

Swami Vivekananda's Concept of Religion

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Abstract

This article deals with Swami Vivekananda's concept of religion as an institution to promote spirituality and harmonious human relationship. As a spiritual heir of Ramakrishna, he followed his principles to nourish the harmony in mankind. This article will give a clear vision of Swami Vivekananda's message on religion that looks at the entire humanity as one and which preaches spiritual identity of all created things with God or soul.

Keywords: Vivekananda, Spiritualism, Religion, Humanity, Realization and Vedas.

Great persons are usually known to us through their lecturers, writings or public activities. But it is always a rare privilege to come into intimate contact with them and study their lives and thoughts at close quarters. This is all the truer of spiritual geniuses like Swami Vivekananda. Spiritual giants are worshipped from a distance, but the influence of their examples enters into the lives of only a fortunate few. All are not destined to have direct contact with spiritual personalities, hence the next best thing for ordinary people is to know their teachings, in which is hidden the inspiration of their lives. It is therefore that the teachings or sayings of saints are so much in demand that all love to follow and absorb for betterment of life. The sayings of Christ as well as the words of Lord Buddha are found giving spiritual sustenance to millions and millions of people for spiritual peace and practice.

The meteoric success of Swami Vivekananda as a religious teacher and as a spiritual guide obviously dazzles all human beings. One gets bewildered by the thought of the gulf between his greatness and our smallness; for his writings and recorded speeches make us get struck with awe and reverence. No doubt, people in almost all walks of life will find guidance and get source of inspiration from his philosophical, religious and spiritual discourses. His primary focus through all his sayings and discourse is on man and his life. "Man-making is my mission" he used to say. A western admirer once described Swami Vivekananda as "being in years but eternal in wisdom" (Lokeswarananda 1). Being a great luminary, a physically well-built and spiritually well-developed man of multiple personality, he stood in the list of twenty makers of modern America, thereby presenting, amplifying and elucidating before the world the precious lessons he had learnt at the feet of Sri Ramakrishna. According to him, "The Lord of one religion is the Lord of all religions". He proved it further: "If one religion be true, then all the others also must be true". He himself embraced all paths of spiritual progress, thereby becoming the personification of the harmony of all religions.

Swami Vivekananda was intensely moved by the sufferings of humanity and particularly of the humanity in India. “He discovered the greatness of man and particularly of men in the humble walks of life who were the despised and denied in the Indian society” (Chauhan 15). He was greatly interested and inspired to serve the poor people and those who are living miserable and hard life all over the world. He exhorted:

“Have charity towards all beings
Pity those who are in distress”

He also emphasised:

“Yes, a daily worship at the feet of beggars,
after bathing and before the meal, would be
a wonderful training of heart and hand together”.

He believed that the service and karma could lead man to great heights. To him, there is no difference between service of man and worship of God, between true righteousness and spirituality. With this realization, Vivekananda wished to elevate man to his own height of spirituality. For Swami Vivekananda, “heroism is soul in action” (Sarma 18).

Born in the famous Dutta family in Calcutta in 1863, Swami Vivekananda, who was called Narendranath till he took to Sanyasa, lived a very short span of life. Within this short span of life, he could achieve what human beings have been striving hard for centuries to achieve – the Goal of life. His was a life dedicated to the realisation of Truth. The speeches of Swami Vivekananda were found to be extempore. Wherever he spoke, his voice electrified the audience. “He had a dynamic dominating and magnetic personality. The charm and power of his eloquence captivated all” (Jagtiani 5). He wanted India to become dynamic and effect the conquest of the world through her spirituality” (Life of Swami Vivekananda 221). Strength-first-Goodness – next – approach is set to dramatically change our lives if we follow the message of Swami Vivekananda. Since time immemorial, all religions unanimously preached that people should develop faith in God. Swami Vivekananda saw that one’s faith in God without faith in oneself does not facilitate the attainment of one’s goals. Thus, Swamiji, calls for ‘Faith in oneself’ first, faith in God next’ as the right sequence and reiterates that ultimately both are required. He declared boldly thus:

“The great thing is to have faith in oneself,
even before faith in God; but the difficulty
seems to be that we are losing faith in
ourselves day by day” (Sarma 51).

In a word, it may be said that nothing can be achieved by us if we do not have faith in ourselves. Hence, developing ‘faith in oneself’ is the first step required to be taken by all those who want to achieve their cherished goals. His contention was that spiritualism was a dynamically active

spirit of life that goads and guides the human life. The speeches of Swami Vivekananda make it clear that “Life’s purpose is to wake up: to realise the Blessed Divine Reality” (Vividishananda 66).

God is everywhere. He is the pure, formless, the Almighty and the all-merciful. Vivekananda calls Him as father, mother, beloved friend – the source of all strength. He invokes God to get strength and courage to bear the burden of the little burden of this life as God Himself bears the burdens of the Universe. It is also sung by the Rishis of the Vedas. Those Rishis revealed the simple way to worship Him and that is to worship through love. “He is to be worshipped as the one beloved dearer than everything in this and the next life.” This is the doctrine of love as declared in the Vedas. It may be seen in the gospels of Sri Krishna. It is fully developed and taught by Krishna whom the Hindus believe to have been God incarnate on earth. Sri Krishna taught that a man ought to live in this world like a lotus leaf, which grows in water but is never moistened by water; so a man ought to live in the world with his heart to God and his hands to work. It is good to love God, for hope of reward in this or the next world, but it is better to love God, for love’s sake. The Vedas teach that the soul is divine. Swamiji’s new Vedantic movement brings about a spiritual movement which would recognise Divinity in every creature high or low, which would concentrate all its energy in aiding humanity to realise its true Divine nature” (PP 177-78).

From time immemorial, God has been a symbol of power for all human beings. The conception of God is as different as there are different religions. Each religion claims God in its own way and eventually there are as many Gods as there are religions. As there are many Gods, the ways of worship are many. Every religionist accepts that human beings, being susceptible to sins and deficiencies, endeavour to rise higher and higher so that they could free themselves from deficiencies. Hence, there seems to be a relationship established between God and human beings. In the words of Swamiji, “Ignorant or wise, saint or sinner, man or woman, educated or uneducated, cultivated or uncultivated, to every human being the highest ideals of beauty, of sublimity and of power, gives us the completest conception of the loving and lovable God” (CWSV 89). Human beings are not satisfied with what they are. They long to reach a state where they can breathe peacefully breaking at the physical fetters. To these aspiring human beings, God is the perfect balanced state. Unfortunately, instead of remaining peaceful, people belonging to different faiths are prone to misunderstand one another and consequently fight with one another making human life virtually a hell. It may be pointed out that each one tries to establish the supremacy of its own God. Hence, the fear and feeling of conquered and conqueror are there. They fail to understand that “all beings, great or small are equally manifestations of God, the difference is only in the manifestation” (CWSV 424). Thus, God, the source of spiritualism, has become a source of endless disputation and violence. All this happens because of human misunderstanding. For putting an end to this, man is expected to pin faith in divinity and God. Swami Vivekananda propagated that everyone should try to reach the perfect state of God where he is one with God.

The divinity of man is the important thing one has to consider in understanding the ‘source of spiritualism’ – God. Swamiji stressed the point so often that God lives in every individual. What is needed to allow the divinity of man to blossom is purity of thought, speech and action. God gives

man strength to live and let others live. But man, in the modern world, thinks only about himself. He has forgotten that he belongs to the society in which he lives selfishness spoils the harmonious living in society. Swamiji proclaimed that in the realization of ‘Brahman’ one should not forget that he should help others in the process of spiritual realization. The dynamic spiritual vision of Swamiji lies in its embracing all Gods as equal in the way to achieve the goal of life. As God remains a source of spiritualism, God is found to be ‘a perfect projection of the Absolute Brahman’.

Religion is considered as an institution of principles and dogmas. As there are many principles and dogmas regarding God in the world, so there are many religions. These religions were established to promote spiritual experience. Minochar K. Spencer writes:

“Religion is a potent factor in leading a divine life. It is religion that walks upright by day-light whereas all other sciences walk zig-zag by night
..... The true spiritual life Lives in the eternal and is rooted in the Infinite” (P xvii).

The ultimate fact in the world is man. The ultimate fact is man is God. ‘The ultimate fact of God is realisation through renunciation of ‘I’ and ‘mine’ through discrimination of the real and the unreal and through intuition of the one and the only Absolute Reality. The very aim of established religions, according to Swami Vivekananda, is to seek divinity and realise God through lofty principles.

The very contention of Swami Vivekananda is that religious institutions are a powerful and dynamic force to develop a spiritual attitude in man. Spirituality has remained a static force in the human life as each religion remained rather secluded. These fetters should be broken for a harmonious development of all religions. This harmonious development can be made possible if the truth is understood in all religions. Truth is truth in all religions. A tolerant attitude of an individual enables him to appreciate the “Innermost Truth” of all religions. This is considered the first necessity of a spirituality. The ultimate universal Truth is contained only in Vedanta. “Vedanta is the most ancient religion of the world, but it has never been practised on a large scale by man in the past. It is not founded by one man; it is the sum total of spiritual experiences of the ancient India. The Vedanta religion preached by Swami Vivekananda tells people to develop a secular outlook in life and reverence to other religions is part of Vedantic spiritual practice. Brahman is all-pervading and each religion projects it in its own way. The essential qualification of a spiritualist is to own every religion his own and every God his Brahman. To conclude, the core of Swamiji’s message is Advaita Vedanta or religion that looks at the entire humanity as one and which preaches spiritual identity of all created things with God or soul.

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