

POSSIBILITY AND RELEVANCE OF UNIVERSAL RELIGION: AS ENVISAGED BY SWAMI VIVEKANANDA

SIRAJUL ISLAM

In India, religion has a pivotal role to shape the humanity and society as well. Indian cultural milieu is unique in character and pluralistic in nature. Basically it is a land of spirituality and cross fertilization. Here religion is not merely a weekly congregation rather; it is an inevitable part of human daily life. Hence, it can be considered as the code of life which motivated people to acquire divine felicity.

Swami Vivekananda, the champion of Hindu revivalism preached for the pragmatic utility of religion which is essential to construct both human life and society as well. His universalistic approach of religion is beyond any sectarian division. His quest for Truth and unsurpassed love towards humanity is to be considered as an inherent propensity of human being that elevated a man from beastly stage to the stage of humanity and ultimately in the state of Divinity. He was not only considered it in his faith but he practiced it deliberately throughout in his life. Therefore, his religious teachings are familiar as Practical Vedanta or Neo-Vedanta which is not merely confined to metaphysical or mythological contents but also the practicality of human life and that he disseminated towards all and sundry without any distinction of caste, creed and religion.

This universalistic approach of Swami Vivekananda is the crying need of the society to provide them peace and solace in their lives. Here lies the relevancy of his universalistic approach.

Key Words: Indian ethos and culture, Swami Vivekananda's notion of religion, spirituality, morality, humanity and universalistic approach.

India is a country; where multiple religions, languages and cultures are exist from time immemorial. Therefore, Indian society is unlike the other societies of the world, here diversity is quite obvious and that exhibits in its various spheres in life and society. Hence, diversity is the outstanding feature of this country and its culture is mainly of composite in character.¹ It is a country, which has an inherent ability of absorption and agglomeration of other thoughts and cultures. Historically it is evident that India is a laboratory of cross-fertilization of various thoughts, ideas, religions cultures and civilizations. It proclaims for global relationship with all parts of the world as “*vasudhaiva kutumbakam*”, i.e. it consider oneself as a global citizen and adorn one nationality in the eternal truth. Its other innate capacity is to move with all together as its own, hence its motto is “*sam gachchadham, sam bodhodham, sam vo manamsi janatam*” i.e. let's moves together, let's talk together and, let's know other as our own. This notion was persists from the very beginning of its civilization. History attests that India has

absorbed with various traditions, cultures and faiths, like, the Aryans, the Kushans, the Huns, the Pathans, the Greek, the British, the Muslims and so on. This unique capacity of absorption and agglomeration has helped in the fusion of divergent ideologies with Indian society, culture and civilization, because its eternal voice is- "*om na bhadra kratava yantu visvatah*" i.e. let noble thought come to us from every corner or direction. Therefore, it disparaged bureaucratic tendency and embraced all and sundry with the global/universal vision of mankind. Its eternally seeks to find a unity with the heterogeneous elements, which makes up its totality. But due to the advancement of material prosperity the unity and integrity between one people to another or one country to another are slackening day by day. Due to the advancement of our technology, peoples are able to reach in the various planets; however, we cannot claim that we are in peace. Various nations are menaced by fratricidal wars, terrorism is increasing day by day, and as a result different barbaric activities are occurring in the society with high bellicosity. We have seen, in the ancient period various clans were engaged in the severe struggle with one another for attaining bodily satiation. Their society was full of antagonism and frequent atrocities hence blood shedding became their normal incident. It was happened due to the lack of their mutual tolerance and proper knowledge. But why the people of this advanced age are engaged in fighting? Religion and politics are the most vital causes of this fighting. Because, the parameter of intolerance is going up day by day, and social equilibrium is disrupted simultaneously. Social confrontations between one community to another become a normal incident. The barbaric activities are not confined to society only in religion and politics even barbarism in added to science and technology and that motivating people for accumulating atomic/molecular weapons. The moral value is degrading; individual respect and safe guard of collective rights are in the diminishing order, on the other self interests are getting much more priority in the society that are to be considered as an important cause of social, national and international unrest and conflict. Each and every moment we are in the phobia of ever imminent nuclear war and feeling nerve tension that violates our psychological tranquility as well as social solidarity. Though we are living in this ultra modern world and enjoying facilities of the new inventions and discoveries of science, however, science is unable to invent an instrument/ any remote by which we can regulate all human minds. Therefore, every people whether he is a sage, savant, philosopher, scientist or

religious leader are paying serious attention for establishing world peace. Notwithstanding the much vaunted covenants, pacts, pledges' and the sanction of UNO, the celebrated religious leaders and good will personalities have expressed their views for prevention of war and establishing peace in the society. Now the question may be emerged how the peace is to be achieved? How can we eliminate social evils, political unrests, and molecular / atomic wars from the society? The answer is not so easy. Peace is not a commodity; hence, it is not possible to purchase peace from the market. The seed of war and evil activities are in the mind of human being, therefore, we will have to eradicate their seeds first from the mind of the people through the process of universal religion, fortunately or unfortunately that is our last hope and that was started by Swami Vivekananda in the 19th century A.D.

What is religion?

There are numerous religions in the world and all are talking about peace as well as universal brotherhood. Each and every religion possesses some common characteristics as well as differences. Broadly, I mean in every great and recognised religion has three basic characteristics. First, there is the *philosophy* which presents the whole scope of that religion, setting forth its basic principles, the goal and the means of reaching it. The second is *mythology*, which is philosophy made concrete. It consists of legends relating to the lives of men, or of supernatural beings, and so forth. It is the abstractions of philosophy concretised in the more or less imaginary lives of men and supernatural beings. The third part is the *ritual*. This is still more concrete and is made up of forms and ceremonies, various physical attitudes, flowers and incense, and many other things, that appeal to the senses. In these consists the ritual. You will find that all recognised religions have these three elements. Some lay more stress on one and some on another. Let us now take into consideration the first part, philosophy. Is there one universal philosophy? Not yet. Each religion brings out its own doctrines and insists upon them as being the only true ones. And not only does it do that, but it thinks that he who does not believe in them must go to some horrible place. Some will even draw the sword to compel others to believe as they do. This is not through wickedness, but through a particular disease of the human brain called fanaticism. Thus, anger is stirred up, nerves are strung high, and human beings become barbarous like tigers. Is there any mythological similarity, is there any

mythological harmony, any universal mythology accepted by all religions? The answer is negative. All religions have their own mythology, only each of them says, “My stories are not mere myths.” It is a kind of superstition. Now come to the rituals. One sect has one particular form of ritual and thinks that is holy, while the rituals of another sect are simply arrant superstition. So even in rituals there is no universal symbol, which can command general recognition and acceptance. Where then is any universality? How is it possible then to have a universal form of religion? The answer is positive. The differences which exhibit in different religions are basically related to external paraphernalia of religion, the inner import of all religions are almost same and that already exists. Swami Vivekananda as an egalitarian Indian monk first apprehended this universality in religion and according to him it has already to every religion. Let us see what it is.

In Indian context Religion is called *Dharma* and it has very deep connotation. Indian dharma never been used in institutionalized form rather it is deeply associated with the mundane daily life as well as the life hereafter of human being. Here *Dharma* specially is an ethical principle which leads the people toward right direction to perform *duties* which are accompanied by a set of cardinal *values* and *virtues* that ultimately swiped away his animal propensities and elevate him in the stage of divinity.² Thus Vivekananda said- “*religion is the manifestation of divinity already in man*”.³ In broader aspect dharma is a natural impulse (*svabhāva*), like the *svabhāva* of water, it going downward always and the *svabhāva* of fire is to flow upward. Here a question may very legitimately emerge, why human being is diverted from his *svabhāva*? The answer is not so easy. However, it is quite evident that Human being is the most complex animal of the world, where the admixture of animal, rational and spiritual faculties are resides together and always there is the tussle between them to preponderate one over others. Generally, concerning worldly affairs animal propensity is most viable that motivate human being towards more consumption, more comforts, more power and physical gratification. Thus, people are trying to fulfil their thirst (*trishnā*) and desire (*kamanā*) in any way which steeped him towards vices. This is basically the motive of animal spirit and that can be eradicated by the process of universal religion.

What do we mean by Universal Religion?

The entire globe is maintaining universal order and harmony. Universe is a vivid sign of perfect toleration and harmony. There is also the perfect co-ordination and harmony in human physiology. But disharmony is in the mind of him. Universal religion is a process to integrate various human minds, it instigate for harmony and toleration. Thus, Universal Religion is not a separate religion or caste or culture rather it is an ideology which can work jointly without hampering any individual religious identity. It can be achieved through the mutual co-existence, rational outlook on religious matters, and exchange of hearts. It is an initiative where people will rationally find out the commonalities of different religions and judge them rationally and at the same time they will practice religious values/teachings for the benefit of entire globe. This is not the extinction of any religion or culture. Theist and atheist can act together for its establishment and both can be benefitted by it. Hence, its relevancy is that it is a process of mutual assimilation, toleration and fraternal relationship to work for well being of all without any sectarian prejudice. The people of entire globe are looking for this unity and harmony and that is the basic motto of all religions so that we can get rid from our sufferings and miseries. Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, Jainas, Politicians, Technocrats, Monks, Savages, Kings, Beggars even babies are very much anxious for achieving it.

Since universal religion is a process of human unity. Thus, its meaning is incomparably wider and profounder than external paraphernalia of religions. The sense inherent in the words in their widest tenor or purport is the *Spiritual unity and brotherhood of all Beings*; particularly, the doctrine implies that all human beings are inseparably linked together, not merely by the bonds of emotional thought or feeling, but by the very fabric of the universe itself, all men, as well as all beings, both high and low and intermediate, spring forth from the inner and spiritual power of the universe. We will have to apprehend that we all come from the one source, that spiritual power and are all builders of the same life-atoms on all the various planes. It is this interior unity of being and of consciousness, as well as the exterior union of us all, which enables us to grasp intellectually and spiritually the mysteries of the universe; because not merely ourselves and our own fellow human beings, but also all other beings. We are all rooted in the same cosmic Essence, whence we all proceed in the beginning of the primordial periods

of world-evolution, and towards which we are all journeying back. This interlocking and interblending of the numberless hierarchies of beings forming the universe itself extends everywhere, in the invisible worlds as well as in the worlds which are visible. Finally, it is upon this fact of the spiritual unity of all beings and all things that reposes the basis and foundation of human ethics when the essence of all religions is properly to be understood.

Swami Vivekananda and Universal Religion:

We have already stated that this world is moving very fast and everybody is engaged in constant competition that mainly divided human beings and motivated them towards the malicious activities in the society. Beside this, the variegated nature of human beings, castes, culture and shallow knowledge/ ignorance about religion motivated them in misusing religious sentiment and as a result people are living isolated; they do not mix up with one another freely. Thus, there is no mutual love and sympathy, hence no reciprocal respect generated in the society. Lack of respect breeds distrust which ultimately culminates in hatred and consequent violence all around, alienating man from man. Loss of love and absence of true religious knowledge are, therefore, the root cause of shocking crash of human values and eventually erupts into the form of tension, discord and suffering. We notice shocking crash in human values both vertically and horizontally. One is bewildered as to what is going to become of the world. Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) and Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) both are the ardent representatives of modern India those who were first realized the necessity of universal unity in national as well as international levels. Rabindranath Tagore was two years elder than Swami Vivekananda who was also realized the spiritual awakening for universal unity and both were highly influenced by Upanisadic teachings of universality.

Spirituality for Rabindranath Tagore is the dynamic principle that touches every aspect of life and is the guiding principle that “leads human existence from partiality to fullness.”⁴ He characterizes his spirituality as that of an artist. This implies a change in one's attitude to the world; one should move away from an egoistic appropriation of the world, which results in experiences of the world as a source of suffering and happiness, to an artistic experience of the world, where it is the source of unconditional joy (*ānanda*).⁵ Thus, in many of his writings Tagore stressed the need to respond to the call from within, from “the man of the heart.”⁶

The relationship between the man of the heart and the individual is very intimate both in Tagore's and Vivekananda's philosophy. To them, the intimacy is often described as the relationship of the lover and the beloved. It is this inner intimacy that also enables one to experience unity with the external world. As admirers of Raja Rammohun Roy Tagore and Vivekananda both have their full faith in the strength of free citizen in a free society. No blind faith and belief, no ancestral habit they allowed in obscuring their vision of such a *free individual man*. As the champions of human understanding they always said for the superiority of man over the other aspects of creatures of the universe. The notion of freedom also lies in the concept of universal religion as depicted by Swami Vivekananda before Rabindranath Tagore. Thus he said- "If you want to know India, study Vivekananda. In him everything is positive and nothing negative".⁷

In Indian context religion is the necessity of life just like other essential commodities of our daily lives, like- food, clothing, shelter etc. It is quite evident that only the physical things are not sufficient to achieve perfection in human life. Human being in the midst of comfort and luxury craves for something higher and perpetual. This craving is basically a religious craving. Nobody can aloof from it. Even an atheist or non believer of any religion is also religious too because in avoiding religious fanaticism he leads pious and ethical life which are the essential parts of all religions.

According to Swami Vivekananda, religion is not just a talk or doctrines, theories. It is a relation between soul and God. He also said, religion does not consist in erecting temples or building churches or attaining public worship. Religion consists of realization. Different people can realize it in different ways. Further, more he asserted that man and his true nature is already divine. But the divinity is hidden. Therefore, the realization of the divinity is the purpose of life, which is the essence of religion. Swami Vivekananda, an Indian monk who realized the necessity of religion and in his eyes religion is the most potent and viable phenomenon of the world, thus he said- "of all the forces that have worked and are still working to mould the destiny of human race, none certainly is more potent than that, the manifestation of which we call religion".⁸ Another important feature of religion is that it is the highest plane of human thought and life, and therein we find that the workings of two opposite forces. Religion had given humanity both "*the intense love and the most diabolical hatred*".⁹ Finding the

incidents from world history he says- “Nothing makes us as cruel as religion and nothing make us as tender as religion. Nothing has made more for peace and love than religion; nothing has engendered fiercer hatred than religion. Nothing has made the brotherhood of man more tangible than religion; nothing has bred more bitter enmity between men than religion. Nothing has built more charitable institutions, more hospitals for men, and even for animals than religion; nothing has deluged the world with more blood than religion.”¹⁰ Therefore, Swami Vivekananda was a personality of India who first apprehended the necessity of universal religion so that evils can be eliminated from the world.

Universal religion as recommended by Swami Vivekananda does not preach uniformity rather he spoke about unity because; unity in variety is obvious in the universe. This unity in variety is our beauty of the world like the different flowers of a garden. Variety is obvious everywhere in the world even in human beings. We are all human beings but we are not all equal. Differentiation actually helps us enormously to become unified but it is the clashes of thought, narrow-mindedness and lack of knowledge concerning religious matters engender problems. ‘The differentiations of thoughts that awake thought... whirls and eddies occur only in a rushing living stream. There are no whirlpools in stagnant, dead water.’¹¹ This differentiation is the very essence of our progress that widens our soul and thought too.

What then is the ideal of universal Religion? Swamiji has given a nice example that ‘various are our faces: I see no two alike, yet we are all human beings. I know, there is an abstract humanity which is common to all. I may not find it when I try to grasp it, to sense it and to actualize it, yet I know for certain that it is there.’¹² Swamiji said- Just as we have recognize variation in the unity by our very nature, similarly, we must also recognize variation in the context of religion. We must learn that truth may be expressed in a thousand ways and that each way is true as far as it goes.¹³ ‘It is quite logical that same thing can be viewed from a hundred different standpoints, and yet be the same thing. Each religion is adding to the rich variety that religion is capable of generating and it is also adding something new for the development of our religion and society as well.’ Thus it is quite apparent that varieties of religions are not antagonistic rather complementary and they do not affect the inner vitality or the core essence of religion.

Vivekananda opined that universal religion is not a new thing, it runs through all the various religions of the world in the form of God: it must and does exist through eternity. In this context he opined very honestly that “I am the thread that runs through all these pearls, and each pearl is a religion or even a sect thereof. Such are the different pearls, and the Lord is the thread that runs through all of them: only the majority of mankind are entirely unconscious of it”.¹⁴ He also maintained that ‘ through high philosophy or low, through the most exalted mythology or the grossest, through the most refined ritualism or arrant fetishism, every sect, every soul, every nation, every religion, consciously or unconsciously, is struggling upward, towards God; every vision of truth that man has, is a vision of Him and of none else. Thus, the universal religion is already exists though most of us are not aware of it.’

Therefore, universal religion, according to Vivekananda is an acceptance of varieties in mundane level as the diversified approach of religious objects. The acceptance of the existence of God or a unifying force of our vision leads us to the unseen thread binding the entire world of religion as one big family. In this regard the Upanishad states- “*yatra visvam bhabatyeka nidam*”, i.e. where ever you go there is my home.

There is no conflict in the universe related to natural phenomenon, one object is different from another, in human body one neuron is different from another, one cell is different from another, and however, there is a perfect coordination and mutual performance. Similarly in one family, one member of the family is different from the other but they all belong to the same family, but at the same time the family will need to develop a vision in which each individual finds personal freedom without taking away the freedom of joy of others in the family. Further each family in the new world order will promote a value of belonging to the whole creation. The value will enhance the character of individuals to consider the impact of their actions on the surroundings, both in their near vicinity and in far off distances. Thus, the one watch ward for universal religion, in Vivekananda’s view is an **acceptance**. Here acceptance is not mere tolerance because tolerance is negative in its import which indicates that something is allowed to be, at any point, he said wrong, Vivekananda prescribed for positive acceptance that binds everybody together in a single knot.

Secondly, Vivekananda asked mankind to recognize the maxim of “do not destroy”. Indian motto is- *live and let live others*. He urged the people to build instead of pulling anything down. So he opined- “help if you can, if you cannot fold your hands and stand by and see things go on. Do not injure, if you cannot render help.” Thus he said- “take a man where he stands and from there give him a lift”.¹⁵

“If it be true that God is the centre of all religions, and that each of us is moving towards Him then it is certain that all of us must reach that centre... None can make a spiritual man out of you... your growth must come from inside”.¹⁶

This notion of universal religion can only be accepted by all rational mankind. It can satisfy the largest possible proportion of human urges. Among billions of people on the earth there appear to be of four major types: people dispose to constant activity, those who are driven by some inner urge to achieve something in life. The second group of people is capable of high emotions. These are the people who love sublime and beautiful aspects of life, nature and God. There is a third type of people who tend to analyze the working of their minds and how to works with their minds. The fourth type of people wants to weigh everything with reason. The problem with the current religious groups lies in their suitability to deal with only one of the four types. The people who have accepted the particular religious method are unable to see the inner needs of a person with a different disposition of mind. Furthermore, this group tend to humiliate, reject or even destroy those who do not meet the criteria of their belief systems.

Religion will have to supply food for all these various types of minds; it must be equally philosophic, equally emotional, equally mystic and equally conducive to action. This combination will be the ideal of the nearest approach to a universal religion. In the eyes of Swamiji Yoga is a very conducive method to reach the goal of universal religion. According to him, Yoga means “*union*” or *realization of Oneness*. It can unite the finite and the Infinite, devotee and the Divinity, worshipper and the worshipped. Yoga helps to control the senses and mind (*citta vritti nirodha*).¹⁷ Vivekananda, one of the central features of Hindu religion is its emphasis on “direct experience” of the ultimate Reality. According to him, Religion is to be realized, not simply to be heard or repetition of hymns (mantras) likes a parrot, and there is a diversity of spiritual paths to direct, personal experience of the ultimate Reality... On the theme of diversity of

religions, Vivekananda holds the view that all religions are true and meaningful since they are diverse expressions of the same Reality and appropriations of one Ultimate Truth. The goal of all religions, Vivekananda points out, is a “final unitive experience,” which for him is highlighted in the Hindu philosophical school of Advaita Vedanta. Thus, for Swami Vivekananda, the advaitic experience (non-dualistic experience) is the final goal toward which all religions are progressing, representing different points along the journey, a “staircase model” by which he is able to advocate tolerance, reject claims of exclusivism, and affirm the relative importance of various religious traditions of the world. The important contribution of Vivekananda is that in the face of the Christian exclusivism of his times, he affirmed that Hinduism included a variety of independent ways of liberation, and that Hindu spirituality, especially in its Advaitic form, had global significance and relevance.

It is quite apparent that the world is full of varieties in all cases. The plurality in language, culture, society, politics, economics etc. are quite vivid and which may be considered as the basic causes of difference in religious theories. On synthesizing all religious faiths a conclusion is drawn that religion is nothing but a way of satisfy the thirst for liberation from mundane miseries and sufferings. If this is the only aim of particular religion then people of all groups are directly or indirectly associated in it. Swami Vivekananda said, “He felt the necessity of religious pluralism. To realize something, man should have to practice four Yogas (Karma yoga, Jñāna yoga, Raja yoga and Bhakti yoga).”¹⁸ Those are the yoga of knowledge, control of mind, selfless work and love of God and universal brotherhood.

In recognizing universal religion Vivekananda underscored the equal status of all the religions and felt the necessity of religious plurality. He discarded the supremacy of any particular religion. According to him, if one religion is only true, automatically the rest religions become false, it is unjust to them. He hold, all religions are not really contradictory rather complementary to one another. 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. Hence, Vivekananda’s ideal was “Many Lamps but one Light”.

Vivekananda’s argument on differences of religions is-*“if someone takes photography of one building from different angles, we can see different faces of*

*the same object. But those differences cannot be called contradictions, but only shows the many sides of a single unique entity. Therefore, we are viewing truth, getting as much of its circumstances will permit, colouring the truth with our own intellect and grasping it with our own mind. We can only know as much as truth as it 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.”*¹⁹

Each religion has particular ideals that are needed to the society. Thus he gave equal importance to all religions in the world. About Islam he said “the followers of Islam are considered to be equal. This is the particular excellence of that religion. It preaches to the world is the brotherhood of all belongings to their faith. Therefore, the ideal may effectively be used to develop social harmony.

Vivekananda again says- *“spirit must be divine and not made by any man”*. 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 can be considered as the fundamental assumption of universal religion. Thus he advised the people to practice universal religion in life and uttered- *“Our watch ward, there will be acceptance and not exclusion, not only toleration but acceptance. I accept all religions that wee in the past and worship them all; I worship God with every one of them, in whatever form they worship Him. I shall go to the mosque of Mohammedans, I shall enter in the Christian church and knell before the crucifix; I shall enter the Buddhist temple where I shall take refuge in the Buddha and in the law. I shall go into the forest and sit down in the meditation with the Hindu who is trying to see the light that enlightens the heart of every one”*.²⁰

The ultimate One, according to him, is very perfection of existence, the ideal reality. He said: If you go below the surface, you find that unity between man and man, between races and races, high and low, rich and poor, god and men, men and animals. If you go deep enough all will be seen as only variations of the One, and he who has attained to this conception of Oneness has no more delusion. What can delude him? He knows the reality of everything, the secret of everything. Where is there any more misery for him?

He finds the Unity of everything, and that is Eternal Existence, Eternal Knowledge, and Eternal Bliss.²¹

The basic relevance of Vivekananda's concept of universal religion is the concept of universal equality of humankind. It is an idea which is very important and necessary for modern global era. Its relevance for the modern cosmopolitan city life cannot be overestimated.

Conclusion:

During the past 150 years we have discussed the philosophical importance of the concept of universal religion. Now it is clear that in this new millennium we have to implement this concept to modern society rather than discussing it again. Following Swami Vivekananda we may conclude that we have only one option to save this scientific world is to adhere to the concept of one universal religion through the process of discharging love and brotherhood by accepting the concept of religious pluralism. It is the essence of Swami Vivekananda's vision to the world. This universal ideal can be practiced not only by believers of different religions but equally by non-believers for it is founded on the ideal of oneness of humanity.

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