Swami Vivekananda and the Idea of Democratic Spiritualism: Vedantic Verse on Universal Brotherhood

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Abstract

Swami Vivekananda was the first in Indian philosophy to envisage an ideal society. Vivekananda was a vedantist. He was a believer in Advaita or Monism. He had a firm faith in the deeper unity of all religion. The Vedanta taught Vivekananda that the soul is infinite. He could see the inseparable linkage between the human soul and the universal soul. Vivekananda emphasized the sameness and omnipresence of the soul of the universe. Vivekananda gave equal importance to all religions in the world. Thus he heroically championed the concept of spiritual equality. He stated that all man is equal and equally entitled to spiritual wisdom. This idea of democratic spiritualism was indeed a radical step. This paper highlights Vivekananda's concept of world-religion is the concept of universal equality of human kind to keep universal brotherhood in society. It is an idea which is very important and necessary for modern global era.

Key Words*: **Advaita or Monism, universal soul, spiritual equality, democratic spiritualism, universal brotherhood**.*

"As the different streams having their sources in different places all mingle their water in, the sea,so,O Lord! The different paths which men take through different tendencies various though they appear, crooked or straight, all lead to Thee."

-Vivekananda

Swamiji's (12th January, 1863-4th July, 1902) idea of democratic spiritualism based on Vedantic values of equality, what may be called 'Vedantic idea of universal brotherhood`. His democratic spiritualism was inspired by the Vedantic principle of 'non-duality`. All are equal and same as all of them share divinity. There is no inequality among them because God does not discriminate against any person. Vivekananda saw democracy as 'a way of life`. Democracy stands for freedom, equality and brotherhood. It ensures the rights as well as dignity of the individual. The Vedanta taught Vivekananda that the soul is infinite. He could see the inseparable linkage between the human soul and the universal soul. Vivekananda gave equal importance to all religions in the world. Thus he heroically championed the concept of spiritual equality. He stated that all man is equal and equally

entitled to spiritual wisdom. Vivekananda also stood for universalism and he also believed in the concept of the Universal man. A deep and intimate vision of the universal man was essential for the realization of universal brotherhood. This idea of democratic spiritualism was indeed a radical step. This paper highlights Vivekananda's concept of world-religion is the concept of universal equality of human kind to keep universal brotherhood in society, the world may have to find inspiration from the Vedantic teachings of which Vivekananda was an expounder in modern times. It is an idea which is very important and necessary for modern global era.

Swami Vivekananda was the first in Indian philosophy to envisage an ideal society. Vivekananda was a Vedantist. He was a believer in Advaita or Monism. He had a firm faith in the unity of Godhood and the deeper unity of all religions. With his belief in 'unity in diversity ', Vivekananda argued that the individuals of all countries and regions as well as of all classes, inspite of their external differences, share an internal unity. To Vivekananda, if there is any God, it is the soul of the individual. Individuals may differ from one another in respect of their socio-economic background and regional identity. But their souls are not different from one another. As God is manifested into the soul of each individual. The individual, because of this soul force, is propelled towards internationalism and universalism. As Sister Nivedita said,

"No institution, no environment stood between him and any human heart." 'That society is the greatest, where the highest truths became practical', he observed. In an ideal society, there is no sphere left for privilege of force, wealth, intelligence. Any kind of privilege for any individual or group on the basis of spiritual power or birth is negation of an ideal society. Vivekananda was very critical of the privilege groups of the society who oppressed the most of the society. In his opinion this was 'the worst tyranny in the world'.[1] Inspired by the Vedanta, Vivekananda emphasized the sameness and omnipresence of the soul of the universe. As the God resides in every soul, all souls are divine and equal. Therefore, any claim of privilege based on spiritual superiority or birth is contrary to this Vedantic truth. He could see the inseparable linkage between the human soul and the universal soul. His vision was a universal order in which all peoples, irrespective of their race, colour, and religion treated one another as brothers and sisters.[2]

Vivekananda argued for the necessity of a universal religion or acceptance of religious pluralism. Contemporary Indian philosopher Swami Vivekananda has discovered a unique explanation to the concept of religion. To create a peaceful co-existence within global society respect for religious diversity and acceptance of religious pluralism is essential. According to him, religion is not just a talk on doctrines or theories, nor is it sectarianism. Religion does not live in sects and societies. It is a relationship between soul and God. Religion consists of realization. Therefore, spiritual realization is religion. Vivekananda says:

"In the Advaita philosophy, the whole universe is one in the self which is called Brahman. That self when it appears behind the universe is called God. The same self when

it appears behind this little universe, the body, is the soul…universal self which is beyond the universal modification of Prakriti is what is called Isvara, the supreme ruler, God."[3] He believed in the divinity of the cosmic creative force regarded as the supreme mother. To realize that religion, according to him, man should have to practice four types of Yogas. Those are the yoga of knowledge, control of mind, selfless work and love of God. We may call Vivekananda's formulation of this new ideal of world – religion as a universal love or universal brotherhood. It gives an equal value for all religions in the world as exemplifying truth. Thus, Vedanta could serve the purpose of social and political reconstruction. In this way religious pluralism argues that claims to absolute truth are a hindrance to peace and harmony.

New information technology in the 21st century has reshaped the economy, culture, social stratification and social values in our lives today. We call this post-modern or post-industrial society .In this society our economy, the way of professional life has changed. New advancements in communication system have transformed our globe into a global village. Our society has moved into the business of generating and manipulating symbols. The important thing is to highlight the culture. But the culture itself has become a big business. New information technology is occupying a very importance place in our life. The education system also has changed. For an example, for higher education we have today what is called 'virtual campuses'. In this scene, the man in present century is not confined to his own village or to his native country. His relation with the society has become vast. Therefore, in this situation people are forced to come to the city for job or for education purposes. They have to live and co-operate with different ethnic groups, various religious believers within a culturally diversified environment. So, in this 'cosmopolitan life' concept, people must be aware of and adhere to plurality of religion, nevertheless, within this 'cosmopolitan life 'and modern society we cannot see respect for religious diversity or acceptance of religious pluralism. Vivekananda reflected on the necessity of the concept of world –religion for the society. Therefore, whole of the world community is expecting a religion, which is acceptable to all. Different social organizations are representing different needs of the man, and they endeavor to practice humanness in society. Religions, on the other hand, represent the spiritual aspirations and struggles of mankind. The unpleasant reality, however, is that various world religions have been indulging in mutual criticisms, vilification and 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 its crucial role in the human life.

Vivekananda underscored the equal status of all religions and the religious plurality in human society. Vivekananda said that "we must understand all of those religions have proved their strength, their worth and their necessity for mankind".[5] However, he did not just jump into this conclusion. 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".[6] That was his justification of equal status of all the religions. Vivekananda also questioned the diversity of religious views in explaining the identical phenomenon, and held that the diversity of views is due to the fact that what each religion described was only the different phases of the same phenomenon. He explained it by giving an example. If, someone takes photograph of one building from different angles, we can see different faces of the same object. But those differences cannot be called contradictions, but only shows the many-sidedness of a single unique entity. Therefore, according to him, "we are viewing truth, getting as much of it as circumstances will permit, colouring the truth with our own intellect and grasping it with our own mind. We can only know as much of truth as is related to us, as much of it as we are able to receive. This occasion sometimes even contradictory ideas; yet they all belong to the same universal truth". Each religion has particular ideals that are needed to the society. Thus, Vivekananda gave equal importance to all religions in the world. He illustrated his view through Islam. The followers of Islam are considered to be equal. This is the particular excellence of that religion. It preaches to the world is the brotherhood of all belonging to their faith. Therefore, this ideal may effectively be used to develop social harmony. Vivekananda heroically championed the concept of spiritual equality. He stated that all men are equal and equally entitled to spiritual wisdom and gnosis of the highest type. His democratic spiritualism was indeed a radical step.

World 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 world-religion. He explained it in a way: "our watch word, 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 every one of them, it whatever from they worship Him. I shall go to the mosque of the Mohammedan; I shall enter the Christian's church and knell before the crucifix; I shall enter the Buddhists temple where I shall take refuge in the Buddha and in the law. I shall go the forest and sit down in the meditation with the Hindu who is trying to the light that enlightens the heart of the

everyone".[7]Vivekananda continued, "As human mind broaden, its spiritual steps broaden too. The time has already come when a man cannot record a thought without its reaching all corners of the earth; by merely physical means we have come into touch with the whole world; so the future religions of the world have to become as universal and as wide. The religious ideals of the future must embrace all that exists in the world and is good and great ,and at the same time, have infinite scope for future development".[8]

What becomes clear from these views is that the religion must be studied on a broader basis than it was hitherto done. In this manner, Vivekananda's point of view of religion is both a means as well as an end to human life. According to him, it is the direct religion 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'. This idea of direct religion is common to all religions. The end of all religions is the realizing of God in the soul, and this is the one world-religion. If there is one world truth, in all religions, according to Vivekananda, it is realizing God. Ideals and methods may differ, but this is the main point to be noted. He built his theory of 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. For Swamiji religion is a total concept. All the religions of the world together constitute one whole. For him, there existed only one eternal religion of which all other religions were only variations .Each religion has a special bit, a unique trait and its own articulation of what is good. This uniqueness does not lie in the different buildings, languages, rituals, books etc., employed in various religions, but … in the internal soul of every religion. Every religion has a soul behind it, and that soul may differ from the soul of another religion.[9] He continued: "my idea, therefore, is that all these religions are different forces in the economy of God, working for the God of mankind". In this way the concept of world-religion is not just a concept, but it has a highly practical value too.

Vivekananda, in his assessment of the need of world-religion, found out the importance of the humanity and universal brotherhood to keep religious harmony in society. Then he tried to eliminate the forces of hatred and destruction from the organizational religion and identified the true religion with universal love. He emphasized that the religion should be equally acceptable to all mind, it must be equally philosophic, equally emotional, equally mystic and equally conductive to action. As a precondition for this world-religion to be a reality, Vivekananda said that man and his nature should be perfect, and he suggested four yoga methods to achieve this purpose. He classified that nature of man into four categories, namely, the active type, the mystic type, the philosophic type and the devotional type. Four yogas were meant for these four types of human types, and this practice was to give strength to life with open mind. Vivekananda strongly believed that the essence of all the religions is one. The proof of one religion depends on the proof of all the rest. Vivekananda explained it in this way: for instances, if I have six fingers, and no one else has, you may say that it is abnormal. The same reasoning may be applied to the argument that only one religion is true

and others are false. One religion only, like one set of six fingers in the world, would be unnatural. We see, therefore, that if one religion true, all others must be true. Therefore, Vivekananda's ideal was "many lamps, but one light". The ultimate one, according to him, is the very perfection of existence, the ideal reality. He said: "if you go below the surface, you find that unity between man and man, between races and races, high and low, rich and poor, God and men, men and animals. If you go deep enough all will be seen as only variations of the one, and he who as attained to this conception of oneness have no more dilusion. What can delude him? He knows the reality of everything, the secret of everything. Where is there anymore misery for him? He has traced the reality of everything to the Lord, the centre, the unity of everything, and that is 'Eternal existence, Eternal Knowledge, and eternal bliss'[10].

The basic premises behind Vivekananda's concept of world-religion are the concept of universal equality of humankind. It provides the backbone to Vivekananda's philosophy of religion. It is an idea which is very important and necessary for modern global era. Its relevance for the modern cosmopolitan city life cannot be overestimated. The conception of religious pluralism is the most critical and important debate within the current thinkers in this field. This paper is meant to understand Vivekananda's identification of the concept of democratic spiritualism/universal brotherhood with a moral foundation and a human face and its application to the modern global time. During the past 150 years we have discussed the philosophical importance of the concept of world-religion. Now it has clear that during this century we have to implement this concept to modern cosmopolitan life rather than discussing it again. Following Swami Vivekananda we may conclude that we have only one solution for this multi-cultural and multi-religious world. It is to adhere to the concept of one world-religion, which is not converting adherents of all other religions into one religion but accepting the concept of religious pluralism. It is the essence of Swami Vivekananda's vision to the world. This universal ideal can be practiced not only by believers of different religions but equally by non-believers for it is founded on the ideal of oneness of humanity and it is geared for human self-realization which is not a monopoly of any particular religion. This, truly, global vision can form the foundation for peaceful co-existence of all in the globe. His prescription was spiritual. He perceived spiritual unity as the ultimate goal of all diversity. His vision of democratic spiritualism or ideal universal order is to be established in which all peoples treated one another as brothers and sisters. From that standpoint his greatness needs no academic authentication. It would remain a subject of study for many more years to come.

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