

Universal Religion Of Swami Vivekananda: A Goal Of All Religions

Dr. Bornali Borah, Assistant Professor, Department of Philosophy, North Lakhimpur College (Autonomous), Lakhimpur, Assam (India). email : bborah27@gmail.com

Abstract

Universal Religion for Vivekananda does not mean a religion with one universal philosophy or one universal mythology, or one universal set of rituals. In his conception of Universal Religion, Vivekananda established that there are different approaches in religious matters. A particular word that Vivekananda emphasises while presenting his conception of Universal Religion is 'acceptance'. The conception of acceptance is much broader than the conception of tolerance. 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 that can be common to all religions in a general way and, consequently, represent the essence of Universal Religion. Every religion consciously or unconsciously struggles towards the realisation of a unity that may be regarded as the ideal of all religion. In this paper, an attempt has been made to discuss Vivekananda's concept of universal religion and humanism and tolerance and acceptance..

Keywords - Universal Religion, Brotherhood, Acceptance, Tolerance, Humanism

Introduction

Being a great social reformer, Vivekananda (1863-1902) made a significant contribution to elevating people's status. Vivekananda philosophy is an integral philosophy. The principal aim of his philosophy is to create a vision of world civilisation. Today the philosophy of Swami Vivekananda is of much importance in creating a universal brotherhood. He dedicated his whole life towards upliftment of humanity. Humanism is the main factor of his philosophy. His ideas are linked with spiritual and physical experiences with their stress on the cultivation of purity and strength. Vivekananda's philosophy is deeply influenced by ancient Hindu philosophy – especially of the Vedanta. From a practical perspective, he worked out exclusively the concept of universal religion. Vivekananda wanted to establish a relation between religion and life. He has given equal importance to all religions because each religion is essentially humanistic. Each religion aims at divinity, the absolute truth, the oneness and the primary goal of all religions is to realise this divinity. This realisation is the one universal religion.

Religion is as old as the human race, and it has much impact on human life. For Universal Religion to be there, diversity of religions have to be maintained. According to Vivekananda, Universal Religion cannot be established by converting any one of the world religions. To him, Universal Religion is possible only

to the extent that there is a conception of universalism in which there is a place for all religions. Each religion is suited for a particular group. He gave due consideration to the phenomenon of diversity among humanity in the world. Different types of people with different mentalities may have different habits, rituals, and beliefs. Each and everyone has one's place in society; this was a fundamental assumption of his Universal Religion.

Vivekananda's View on Religion

Vivekananda referred to the concept of religion in a very different manner, i.e. in a practical way. For him, religion is a necessity of life. It is not just a talk and doctrines or theories, nor is it sectarianism. Every religion, according to Vivekananda, should cultivate principle for world peace and harmony. He explains that religion does not consist of erecting temples or building churches, or attending public worship. Religion does not consist in subscribing to a particular faith or creed but in spiritual realisation. Religion, Vivekananda says, provides a secure foundation and an ultimate sanction to morality also. He discovered a unique explanation for the concept of religion. The various definitions given are not wrong, but they invariably miss one or the other aspect of true religion. Therefore, the best way to appreciate religion's nature is not to define it but to highlight such an aspect of religion. It would be challenging to call religion.

According to him, religion is not just a talk on doctrines or theories, nor is it sectarianism. Religion does not live in insects and societies. It is a relationship between the Soul and God. Vivekananda said that it is a fact that there have been various religious organisations having different religious codes and beliefs and also that there had been conflicts among religions. But equally actual 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; this shows that conflicts among religions are only apparent. In reality, there is some common essence lying at the core of all religions, i.e. universal brotherhood and tolerance.

But still, the question remains as to why the conflicts arise at all. Vivekananda explains it by saying that one religion emphasises a particular aspect of truth while the other emphasises another aspect. If one shows one aspect, the other will emphasise another aspect. If this is the case, then no religion can be more memorable than the other. Each religion is equally important and equally correct. He explained it by giving an example that a building may be photographed from different angles and each angle will make the building appear different does not mean that the photographs are of different buildings. 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 ultimate reality. Only the perspectives and way of expression 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 reality, which 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.

According to Vivekananda, various religions are revelations of the same reality, and all religions express 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, Universal Religion. Universal Religion, to be 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 individualising religion, we universalise it. Secondly, Universal Religion must give satisfaction and comfort to every religious sect. After all, the Universal Religion has to supersede the conflicts of sects and therefore must satisfy all. Vivekananda's 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 will hide if the people search for Universal religion. 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 with 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. A particular word that Vivekananda emphasises while presenting his conception of Universal Religion is 'acceptance'. The conception of acceptance is much broader than the conception of tolerance. 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 that can be common to all religions in a general way and, consequently, represent the essence of Universal Religion. Every religion consciously or unconsciously struggles towards the realisation of unity which may be regarded as the ideal of all religion.

Universal Religion does not talk about doing away with other religions. Universal Religion holds that diversity of religions has to be maintained and in this diversity, all religions would enjoy the same importance. Each religion has particular ideals that are needed for society. Vivekananda pointed out that different religions emphasise different factors. For example, in Christianity, the factor of self-purification is emphasised. 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 would enter the kingdom of God. Islam emphasises the factor of universal-brotherhood. Hinduism emphasises the essential spirituality of man. Every religion takes up an aspect of religion and develops it, which is equally important. Universal Religion balances the various aspects of religions.

According to Vivekananda, universal religion is not just hoped or an idea. It is already there. It is a system of the union of human beings' minds, which is nothing but a kind of realisation, not talk, nor doctrine, nor theories; it is being and becoming.

The universal religion of Vivekananda was humanistic. For Vivekananda, the Universal religion is not a utopian concept. It is possible as every religion is based on the shared 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. Each religion is suited for a particular group. He gave due consideration to the phenomenon of diversity among humanity in the world. There may be different types of people in the world with a different mentality, with different habits, rituals and beliefs. Each and everyone has one's own place in society. All these various minds and various types of people are needed in the society. That was a fundamental assumption of his Universal Religion.

Explaining the concept of Universal Religion, Vivekananda said that all religions in the world are looking at truth from different standpoints, which may vary according to our birth, education, surroundings, and so on. His idea was that all religions are different forces in the realm of God; each religion is working for the good of humankind. Universal Religion, which philosophers are looking for, already exists in every country like a universal brotherhood. Every religion has a great mission to fulfil. In Hinduism, we find one idea, i.e. spirituality. Hinduism tries to define the idea of the Soul so that no earthly touch can destroy it. Renunciation and spirituality, the great ideals of India, are still clinging to these ideas. Referring to Islam, he said that Islam makes its followers all equal. It stands to preach to the world the practical brotherhood of all belonging to their faith. Christianity's central idea is to preach – 'watch and pray, for the kingdom of Heaven is at hand'- it means that man should purify his heart and be ready to that spirit

that never dies. Vivekananda was ready to accept all religions of the past, and hence he uttered- “I worship God with every one of them in whatever form they worship Him. I shall go to the mosque of the Mohammedans, I shall enter the Christian Church and kneel down before the crucifix, I shall enter the Buddhist temple, where I shall take refuge to Buddha and His law. I shall go to the forest and sit down in meditation with the Hindu who is trying to see the light which enlightens the heart of everyone.” He was ready to accept all the religions and keep heart open to accept any religion that may come into existence in the future.

Vivekananda questioned the diversity of religious views in explaining the identical phenomena and held that the diversity of the views is because each religion described was only the different phases of the same phenomenon. Each religion has particular ideals that are needed for society. Thus Vivekananda gave equal importance to all religions in the world. Strengthened by this understanding of religion, Vivekananda identified the need for Universal Religion. Then he searched for a way to form that Universal Religion. He realised that the Universal Religion could not be established with any one of the world religions, converting the followers of all other religions into it. Universal Religion is possible only to the extent that there is a conception of universalism in which there is a place for all religions suited to different types of humanity. Therefore he gave due consideration to the phenomenon of diversity among humanity in the world. There may be different types of people in the world with a different mentality, with different habits, rituals and beliefs. Each and everyone has one's place in society. All these various minds and various types of people are needed to society. That was a fundamental assumption of his Universal Religion. Concerning his Universal Religion concept, Vivekananda says that religion consists neither in doctrines nor in dogmas. It is the direct realisation of the spiritual world's truths that forms the real essence of religion. True religion is a direct transcendental experience of the ultimate reality. The idea of direct realisation is common to all religion. The end of all religions is the realisation of God in the Soul, and this is the one Universal Religion. According to Vivekananda, if there is one universal truth in all religions, it is the realisation of God. Ideals and methods may differ, but this is the main point to be noted.

Vivekananda's aim was to present the ideal of Universal Religion as the spirit of a universal society that is a new idea of religion for a new humanity. Vivekananda did not mean his Universal Religion to supersede or supplant the existing religions. The concept of a Universal Religion is just an awareness where all religions of the world co-exist, forming a grand symphony of man's spiritual aspirations. He adds that Universal Religion already exists in the minds of people who, even while sticking to their religion, their ancestral faith, look upon other religions with sympathy, who can, without rejecting their

own belief, show genuine respect for the prophets of the different nations of the world. A believer in Universal Religion possesses a good understanding of and reverence for world religion without losing his sense of belonging to his religion. According to him, unity in variety is the plan for the universe. Universal religion as conceived by Vivekananda is, therefore, not a new religion with a new scripture and a new liturgy, it can be regarded as a fresh attitude to religion, a fresh spiritual and moral outlook. It commands not merely tolerance; it insists on accepting other religions as true and making religion, thereby creating a principle of human unity. Universal Religion may, thus, be said to be a discovery of universality in all religions.

Relevance of Vivekananda's Concept of Religion in Present Context

Vivekananda's concept of religion has much relevance in the present context. His relevance will increase with each passing day. No days, there have been many quarrels, debates, controversies in the name of religion. People take religion as a weapon to exploit others. But the universal religion of Vivekananda was humanistic. He aimed to strengthen the humanistic religion, which exalts man against the orthodox religions.

For Vivekananda, the Universal religion is neither a utopian concept nor a fiction. It is possible as every religion is based on the shared 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. Each religion is suited for a particular group. He gave due consideration to the phenomenon of diversity among humanity in the world. Different types of people in the world with different mentality may have different habits, rituals, and beliefs. Each and everyone has one's own place in society. All these various minds and various types of people are needed to society. That was a fundamental assumption of his Universal Religion.

Moreover, Swami Vivekananda talked about complete freedom. People want to be free from poverty, ageing and others. According to Vivekananda, once we realise our inner power and divinity within ourselves, we will get freedom from everything.

Conclusion

Thus it seems that Universal Religion should not be treated as one more religion, including the many existing from beforehand. Rather, it should be treated as the only religion pre-existent by nature worldwide, which will be acceptable to and followed by all religious persons alike. This religion will become the religion of all religious men, and it will be not of one specific group or society. In this way,

Universal Religion will become a universally accepted religion. It has been a matter of feeling that once Universal Religion is realised from within, all bloodshed and hostility in the name of religion will be entirely over, and the real role of religion then will be played, i.e. the role of uniting all people of the world by one thread of universal brotherhood. Hence Vivekananda's concept of Universal Religion may be a safeguard of decaying morality in the society of ill practices, malice and hatred to other faiths. The concept of Universal Religion, which teaches caste love against hatred and compassion against violence with calm and dignity, is highly required in the present-day context to reshape man's ideals. Vivekananda's philosophy may be regarded as the philosophy of fundamental unity underlying in all religions. He inspired mankind to understand and follow the Universal Religion through religious tolerance and universal acceptance.

References:

1. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, (1994) Advaita Asrama, Kolkata, Vol. III.*
2. *Thus Spake Vivekananda, Vivek Sutras, (1987) P.V, Sri Ramakrishna Math, 16 Ramakrishna Math Road, Madras.*
3. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, (1989) Advaita Asrama, Kolkata, vol II.*
4. *Heehs Peter (ed.), Indian Religions: The Spiritual Traditions of South Asia, Reprint, Delhi, 2006.*
5. *Tapasyananda, S, The Philosophical and Religious Lectures of Swami Vivekananda, (1984) Advaita Asrama, Kolkata.*
6. *Jyotirmayananda Swami(ed), (2000), Vivekananda, His Gospel of Man Making with Garland of Tributes and a Chronicle of Life and Time with Pictures, 4th ed, Chennai.*
7. *Virjananda Swami (ed), (2006), The Life of Swami Vivekananda by His Eastern and Western Disciple, vol II, Chapter LXXIII, Advaita Asrama, Kolkata.*
8. *Religion Today, A Vedanta Kesari Presentation, Sri Ramakrishna Math, Mylapore, Madras, 1992.*