

Solution to the Problem of Religious Intolerance with special reference to Swami Vivekananda

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Abstract

Religion is essentially associated with the human society from time immemorial. It has been recognized as a cohesive force in society. No doubt religion has played a great role in maintaining the peaceful social order. But we can not ignore the negative role of religion that it has played in society. History tells us both the positive or creative and negative or destructive role of religion in society. Religion literally means a bond of unity. It is the principle of unification and humanization. But it also instigates peoples to behave with others in the most inhuman way. This happens only when religion loses its purity. When religion loses its purity it paves the way for intolerance. Religious intolerance is that situation where peoples belong to one religion can not tolerate the peoples of other religions. This creates great chaos in society. In India various philosophers, saints, reformers have come forward to give right shape to religion and thereby to solve the religious conflicts. Swami Vivekananda is one of them. According to Vivekananda religion is Self-realization. This means realization of the individual self with the Infinite Absolute Self which in common parlance is the God, Isvara, Allah etc. Realization of oneness with the Infinite and realization of oneness with the other individual self is the core of religion. Every religion, great or small, teaches us this great truth. If we realize this truth religious intolerance will vanish forever from the human society.

Key-words: Intolerance, Individual-self, Oneness, Religion, Realization, Self-realization, Absolute-self.

Introduction:

Defining religion is not an easy task. It is because religion is a growing, dynamic thing, elemental, personal and broad in scope. Etymologically the term 'Religion' means two things. According to Cicero, the word 'Religion' comes from the word 'Relegere' which means 'together' signifying performances of certain activities to show respect and reverence towards God. The Roman Lactantius derived the word 'Religion' from 'Religare' which means 'to bind together' signifying that religion is essentially a bond of piety. So literally speaking, religion means, "a bond of unity, a principle of unification and humanization."¹

The fundamental motive of religion is that which binds men together and also binds the desires and different process of every man. From this point of view, religion, collectively and individually, is an integrative experience of men. Religion may be said to have its roots in the tendency of mankind to look upward. That is to say, if a man has to proceed, religion must live. The social momentum towards progress is maintained by religion. Everywhere religion has connection with social and cultural ideals. With the transformation of social ideal religion has also been transformed. Religion is an index of man's expectation for and a guide towards future. Religion is a force that can be used both for good and evil. The more it approaches spirituality the more it serves its true purpose, as spirituality is its fulfillment and culmination. It is through religion community rises higher in culture.

Though religion is an integrating force of society there are many cases of bloodshed in different parts of the world in the name of religion. Every religion, as has been said by the prophets, leads us towards the same goal. Every religion is equally valid. Yet we can not ignore the point that there are conflicts among the peoples of different religions even today. Some people can not tolerate devotees of other religions. This intolerance sometimes takes the shape of bloody violence. Swami Vivekananda, the great nineteenth century saint has given the right shape to religion. According to him all the religions of the world teach us to respect the followers of other religions. In his religious lectures he showed us that no religion is higher or lower than others.

Objective of the study:

The basic objective of the present study is to find out solution to the problem of religious intolerance on the basis of Swami Vivekananda's concept of religion.

Methodology:

Analytical method has been applied here.

Religious Intolerance:

Religious intolerance is intolerance of another's religious beliefs or practices. The mere statements or any contrary beliefs are incorrect does not in itself constitute intolerance. Religious intolerance, rather, is when a group (e.g., a society, religious group, non-religious group) specifically refuses to tolerate practices, persons or beliefs on religious grounds. As a matter of fact it is a deep rooted belief in our mind that our own religion is the best. In some people this belief becomes so deep that they begin to hate the devotees of other religions and whenever they get an opportunity they try to persuade others for conversion. These believers are one kind of religious fundamentalists. These fundamentalists believe that their religion is beyond any form of criticism. They do not like to apply logic to their beliefs. Logical explanations and scientific evidences have no place in

these belief systems. For fundamentalists, religion dictates every sphere of their daily lives, and they also attempt to involve the entire society into their own belief system, often by the use of force.

Swami Vivekananda's idea of religion:

According to Vivekananda, religion is the manifestation of the Divinity already in man. It is Vivekananda's conviction that man is already divine. Man's goal is to manifest this divinity. To Vivekananda religion is that search of human heart which brings the light of eternal to the finite creature. Man is conscious about his limited existence and hence wanted to get something higher and mightier than him. Religion is the expedition which expands human self and knots finite self with infinite eternal one. It is the search of human destiny, realization of man's basic divine nature, through the search of God. He writes "Man has wanted to look beyond , wanted to expand of himself ,and that we call progress , evolution , has been always measured by that one search , the search for human destiny, the search for God."²

Human mind wants to sour higher and higher to go beyond itself to catch some glimpses of the eternal light. Religion is an attempt to transcend this limit of phenomenal world. Vivekananda regards religion as the attempt to exercise perfect freedom from the part of human self. He distinguishes between the living and the dead. He asked "How can we make the distinction between the living and the dead? In the living there is freedom, there is intelligence, in the dead all is bound and no freedom is possible, because there is no intelligence."³ A small worm is a majestic being compared to a huge powerful engine which may be thousand-fold larger than the worm. It is because the worm has more freedom than the engine. In living creature there is freedom, there is intelligence. This freedom distinguishes us from mere machine. We are part of Infinite Ocean of consciousness, intelligence and freedom.

From the above situation, Vivekananda shows us the point that as human being who has the intelligence, is striving for more freedom. With the help of his intelligence human being realized that he is a limited creature with limited freedom and absolute freedom yet to be realized. Religion is such effort from mankind to realize absolute freedom. It is an attempt to be free. That is why religion and freedom both go hand in hand, both are related terms. Human intelligence starts a ceaseless inquiry from the down of its consciousness, about the meaning and mystery of life. There is always a universal dissatisfaction which is associated with man. We struggle hard to attach to some goal and then discover that we do not want that. He writes "It is because freedom is every man's goal. He seeks it ever. His whole life is a struggle after it. The child rebels against law as soon as it is born. Its first utterance is a cry, a protest against the bondage in which it finds itself. This longing for freedom produces the idea of a Being who is absolutely free. The concept of God is a fundamental element in the human constitution."⁴ Thus there is always an unconscious struggle of the human with the spiritual, of the lower with the higher mind to break bondage and to be free.

For the spiritual and rational justification of all issues Vivekananda took his stand on Vedanta, especially on the non-dualistic Vedanta philosophy of Sankara. He explained it on his own way in accordance with the light he had received from his great master Ramakrishna. Vedanta says that all is Brahman. Brahman is the source of freedom and every moment men assert freedom. Individual attains freedom only when all the distinction of thine and mine disappears, when individual is one with Brahman. This is self-realization. In other words, according to Vivekananda, the search which starts to break the limitation to actualize perfection ends, when the individual becomes one with the absolutely free being which is called 'Brahman' in Vedanta philosophy. That is the end or ultimate goal of religion.

The concept of freedom brings with it a perfectly free being which is called God. According to Vivekananda, the whole of nature is worship of God. Wherever there is life there is this search for freedom and that freedom is the same as God. Necessarily this freedom gives us mastery over all nature, but it is impossible without knowledge. The more we are knowing the more we are becoming master of nature. He says "Mastery alone is making us strong and if there be some being entirely free and master of nature, that being must have a perfect knowledge of nature, must be omnipresent and omniscient. Freedom must go hand in hand with these, and that being alone who has acquired these will be beyond nature."⁵

Vivekananda's conception of religion is linked with Vedantic principle of feeling oneness of the universe. He emphasizes that the knowledge which brings the feeling of sameness towards mankind leads to the fruit of religion, that is freedom. He further says "In what sense you are pure? The God in you is God in all. If you have not known this you have known nothing. How can there be difference? It is all one. Every being is the temple of the most high; if you can see that, good, if not spirituality has yet to come to you."⁶ He again says "..... See God in every person-working through every all hands, walking through all feet, and eating through every mouth. In every being He lives, through all minds He thinks. He is self-evident, nearer unto us than ourselves. To know this is religion is faith, and may it please the Lord to give us this faith! When we shall feel that oneness, we shall be immortal."⁷

He practically represents the Vedanta philosophy of India. He realized that religion is the watch-word of Vedanta. There is only one reality is pervading through the universe. There is one idea throughout all the Upanishads that is the realization of this One reality. Hence Vivekananda says "Religion is realization, not talk, nor doctrine, nor theories, however beautiful they may be, it is being and becoming, nor hearing or acknowledging. It is the whole souls becoming, not hearing or acknowledging. It is the whole soul's becoming changed into what it believes. That is religion."⁸ Vivekananda for the justification of any issue took his stand on the non-dualistic Vedanta philosophy of Sankara. He explained Vedanta on his own way in accordance with the knowledge he had received from Ramakrishna. According to Vedanta all is Brahman. Brahman is the source of freedom and every moment men assert freedom. Individual attains freedom only when all the distinction of 'I' and 'not-I' disappears, or when individual is one with Brahman. This is called self-realization or God-realization.

Thus, according to Vivekananda, the search which begins to shatter the limitation to attain perfection ends, when the individual identifies itself with the absolutely free being which is called 'Brahman' in Vedanta philosophy. This identification is the end or ultimate goal of religion.

Philosophy of Religion always deals with the concept of existence of God. Vivekananda asked us to see God in everyone. In his philosophy God is identified 'Self'. He told that, God is within our own self. That is propelling us to seek for him, to realize him. That is his concept of God. To him God exists, but he is not the man sitting upon a cloud. But if we approach to our real self we can see the Him within us. He is pure spirit. He is our self. God is the body, God is the mind, the soul and everything in this world. He is something still higher than known, unknown, and unknowable. If it can be known, He will be no longer God. God can only be known in and through man. We are ordinary morals and God can be seen in man alone as a form. Vivekananda in this regard suggested us to play our part in the universe as an actor on the stage. He asked the people to see each and every man in the world as God. His identification of God is in everything, in every work, every thought, in every feeling. Such realization of divinity in humanity leaves no room for arrogance.

Since God is identical with self, so Vivekananda views that it is in love that religion consists and not in ceremonies. To put him "It is in love that religion exists and not in ceremony, in the pure and sincere love in the heart."⁹ It is love which makes us able to see God in others. Love is worship. As he says: "He who sees Shiva in the poor, in the weak, and in the diseased, really worships Shiva...He who has served and helped one poor man seeing Shiva in him, without thinking of his caste, or creed, or race, or anything, with him Shiva is more pleased than with the man who sees Him only in temples."¹⁰

According to Vivekananda religion is not in books. We find that in every country in every religion, the book associated with the religion, becomes God itself. Holiness of such book is preoccupied in human mind. Vivekananda was conscious of the defect associated with the book worship. Absolute dependence on the book of our own religion compels us to stop liberal thinking. We are so used to such sacred book that anything new appears to us becomes false. As a result some sort of fanaticism is grown in our mind, that anything that is contradictory or new to our scripture, must be demolished. It is a kind of dogmatism, which stops our rational independent thinking. In his philosophy Vivekananda has clearly mentioned the advantages and disadvantages of overdependence on book. To quote Vivekananda, "But in my opinion books have produced more evil than good. They are accountable for many mischievous doctrines, creeds all come from books, and books are alone responsible for the persecution and fanaticism in the world. Books in modern times are making liars everywhere. I am astonished out the number of liars abroad in every country."¹¹

Another disadvantage of book worship is that, the doctrines which are propounded in a sacred book are interpreted by various followers in various ways. We deduce various meaning of the same truth and refer to the same text as their authority. As a result various disconformities of religious doctrines occur. Vivekananda was quite rational and philosophical in his attitude, as he emphasized both the positive and negative aspects of

particular matter. He was also aware of the advantage of book worship. If we look to the history of religions, we find that all religious sects have disappeared excepting those have a book as their resource. In this regard the best example can be showed to ancient Persians. The majority of them were conquered by the Arabs, and converted to Mohammedanism. Some of them fled from their persecutors with their sacred religious book 'Talmud', which is still preserving them. The Talmud keeps them up and together, in spite of the horrible persecution. Hence Vivekananda states, "A book is the most tangible form of God...One of the great advantages of book is that it crystallizes everything in tangible and convenient form, and is the handiest of all idols."¹² So we can conclude that Vivekananda restricted absolute dependence on book. But he never asked us to abstain from books. Again since his religion is nothing but self –realization, it does not include any religious rituals, any religious scripture.

One point we have to make clear that Vivekananda called his religion Vedanta religion. Truly speaking, Vedanta was not, then, the Indian religion. It was merely a philosophy originated and brought up in India. By religion Vivekananda does not mean any non-essential parts of it, say, dogmas, rituals etc. According to him religion means self-realization and realizing the same self in others. And every religion has this basic faith. If we look into his concept of universal religion we find that by universal religion Vivekananda denoted the mingling of faiths and he realized about Vedanta, particularly Advaita Vedanta of Sankara which could bring about this mingling of spiritual voices in one remarkable unity of beliefs. Again, Vivekananda preached to practice Vedanta in our every wake of life. And according to him, life and religion should not be considered as different phenomenon. Since his religion is based on Vedanta philosophy and it is his conviction that life and religion are not separate, so he calls his religion Vedanta religion. It is in this context he calls Vedanta a religion.

While delivering his religious lectures, he always had social aim in his mind. He was sad to have seen the miserable condition of the Indian poor masses. He asked us to serve man as God by realizing the Oneness. To Vivekananda it is in love that religion consists and not in ceremonies. He says that unless a man is pure in body and mind, his coming into a temple and worshipping the Deity are useless. External worship is only a symbol of internal worship, and for internal worship purity is essential. Vivekananda again says that he who sees God in the poor in the weak and in the diseased really worships God, and if he sees God only in the image, his worship is but preliminary. Perception of oneness is the mother of true service. But minimum people perceive oneness.

To Vivekananda the ultimate goal of all mankind, the aim and end of all religions, is but one- reunion with God or with the divinity which is every man's true nature. But while the aim is one, the method of attaining may vary with the different temperaments of men. Vivekananda opines that every man must develop according to his own nature. And the ideal way of religion is called by Vivekananda 'Yoga'. There are four kinds of yoga according to nature and temperaments of man. These are karma, bhakti, raja and jnana yoga. Karma yoga is the manner in which a man realizes his own divinity through works and duty. Bhakti yoga is the realization of the divinity through devotion to, and love of a personal God. Raja yoga is the realization of the divinity through the

control of the mind. Jnana yoga is the realization of the divinity through knowledge. According to Vivekananda these are all different roads leading to the same Centre- God.

The outcome of our deep realization of divinity in everything according to Vivekananda is religious experience. Religions experience is the experience of oneness with all creatures. It is an attitude of oneness with all life and beyond that with the universe along with awareness of the unique entity of the self. The religious consciousness is closely related to the religious experience of breaking down individual and feeling one with the all.

For Vivekananda, religion has to be scientific. According to him religion to be put in a more concrete form, has to be justified itself by the discoveries of reason through which every other science justify itself. The same methods of investigation, which we apply to sciences is to be applied to religion. He says that if a religion destroyed by such investigations, it was then all the time useless unworthy, superstition. He was thoroughly convinced that its destruction would be the best thing that could happen. According to him, all that is lost will be taken off, but the essential parts of religion will emerge triumphant out of this investigation.

Another very significant point to be noted in Vivekananda's concept of religion is that he believed in the equal validity of all religions. There is one Universal Truth, in all religions, it is the realization of God. Ideals and methods may differ, but this is the main point to be noted. He built his theory of the Transcendental Unity of all religions based on the direct experience of the Ultimate Reality. He spoke on the oneness of all religions with regard to the transcendental aspect of each religion. Differences among religions would not be the cause of conflict; we have to understand them to be mutually complementary. For Swami Vivekananda, religion is a total concept. All the religions of the world together constitute one whole.

The central theme of his universal religion is the divinity of man, for this is the core of every religion. The knowledge of this divinity is the secret of man's secular and spiritual development. This knowledge gives him infinite faith in himself and the awareness that he has infinite potentialities. He is thus invested with great strength which finds expression in creativeness of various types and dimensions enriching the society also.

According to Swami Vivekananda religion is nothing but the manifestation of the divinity within man. In his conviction man is already divine. We have just to realize this divinity. Swami Vivekananda reminded us that the essence of religion is God-consciousness. When this fact is forgotten, religious differences arise. The oneness of existence and harmony of religions are cardinal principles of Hinduism, and Vivekananda stands as an example of unity, tolerance, and diversity. At the First World Parliament of Religions in Chicago, Swami Vivekananda made his famous farewell remarks: "Sectarianism, bigotry, and its horrible descendant, fanaticism, have long possessed this beautiful earth. They have filled the earth with violence, drenched it often and often with human blood, destroyed civilization, and sent whole nations to despair. Had it not been for these horrible demons, human society would be far more advanced than it is now. But their time is come; and I fervently hope

that the bell that tolled this morning in honor of this convention may be the death-knell of all fanaticism, of all persecutions with the sword or with the pen, and of all uncharitable feelings between persons wending their way to the same goal.”¹³

Thus Swami Vivekananda stood in the parliament of religions in Chicago as the living embodiment of universality and harmony. There he urged everyone to give up narrow mentality and become universal. According to him if there is even to be a universal religion, it must be one which will be beyond the boundaries of space and time. Such a religion will be infinite like the God and whose light will shine upon the followers of Krishna and of Christ, on saints and sinners alike. Again this religion will not be Brahminic or Buddhistic, Christian or Mohammedan. This religion will be the sum total of all the religions of the world. But still have infinite space for development. It will embrace in its infinite arms every human being, from the lowest groveling savage to the highest man of virtue. Such a religion was represented by Vivekananda at the Parliament of world religions. It was in fact the Religion beyond all religions. Swami Vivekananda while delivering his lecture on religion found out the essential similarities of the various religions of the world. He says that in every religion there are three parts- philosophy, mythology and ritual and all the recognized religions in the world have these three elements. Some lay more stress on one, some on another. But there is no universal philosophy mythology and ritual common to all the religions of the world. Hence, apparently there is no universal religion in the world. But all the religions are true. He accepts the law of unity in variety. He explains this point with the following example. We are all human being. But there are differences among us. Some are white some are black, some are rich some are poor. Again some are male and some are female. But as human being all are the same. All are called man. It is because the same manhood is in every individual. Similarly there are various religions in the world. It is impossible to find out any universal religion. But all the religions are equally true. Each religion is struggling towards God. He opines that through their philosophies, mythologies and rituals, no matter whether the philosophies, mythologies and rituals are high or low, every religion is struggling upward, towards God.

Thus, Vivekananda admits that all the religions of the world are different paths converging on the same ultimate goal. And that ultimate goal is God. The only watchword for establishing such a religion is ‘Acceptance’ according to Vivekananda. He says “Our watchword, then, will be acceptance and not exclusion. Not only toleration, but acceptance. 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’s church and kneel 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 meditation with the Hindu who is trying to see the light that enlightens the heart of everyone.”¹⁴ These lines show the all-embracing nature of Vivekananda’s concept of religion.

Conclusion: From the above discussion we have seen that Swami Vivekananda has given us a very simple but essential lecture on religion. Religion is self-realization. Self- realization means realization of oneness with

the infinite Self which is God, Allah or Isvara. If we look into Vivekananda's concept of religion we can very easily understand that intolerance has no place in religion. Every religion is a way to realize the self. All the religions of the world are equally valid. It is extremely wrong to get others converted into our own religion against the will of that individual. If religion is nothing but God realization and if every religion is teaching and preaching this truth then what is the necessity of forcing others belong to other religion to accept our own?

Vivekananda was not a religious preacher. Though he tried to give his own concept of religion, his intention was not to establish a new religion with a new sect. In his eyes all religions of the world have equal validity. To be one with God he prescribed for four Yogas. Every individual, no matter what his religion, caste, sex is, can follow the path. According to him, diversity of religions will remain. But we must realize that the different religions will co-exist as diverse ways of worship of the one infinite. The result is not a uniform pattern of religion for diverse people but the accordance of all religions as true by all.

In a society where different religious community live together, each religious community has a responsibility of their own so that their preaching should help in ending conflicts and strengthen the security, so that fear is replaced by trust. Responsibility of each individual is also important in each religion. If we have to feel oneness there should be a universality of religious expression. It is extremely important to have the feeling of oneness and humanity to maintain cooperation and peace within our globe. Religious intolerance is due to the differences in opinion of people of different religions. It always hinders love and peace. Religious intolerance is mostly because of ignorance and limited knowledge of religions. So people must be given education of religion. Education can help us to enhance the spiritual values inside man. Education enables us to show not only tolerance towards different religions, it also enables us to appreciate different beliefs genuinely from our heart. So the curriculum of education should consist of the comparative study of various spiritual traditions and scriptures in order to know the essence of each religion. This will enhance religious tolerance, because people then will know that all the religions of world have one common point and that is God.

Different social organizations are representing different needs of the man, and they endeavor to practice humaneness in society. Religions, on the other hand, represent the spiritual aspirations and struggles of mankind. The unpleasant reality, however, is that various world religions have been indulging in mutual criticisms, vilification, and persecutions. We have seen how some religions in the world, claiming universal empire in the field of religion over all mankind, have engaged themselves in ruthless wars and bloodshed to achieve this end. Vivekananda has observed these two mutually opposing aspects of religion. Vivekananda deeply felt the importance of religion, as well its crucial role in the human life. To improve this situation, some intellectuals and peace workers are searching a way to establish peace among the religions. Vivekananda views that we must understand all of those religions have proved their strength, their worth, and their necessity for mankind. Therefore, he underscored the equal status of all the religions and the religious plurality in human society.

If all mankind today realize only a bit of that great truth, the aspect of the whole world will be changed, and, in place of fighting and quarrelling, there would be a reign of peace. This outlook - the spiritual outlook is absolutely essential to the present age. There will be no place in a world of untold power and knowledge for anything but the broadest acceptance of all human cultures of all individuals, of all the varied ways in which human being search for truth. The future world will brook no barriers between persons, genders, creeds, races, cultures, and nations; for in the truth in the vast ocean of life there are no barriers, and truth alone will be able to survive in a world where no knowledge will be withheld from any person. Madame Sophia Wadia in her article "The essential Unity of All Religions" wrote, "Religious maturity makes for tolerance, for understanding, for acceptance of other religions. Only the immature evince bigotry and intolerance. As the human mind becomes enlightened it perceives more and more the essential unity of all religions, for it can probe behind the form, go within the surface and, discarding the husk, grasp the nourishing core. Since every man is potentially divine, every man has within him the latent gift of learning Truth."¹⁵

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