

# A Study of the Ideals of Vivekananda's Concept of Universal Religion in Present Indian Context with a Positive Message to the World Community

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## Abstract

*The religious concepts of Vivekananda are very much broad in attitude. He says that religion is not talk or doctrines or theories. It is not sectarianism, i.e., it cannot live in sects and societies. Religion is the relation between the soul and God. It doesn't consist in erecting temples or building churches or attending public worship. Religion is not to be detected in books or in words or in lectures or in organizations. It is realization.*

*The intention of Vivekananda is that religion cannot be accepted as signifying a particular creed or faith but in a state of spiritual realization. All religions should cultivate the divinity within to the perpetual level. It is neither blind faith nor mere intellectual understanding, but being and becoming are more significant regarding spiritual life. Each and every religion of the world should understand that this building of life and character and spiritual transformation is the essence of religion. We can notice in the philosophy of Vivekananda that spirituality gets prime importance through which he doesn't denote the changing manners and customs but the idea of oneness of all. He wanted to make man understand that the more the religions of the world rise to spiritual realization the more conflicting or quarrelling forms and clear cut variations are bound to disappear. Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, in this regard, says that all paths of ascent lead to the top of the hill. Whatever approach we take is immaterial. Like all birds fly in the air and all the fishes swim in water without any trace behind, the seeker of the spirit also traverses the pathway.*

**Keywords:** Being and Becoming, Divinity, Intellectual Understanding, Spiritual Life, Spiritual Realization, Universal Religion.

## Introduction:

Vivekananda puts that religion is being and becoming, not hearing or acknowledging. It is the becoming of the whole soul that gets changed as its beliefs. It may be called religion in true sense. He reiterates, "Do not care for dogmas, or sects, or churches or temples; they count for little compared with the essence of existence in each man, which is spirituality, and the more this is developed in a man the more powerful is he for good. Earn that first, acquire that, and criticize no one. Show by your lives that religion does not mean words, or names, or sects, but that it means spiritual realization".<sup>1</sup>

"Temples and churches, books and forms, are simply the kindergarten of religion, to make the spiritual child strong enough to take the higher step. Religion is not in the doctrines or dogmas, nor in intellectual argumentation".<sup>2</sup> Religion is the manifestation of the divinity already in man. Vivekananda says

that man must realize God, feel God, and talk to God. That is religion.

The more significant, the tide turns and to the rescue has come what. The study of comparative religions may be the answer. The study of different religions reveals that all the religions, in essence, are one. Vivekananda holds that there are three various stages of ideas regarding the soul or God in the study of the different religions of the world. Firstly, all religions admit that there is, apart from the body that perishes, a certain part of something that doesn't change as that of the body, a part which is said to be immutable, eternal, and never dies, i.e., purely immortal by nature. We, the essential part of us didn't possess a starting and an end. We can feel the very existence of another eternal Being that possesses no end—God above all of us, above this eternal nature. People generally seem to talk about the beginning of the world, the beginning of man. The term 'beginning' simply indicates the starting of the cycle. The beginning denotes the end too, i.e., that which possesses a beginning must possess an end. The beginning of creation means the beginning of a cycle. Man's body will one day meet with death, but the soul, never.

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We may have another set of notions about perfection with the notions of the soul. The soul in itself is complete at the beginning. Man himself makes impure through his own deeds. But he can regain his origin nature, his pure nature. Some put these points in all fables, and symbols. But after acute analysis of these statements, we gain that they all teach that human soul is in its very nature perfect and that man is to regain that original purity. But the question arises—How it would be possible? It is certainly by the knowledge of God.

It is a fact that all the religions of the world teach the eternal existence of the soul, and its tendencies are dimmed, but its original purity is to be regained by the knowledge of God. Again, a question comes—what is the idea of God in these different religions? The primary idea as to God was not vivid and distinct. We can see that the different deities like the sun, the earth, the fire, the water were believed by the most ancient nations. If we look at the ancient Jews, it follows that many gods with anger fight with each other. Then we find Elohim as worshipped by the Jews and the Babylonians. We have one God standing supreme next. This idea, of course, differs from tribe to tribe. All claim their own God to be the greatest. These races endeavoured to prove it through fighting and the one was able to do the best fighting seemed thereby that its God was the greatest. Those old ideas have been passed by. All those religions existed for the out-growth of centuries, not one fell from the sky.

We find the monotheistic idea next, i.e., one God is believed to be extra-cosmic; he has been dwelling in the heaven. We notice, in the course of time, the tribal gods disappeared for ever and the one God belief has taken their place, i.e., the God of gods. The new Testament teaches, 'Our Father who art in heaven'—God in the heaven is separated from men. Later on, we have the teaching concerning the immanent nature of God, i.e., the God is in us.

We can find a stage of the similar proximity of God to human beings in the philosophy of the Hindus. But let's not stop therein. We, again, find the stage of non-dualism where every man can realize that the God he has been worshipping is not only the Father in heaven and on earth but that 'I and my Father are one'. Man starts believing himself as God in his soul. He realizes that he is merely a lower

representation of God. The reality in me is He; the reality in Him is I. In this way, the gulf between God and man has been bridged in the light of non-dualistic philosophy. Thus, men may, by realizing God, have the beautiful kingdom of heaven within them.

The different stages of development are supremely necessary for gaining purity and perfection. The changing systems of religion are at bottom founded on the similar concepts. Jesus, the Christ, says that the kingdom of heaven has been within man. Again he says, 'Our Father who art in heaven'. How can one reconcile these two sayings? Thus, Christ was talking to them uneducated in religion. To make the masses understand, speaking in their own languages was necessary. The masses looked for such concrete ideas that cannot be attained by their sense-ability. A great philosopher in the world may remain a child in religion. A man of highly developed state of spirituality can merely realize how the kingdom of heaven may exist within him.

Thus, it is seen that the direct contradictions and perplexities in all religions of the world indicate different stages of development. Hence, we, the human beings, possess no right to blame anyone for his religion. We see various stages of development where forms and symbols are very much necessary; the souls can realize these languages in the stage.

The next idea is furnished us by Vivekananda with reference to his concept of universal religion that consists neither in doctrines nor in dogmas. The belief in dogmas or doctrines is not an important thing, but what we realize.

The great religious masters of the world teach that not the external forms but the power that is latent within mankind can bring salvation to light. Man lives and takes movement in God. Creeds and sects play their parts for children, their lasting is purely temporary. Books never make religions, rather religions make books. The end of all religions is the realization of God in the soul. That is the one universal religion. The one universal truth in all religions, according to Vivekananda, thus, is realizing God within. He asserts that ideals and methods may differ, but that's the central point. When someone puts that he is right or his church or temple or mosque or gurudwara is right and all others are wrong, he unfortunately misses that upon the roof of all the others depend the proof of his own.

Naturally, a relevant question may immediately arise –what do we mean by the ideal of a universal religion? In this respect, Vivekananda comments: 'I do not mean any one universal philosophy, or any universal mythology, or any one universal ritual, held alike by all; for I know that this world must go on working wheel within wheel, this intricate mass of machinery, most complex, most wonderful'.<sup>3</sup>

According to Vivekananda, the same thing in respect of anything else can be perceived from a lot of attitudes and corners, yet the thing remains unchanged. We may get, if there is a through going study of the essential points of all the religions of the world, same picture in religion too. Every human being is making attempt to arrive at the realization of God. God is one. We, the human beings, can only find this recognition of universality.

Vivekananda reiterated that there was much that the East should borrow from the West, and much that the West should do the same from the East. He preached a universal religion, and the thing which he gave more stress was the value and importance of the individual. His creed was that every individual possesses the spark of the divine. All individuals are alike, because each man possesses a divine spark

within; that is in fact, the essence of his religion. The individual, as per Vivekananda, can find God anywhere, whether in the temple, the church, the mosque or the synagogue. God is omnipresent and one does not require to report to rites or rituals or any particular form of religion with a view to discovering Him. Thus, the realization of God is the end of all the men belonging to divergent religious traditions.

Vivekananda reveals that life is not monochord, variation is essential for the enhancement of the same. Similarly, variety of beliefs enriches the world of spirit and makes it conceivable to all aspects of man. Since men are various in their natures, the same method can scarcely be applied to any two of us in the same way. Some are found very much emotional by their nature. Some are very much philosophical, rational; others cling to all sorts of ritualistic forms, want things which are concrete. And, certainly the same method can't be applied to all of these things. If there were only one method to arrive at truth, it would be death. Both Sri Ramakrishna and Vivekananda gave only stress on the necessity of variation. But they simultaneously wanted that it should not be narrowed down to mutual exclusiveness. Really speaking, all the religions of the world are not contradictory or antagonistic; they should be treated as different phases of one Eternal Religion. That one Eternal Religion is applied to various plans of existence and is applied to the opinion of different minds and different races.

Vivekananda says, "I do not want to live in a grave-like land: I want to be a man in the world of man—variation is the sign of life. Difference is the first sign of thought. I pray that they (sects) may multiply so that at last there will be as many sects as human beings—whirlpool and eddies occur only in a rushing, living thought. let each have his individual method of thought in religion".<sup>4</sup> Here, none will get chance to detect the slightest desire of conversion, the racial or communal conflicts. It withers and has its natural death. A Hindu should try to become a better Hindu, a Muslim a better Muslim or a Christian to become a better Christian.

Therefore, religion that can be claimed as dynamic in nature hopes for man's absolute sincerity and dedication to our destined goal. Man can't both walk along the path of the spirit and worship flesh and mammon simultaneously. Similarly, man can't both serve the spirit within, the spark of conscience and satisfy our ego-desires. One will have to abandon one for the other.

In modern age, the very essence of universal religion has been highlighted by Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Keshab Chandra Sen., Sri Ramakrishna Paramhansa, Vivekananda, Rabindranath Tagore, Romain Rolland etc. Universal religion does not seem a mere dead conformity or dry dogma as constituted by vain intellect or only product of liberal thought. This concept recognizes and pays significance to the emotional and aesthetic resources of man to divert or sublimate them towards the Para or the Highest.

Vivekananda explained that the language of the soul is one, the languages of the nations are many; their customs and methods of lives are totally different. Religion is of the soul that gets revealed through various nations, languages and customs. So, the difference among the world religions is one of expressions and not of substances, and their points of similarity are intrinsic. Vivekananda puts that the so-called doctrines or dogmas, rituals or books, temples or churches are but "secondary details".

Vivekananda represented Hinduism not as a specific belief found on Puranic idolatry and mythology. As a proud Hindu, he described that Hinduism is a Universal Religion which depends on spiritual truth to be achieved in own life. He puts that the spiritual realization is the absolute testing of

truth than any authority got from the past. This realization is of oneness.

The philosophy of the Advaita Vedanta was realized by Vivekananda as the last term in respect of religious ways and this deep realization and conviction made him to synthesize and harmonize all sorts of sects under the banner of Vedanta. Vivekananda was very much aspirant regarding the future religion to be free from all racial prejudices or sectarian biasness that should be sustained through the spirit of a democratic unified awareness, made realistic and concrete through the highest spiritual ideals.

Vivekananda accepts Vedanta's true metaphysics and universality. The objectivity of all religious quests is fulfilled by the Vedanta. The great idea of Vedanta is nothing but the idea of the oneness of all, of the infinite and the impersonal, the wonderful idea of the eternal soul of mankind, of the ceaseless continuity in the march of objects, of the infinity of the universe. Vedanta consists of eternal principles without depending upon the authority of persons. It alone can be treated as universal religion as it teaches principles. No religion based on a person can be accepted as a type of universal religion by all the races of mankind. The Vedanta approves the eternal nature of man. Reality is one and eternal but it exists in many forms – "*Ekam sat Vipra Vahuda Vadanti*". The central principle of the universe can be treated as unity in variety.

The personality of human being should be recognized as an integral and basic entity on which the whole superstructure of religious life rests. According to Vivekananda, the basis of universal religion is the light within each and every human personality. Human personalities can't be regarded as articles manufactured to a type, conforming to mechanical unity. We are but sum total of personalities and thus are found to be unique.

The variety of human beings is as much a fact as the unity of the same. Universal religion will have to tolerate and accept peculiarities internally existent in the individuals. One in his own manner, may select, as per one's temperament and aptitude, one symbol and pursue a particular way to reach the universal source that has been existing behind all manifold ways and different symbols. Vivekananda asserts that the Vedanta understands that and so preaches one principle and admits a lot of methods. It only preaches the principle and the method it leaves to us. Take any path you like to follow, any prophet you like, but have merely that method that suits your own nature.

The above discussion clearly reflects that Vivekananda called upon us to worship the living God around us – the man, neglected and dispossessed, i.e., the poor, the down-trodden, oppressed and needy people. In accordance with Vivekananda, we have no other religion except service to man in the image of God. This is the only God that is awake; all other Gods have been found sleeping. This idea of living God in Vivekananda has been seemed to reflect from Lord Buddha's as the later, none else, upheld religion as a mode of worship of defied man, i.e., worshipping man as God. *Jeeva is Siva*. A man encouraged by God's blessings gives moulding to all his passions and desires, love and ambition in one single mission of life, i.e., offering service to the poor and neglected class and uplifting the very spirit of people bound up by slavery to a honourable position with fullness of life and manliness is the highest religion. A very beautiful reflection regarding universality of religion of the world has been well represented in the following remark of Vivekananda: "A religion which will give us faith in ourselves, a national self-respect and the power to feed and educate the poor and relieve the misery around me....if you want to find God, serve man!"<sup>5</sup> With a view to understanding the exact nature of universal religion, we must learn the true nature of the Divine

Life within. Vivekananda says that we must have a pure mind and true realization of the Supreme Reality through right knowledge. So, in essence, all men are equal and in every man there is the reflection of the same Supreme Reality. Vivekananda emphasized the oneness of soul of all men.

In this way, it is seen that Vivekananda's concept of Universal Religion is rooted in his Vedantism. He discovered this idea as exemplified in the life and teachings of his Master Sri Ramakrishna Paramhansa. The concept of universal religion can't be found in the Western history of religious thought unless we denote by this the universality that has frequently been utilized for Christianity by some followers of that religion. Islam too was once denoted to be a universal belief. The universal movement of early nineteenth century amongst some Protestant Christians is not, in fact, a universal religion-oriented movement. Its aim was to gain a universal Christian unity and Church union through international interdenominational organizations co-operating on matters of mutual concern. Vivekananda does not mean by universal religion a universal Hindu church.

In the parliament of religions at Chicago on 11<sup>th</sup> Sept, 1893, Vivekananda presented before that assembly that the different religions of the world like Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, different sects of Christianity, Islam etc. were not religions dividing the whole world into disputing sects, but these religions formed a grand federation of kindred faiths owing allegiance to some spirit, i.e., universal. The universalism of Vivekananda maybe said to be essentially a creative religious tolerance that broadens that liberal principle into a spiritual ideal and accepts all religions as but different revelations of man's approach to Truth and God. Vivekananda presents the very concept of universal religion in the sense that it has been dependent on the idea of the universality of the human spirit. His ideal of universal religion does not mean a universal church and a universal scripture. For Vivekananda, a particular religion, when it becomes a true religion, is called a universal religion.

Towards the end of the memorable and historic third address at the Parliament on 19<sup>th</sup> Sept, 1893, Vivekananda, emphasizing on universal religion, said: 'if there is ever to be a universal religion it must be one which will have no location in place or time; which will be infinite like the God it will preach, and whose sun will shine upon the followers of Krishna and of Christ, on saints and sinners alike, which will not be Brahmanic or Buddhistic, Christian or Mohammedan, but the sum total of all these, and still have infinite space for development; which in its catholicity will embrace in its infinite arms, and find a place for every human being from the lowliest gravelling savage not far removed from the brute, to the highest man towering by the virtues of his head and heart almost above humanity, making society standing in awe of him and doubt his human nature'.<sup>6</sup> Through his conception, Vivekananda meant uplifting his own religion to the high height of a universal religion. He earnestly believed that the followers of all religions may do the same.

To Vivekananda, religion is a growing, dynamic spirit, and not bound by any sectarian command. This capacity of expansion gives religion its universality and makes it friendly to other religions. He called on all people of the world to come under one umbrella for realization of life and its destined goal. He, in the last address at the Parliament emphasized that 'upon the banner of every religion will soon be written in spite of resistance: *"Help and not Fight"*. *"Assimilation and not destruction"*. *"Harmony and Peace and not Dissension"*. Vivekananda's aim was to present the ideal of universal religion as the spirit of a universal society, i.e., a new idea of religion for a new humanity. And that is why Romain Rolland called Vivekananda a universal gospel. He gave a long but beautiful address on 'The Way to the Realization of a

Universal Religion' at the Universalist Church, Pasadena, on 28<sup>th</sup> Jan, 1900 and a still longer address, on 'The Ideal of a Universal Religion'. The two addresses show how Vivekananda did not mean his universal religion to supersede the existing religions. The concept of a universal religion, then, is just an awareness of this 'economy of God' where all religions of the world co-exist forming a grand symphony of man's spiritual aspirations. And he quotes – 'Universal religion is already existed'. It exists in the minds of people who even while sticking to their own religion, their ancestral faith, look upon other religions with sympathy, who can, without rejecting their own belief, show a genuine respect for the prophets of the different nations of the world. He shows himself as an example of such a universal religious mind when he puts: 'I accept all religions that were in the past, and worship with them all; I worship God with every one of them, in whatever form they worship Him. I shall go to the mosque of the Mohammedan; I shall enter the Christian Church and kneel before the crucifix; I shall enter the Buddhist temple, where I shall take refuge in Buddha and in his law. I shall go into the forest and sit down in meditation with the Hindu, who is trying to see the light which enlightens the heart of every one'.<sup>7</sup> Thus, a believer in universal religion possesses a good understanding of and reverence for world religion without losing his sense of belonging to his own religion. For him, 'unity in variety is the plan of 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 treated as a fresh approach to religion, a fresh spiritual and moral outlook. It prescribes not only tolerance; it insists on acceptance of other religions too as true and making religion thereby a principle of human unity. Universal religion may, thus, be said to be a discovery of universality in all religions.

### Conclusion:

From the above discussion, it follows that Vivekananda's ideal of universal religion is a step towards universal humanity. According to his thoughts, the concept of universal fraternity has frequently been claimed as the central message of the great religions of the world which is to be attained. Frankly speaking, the religions have divided the world and have become the cause of unfinished disorders. So, he preferred Hinduism amongst the major religions of the world which could be developed into a universal religion. By Hinduism, Vivekananda means Vedantism, and so he does not at all think that it was the creation of a particular ism like Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam. He says the point is not that Hinduism is identical with Vedantism; rather Vedantism is the fundamental philosophy of Hinduism. He took a religious spirit to prompt one to embrace all religions. Hence, at the time of Vivekananda's demand of more of universality in Vedantism than any other religion of the world, he never said of any man rejecting his belief to embrace Vedantism. While he upheld that Vedanta could become the future religion of the world, he didn't denote at all that Vedanta was going to substitute all other religions. He only meant that Vedanta would give a fresh horizon and a fresh depthness to all existing religions. Really speaking, Vedanta was not, then, the Indian religion: it was only a philosophy originated and brought up in India. And whenever Vivekananda asserted that Vedanta would be the religion of the world in the times to come, he kept the religion of India too in his mind. He, by universal religion, meant the mingling of faiths and he realized regarding Vedanta, particularly Advaita Vedanta, which could bring about this mingling of spiritual voices in one remarkable unity of beliefs. And certainly, such environment can pave the way for peaceful living of the world people.

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