



Universalism and Swami Vivekanand

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ABSTRACT

Universalism is religious, theological and philosophical concept with universal application and applicability. This is very much current trend in serious discussions today. But it remains mostly a theoretical concept, reluctant to function in practical life. Swami Vivekananda in the World's Parliament of Religions at Chicago in 1883 gave a very new insight of the universalism. His universalism was based upon spiritual thinking and philosophy. Before him also there were so many who tried their hand on universalism but it was Vivekananda, who, perhaps, with his idea of spirituality made the topic more significant and impactful. Swamiji was greatly influenced by his Great Guru, Ramakrishna Paramahansa, who, in true sense was the inspiration and teacher of Vivekananda, and his versatility and thinking was greatly inspired by Ramakrishna. After the death of Ramakrishna, Vivekananda continued the good work left behind by his Guru. Vivekananda extensively travelled throughout the West and visited many places around India. This gave him great opportunity to manifest his thinking and connect with the masses. Although, Vivekananda did not live long, but whatever length of time he was alive, he worked tirelessly on his part to make people understand the true value of life, religion, and philosophy.

KEYWORD: universalism, secular ideas, religious philosophy, monotheism

Universalism is religious, theological and philosophical concept with universal application and applicability. Universal doctrines consider all people in their formation. In terms of religion, in a broad sense, universalism claims that religion is a universal human quality. This can be contrasted with non-universal religions. Religion in this context is defined as a set of beliefs concerning the cause, nature and purpose of the universe, especially when considered as the creation of a superhuman agency or agencies, usually involving devotional and ritual observances, and often containing a moral code

governing the conduct of human affairs. Unitarian universalism believes that religion is a universal human quality, emphasizing the universal principles of most religions and accepting other religions in an inclusive manner, believing in a universal reconciliation between humanity and the divine. Universalism has had a strong influence on modern Hinduism, in turn influencing western modern spirituality. A community that calls itself Universalist may emphasized the universal principles of most religions and accept other religions in an inclusive manner, believing in a universal reconciliation between humanity and the divine.

Narendranath Dutta, who was born on 12th January 1863, who later became famous as Swami Vivekananda was a champion of universalism. He was the most beloved disciple of Ramakrishna Paramahansa (1836-1886), after whom the Ramakrishna Mission is named. Ramakrishna had scarcely any formal education, Eastern of Western, worth the name, but led an intense spiritual life in his splendid isolation. He had a deep faith in the inherent truth of all religions and tested his belief by performing religious exercises in accordance with the practice and usages not only of different Hindu sects, but also of Islam and Christianity. His broad catholicity, mysticism and spiritual fervor attracted a small number of occasional visitors, mostly from Calcutta.

Swami Vivekananda carried the message of Ramakrishna all over India. His learning, eloquence, spiritual fervor and wonderful personality gathered round him a band of followers which included both prince and peasant. One of the characteristic features of the Ramakrishna Mission, also practically demonstrated by Ramakrishna, was the belief in the truth of all religions. "All the different religious views are but different ways leading to the same goal", was the characteristic expression of the Great Master. As different words in different languages denote the same substance, e.g. "water", so Allah, Hari, Christ, Krishna, etc., are but different



names under which we worship the same great God. He is both one and many, with and without forms, and may be conceived either as a great universal spirit through different symbols. This catholic and broad view is in striking contrast to the sectarian views which are dividing the modern world into so many hostile camps and making religion a symbol for hate and discord instead of love and brotherhood. Such a great personality Ramakrishna was, young Narendra Dutta was deeply impressed and influenced by the ideals and spirituality of his Great Guru.

Vivekananda found an international platform to express his ideas and philosophy regarding the religion in the famous 'World's Parliament of Religions' at Chicago on 11th – 29th September, 1893. There were two mind-floods, two immense rivers of thought- Eastern and modern, in the Parliament of which Vivekananda was representing the former which had with it a long ages of spiritual development. In such, Parliament of Religions formed a confluence of diverse ideas and Vivekananda was the bridge between the two. He did not even take advantage of the occasion to tell the story of his Master. Instead of either of these, it was the religious consciousness of India that spoke through him, the message of his whole people, as determined by their whole past. And as he spoke, in the youth and noonday of the West, a nation, sleeping in the shadows of the darkened half of earth, on the far side of the Pacific, waited in spirit for the words that would be borne on the dawn that was travelling towards them, to reveal to them the secret of their own greatness and strength. Others stood beside Swami Vivekananda, on the same platform as he, as apostles of particular creeds and churches. But it was his glory that he came to preach a religion too which each of these was, in his own words, "only a travelling, a coming up, of different men, and women, through various conditions and circumstances to the same goal".

The popular and academic perceptions of Vivekananda's role are highly influenced by his famous speech at the Parliament of Religions and the religious discourses he delivered during the extensive tours he undertook in India. In his highly applauded speech at the Parliament of Religions, he tried to highlight the universalism inherent in all religions and then to demonstrate that it was best exemplified in Hinduism. Such a position was derived from his belief in Vedanta which, he argued, transcended the limits of any particular religion or cultural tradition. "truth alone is my God, the entire world is my country" maintained Vivekananda. Thus he tried to reconcile his understanding of

universalism. Because, he argued that all religions were universal and that there was no superiority of one over the other. He said "every religion is an expression, a language to express the same truth, and we must speak to each other in his own language." Regarding the unity of various religions of the world, Swamiji said the following lines: "much has been said of the common ground of religious unity. I am not going just now to venture my own theory. But if anyone here hopes that this unity will come by the triumph of any one of the religions and the destruction of the others, to him I say- Brothers, yours is an impossible hope. Do I wish that the Christian would become Hindu? God forbid. Do I wish that the Hindu or Buddhist would become Christian? God forbid." From above lines we can understand the respect of Swamiji over different religions. In his eyes all the religions are same, no one is better than other; they bear equal value on their own part.

It has proved to the world 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 face of this evidence, if anybody dreams of the exclusive survival of his own religion and the destruction of the others. Vivekananda said "I pity him from the bottom of my heart, and point out to him that upon the banner of every religion will soon be written, in spite of resistance, "help and not Fight," "Assimilation and not Destruction", "Harmony and Peace and not dissension." If a religion cannot help man wherever he may be wherever he stands, it is not of much use, it will remain, only a theory for the chosen few."

For Vivekananda, religion was a constitutional necessity of the human mind. The proof of one religion depends on the proof of all the rest. We cannot say that only one religion is true and all 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 is true, all others must be true. There are differences in non-essentials, but in essentials they are all one. Vivekananda never underestimated the value of religion. For him essence of all religions is same.

Vivekananda opines that the problem of life is becoming deeper and broader every day as the world moves on and it is becoming everyday clearer that the solution of any problem can never be attained on racial, or national or narrow grounds. There cannot be any progress without the whole world following in the wake. Besides, international activities and institutions are on the increase. People with sound understanding are trying to come



together willy-nilly as the concept of universality is ingrained in their minds. Vivekananda had his doubt about the actualization of 'one world' in practice. But his doubt has not prevented him from making an earnest effort for achieving the same. In his words, "whether that ideal world will ever come, I do not know; whether that social perfection will ever be reached, I have my own doubts; but, whether it comes or not, each one of us will have to work for the ideal as if it will come tomorrow, and as if it only depends on his work, and his alone." Notwithstanding the doubt about the consummation of 'one world', Swamiji has in his mind great hopes for universalism. It is because of the fact that he has experienced man's natural love and goodness all over the world. The success of universalism depends upon a higher spiritual consciousness all round. He says, "If the priests and other people that have taken upon themselves the task of preaching different religions simply cease preaching for a few moments, we shall see it is there. They are disturbing it all the time, because it is to their interest." Swamiji made the above remarks having bitter experience at the Chicago Parliament of Religions and Paris Congress where he found organizers aiming at bringing the whole world under the aegis of their own faith. They talked of universalism but they were not in the habit of preaching the same in the true sense of the term. Hence he says, "Universal religion... and all that are very good in theory, but one must practice. People can understand principles but they fail to apply those principles in practice."

We find that all religions teach the eternity of the soul, as well as that its luster has been dimmed, and that its primitive purity is to be regained by the knowledge of God. What is the idea of God in these different religions? The primary idea of God was very vague. The most ancient nations had different deities—sun, earth, fire, water etc. We next find one God standing supreme. But the idea differed according to different tribes. 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. Those races were more or less savage. But gradually better ideas took the place of the old ones. All those old ideas are gone or going into the lumber-room. All those religions were the outgrowth of centuries: not one fell from the skies. Each had to be worked out bit by bit. Next come the monotheistic ideas: belief in one God, who is omnipotent and omniscient, the one God of the universe. This one God is extra-cosmic: he lies in the heavens. He is unapproachable; nothing can come near Him.

Vivekananda was of the opinion that religion does not consist in doctrines or dogmas. It is not what you read, nor is what dogmas you believe that of importance, but what you realize. "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God". And that is salvation. The power of attaining it is within ourselves. According to Vivekananda "We live and move in God. Creeds and sects have their parts to play, but they are for children, they last but temporarily. Books never make religions, but religions make books. We must not forget that. No book ever created God, but God inspired all the great books. And no book ever created a soul. We must never forget that. The end of all religions is the realizing of God in the soul. That is the one universal religion. If there is one universal truth in all religions, I place it here-in realizing God. Ideals and methods may differ, but that is the central point. There may be a thousand different radii, but they converge to the one centre, and that is the realization of God. A man may believe in all the churches in the world, he may carry in his head all the sacred books ever written, he may baptize himself in all the rivers of the earth, still, if he has no perception of God, he is simply an atheist. Though all religions are essentially the same, they must have the varieties of form produced by dissimilar circumstances among different nations. We must each have our own individual religion, individual so far as the externals of it go."

Swami Vivekananda saw the entire universe as manifestation of the absolute One. There is only one self in the universe, only One existence. When it passes through time, space and causation it appears to be diverse and is called by different names. In the heart of things there is fundamental unity. Vivekananda stood for harmony of religions and divinity of humankind. He said that each soul is potentially divine, omnipotent and omniscient, awaiting manifestation. The aim of life is to realize the same through selfless service to humanity, assimilation of wisdom through deep introspection, devotion to divinity or a special psychological practice. He said, "We want to lead mankind to the place where there is neither Vedas, nor Bible, nor Quran, yet this has to be done by harmonizing all three. We need to learn that religions are but varied expressions of The Religion, which is Oneness, so that each may choose a path that suits him best." The vision of a universal concerns no particular cult but signifies culmination of wisdom. The ideal for universal brotherhood is not a new concept and had been contemplated by many before him. But any endeavor for the same without spirituality had been



self-defeating as has been already proved all over the globe.

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