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SWAMY VIVEKANANDA'S PERSPECTIVE OF RELIGION: ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR WAR AND PEACE

Introduction

In the twentieth-Century Westernizing world humanity is trying to gain security in exchange for their submission to social, political and economic bondage. Man living in such a regimented world tries to seek solace and peace offered in the realm of religion. But historical precedents are proving decisively true as man flees from religious persecution once again. This flight seems even more horrifying in the face of his anxiety to fly from evil, terror and misery which pursues him relentlessly. It is at this critical juncture, that the spirit of man needs a 'renaissance' as it were, to walk once again on the path of freedom- "sharp as the Blade of a razor, long and difficult and hard to cross".¹ Let mankind shed its weakness, the cause for all ignorance and misery and set the power of strength in motion to endure sorrow and realise the eternal jewel of Peace.

It is sweet rest in music;
And pause in sacred art;
And Silence between speaking;
Between two fits of passion -
It is the calm of heart.²

Swami Vivekananda: Man, Mission and Message

Narendra Nath Datta better known as Swami Vivekananda conjures up a brilliant vision of a dynamic figure in orange, yellow and red whose eyes propell mankind to attempt to recapture his profound

1. The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, (Hereafter as C.W) Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1985, Vol. 1, P. 342.

2. C.W., Vol. 4, P. 395.

spiritual experience of India's glorious past and work ceaselessly 'upon a plan'³ of reinstating humanity to its original purity as children of God.

Swami Abhedananda, in his lecture before the Vedanta Society of New York on March 8, 1903, said of Swamiji:

The preachers of truth are very few but their powers are felt by those who happen to come within the atmosphere of their divine personality. Such a preacher of truth occasionally appears like a gigantic comet above the horizon, dazzling the eyes and filling the hearts of ordinary mortals with wonder and admiration and silently passes away into the invisible and unknown realms of the universe. The late Swami Vivekananda was one of those great comets who appeared in the spiritual firmament once perhaps after several centuries.⁴

When he began his unique historic address at the International Congress of Religions in Chicago in 1893 with "Sisters and Brothers of America", "seven (?) thousand people rose to their feet as a tribute to something they knew not what" writes Mrs. S.K. Blodgett who later became Swamiji's hostess in Los Angeles.⁵ So stirred by Swamiji's majestic figure and the toll of his voice, rich as a bronze bell,⁶ were the audience that the applause which lasted several minutes symbolised the awakening of the hearts of people to a recall of the former glory of spiritual communion. It was this momentous experience that subtly but surely transformed the hearts of men and hastened humanity towards its goal of true religious harmony.

Thus began the meteoric ascent of Swami Vivekananda as one of the greatest missionaries of Hinduism, Philosopher, spiritual leader, patriot-saint, nation-builder and eventually as an Avatara who came to save humanity as truthfully proclaimed by the 'Gita'.

3. Burke, Marie Louise *Swami Vivekananda in America: New Discoveries*, Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1958, P. 13.

4. *Ibid*, P. 337.

5. *Ibid*, P. 57.

6. *Ibid*, P. 59.

His plan was to organize monks for industrial purposes, to educate the people who could benefit from this knowledge and lead better lives. Says Swami Vivekananda:

To proclaim and make clear the fundamental unity underlying all religions was the mission of my Master."⁷ He further expresses his ideal as: "to preach mankind their divinity, and how to make it manifest in every movement of life".⁸ "To do good for good's sake – with no expectation or desire of reward and never to speak of what we have done – but to keep on working for the love of doing God's work"⁹ was Swami Vivekananda's ultimate philosophy of life which has been the philosophy of great prophets such as Buddha, Christ, Mohammed and Saints alike.

With this philosophy, he worked to bring a confluence between the East and the West leaving an indelible influence on the lives of the vast multitudes whom he touched by his all encompassing love and compassion. With his stature as a world-spiritual teacher he paved the way for international unity, peace and the most important goal of a universal religion.

Swami Vivekananda's Perspective of Religion

His childhood spiritual power was an indication of his growth into a towering personality in whom the aspirations of millions of people would find expression. In him they were to find an able leader who would shake the very foundations of slumbering mankind to respond to his clarion-call of "Arise! Awake! and stop not, until the goal is reached"¹⁰. Just as Plato is incomplete without Socrates, Swami Vivekananda is almost the extension of Sri Ramakrishna, his Master in life and spirit. "Sri Ramakrishna was thought; Swami Vivekananda was the expression of that thought"¹¹. Swami Vivekananda's advent saw, India at the depths of spiritual degradation with 'dont-touchism', extreme ritualism and Hinduism transformed into 'a religion of the kitchen' with

7. C.W., Vol. 4, P. 187.

8. C.W., Vol. 7, P. 501.

9. Burke, Marie Louise, Op.Cit., P. 29.

10. C.W., Vol. 1, P. 342.

11. Vivekananda Centenary Memorial Volume, P. 252.

the object of religion, man being totally rejected. It was on Swami Vivekananda that Sri Ramakrishna bequeathed, the legacy of unique spiritual power and insight to uplift humanity from its conservative groove and urge them towards the realisation of a totally pure and free spiritual ecstasy. Service of mankind was the paramount ideal of Sri Ramakrishna to which his faithful disciple Swami Vivekananda lived upto till his very end. He established the Ramakrishna Mission on 1st May, 1897 to continue spreading the Gospel of his Master even after his passing away.

According to him, it was a standing libel on human nature to call man a sinner. He calls men, by a sweet name—"heirs of immortal bliss.... the children of God, the sharers of immortal bliss, holy and perfect beings..... divinities on earth"¹². This form of address put into men and women a new strength to shake off their age-old weaknesses and discover a power for spiritual growth they had not thought capable of.

Swamiji's Vedanta does not accept a God who will give man eternal bliss in heaven but cannot give him bread on earth. According to him, the East had enough religion but no bread for the suffering millions and it was an insult to preach religion and metaphysics to them.

Religion was composed of philosophy, mythology and ritual. The essence of the religion was its philosophy, whereas mythology through its parables, stories and legends sought to explain and clarify. Rituals lent the religious philosophy a more definite and concrete form.

People failed to realise that all religious eventually lead to the same God "As so many rivers, having their source in different mountains, roll down, crooked or straight, and at last come into the Ocean - So, all these various creeds and religions, taking their start from different standpoints and running through crooked or straight courses, at last come unto Thee".¹³

Swami Vivekananda is against man entering into any organised religion as it puts an end to the growth of one's individual development. The greatest religion man could practise was to be true to his own nature and to have unflinching faith in himself. Says he:

12. C.W., Vol. 1, P. 11.

13. C.W., Vol. 1, P. 390.

"If you do not exist, how can God exist, or anybody else? Wherever you are, it is this mind that perceives even the Infinite".¹⁴

Religion is not enshrined in temples, churches, books and doctrines but in man's soul. It is only when this realisation dawns on man that his fight and differences regarding religious faith will cease. The different world religions are only the different paths of men and women coming from different conditions and circumstances to the same goal.¹⁵

Swami Vivekananda exhorts man to be optimistic despite all odds as "despondency is not religion, whatever else it may be. By being pleasant always and smiling, it takes you nearer to God, nearer than any prayer"¹⁶.

Religion has varied manifestations; in one man religion may find expression in intense activity, in another it pours forth as intense devotion, in others mystic experiences, philosophy, music, art. But the most important core is the germ of truth in all religions.

... truth is to be found not in subtraction but in addition. We should offer God a bouquet of the most beautiful flowers of all the diverse faiths. We must love God for love's sake, not for the hope of reward. We must do our duty for duty's sake, not for the hope of reward. We must worship the beautiful for beauty's sake, not for the hope of reward. Thus in the purity of our hearts shall we see God.¹⁷

Swami Vivekananda ends the long and drawn out controversy of science versus religion as he is convinced: "Inspiration is the only source of religious knowledge Religion belongs to the plane beyond the senses. It is where the eyes cannot go or the ears, where the mind cannot reach, or what words cannot express".¹⁸ It is also of far greater importance than politics as it paves the way for right conduct and ethical living by striking at the roots of mankind.

Swami Vivekananda calls the spirit of freedom of man to soar like a bird and exert its individuality even in religious faith.

14. C.W., Vol. 1, P. 483.

15. C.W., Vol. 1, P. 18.

16. C.W., Vol. 4, P. 11.

17. C.W., Vol. 4, P. 191.

18. C.W., Vol. 4, P. 211.

No one form of religion will do for all. Each is a pearl on a string. We must be particular above all else to find individuality in each. No man is born to any religion, he has a religion in his own soul. . . . Each life has a current running through it and this current will eventually take it to God.¹⁹

This would mark the end of all religious strife and struggle as the ultimate goal of all religions was the realisation of God. It is a commonly held conviction that human religion begins with fear which is expressed in the ancient scriptures as "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom". But, later this fear vanishes as man establishes a perfect and pure relationship with God. Says Swamiji, "Perfect love casteth out fear"²⁰ Religion is not the outcome of the weakness of human nature; religion is not here because we fear a tyrant, religion is love, unfolding, expanding, growing".²¹ This love transcends all barriers of caste, creed, religion, race and nation and envelopes humanity in a glow of warmth.

Swamiji asks man to relinquish his destructive tendencies and build up his creative powers for the welfare of mankind.

Break not, pull not, anything down, but build it, if you can; if you cannot, fold your hands and stand by and see things go on. Do not injure, if you cannot render help. . . . Take a man where he stands, and from there give him a lift.²²

Swamiji exhorts man to give up his attitude of resignation towards life and the resultant passivity. He wants men of action to contribute towards a goal in its fullest measure. Accordingly, what he wants to propogate is a religion "that will be equally philosophic, equally emotional, equally mystic, and equally conducive to action".²³ He constantly urges man to conquer the miseries of life and achieve happiness.

19. C.W., Vol. 6, P. 82.

20. C.W., Vol. 7, P. 27.

21. C.W., Vol. 7, P. 421.

22. C.W., Vol. 2, P. 384.

23. C.W., Vol. 2, P. 385.

He goes further to explain his philosophy of religion. He says: "I propound a philosophy which can serve as a basis to every possible religious system in the world, and my attitude towards all of them is one of extreme sympathy - my teaching is antagonistic to none. I direct my attention to the individual to make him strong, to teach him that he himself is divine, and I call upon me to make themselves conscious of this divinity within that is really the ideal - conscious or unconscious of every religion".²⁴

Swamiji spoke often on the 'Harmony of Religions' a topic close to his heart and in the course of his discourses he urged man to work towards the goal of universal religion. "The end of all religions is the realising of God in the soul. That is the one universal religion".²⁵ He believes in a harmonious blend of all faiths when he says "we must show the spirituality of the Hindus, mercifulness of the Buddhists, the activity of the Christians, the brotherhood of the Mohammedans, by our practical lives. We shall start a universal religion now and here . . ." ²⁶

In his two lectures, "The way to the Realisation of Universal Religion" and "The Ideal of a Universal Religion" he announces that Vedanta and Vedanta alone can become the universal religion of man, and that no other is fitted for that role. "Through all these various conceptions runs the golden thread of unity and it is the purpose of the Vedanta to uncover this thread. I am the thread that runs through all these various ideas, each one of which is like a pearl, says the Lord Krishna; and it is the duty of Vedanta to establish the connecting thread"²⁷. " . . . The duty of Vedanta is to harmonise all these aspirations, to make manifest the common ground between all the religions of the world, the highest as well as the lowest."²⁸

Thus by brushing aside narrow and conservative ideals, Swamiji poured forth a new Gospel of synthesis, which calls for harmony and toleration and is one of his greatest contributions to the philosophy and practice of religion. It tries to resolve differences among religions and attempts to work at achieving harmony through a universal religion.

24. C.W., Vol. 5, P. 187.

25. C.W., Vol. 1, P. 324.

26. C.W., Vol. 8, PP. 79-80.

27. C.W., Vol. 2, P. 106.

28. C.W., Vol. 2, P. 125.

"Is God's book finished? or is it still a continuous revelation, going on? . . . an infinite number of pages remain yet to be unfolded. I would leave it open for all of them. We stand in the present, but open ourselves to the infinite future. We take in all that has been in the past, enjoy the light of the present and open every window of the heart for all that will come in the future. Salutation to all the prophets of the past, to all the great ones of the present, and to all that are to come in the future."²⁹

Implications of Religion for War and Peace

Swamiji at his historic address at the Parliament of Religions, Chicago spoke convincingly how religious intolerance had turned the world into an eternal battle-ground. "Sectarianism, bigotry and its horrible descendants fanaticism, have long possessed this beautiful earth. They have filled the earth with violence, drenched it often and often with human blood, destroyed civilisation and sent whole nations to despair. Had it not been for these horrible demons, human society would be far more advanced than it is now. But their time is come: and I fervently hope that the bell that tolled this morning in honour of this convention may be the death knell of all fanaticism, of all persecutions with the sword or with the pen, and of all uncharitable feelings between persons wending their way to the same goal".³⁰

Swamiji opined that conflicts were present in every sphere of social, political, economic life and not to forget religious strife. "As our social struggles are represented amongst different nations by different social organisations, so is man's spiritual struggle represented by various religions; and as different social organizations are constantly quarrelling, are constantly at war with one another, so these spiritual organizations have been constantly at war with one another constantly quarrelling."³¹

Swamiji regards the world as "a dog's curly tail, and people have been striving to straighten it out for hundreds of years; and when they let it go, it has curled up again . . . When we know that this world is like a dog's curly tail and will never get straightened, we shall not become fanatics. If there were no fanaticism in the world, it would

29. C.W., Vol. 2, P. 372.

30. C.W., Vol. 1, P. 4.

31. C.W., Vol. 2, P. 359.

make much progress than it does now . . . It is a retarding element creating hatred and anger, and causing people to fight each other; and making them unsympathetic."³²

Religion was taught as set forth in books, doctrines and dogmas. Blind faith has led man to fail to grasp the true essence of his religion and bend towards mere ritualism. "Religion as it is generally taught all over the world, is said to be based upon faith and belief, and in most cases, consists only of different sets of theories and that is the reason why we find all religions quarrelling with one another."³³ "This turmoil and fight and difference in religions will cease only when we understand that religion is not in books and temples. It is an actual perception. Only the man who has actually perceived God and Soul has religion."³⁴

As it is true in even the contemporary world religion has been the chief source of discord among nations and within nations. "There has been more bloodshed in the name of God than for any other cause . . . If there is a God we must see Him, if there is a soul we must perceive it. Otherwise it is better not to believe. It is better to be an outspoken atheist than a hypocrite."³⁵

Religion runs as a common tie between people of diverse cultures and nationalities which is evident in the solidarity seen among Christian and Muslim countries. "The intensest love that humanity has ever known has come from religion, and the most diabolical hatred that humanity has known has also come from religion. The noblest words of peace that the world has ever heard have come from men on the religious plane, and the bitterest denunciation that the world has ever known has been uttered by religious men"³⁶

Swami Vivekananda wanted to see his Master's message in practicality; Sri Ramakrishna said: 'As many faiths, so many paths'. His ideal of a universal religion offered a solution to mankind. It made men except that religion lay at the root of all their miseries and they had to learn to

32. C.W., Vol. 1, P. 79.

33. C.W., Vol. 1. P. 125.

34. C.W., Vol. 2, P. 103.

35. C.W., Vol. 1, P. 127.

36. C.W., Vol. 2, P. 375.

be more tolerant. "Though 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 fierce 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."³⁷

The world continues to indulge in religious intolerance and all attempts to bring harmony and peace in the midst of various jarring and discordant faiths have proved to be in vain. "They each asserted that their God was the greatest. And they tried to prove it by fighting. The one that could do the best fighting proved thereby that its God was the greatest."³⁸

Swamiji is critical of compromises which make men lay down their principles to adjust to other's 'fads' in their greed to get supporters. But 'conformity was the watchword, and even now is the watchword of European religion, and each new departure had to gain the least advantage only by wading through a river of blood. The result is a splendid social organisation, with a religion that never rose beyond the grossest materialistic conceptions."³⁹

Man seems to have lost the ability to make peaceful adjustments and progress harmoniously. He has been so conditioned by history which is replete with violence in its attempt to make him fit into the various ideologies either by seemingly harmless persuasion or by force. "The majority of mankind can only understand power when it is presented to them in a concrete form, fitted to their perceptions. To them, the rush and excitement of wars with its power and spells is something very tangible, and any manifestation of life that does not come like a whirlwind, bearing down everything before it, is to them as death."⁴⁰

37. C.W., Vol. 2, P. 360.

38. C.W., Vol. 1, P. 322.

39. C.W., Vol. 4, P. 346.

40. C.W., Vol. 4, P. 323.

Swamiji with his accurate grasp of the world's history boldly pointed out injustice and exploitation of humanity wherever it was observed. He firmly believes that: "Each nation has a mission for the world. So long as that mission is not hurt, that nation lives, despite every difficulty. But as soon as its mission is destroyed, the nation collapses".⁴¹ This is especially true of Russia in the present time. He had indeed seen the future of man with his prophetic eye when he said: "The next great upheaval which is to bring about a new epoch will come from Russia or China".⁴²

Swamiji declares the Orient to be "the cradle of the human race for ages... a Golgotha of power and learning... as for prophets... without one exception, all the Messengers were Orientals."⁴³ The diversity between East and West should be reconciled to achieve a sympathetic fusion of ideas to benefit mankind rather than engaging in hostile combat. "The ivory of one nation should make a fine setting for the gold of another nation. The spirituality of the East ought to be set in the practical reason of the West."⁴⁴

Just as "many gushing springs and roaring cataracts... many icy rivulets and every flowing streamlets, issuing from the eternal snow-capped peaks of the Himalayas combine and flows together to form the gigantic river of the Gods, the Ganga as rush impetuously towards the Ocean!"⁴⁵, many faiths with diverse streams of thoughts, ideas and beliefs contribute to make up the ocean of a universal Religion which finally leads to the Divine creator.

Swamiji boldly proclaims: "Purity is our real nature, and to regain that is the object of all religion. All men are pure; all men are good... That man you call a brute is like the diamond in the dirt and dust-brush the dust off and it is a diamond just as pure as if the dust had never been on it, and we must admit that every soul is a big diamond."⁴⁶ The world has to learn to be more patient, forbearing and tolerant to bring out the best in man rather than persecuting him and crushing his spirit.

41. C.W., Vol. 8, P. 75.

42. Burke, Marie Louise, Op.Cit, P. 26.

43. C.W., Vol. 4, P. 143.

44. Burke, Marie Louise, Op. Cit, P. 227.

45. C.W., Vol. 4, P. 407.

46. Burke, Marie Louise, Op. Cit, P. 154.

We should render all help possible to man irrespective of caste, creed, race and nationality to lift him up from the deep, dark abyss of misery and futility and lead him to the kindly light of hope, inspiration and liberty. "Instead of antagonising, therefore, we must help all such interchange of ideas between different races by sending teachers to each others, so as to educate humanity in all the various religions of the world."⁴⁷ Thus the preservation of the human soul was of paramount importance and any religion which furthered this end in a way that harmed none was indeed the touchstone of human freedom.

As the United Nations Organization preamble rightly expresses: "Wars are made in the hearts of men, it is heart of men, that must be changed." Swamiji wrought a change in the hearts of men who looked at the East sceptically as a land of God-men miracles, gory rituals and mysticism. Through him they realised the glory of the East and were surprised to find one who had not come to impose his faith on anyone but to take from them any idea or experience that would lead to human progress, peace, co-operation and international amity.

In Swamiji we have a symbolic confluence of the East and the West, the gentleness of the lamb and the strength of a lion. He has left an indelible mark on the minds of men as a great mediator between the East and the West and has given the world a philosophy of life that is Universal in its appeal.

His message is like a fresh spell of life-giving rain drenching the dry and parched souls of war-torn and strife-ridden nations, it cannot have come at a better time when man at the brink of a nuclear war is spending all his energies in arming himself for a fresh bloodbath. The world is in need of yet another Renaissance. This comes in the wake of the significance that it is almost a century now since his historic speech at the Parliament of Religions at Chicago in 1893.

Conclusion

When the human spirit has spent itself in so many trivial encounters and is totally broken, Swami Vivekananda draws upon his spiritual reservoir to strengthen himself and reposes this lost faith.

47. C.W., Vol, 4, P. 376.

According to him, Man is not travelling from error to truth but from truth to truth, from lower to higher truth.⁴⁸ He cautions mankind that holiness, purity and charity are not the exclusive possessions of any Church in the world, and that every system has produced men and women of the most-exalted character. In the light of this evidence, it would be futile if anybody aspires for the exclusive survival and growth of his own religion and the destruction of others. Swami Vivekananda points out to him that upon the banner of every religion will soon be written, inspite of resistance: "Help and not Fight", "Assimilation and not Destruction", "Harmony and Peace and not Dissension".⁴⁹ He raises man to eternal life with his prophetic words that to worship is the human soul in the human body.⁵⁰

48. C.W., Vol. 1, P. 15.

49. C.W. Vol. 1, P. 24.

50. Thus spoke Vivekananda, Madras, 1955, P. 24.