciousness (*cit*), Bliss (*ānanda*), Universal Religion.

#### Introduction :

Swami Vivekananda, the great religious teacher of modern India, introduces contemporary features to the age-old notion of religion. The present paper is a cursory discussion of his philosophy of religion. The discussion is divided in three parts. The first section devoted to his idea of religion in general. The second section consists of a brief exposition of his concept of a universal religion. The third section is devoted to the new orientation, he has suggested, to the rich philosophy of *Advaita Vedānta* to guide and control the life-pattern of modern man.

#### I

#### Vivekananda's Idea of Religion

Religion, according to Swami Vivekananda, is a basic necessity of life. Man, the strongest being in the animal kingdom, has an aspect higher than his animal self. His rationality discovers the limitations of his reason and senses. Vivekananda envisages that religious consciousness originates in mortal man's endeavor to transcend these limitations. This urge is a growth from

within and, being inherent in the very nature of man, it is universal. It is present even in an atheist, for the tendency to avoid religious ideas may also be considered as a form of religion.

Swami Vivekananda analyses religious consciousness to unravel the true nature of religion. Like all mental phenomena, religious consciousness contains three basic elements of cognition, conation and volition. Different religious sects have emphasized on one or the other of these elements. In an ideal religion these elements are to be harmonized and organized in the form of a unity.

Another unique feature of religion, according to Swami Vivekananda, is the fact that religious consciousness has a supernatural reference- be it a personal God, an impersonal absolute, a moral law or the ideal of humanity. The religious facts, unlike the scientific facts, are abstract; in every religion 'there is an ideal unit abstraction, which is put before us...'

The history of mankind has records of many

\*Research Scholar - Department of Philosophy, Calcutta University

religious wars. Swami Vivekananda notes that despite the conflicts, none of the major religions have been eradicate. This proves the eternity of religion. The conflicts, in fact, have added vitality to enrich religious thoughts. Human progress, Swami Vivekananda observes, has moved not from falsehood to truth, it is the progress from the lesser to the higher truth. He says emphatically: 'it is the clash of thoughts that awakens thought'. And Swami Vivekananda maintains that the conflicts may be resolved in a universal religion.

## II

### Swami Vivekananda's idea of a universal religion

For Swami Vivekananda, the idea of a universal religion is not a Utopia. He firmly believes that it already exists. The differences among various religious sects arise due to undue emphasis on one aspect of reality, ignoring others. But all religious faiths represent the same reality. In this sense, the contradictions are only apparent and different religious thoughts may be regarded as complementary to one another. Universal religion, which must be satisfactory to everyone, must make room for acceptance of others' ideals and beliefs. This is the cardinal principle of universal religion, which has been imparted to Swami Vivekananda by his master Sri Ramakrishna. The ideal religion, must strike a proportionate balance between philosophy, emotion and practice. Swami Vivekananda maintains: 'Religion without philosophy runs into superstition, philosophy without religion becomes dry atheism.' Religion, besides enriching man, has a social value. It exerts social control through ethical codes and philosophy provides the justification of ethical codes.

Swami Vivekananda's concept of universal religion satisfies a modern man. He wants to elevate religion from the narrow limits of prejudices and superstitions and establish it on a rational foundation. Religion becomes a matter of choice; it is not something, which a man obtains by heredity. Swami Vivekananda introduces scientific approach to religion. Science begins with concrete facts, but facts are not kept isolated and individual. Science aims to provide an explanation of individual facts in the light of a higher law. The laws, again, are not kept as isolated, they are arranged in a

hierarchy. In this way, the progress of science moves from the lower to the higher and from the gross to the refined. Secondly, in scientific explanations, there is no reference to any factor outside the nature of the explanandum. A proper explanation must be in terms of the essential nature of the very thing it explains. For example, Swami Vivekananda says: 'The chemist never requires demons, or ghosts, or anything of that sort to explain his phenomena.' Universal religion, acceptable to modern man, must fulfill these two criteria. And these criteria, Swami Vivekananda believes, are duly satisfied in Śankara's philosophy of *Advaitavāda*. There are different versions of *Advaitavāda*. Swami Vivekananda regards these different versions as the stepping stones towards Śankara's theory of Absolute Monism. According to Śankara, Brahman, or the Absolute Reality, is one; it is the highest abstraction having existence (*sat*), consciousness (*cit*) and bliss (*ānanda*) as its essence. Living animals, including man and the material world are all, in essence, identical with *Brahman*. Vivekananda also accepts Śankara's explanation of the apparent differences in the world. *Brahman*, for him, is like the infinite ocean, and the individual souls the waves, which are, in essence, non-different from the ocean.

Śankara's *Advaitavāda* with its rational profundity, Swami Vivekananda thinks, satisfies the demand of a contemporary religion. The doctrine of an abstract Reality has some special advantages. First of all, it is an explanation of the concrete and individual in terms of the higher and the refined. *Brahman* of Śankara, for Swami Vivekananda, is 'the last generalization to which we can come.' Everything else is nothing but a manifestation of Brahman. The casual connection established in science involves two homogeneous entities. The effect is not essentially different from the cause. What was latent in the cause becomes manifested through the process of causation. The explanation *Advaita Vedānta* provides, thus, is able to fulfill the first criterion.

The idea of a personal God involves determinations. God as *saguna* is the creator and sustainer of this world and He is full of noble qualities and bereft of everything evil and vicious. Thus the 'idea of a

personal God has to carry with it a personal devil.' In *Advaitavāda*, we go beyond the Personal God. The *Brahman* is devoid of all determinations - He is neither good nor bad. In fact, for Vivekananda, good and bad do not stand for any absolute value. They are relative to time and situation. What is good from one perspective may be bad from another. Further the personal God, who creates the world, is external to his creation, but the *Advaita* explanation of everything in the universe as identical with the *Brahman* is an explanation that appeals to no adventitious element. Everyone is potentially identical with the Supreme Reality and thus all are, by their very nature existence, consciousness and bliss.

*Advaitavāda* propagates the metaphysical unity of all and this is also the truth modern science aims to establish. Swami Vivekananda writes: '...if modern science is proving anything again and again, it is this, that we are one – mentally, spiritually and physically... it is the ocean of thought, one infinite mass, in which your mind and my mind are like whirl pools... everyone from the highest angel to the lowest particle of matter is but an expression of that one infinite ocean.' Besides, the personal God is not denied in *Advaitavāda*. Rather, He has been given a 'better basis'. To put in the words of Swami Vivekananda:

There are various forms of that same oneness, of which all these various ideas of worlds are but various readings, and the personal God is the highest reading that can be attained to, of that impersonal, by the human intellect.

Later he adds

The whole is impersonal, and within this impersonal are all these various persons beginning with the lowest atom, up to God, the Personal God, the Creator, the Ruler of the universe, to whom we pray...such a personal God is explicable as the highest manifestation of the impersonal.

Thus nothing of ordinary religion is lost in *Advaitavāda*. There remains the personal God with all his excellence and grandeur. Nevertheless, Swami Vivekananda holds that we must know the impersonal reality in order to know the personal God. And the worship of the impersonal God is through truth,

with proclaims the essential identity of all beings. The doctrine of Impersonal Absolute thus endows man with immense strength. Once the doctrine is understood and internalized, nothing more remains to be known. This is the truth where all religious remains to be known. This is the truth where all religious searches come to end; 'That is the only true knowledge which makes us one with this Universal God of the Universe.'

### III

#### Swami Vivekananda's Idea of Practical Vedanta

For a social reformer like Swami Vivekananda, Philosophy cannot remain a mere speculative enterprise. It inspires man act in a special manner. The philosophy of *Advaita Vedantā* highlights the divinity or spirituality of man, thereby removing all differences of status and gender. The service to humanity, according to the principle of Universal Brotherhood, becomes service to God. The highest and purest action of a man is his endeavor to uplift the downtrodden in empathy and Swami Vivekananda's life has been devoted to realize this mission. For him, true love for mankind is the essence of religion. He says:

When we come to the real, spiritual, universal concept, then, and then alone, religion will become real and living, it will come into our very nature, live in our every movement, penetrate every pore of our society and be infinitely more a power of good than it has never been before.

A true religion consists not in the performance of external rites and rituals. A true religious man is pure in heart; he rises above selfish desires to embrace others in universal love. The pursuit of the infinite is the purest pursuit a man can undertake. The satisfaction one gets in this pursuit is the greatest and noblest of all gifts that offer to mankind.

Swami Vivekananda's concluding words in his final address clearly substantiate the pluralistic view of religion: "The Christian is not to become a Hindu or a Buddhist, nor a Hindu or a Buddhist to become a Christian; but each must assimilate the Spirit of the others and yet preserve his individuality and grow according to his own law of growth." These words should ignite the society once again to implement the teachings of Swami

Vivekananda. Harmony among religions means expressing empathy, love, concern and togetherness. Love and forgiveness of the past heal the wounds of conflicts and selfishness inflicted by fundamentalism and fanaticism. Love breaks the boundaries of monocultures and opens the doors for multiculturalism. Harmony leads to democracy and fosters tolerance, solidarity, dialogue and acceptance. Above all, it is love that binds the society and the nations and this love-bond is the foundation for inter-religious harmony and peace. We need to adapt new approaches to promote a sustainable culture of harmony and peace suitable for the emerging pluralistic society. After 125 years, the vibrancy of the voice of Swami Vivekananda that filled the Columbus Hall in 1893 is echoed today- “Help and not fight,” “Assimilation and not Destruction,” “Harmony and Peace and not Dissension.”

#### Endnotes :

- I. Swami Vivekananda, *Jnāna Yoga*, p. 8.
- ii Swami Vivekananda, *Jnāna Yoga*, p. 379.
- iii. Swami Vivekananda, *Complete Works*, Vol. 7, p. 34.
- iv. Swami Vivekananda, “Reason and Religion”, *Complete Works*, Vol.1, pp. 367-386.
- v. Ibid
- vi Swami Vivekananda, “Reason and Religion”, *Complete Works*, Vol.1, pp. 367-386.
- vii. Swami Vivekananda, “Reason and Religion”, *Complete Works*, Vol.1, pp. 367-386.
- viii. Ibid, p.362.
- ix. *Jnāna Yoga*, p.19
- x. Swami Vivekananda , *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* , Advaita Ashrama, Kolkata, Vol. 1, 2011, p. 24.
- xi. Swami Vivekananda , *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* , Advaita Ashrama, Kolkata, Vol. 1, 2011, p. 24.

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