



Pratidhwani the Echo

A Peer-Reviewed International Journal of Humanities & Social Science

ISSN: 2278-5264 (Online) 2321-9319 (Print)

Impact Factor: 6.28 (Index Copernicus International)

UGC Approved, Journal No: 48666

Volume-VII, Issue-IV, April 2019, Page No. 131-138

Published by Dept. of Bengali, Karimganj College, Karimganj, Assam, India

Website: <http://www.thecho.in>

Religion of Advaita Vedanta and the Concept of Unity of All Religions for Global Peaceful Co-Existence with Special Reference to Vivekananda

Dr. Naba Kr. Kalita

Associate Prof. & HOD, Dept. of Philosophy, Chhaygaon College, Kamrup, Assam

Abstract

Swami Vivekananda, an extraordinary personality, dedicated his whole life towards real upliftment of humanity. His philosophical vision is integral in kind and quality. The chief intention of his philosophy is to create consciousness of the world civilization, from the integration of all the essential insights now carried within the various cultures of the world. In his dynamism of thought, humanism is the prime factor to be served. The central theme of his inspiring speeches for the whole world was man-his growth, development and upliftment.

Vivekananda's life-long mission was to establish spiritual oneness of existence among mankind. He was a philosopher who deeply felt, valued, acted and experienced life in every detail. His teachings are linked up with spiritual and physical experiences with their stress on cultivation of purity and strength. Vivekananda spoke of natural and harmonious development of the latent powers in man. His heartfelt call to the world was unmistakable and unambiguous. To him, the ideal of all education and training should be man-making and to make the man grow. He had all appreciation for the industrial progress of the West, yet there was something more in his philosophy. According to him, the same divinity exists behind each and everything. He said a man of reason and intellect can have the best of wealth and power, still he may not find peace of mind unless he discovers his divine existence. This evolution of the individual into whole man is what the Vedanta calls the spiritual growth of man. Vivekananda, the illustrious apostle of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa, reiterated this divine message of his master over and above the socio-political development of the West.

Keywords: Religion, Advaita, Vedanta, Humanity, Essential Insights, Dynamism of Thoughts, Global Peaceful Co-existence.

Introduction: Religion magnifies the virtues of human nature as it distinguishes man from his animal faculties. It justifies the ascending journey from the natural profane to the supernatural insight in human soul....a transaction of the soul from within and self-

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surrender. Religion is intimately concerned with our whole world from extrinsic as well as from intrinsic aspects.

Viewed from the Indian perspective, there has always been a firm conviction about something that is not shakable, eternal, divine, and self-evident. This conviction indicates the characteristic element of the thought process better known as Hinduism. It is through the development of spiritual laws, which contends for the existence of a super sensuous sense, that man can achieve revelations of spiritual truths. Every man has to understand the basic nature of religion; one has to study the architecture of temples, idols, hymns, songs, religious poetry of the Zendavesta, Rg-Veda, the Bible, the Koran, Adigrantha and so on.

In almost all religions of the world, man has been given a very respectful as well as high status. As for example, Buddhism and Jainism have treated man as the highest being as because they do not believe in God. Man's true nature is temporarily hidden due to ignorance. Man becomes infinite and free from all limitations when he realizes his real nature. Judaism and Christianity regard man as the greatest of all creatures in their own manner. To them, God made man in his own image and man has been made to establish the complete reign of good on earth by eradicating evil. Zoroastrianism too offers the same position to man. In Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism, human mind comes to earth with certain limitations and so, neither he is completely free nor fully responsible for his work. For Islam, man seems to have been denied freedom of will to some extent. So, it can be said that each and every religion including Islam grant some amount of freedom to man in their own manners.

In fact, the true sense of the purpose of religion is to assist man to grow from this world of intellect, this world of divided consciousness, with its discords and dualities, to a life of unity, of freedom of love. Religion voices man's protest against the subnormal and his aspiration for the supernormal. It develops character and in this way, cures degenerations. This is to say, if a man has to proceed and live in a congenial atmosphere, religion must live. Religion maintains the social momentum towards progress. Everywhere it has concern with social and cultural ideals. Community can rise higher in culture through religion. Religion evolves correlation with the social evolution, i.e., the evolution of thought, culture and spirituality.

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In the religion of Advaita Vedanta, we have the principle that you, I and everything of this universe are that Absolute-not parts but whole. The Atman or the Self is same as the Brahman. The vision of Vivekananda which shaped his practical Vedanta, ultimately explored the quintessence that 'Jiva is Siva', 'Service to man is service to God'...the solution to every religious crisis is found in Advaita, the greatest and the best known system of Vedanta. The Advaitism is basically spoken of in connection with Sankara's philosophy. The Upanisads, the Bhagavad-Gita and the Brahma sutra are the triple basis of Advaita philosophy. Advaita Vedanta of Sankara may be said to be an attempt of a harmonious

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interpretation of the Upanisadic texts. All works of Sankara were directed towards one purpose of assisting the individual to realize the identity of the soul with Brahman, which paves the ways for unity of men.

The central doctrine of Advaita is that Brahman is the only reality, all else being an illusory appearance thereof Sankara himself expresses the quintessence of his philosophy in a half verse—

*Brahma satyam Jagatmithya
Jiva brahmaiva na parah.*

Brahman is the only ultimate Reality, the world of multiplicity and plurality is false and ultimately, the Atman and the Brahman are not different. This is the central theme of the religion of Advaita Vedanta. The non-duality of Brahman, the non-reality of the world and the non-difference of the soul from Brahman—these three constitute the essential teaching of Advaita.

The famous thinker Christopher Iserwood said that Vedanta is a non-dualistic philosophy which teaches that Brahman is one without a second-Brahman the ultimate reality behind the phenomenal world. Brahman is the Atman of every human being, creature and object. William James has rightly remarked that Sankara's system is the paragon of all monistic systems.

According to Sankara, Atman and Brahman are same, but owing to limiting adjuncts of body, mind etc. that it appears to be different from Brahman. The individual soul is not a microcosm in a macrocosm; it is the macrocosm itself. For Advaita, the world is a product of Maya, an illusory creation of God's magical power. Describing the attitude of Sankara, Vivekananda puts that so long as we are under the clutches of Maya, the universe appears real to us. Maya has produced this universe with its multifarious names and forms and has drawn a veil, as it were, over the Reality behind the phenomenal world. When we are able to tear off this veil of Maya, the real man will manifest himself and then we shall realize our true nature, namely, Brahman. Hence the Vedanta argues to discover 'Tat'-the Ideal in us and identify ourselves with It. To become Brahman is the highest ideal of the Vedanta.

Vivekananda took up the thread of Sankara's philosophy detecting enough convincing thought in the Advaita Vedanta. But he felt that there was scope for intuitive awareness of many aspects of life not encompassed by Advaita Vedanta. Deeply impressed by the great universal heart of Buddha, Vivekananda found enough base and thoughts to make for the apparent irreconcilables in Sankara's Advaita Vedanta. As an outcome of his comprehensive study of the heart of Buddha and Advaita Vedanta of Sankara, he could offer us a more comprehensive view of life. He established a clear view of life which if we realize shall lead us to a far deeper understanding and awareness. In the words of Vivekananda, in Buddha we had the great, universal heart and infinite patience, making religion practical and bringing it to everybody's door. In Sankaracharya, we saw tremendous intellectual power, throwing the searching light of reason upon everything. We

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want today that bright sun of intellectuality joined with the heart of Buddha, the wonderful infinite heart of love and mercy. This union will offer us the highest philosophy of mutual co-existence that can create global understanding.

In fact, religion is a real life force and its very aim is to bind together the heart of all living beings to each other and to God. According to Vivekananda, all the forces have been still functioning to mould the destiny of the human beings. They are more potent in manifestation of one's own true nature which we call religion. He said that the goal of all religions is the same in essence, i.e., reunion of men with God or with the divinity which is the real nature of all mankind. There are so much similarities in various religions which suggest the idea that the particulars of different religions have been copied from one another. Realization of self as God in all is the principal teaching of all religions. It is the belief in all religions that service to all living beings is the service to God and this is the way of attaining perfection in life. All religions believe in super-natural being, transcendental but not indifferent to His creatures. Comparative study of all major religions of the worlds shows that except certain differences as to non-essentials or superficial elements, all religions teach the same fundamental truth. All religious practices are the manifestations of the intrinsic desire for realizing the supreme.

Vivekananda said that the difference among the world religions is one of expression and not of substance, and their points of similarity and unity are intrinsic. The language of the soul is one for all men. All religions believe in one supreme spirit as the source from which the world proceeds, by which it is sustained and ends. In fact, no founder of a religion does preach absolutely new truth i.e., there is no difference in respect of fundamental truth. The different prophets preach the same fundamental truth in varied languages at different times in almost all religions of the world. In the Bhagavad Gita, Lord Krishna said to Arjuna-“The royal saints, the kings, the philosophers of ancient days from one to the other did pass this wisdom from age to age, that same eternal yoga, ancient vision. Here I declare to this day to strengthen the mind and heart of life's perpetual strife.”¹ Buddha and Jaina speak respectively of the past Buddhas and Tirthankaras and they admit that they have codified the same truth taught by them. In Christianity, Christ says, “I am not to destroy the law of prophets but to fulfill them.”² Similarly in Islam, Muhammad says, “ This that I am now telling unto you the Holy Quran it is to be found within the ancient seers too.”³ Kung-pen-Tu (Confucius) declared- “I could hand on, I can not create new things.” The Sufis declared that just it is luster of one Sun that shines in the different sea waves and bubbles, so it is one truth that is expressed under the cover of various forms.

In all religions, we find that each religion appears to an ethical ideal. Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism, the followers are advised to be aware of the moral Law of Karma and to follow the path of righteousness and wisdom to get rid of bondage. The path that Buddha taught categorically is known as ‘Majjhima Pratipada’, i.e., the middle path. Confucianism primarily teaches – “Commit no excess, do nothing injurious, there are few who will not then take you for their pattern. The will should not be gratified to the full; pleasures should not be carried to excess”.⁴ The Bhagavad Gita also teaches that he who

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avoids excess in food and fast, on sleep and waking and work and play, he wins peace and joy. Taoism too teaches five moral principles and puts more stress on moderation. Shintoism teaches its followers certain moral offences for it leads to the displeasure of God. Zoroastrianism is ethical and it asks its followers three principles - think good, speak good and do good. Christianity teaches its followers the golden path and to establish the kingdom of God on earth following the path of righteousness. The Bible puts, "Be not righteous over much, neither make thyself over wise, not over-wicked, neither thou be too foolish".⁵ Islam too asks its followers to enhance a silent resignation to the almighty for guidance of the right path and to form one brotherhood. Sikhism asks its followers to have simple faith in God and have plain living with high moral spirit.

The ethical ideas to be pursued by the followers are social in outlook and it is the principle of all world religions. In Hinduism, this universal outlook has been detected since the period of Rg-Veda--united is the thought of all that may happen to agree. The famous writer Bhagaban Das points out that all religions of the world aim at binding together a new the hearths of all to each other and get back again to God. Jaina's concept of Ahimsa is another name for universal love. Zoroastrianism believes in the power of love that paves the way to unity. Islam and Christianity advocate fraternity of man under the common faith in God. In fact, all religions teach us to rise above selfishness and upgrade a spirit of universal love.

Every religion believes in some stable character of inner personality, called the soul. And this soul is believed to be in kinship with the spirit. Thus soul has destiny of its own even after death. It may be absorbed in the Supreme soul or continue in everlasting communion with Him. The Supreme soul dwells hidden in the hearts of all and make possible for man to understand and help each other in the difficulties of life. It is the one soul force of whatever unity is there in all human thought.

Hinduism looks upon liberation as the highest goal of human life. Liberation, for Hinduism, ultimately means the union with God. The Upanishads declare— "The one God is hidden in all living beings, the living witness binding all hearts. The wise who seek them and find them in themselves, to them one else, is eternal joy".⁶

Vivekananda points out that the different religions have only one common central point and that is preaching of freedom that find the way out of this world. He compared Christianity and Islam to the dualist branch of Hinduism. Vedanta contains in it all the religions of the world. By Vedanta, he meant universal oneness of humanity and not in sectarian sense. He said that each and every religion is found in the Vedanta. There are three stages of Vedanta philosophy— the Dvaita, Visistadvaita and Advaita. One comes after another. These are nothing but man's spiritual stages of growth. Each is necessary...Vedanta is applied to various ethnic groups and creeds of India. Hinduism is basically Vedantism. The first stage, i.e., Dvaita applied to the ethnic groups of Europe, is Christianity, as applied it to the Semitic groups, is Muhammedanism, and the same as applied in its yoga perception form is called Buddhism.

Religion, according to Vivekananda, is not mere beliefs or dogma. He urged upon the followers of different religions to make it a living thing so that the world people can co-exist harmoniously. Religion should assist in the development of humanitarian values. Necessarily, the goal of religion is man-making, not institutionalization only. Vivekananda explains that the goal of all religions is Divine awareness, arising and awakening to the individual insensitivity and callousness to our divinity, to the injustices almost all round, to the misery and sickness of the world.

Vivekananda discussed the concept of religion in a very practical way not only in individual life but in social life too. He can be regarded as evolving any new religion in the academic sense of the term though he has made a superb analysis on the concept of universal religion. Being influenced by many great religious philosophers-teachers of the world like Lord Buddha, Adiguru Sankara, his spiritual guide, Sri Ramakrishna etc., Vivekananda gained the very essential elements of religions and he attempted at assimilating them in his own way. He applied these not in his personal life but in social, political and economic problem also. Religion for him does not mean any creed, dogma or cult; but realization of divineness of one's very self within. Every religion, according to Vivekananda, should cultivate this fundamental principle for global peace and harmony. He said that only such thinking can create a congenial atmosphere for peaceful co-existence of the world people. That is why Vivekananda is named a practical philosopher—a true advaitin. He was concerned deeply and passionately for the upliftment and salvation of the down-trodden, poor, weak and neglected class of the society.

Vivekananda became a shining symbol of how much could be good in mankind. He has been from various perspectives, characterized by people from different corners as a saint, a sannyasin, a spiritual thinker, a philosopher, a social reformer and so forth. But above all he was a true sannyasin, a real man, a true religious man, a man of man-making religion etc. Vivekananda uses to say that the human mind, at certain moments, goes beyond the limitations of the sense and the power of reasoning, and realizes facts which are the basis of all religions of the world. The facts are an abstract presence, an omnipresent Being, an abstract Personality called God, a moral Law or an abstract essence that underlies every existence. Men, according to Vivekananda, ought to struggle to reach this ideal, the ideal of infinite power and the ideal of infinite pleasure. He says that true religion is the 'sense taste for the Infinite'. Religion consists not in a theological system but in man's soul. The primacy of Vivekananda's religious urge behind all his religious and spiritual activities was nothing but self-realization or the realization of the infiniteness in the finite self. He called upon all men to cultivate to realize that divine nature from within and the very non-difference between the self and the Absolute Reality. He took the principle of the service of the helpless, i. e., needy, poor, weak with a view to uplifting them to the general level of living. It was his chief concern as he believed that merely through the real advancement of the poor and the down-trodden of the society, the destiny of religion can be achieved.

Vivekananda with his practical application of religion of the Vedanta wanted his countrymen to be strong and bold, independent and proud. He treated Vedanta as reforming

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tool for the common people. He believed in supremacy of spiritualism over the materialistic view of life. The whole world needs light and India alone possesses that light not in magic but in the teaching of Advaita Vedanta. Vivekananda preached that the aim of the Advaita Vedanta is to lead man to the highest truth. Man is rooted in the spirit ; man is divine ; Atman is Brahman – there is the sum and substance of its teachings. This metaphysical foundation of divinity behind humanity will enable people all over the world to resolve all their problems – political, economic, social, spiritual etc.

Vivekananda called upon all people of the world to realize that the underlying unity of existence is the chief motive of human activity. Man is inevitably and constantly moving towards Advaita, knowingly or unknowingly. Modern scientific progress unmistakably demonstrates this, and Vivekananda excessively draws importance of Advaita to modern scientific progress. He said that all religions complement each other in the heart of everything the same truth prevails. Vivekananda indicates that we have to recognize unity by our very nature through variations. Truth may be expressed in a hundred thousand ways. But each of these ways is true as far as it goes.

Religion for Vivekananda is Vedanta. He once clarified with certainty that worldliness and realization of God cannot go together. In India, the attempt has been made to reach a science of religion and philosophy. The Hindus do not separate these as is customary in western countries. It is always grounded in reason and scientific truth. Vedanta religion is known as Hinduism. Vivekananda opined that real religion rises above mythology. It can never rest upon that. Modern science has really made the foundations of religion strong. It is scientifically demonstrable that the whole universe is one. What the metaphysicians call ‘being’, the physicists call ‘matter’. There is no real fight between the two. Vedanta and modern science both posit a self-evolving cause. This view of Vivekananda is akin to Dr. S. Radhakrishnan as for Dr. Radhakrishnan the spirit of science leads to the refinement of religion.

Conclusion: Vivekananda has a catholic and tolerant mind to discover the fundamental unity behind all the religions of the world. He considers that the possibilities of religious harmony depend on the definition of religion itself. When man’s ideal of religion becomes broad and deep then only it can embrace every variety of religious forms and practices. Such a broad religion can satisfy every level of human possibilities. This spiritual renaissance of India inspired him to cultivate the past with present and traditionalism with modernism. As every individual is unique in his own possibilities, so a practical generalization becomes impossible.

Vivekananda as an essentialist puts that religion is essentially one but differences are its manifestations. Diverse manifestations of this essence must be admired to multiply. Every religion is the expression of ‘Truth’. Truth stands on its own evidence. For the progress of the society, variety on every plane is appreciable. So for better functioning of the ‘World of Religions’, we must look for opportunities suit us the best. Vedanta proclaims and wants to present before the world various methods through which every man can work. The Vedanta

Religion of Advaita Vedanta and the Concept of Unity of All Religions for Global Peaceful... Naba Kr. Kalita puts,” Let each person in the world be separate, if you will; the one principle, the unity will be behind. The more prophets there are the more books, the more seers, the more methods, so much the better for the world”.⁷

This is the practical side of all religions of the world. Vedanta’s plane is first to establish the principles, mapping out for us the goal and then to teach us the method for arriving at the goal, to understand and realize what is religion. From this particular perspective, the requirement for ‘tolerance’ and the value of ‘comparison’ have to be cultivated. This approach of comparison will at the end deter us from detecting the disadvantages in religions other than our own. In amplifying this idea, Vivekananda clarified: “We Hindus do not merely tolerate, we unite ourselves with every religion... So we gather all these flowers, and binding them together with the cord of love, make them into a wonderful bouquet of worship”.⁸ Thus all throughout his life, he made attempt to show to the world that Vedanta religion is a symposium of all faiths of the world. Therefore, the whole of Vedanta religion must be conquered by spiritual contemplation for a better realization of what is the essential unity of all religions of the world. Vivekananda said that the appropriate understanding and application of such ideals of Vedanta religion will definitely pave the way for peaceful living of the world people.

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