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VIVEKANANDA'S CONCEPT OF UNIVERSAL RELIGION

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Abstract:

Vivekananda has put forward the concept of Universal Religion in his various writings. He argued for the necessity of universal religion that necessarily implies acceptance of religious pluralism. Religion for him 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. Spiritual realization is religion.

For Vivekananda, the necessity of universal religion lies in its being ingrained in human nature. According to him, every man, irrespective of where he lives, is involved in the quest for his ultimate destiny or search for God. On the basis of this common characteristic of man, Vivekananda concludes that it is *one* religion that man is actually looking for. This is Universal Religion. It is the religion which is acceptable to all. But the question arose, in fact during Vivekananda's life time of the possibility of having Universal Religion. Giving an answer to this question, Vivekananda said that Universal Religion is not a hope or an ideal to be realized. It is present, though implicitly, as a fact of human society. Universal Religion is just making explicit what is implicitly there.

My paper will be an enquiry into grounds on the basis of which Vivekananda claimed that Universal Religion is not an ideal but an already existing fact of human society and what is the possibility of accepting them.

INTRODUCTION

Swami Vivekananda was one of the famous contemporary philosopher who discovered a unique explanation to the concept of religion. His participation at the parliament of religion at Chicago enables him to assume the spiritual leadership of the Indian masses. He argued for the necessity of a universal religion or acceptance of religious pluralism. He pointed out that the different people in the world approach spirituality in different ways. Furthermore he asserted that man and his true nature is already divine. But that divinity is hidden. Therefore, the realization of that divinity is the purpose of life which is the essence of religion. To realize that religion, according to Vivekananda, man should have to practice four yogas. Those are the yoga of knowledge, control of mind, selfless work, and love of God. Therefore, religion is the essence of human life and it has the great motivating power in one's life including his social, economic and political aspect.

RELIGION AND UNIVERSAL RELIGION

Religion holds a special place in the philosophy of Swami Vivekananda. The various ideas developed by him are headed by the idea of religion. Universal love or universal brotherhood is the main essence of Vivekananda's concept of Universal Religion. He discovered a unique explanation to the concept of religion. He believed that no description of religion can be exact. The various definitions that had been given are not wrong but they invariably miss one or the other aspect of true religion. Therefore, for him, the best way to appreciate the nature of religion is not to define it but to highlight such aspect of religion without which it would be difficult to call a religion as religion.

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. He explained that religion dose not consist in erecting temples or building churches or attending public worship. It also cannot be found in the books or in words or in lectures or in organizations. Religion dose not consist in subscribing to a particular creed or faith but in spiritual realization. Religion consists of spiritual realization. In other words, spiritual realization is religion.

Vivekananda said that it is fact that there have been various religious organizations having different religious codes and beliefs and also that there had been conflicts among religions. But equally true is the fact that these conflicts have not been able to make any religion extinct. Most of the major religious sects have continued to live. According to Vivekananda this is significant. This shows that conflicts are only apparent. In reality, there is some common essence lying at the core of all religions.

But still the question remains as to why the conflicts arise at all. Vivekananda explains it by saying that one religion gives stress on a particular aspect of truth while the other emphasizes on another aspect. He said “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.”ⁱ According to him, religions are not really contradictory but supplementary. If one shows one aspect, the other will emphasize on another aspect. If this is really the case, then no religion can be said to be more special than the other. Each religion is equally important and equally true. Moreover, the same thing can be looked at from different points of view. He explained it giving an example. The same building may be photographed from different angles. And each angle will make the building appear different. This does not mean that the photographs are of different buildings. The object is not different; it is looked at from different sides. Each photograph reveals a particular aspect of the building without being false by any standard. Similar is the case with religions. All religions are description of one and the same basic reality. Only the perspectives are different.

Each religion reveals a particular aspect of reality and thus cannot be called false. The limited human mind can grasp only a fraction of the reality and this we sometimes mistake for the whole reality. When one thinks what one has grasped is the whole reality and considers it as the only truth and others’ claim to truth as false, problems crop up. Vivekananda says: “We are viewing truth, getting as much of it as circumstances will permit, colouring the truth with our 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.”ⁱⁱ

The religions are different on account of their emphasis on a particular aspect of truth and similar as they all are attempts to arrive at the truth. And there are not many truths but *the* truth; for, truth is revelation of reality and reality is one. Vivekananda holds, like a true Vedantins, that in essence all things are alike. One essence underlies everything. According to him, things are one in their essence. They appear as many in their various manifestations. In support he quoted from the Rig-Veda:

“The same reality has presented itself as many. Religion is defined by Vivekananda as an attempt to experience this oneness of reality abiding everything, we are completely transformed. All the religion seeks this basic experience of the oneness of reality. The various religions describe this single reality difficulty and purpose various methods attaining it.”

When this is applied to religion, the various religions being revelation of the reality, which is one, expresses the same truth. This common aspect of all religions is what Vivekananda calls universal religion. Each religion is an effort to arrive at the truth and this truth is the same. From this Vivekananda concludes that what humanity is looking for is finally one religion and this is Universal Religion. Universal Religion to be really universal must satisfy at least two conditions: first, it must open its gates to every individual; it must admit that nobody is born with this or that religion; whether he takes to one religion or the other must ultimately be left to his inner likes and choice. In this sense by individualizing religion we really universalize it. Secondly, Universal Religion must be able to give satisfaction and comfort to every religious sect. After all the Universal Religion has to supersede the conflicts of sects and therefore must satisfy them all. Vivekananda Universal Religion has three distinctive features. Firstly- it is universal in spirit, Secondly- It is comprehensive in its scope, thirdly- it is concrete in its application.

Universal Religion is not a new religion. It already exists in all religions as the universal feature of enquiry into the same truth. The external conflicts hide from one its common feature. It is a religion of the spirit. It affirms the unity of existence. It affirms the oneness of reality, and asserts the divinity of man in his essence.

Universal Religion for Vivekananda did not mean a religion that will have one universal philosophy or one universal mythology or one universal set of rituals. In his conception of Universal Religion Vivekananda accepted the point that there are different approaches to religious matters. The individual is in perfect liberty in this regard. A particular word that Vivekananda emphasizes while presenting his conception of Universal Religion is 'acceptance'. The conception of acceptance is much broader than the conception of tolerance. Tolerance as a concept is rather negative. It implies that something may be allowed to operate in spite of the fact that it is wrong. Vivekananda was not satisfied with such a negative conception. He wanted to go beyond various negative conceptions and put a positive conception. That is why he says that he can worship in any form with any individual or sects. Such an attitude enables the followers to discover at least one such element which can be said to be common to all religions in a general way and consequently may represent the essence of Universal Religion. Every religion consciously or unconsciously is struggling towards the realization of a unity which may be regarded as the ideal of all religion and of thus of Universal Religion.

Universal Religion does not talk of doing away with other religions. For Universal Religion to be there, diversity of religions have to be maintained. And in this diversity all religions would enjoy the same importance. Each religion has particular ideals that are needed for the society. Vivekananda pointed out that different religions emphasized different factors. For example, in Christianity the factor of self- purification is emphasized. One is to be pure at heart only then it would be possible for him or her to enter into the kingdom of god. Jesus declared that only those who are like children at heart will enter the kingdom of god. Islam emphasizes the factor of universal-brotherhood. Hinduism emphasizes the essential spirituality of man. Every religion takes up an aspect of religion and develops it which is equally important. The Universal Religion balances the various aspects of religions.

According to Vivekananda universal religion is not just hope or an ideal. It is already there. Therefore, "by Universal Religion Vivekananda intended a system of union of the minds of human being which is nothing but a kind of realization, not talk, nor doctrine, nor theories..... It is being and becoming."ⁱⁱⁱ

The universal religion of Vivekananda was a humanistic religion. His aim was to strengthen the humanistic religion which exalts man against the orthodox religions which portrait man as a miserable sinner, or a weak and helpless being completely at the mercy of God.

CONCLUSION

For Vivekananda the Universal religion is not a utopian concept. It is possible as every religion is based on the common essence of enquiry into truth. But Universal Religion cannot be established by converting any one of the world religions. He said that Universal Religion is possible only to the extent that there is a conception of universalism in which there is a place for all religions. For each religion is suited for a particular group. 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 Universal Religion.

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