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RELIGIOUS COMMUNICATION OF SWAMI VIVEKANANDA: AN EXPOSITION OF HINDUISM TO THE WORLD

Introduction

Everyone associated with and everything else that was said at the World's Parliament of Religions at Chicago in September 1893 has long been forgotten, only one name is cherished today, that is the name of Swami Vivekananda. He shook the world to its very foundations by his "speech" a hundred years ago.

These facts are striking, especially in the face of the peculiar conditions that were prevailing in India. India was incessantly invaded by foreign powers and subjected to foreign rule for almost a thousand years culminating in the British occupation of it. The imposition of foreign domination came as a shock to the masses of India set afloat from the moorings of their ancient culture and ideals adrift into the stormy seas of Western materialism. It was in the midst of such oppression and tyranny that we see the meteoric rise of yet another spiritual giant in Swami Vivekananda who gave humanity all over, a vision of the inherent divinity in man. His authoritative pronouncements form not only an enlightening Gospel to the world but is also a glowing Charter of the Hindu faith.

Swami Vivekananda's Exposition of Hinduism to the World

Swami Vivekananda convincingly establishes the world's need for Indian thought. Says he,

Is it not curious that, whilst under the terrific onset of modern scientific research, all the old forts of Western dogmatic religions are crumbling into dust; whilst the Sledgehammer blows of modern science are pulverising the porcelain mass of systems whose foundation is either in faith or in belief or in the majority of votes of church synods; whilst

Western theology is at its wits end to accommodate itself to the ever-rising tide of aggressive modern thought; whilst in all other sacred books the texts have been stretched to their utmost tension under the ever-increasing pressure of modern thought, and the majority of them are broken and have been stored away in lumber rooms; whilst the vast majority of thoughtful Western humanity have broken asunder all their ties with the church and are drifting about in a sea of unrest, the religions which have drunk the water of life at that fountain of light, the Vedas-Hinduism and Buddhism alone are reviving?¹

A serious crisis arising out of personality problems and an almost total erosion of values by a veritable shift from God-centred to man-centred ideas, have seen a tremendous increase in the communication of religious ideas and thoughts. This crisis which was characteristic of Western Societies has now gradually spread its tentacles towards the East. The West in despair turns its eyes eastwards, which has always been its teacher in all spiritual matters for that much needed ray of hope. If the West is a master in scientific matters, the East is the basis of all adjustment on the spiritual plane in the history of the world. Thus religious communication is the bridge between the East and the West bringing about adjustment on the material and spiritual planes rising in waves from the Occident and the Orient. Swami Vivekananda was the chief architect of the arch – the Vedantic spiritual bridge – that was to span the two banks, the East and the West.

During the 'Wanderjahre'² of his pilgrimage, Swami Vivekananda saw and felt intensely throughout the length and breadth of his Motherland – India in all her past resplendent glory reduced to penury and degradation and humanity blanketed under a thick fog of ignorance and poverty. It is at the southernmost tip of India, at Kanyakumari, that he realised the cause for India's degeneration lay not in religion but in the practice of it which was severely lacking in true spirituality. This anguish strengthened his resolve to regenerate India and brought forth a renewed consciousness of his mission of human service. He wanted

1. The Complete works of Swami Vivekananda (Hereafter abbreviated as C.W.) 8 Vols., Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1991, Vol. 4., pp. 348-349.
2. Rolland, Romain, The Life of Vivekananda and the Universal Gospel, Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1963, p. 11.

the practice of a religion which would give us "faith in ourselves, a national self-respect, and the power to feed and educate the poor and relieve the misery around"³ People were to find God in the service of man. This conception of religion was to form the foundation of his gospel for India. A regenerated India would unveil her spiritual treasures and revitalise the world with the voice of peace and benediction.

Swami Vivekananda had seen the glory of his motherland steeped in ancient culture issuing from the perennial Vedic springs and Upanishads which gave birth to the Puranas and the Tantras enriched by the confluences of various peoples such as the Saks, the Huns, the Greeks, the Pathans, the Moghuls and the British who touched her shores. This led to a synthesis of a unique Indian civilisation with a surprising unity amid mindboggling diversity. He was pained to see the ignorance, narrowness, hatred and disunity among the Hindus. He wanted them to rise above these differences and become self-confident. He wanted Hindus to be more assertive alluding to the epithet 'mild-Hindu' which was used as a term of reproach. He wished to restore their lost self-confidence by giving them a renewed vision of their ancient spiritual and cultural heritage which ranked India among the world's glorious civilisations, a Golgotha of power and learning. As he brooded about his mission, there flashed a vision in his mind of a new continent, America, a land of optimism, enterprise, prosperity and generosity. He resolved to gain the appreciation of the West and represent India by giving an enlightening interpretation of Hinduism in the forthcoming World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago.

Swami Nikhilananda in his memorable biography of Swami Vivekananda captures beautifully the young man of twenty-nine, Swami Vivekananda, and his burden of memories as he set out boldly to America,

The legacy of his noble parents, the blessings of his Master (Shri Ramakrishna), the wisdom learnt from the Hindu scriptures, the knowledge of the West, his own spiritual experiences, India's past greatness, her present sorrow, and the dream of her future glory, the hopes and aspirations of the millions of India's brown men toiling in their brown fields under the scorching tropical sun, the devotional stories of the Puranas, the dizzy heights of Buddhist

3. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

philosophy, the transcendental truths of Vedanta, the subtleties of the Indian poets and mystics, the stone carvings and the frescoes of the Ellora and Ajanta caves, the heroic tales of the Rajput and Mahratta fighters, the hymns of the South Indian Alwars, the snow peaks of the towering Himalayas, the murmuring music of the Ganga – all these and many such thoughts fused together to create in the Swami's mind the image of Mother India, a universe in miniature, whose history and society were the vivid demonstration of her philosophical doctrine of unity in diversity.⁴

India could not have sent a son worthier than Swami Vivekananda to represent her in the World's Parliament of Religions – a son who had been moulded spiritually by a man whose life was a Parliament of Religions – a son whose loving heart was large enough to embrace the whole of humanity in its spirit of universal compassion. He was a "Condensed India."

In the Parliament of Religions

The World's Parliament of Religions was proclaimed open at 10.00 a.m. on 11th September 1893 by the ten solemn strokes of the New Liberty Belleach stoke representing the Chief Religions listed at the Congress as Judaism, Mohammedanism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Shintoism, Zoroastrianism, Catholicism, the Greek Church and Protestantism.⁵ One of the objectives of the Parliament was to give mankind a vision of the truths upheld by each religion. All the delegates read their carefully prepared speeches. When Swami Vivekananda was asked to speak he was seized with stage-fright and let his turn go by until the end of the day. It was the first time that he was speaking before such an assembly and he was totally unprepared.

When he finally gave his message, "his speech was like a tongue of flame. Among the grey wastes of cold dissertation it fired the souls of the listening throng."⁶ No sooner had he begun by addressing

4. Swami Nikhilananda, *Vivekananda A Biography*, Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1987, pp. 107-108.

5. Burke, Marie Louise, *Swami Vivekananda in America: New Discoveries*, Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1958, p. 53.

6. Rolland, Romain, *Op. Cit.*, p. 37.

the audience with simple yet touching words than he was given a standing ovation. Mrs. S.K. Blodgett, who became Swamiji's hostess at Los Angeles, later recounting this historic moment said, "When that youngman got up, and said, 'Sisters and Brothers of America,' seven thousand people rose to their feet as a tribute to something they knew not what."⁷ He was the first to shed the formalism of the Congress and speak to them as a brother who was meeting them after a brief spell of separation. His words wrought a subtle change in the hearts of the people bringing to the surface the hidden spring of spiritual union which lay submerged for centuries.

Swamiji began his speech by thanking the youngest of the nations in the name of the most ancient monastic order in the world, the Vedic order of sannyasins. He announced that he took pride in belonging to a religion, Hinduism, that had taught the world not only tolerance but universal acceptance, and to a nation that had long sheltered the persecuted refugees of all religions and all nations of the earth, for instances, the Israelites and the Zoroastrians. He reiterated the eternal message of the Vedanta: "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."⁸

He concluded his short but much acclaimed address by hoping that the convention would usher in an era of peace and mutual co-operation and signify the end of sectarianism, bigotry and fanaticism.

Each of the other orators spoke of his own religion, his own God, but Swami Vivekananda alone spoke of all their Gods encompassing them in the all pervading Universal Spirit transcending all barriers that made for disunion rather than harmony. The Parliament gave the youngest delegate an ovation in recognition of this "prophet of infinitude."⁹

7. Bruke, Marie Louise, *Op. Cit.*, p. 57.

8. *C. W.*, Vol. 1, p. 4.

9. *Reminiscences of Swami Vivekananda by His Eastern and Western Admirers*, Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1983, p. 123.

Swami Vivekananda addressed the Parliament about a dozen items and was undoubtedly the favourite speaker. On 19th September 1893 he presented his outstanding paper on Hinduism in which he stated with sublime eloquence the divinity of the soul, the oneness of existence, the non-duality of Godhead and the harmony of all religions.

All Embracing Hindu Religion

He traces the growth and status of three religions Hinduism, Zoroastrianism and Judaism from prehistoric times. All these religions have been subjected to severe tests and have stood their ground due to their inherent strength. Judaism failed to absorb Christianity and was thus driven out of its place of birth by Christianity and only a few Parsis remained to testify to their grand religion. But in India sect after sect rose as tumultuous waves to storm the Vedas shaking its very foundation, but receded slowly to return soon in a vigorous all-absorbing flood assimilated into the vast body of the mother faith, Hinduism.

The Hindu religion accommodates the highest spiritual flights of the Vedanta Philosophy, in which recent scientific discoveries are echoed, to the lower ideas of idolatry with its multifarious mythology, the agnosticism of Buddhism and the atheism of the Jains.

The Hindu believes he is a spirit, "Him the sword cannot pierce-him the fire cannot burn-him the water cannot melt-him the air cannot dry."¹⁰ Hinduism believes every soul to be a circle with its centre in the body and whose circumference is nowhere. Death means only a change of this centre from one body to another. Thus the human soul is eternal and immortal, perfect and infinite. It is human ignorance that deludes man into believing himself to be matter which is imperfect. The actions of the past determine the present and the present determines the future. The soul is constantly evolving up or reverting back from birth to death and death to death. Then the question arises as to whether man is a tiny helpless wreck buffeted by the ever-raging storms of cause and effect with no hope of escape from the law of Nature. But the Vedas dispell human despair by the proclamation pronounced by Swami Vivekananda to his audience with devastating effect.

10. C. W., Vol. 1, p. 9.

"Children of immortal bliss – what a sweet, what a hopeful name! Allow me to call you, brethren, by that sweet name-heirs of immortal bliss-yea, the Hindu refuses to call you sinners. Ye are the children of God, the sharers of immortal bliss, holy and perfect beings. Ye divinities on earth-sinners! It is a sin to call a man so, it is a standing libel on human nature"¹¹ Swamiji's revolutionary form of address wipes out the centuries of shame and theories of degradation under which humanity has been labouring. He questions the world as to what good could one expect if a man was repeatedly called a sinner. This is the Vedic salutation to the human race to shed their weakness and rise above matter to the sublimity of Godhead.

Hinduism is not believing a certain doctrine or dogma, but in realising God-but in being and becoming divine. In his lecture on "In Defense of Hinduism" Swamiji expresses the loftiness of the Hindu religion. "The one idea the Hindu religions differ in from every other in the world, the one idea to express which the sages almost exhaust the vocabulary of the Sanskrit language, is that man must realise God even in this life."¹² The Advaita texts add, 'To know God is to become God.'

According to Swamiji, to the Hindu, man is not travelling from error to truth, but from lower to higher truth. To him all religions from the lowest fetishism to the highest absolutism are the many attempts of the human soul trying to grasp and realise the Infinite. Hinduism regards the whole of religions as "a travelling, a coming up of different men and women, through various conditions and circumstances, to the same goal."¹³ Every religion is inspired by the same God and tries to evolve a God out of the material man. As such the Christian was not to become a Hindu or a Buddhist to become a Christian. Each religion was to assimilate the spirit of the others and was to grow according to its own law of growth by preserving its individuality. He finally establishes Vedanta as a Universal religion which had no location in place or time and was infinite like the God it preaches. All religions could find a place in it and it would still have infinite scope for development.

11. Ibid, p. 11.

12. Swami Vivekananda, In Defence of Hinduism, Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1991, p. 22.

13. C. W., Vol. 1, p. 18.

Speaking on Buddhism, Swami Vivekananda declared that Hinduism could not live without Buddhism, nor Buddhism without Hinduism. The great intellect of Hinduism could be fired only by the wonderful humanising power of Lord Buddha.

In his address at the final session of the Parliament on 27th September 1893, Swamiji declared that inspite of resistance, upon the banner of every religion will soon be inscribed: "Help and not Fight," "Assimilation and not Destruction," "Harmony and Peace and not Dissension."¹⁴

Swami Vivekananda began by giving an exposition of Hinduism, by the end of his address we see a regeneration of the Hindu faith. He formed the point of confluence of the Eastern and Western mind floods, the vast oceans of thought, as he stood on the platform of the Parliament. He successfully altered the decades of negative thinking of the West into an instinctive reverence of that distant jewel sparkling across the seas. Hinduism which had long been groping for support amidst turbulent times had found a strong anchor in Swamiji. He stands as an interpreter of India to her own children as well as India's ambassador to the world.

Vedanta to the West

After his phenomenal success at the Parliament of Religions Swami Vivekananda travelled extensively throughout the world scattering his Vedantic ideas, thus putting the chemicals together and awaiting the crystallisation to take its own course. He wrote to one of his disciples: "To put the Hindu ideas into English and then make out of dry philosophy and intricate mythology and queer, startling psychology, a religion which shall be easy, simple, and at the same time meet the requirements of the highest minds- That is my life's work."¹⁵

He gave valuable insights in the way of life in India and the Hindu culture. He cites instances in Indian history, especially the years when it was under foreign powers, to show that Hindus were quite un-

14. *Ibid.*, p. 24.

15. C. W., Vol. 5, pp. 104-105.

concerned with their rulers so long as they did not hamper their spiritual independence. The Pathan dynasties could not sustain their hold on India as they were constantly attacking Hinduism. Whereas the Moghul empire was tremendously strong, supported by Hindus. Jahangir, Shahjahan and Dara Shikoh were all born of Hindu mothers. It was under Aurangzeb's intolerant reign that the Moghul empire crumbled. Britishers were well established in India until they provoked the Mutiny of 1857. Thus spirituality is the soul of India and all cultural and political revivals have been preceded by a spiritual renaissance. The princely reception accorded to Swami Vivekananda, a penniless Sanyasin, after his return to India was indeed a revelation of the spirituality of the Hindus.

Indian thought especially the Vedanta had penetrated into China, Persia, and many other parts of the world long before Buddhism. Swami Vivekananda echoes the sentiments of the German Philosopher, Schopenhauer, who foretold the flooding of the world with Indian spiritual ideas: "The world is about to see a revolution in thought more extensive and more powerful than that which was witnessed by the Renaissance of Greek literature."¹⁶ Hinduism ropes in the alien mind with an imperceptible charm and has an abiding influence on it. Describing the effect of Hinduism upon the world of thought Swamiji says that the work of this calm, patient, all-suffering, spiritual race has been to produce tremendous results, silently and slowly, as the gentle fall of dew at dawn.

Contrasting Buddhism with Hinduism Swami Vivekananda said that the former exhorted men to "realise all this as illusion" While Hinduism asked them to "realise that within the illusion is the Real." The Buddhist command could be carried only through the rigid discipline of monasticism; the Hindu might be fulfilled through any state as in the case of the householders in Mahabharata who received spiritual illumination through the performance of their duties.

Need for Orthopraxy in Hinduism

Swamiji strikes out in anger at the practices of Hinduism as 'a religion of the kitchen' and 'don't touchism' that had driven the people to Christianity and Islam. Says he: "No religion on earth, preaches

16. C. W., Vol. 3, p. 104.

the dignity of humanity in such a lofty strain as Hinduism, and no religion on earth treads upon the necks of the poor and low in such a fashion as Hinduism."¹⁷ However queer it may appear, Hinduism shows the idea of toleration for other religions even in the most untoward circumstances. A low-caste man may be shunned by the upper castes, but if he were to become a Christian or Mohammedan he would be treated with courtesy.

Despite its failing the well-known aphorism that a tree is known by its fruits applies to Hinduism. Hundreds of the most learned volumes on bushels of worm-eaten, fallen and unripe mangoes fail to describe the beauty of a single mango. It is only a luscious, full grown, juicy fruit that is a measure of the potentialities of the tree. Similarly it is man – gods who reveal, by their character and power, the grand possibilities of that racial tree, Hinduism the tree which has seen the changing seasons of culture by centuries, and borne the onslaughts of many storms to stand with the unimpaired vigour of eternal youth.

Swami Vivekananda refused to join the Hindus who having identified themselves with a conquering nation were contemptuous of miserable lives led by their own people. He did not consider it his mission in life to be a paid reviler. He always spoke with great pride of his motherland and countrymen which Sister Nivedita calls his "Splendid scorn of apology for anything Indian." He later writes that he was one man who dared to defend his country and give the west such ideas never expected from a Hindu.

Swami Vivekananda desired to unite Hinduism and Islam on the basis of the Advaita Philosophy, which preaches the oneness of all. Hinduism may get the credit for arriving at Advaitism earlier than other religions but practical Advaitism which perceives all mankind as one's soul is lacking among the Hindus. It is the followers of Islam alone who achieve the practice of this equality in an appreciable degree. Thus Swamiji felt that Vedantism with its finest and wonderful theories were valueless to humanity without the help of practical Islam. He rightly foresees India's future: "For our own motherland a junction of the two great systems, Hinduism and Islam, Vedantic brain and Islamic body-is the only hope."¹⁸

17. C. W., Vol. 5, p. 15.

18. Swami Nikhilananda, Op. Cit., p. 255.

Universal Religion

Swami Vivekananda identifies the central idea of Hinduism as spirituality which is similar to that of christianity: "Watch and pray, for the kingdom of Heaven is at hand." Both call for the purification of the mind and a state of readiness. According to Swamiji, man begins with temples or churches, books or forms which are the kindergarten of religion and strengthen the spiritual child to ascend higher levels. These initial steps are essential in the realisation of God.

Forms, images bells, candles, books, churches, temples and all holy symbols were helpful to the growing plant of spirituality but it was necessary for man to go beyond this stage. The plant of spirituality should outgrow this stage. Swami Vivekananda warns man of this point of stagnation and cautions them that it was good to be born in a church, but it was very bad to die in a church. Man must outgrow the narrow bounds of his own religion and perceive the grandeur of all other religions.

Swami Vivekananda's philosophy of Vedanta aims at harmonising all religions which were like the many pearls strung on God's necklace and strives to uncover the golden thread of unity by manifesting the similarities between all religions of the world, however great or small they may be.¹⁹ His universal Religion would "show the spirituality of the Hindus, mercifulness of the Buddhists, the activity of the Christians, the brotherhood of the Mohammedans"²⁰ in practical life. His conception of a Universal Religion embraces all faiths in a spirit of tolerance and lasting unity.

As a fulfilment of his national and inter-national mission, Swami Vivekananda organised the Ramakrishna order of monks, which is an outstanding religious organisation of modern India devoted to the propagation of Hindu spiritual culture not only in India but also in America and other parts of the world.

19. Nair, Kiran Ramachandran - "Swami Vivekananda's Gospel of Universal Religion: A Reconceptualisation of Global Spiritual Unity"; Darshana International, Vol. XXXII, No. 1 pp. 38-47.

20. C. W. Vol. 8, pp. 78-79.

Conclusion

Swami Vivekananda was the man of the hour; the world weary of wars could not have asked for a greater teacher of peace. There was never a preacher of truth as Swami Vivekananda, there was never a Congregation like the Parliament of Religions, there was never a speech like the Chicago address. Sister Nivedita pays a fitting tribute to Swami Vivekananda. "For the first time in history..... Hinduism itself forms the subject of generalisation of a Hindu mind of the highest order. What Hinduism needed was the consolidating of its own idea. what the world had needed was a faith that had no fear of truth."²¹ Swami Vivekananda has been a proof of the eternal vigour of the Sanatana Dharma, a religion to which none is alien and nothing exists, save Humanity and Truth.

21. C. W., Vol. 1, p ix.