

# Swami Vivekananda's Concept of Universal Religion

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## Abstract

Universal religion may be said to be the most general concept which reveals the very unity and the unique nature of all religions of the world. The very heart underlying all religions of the world is the same. Universal religion expresses the sameness of the fundamental principles as well as the teachings of each and every religion of the world. All the religions of the world meet with each other in a supernatural power which is very commonly called God. Vivekananda says that we must learn that truth may be expressed in a hundred thousand ways and each one of these ways is true as far as it goes. We must also learn that the same thing may be viewed from a hundred different standpoints, yet is the same thing. Accordingly, 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, is consciously or unconsciously struggling upward towards God. Just as universal brotherhood is there, similarly universal religion also there. Universal religion is not a new concept. All the religions in the true sense of the term are universal in nature.

**Keywords:** Religion, Universal religion, Brotherhood, God, Vivekananda.

## Introduction

In India there is an unbroken line of spiritual teachers from the Vedic period to the modern age and Swami Vivekananda is also one in that line. These spiritual teachers imparted the energy and direction to Indian culture- its deep spirituality. It is because they came age after age that India is still alive, in spite of invasions, subjections, humiliations by many foreign nations. India still exists, not only exists, but is strong and vital. Sri Ramakrishna and his disciple Swami Vivekananda brought youthfulness to the age-old Indian culture. The Indian nation becomes youthful through the touch of Swami Vivekananda. And according to Indian philosophy, he who imparts youthfulness, vitality and clarity of vision to a man or a nation is the guru of that man or that nation. In this sense, Vivekananda can be rightly called the Rashtra-guru of India. But Vivekananda did not limit his service in India alone; he did the same service to the west also. Through the thread of divinity within man he tried to unite the whole human race. And he achieved to a great extent in this gigantic task within a short period of ten years in his brief thirty-nine years. He became a bridge between the East and the West, the old and the new. Thus we can say his mission was not only national, it was international too.

There are so many religions in this universe but no universal religion. There is a plurality of faiths differing from one another but there is no religion which is universal and one, which is accepted by all the peoples of the world. A considerable section has begun to think seriously, in utter disappointment,

whether it is not time to abandon the cult of religion if, instead of promoting love and sympathy, fellow-felling and concord, it sows seeds of distrust and suspicion of hatred and discord. In one sense, religion is universal and one, and the particularities, dogmas of religions, have nothing to do with the essence of religion. In each of the religions, the universal religion is working and we have only to find out the essential and the fundamental element. There is no need for any special world-faith to work as the universal religion. Religion, properly understood, is nothing if it is not universal, and our search for a world-religion should be directed to find out the truth of religion itself which, when discovered, will reveal itself to be the one universal religion, which has been the dream of many visionaries.

Religion is a thing which cannot be dismissed easily from the human mind. It is inherent in the constitution of the human being. It belongs to the psychology of human beings. It is a passion, a craving, a desire for something universal. It is a longing for the infinite which will explain the mystery of the infinite, a striving towards reaching something which will solve the riddle of having the idea of the infinite in a finite frame. According to Swami Vivekananda also religion is that which knots the finite self with the Infinite universal self. Man has been endowed with a vague sense of the infinite. He has been given a glimpse of the infinite brightness which, though he does not remember it exactly, is still in his sub-conscious mind, and which rejects everything as dark and dull, constructed with itself. Although man is baffled in his attempts and although he is disappointed in most quarters, he has been given a strange confidence and a never-failing hope by religion, which invites him to undertake the gigantic task and solve the riddle.

### **Objective Of the Study**

The major objective of the present paper is to analyse Swami Vivekananda's idea of Universal religion.

### **Methodology**

Analytical Method has been applied in this paper.

### **Vivekananda's View on Universal religion**

Universal religion may be said to be the most general concept which reveals the very unity and the unique nature of all religions of the world. The very heart underlying all religions of the world is the same. Universal religion expresses the sameness of the fundamental principles as well as the teachings of each and every religion of the world. Universal religion is neither the product of discursive understanding nor a synthesis of the vital elements of different religions. It is the realization that the different religions are expressions of one basic truth. Swami Vivekananda believes that universal religion exists. Just as universal brotherhood of man is there, so also universal religion is there.

Different religions have come out of different traditions and against different backgrounds. Therefore, differences are bound to be present in them. But if we make a comparative study of the religions we clearly find that there are certain striking similarities among the different religions of the world. Realization of self as God in all is the principal teaching of all religions. It is the belief in all religions that service to all living beings is the service to God and this is the way of attaining perfection in life. All religions believe in supernatural being, transcendental but not indifferent to his creatures. Comparative study of all major religions of the world shows that except certain differences in regard to non-essential or superficial elements, all religions teach the same fundamental truth. All religious practices are the

expression of the inward desire for realizing the supreme. The founders of different religion agree in holding that underlying differences there is essential unity. To Vivekananda, religion gets expression through different nations, languages, and their points of similarity and unity are intrinsic. The language of the soul is one for all men.

Amidst the variety of religions, Vivekananda found the universal element in God conceived as a generalized entity. He said that through a generalized entity called ‘man’ we can see one as a man or woman. So, universal religion runs through all religions of the world in the form of God. This God may be attained as personal, omnipotent or it may be described as the universal existence or the ultimate reality of the universe.

True religion is a direct, transcendental experience of the Ultimate Reality. This idea of direct realization is common to all religions. The end of all religions is the realization of God in the Soul, and this is the one Universal Religion. If there is one Universal Truth, in all religions, it is the realizing God. Ideals and methods may differ, but this is the main point to be noted. Swami Vivekananda 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.

Religion can be divided into three aspects- philosophy, mythology and rituals. In all these aspects the existing religions disagree. There is no universal philosophy, mythology or ritual accepted by all of them. We can take here an example with regard to rituals. To the Hindus the Sivalingais a sacred symbol used for worship. Others look upon it as a phallic emblem. Thus there are various religions in the world and they have differences in all the above mentioned aspects.

Diversity in all fields of life is an obvious fact. In religion also it is so. In fact it is necessarily too. It is a sign of life. When all diversities are eliminated, we get only the peace and uniformity of graveyard. The law of life is therefore unity in diversity. For example, all man are different from one another, but there is an abstract humanity which is common to all. Though we do not see it, yet we are certain it is there. For it is through this generalized humanity that we see and recognize individual men. So is the universal element running as a thread through all individual religions. This universal element is the idea of God, and it exists through eternity. God is the universal existence, the ultimate unity in the universe. In Him we are all one. To put Vivekananda “Unity in variety is the plan of the universe. If it be true that God is the Centre of all religions, and that each of us is moving towards him along one of these radii, then it is certain that all of us must reach that Centre. And at the Centre, where all the radii meet all our differences will cease.”<sup>16</sup> So if by universal religion any one means that a set of doctrines should be believed in by all mankind, or there should be one universally accepted system of mythology or rituals, it is an impossibility.

Now the question is if variety, the basic law of life has to be recognized and conceded, in what sense can we propound the ideal of universal religion? Vivekananda’s answer to this question is that we must learn that truth may be expressed in a hundred thousand ways and each one of these ways is true as far as it goes. We must also learn that the same thing may be viewed from a hundred different standpoints, yet is the same thing. Accordingly, 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, is consciously or unconsciously struggling upward towards God. It is like men going to the ocean to fetch water in different vessels. The water gets into each vessel according to its shape and capacity. God is like that water, filling these different vessels, and in each vessel the vision of God

comes in the form of the vessel. He is God in every case. According to Vivekananda this is the only recognition of universality we can get.

So far as the possibility of Universal religion is concerned, according to Vivekananda it is possible only to the extent of having a conception of universalism in which there is a place for all religions suited to different types of humanity. There are various types of mind (man). These various types of man can be classified into four types according to their nature. These are active type, mystic type, philosophic type and devotional type. Swami Vivekananda wants to propagatethatreligion which will be equally acceptable to all minds; it must be equally philosophic, equally emotional, equally mystic and equally conducive to action. This combination will be the ideal approach to a universal religion. In the words of Swami Vivekananda, “Would to God that all men were so constituted that in their minds all these elements of philosophy, mysticism, emotion and of work were equally present in full. That is the ideal, my ideal of perfect man.....To become harmoniously balanced in all these four directions is my ideal of religion.”<sup>17</sup> And according to Vivekananda this religion is attained by what we, in India, call Yoga-union. To the worker, it is union between men and the whole of humanity; to the mystic, between his lower and higher self; to the lover, union between himself and the God of Love; and to the philosopher, it is the union of all existence. This is what is meant by Yoga.

When Vivekananda pleads for universal religion, he does not mean a new religion. He calls for a new attitude towards all religions. And he speaks on behalf of, not his own religion, Hinduism, but of all religions without any exception. This religion recognizes divinity in every man and woman and has no room for persecution and intolerance. The one watchword for universal religion, according to Vivekananda is acceptance. It is not just tolerance. 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.”<sup>18</sup>

## Conclusion

From the above discussion it has been surveyed that Vivekananda’s concept of universal religion is not any newly originated independent religion. Universal religion is neither the product of discursive understanding nor a synthesis of the vital elements of different religions. It is the realization that the different religions are expressions of one basic truth. There are various religions in the world and Swami Vivekananda has taken all these religions as true. All the religions of the world may vary from each other’s in their philosophy, mythology and rituals. There is no universally accepted philosophy, mythology and ritual. But with the help of their philosophies, mythologies or rituals all are struggling towards God. And this is the main teaching of all the religions of the world. The essential unity of all religions lies in realization of God. God is the Centre of all religions. Though the end of all religions is the same, but the means of arriving at the same goal may vary from religion to religion.

Universal religion would consist in recognizing that there may be various and different ways of approach to the religious object. It gives perfect liberty to the individual in this regard. But at the same time, the spirit of universal religion demands that every approach must be large hearted enough to have a

respect for the other ones. The one watch word for universal religion, according to Vivekananda is 'acceptance'. It has been a matter of feeling that once universal religion is realized from within, all bloodshed and enmity in the name of religion will be fully over and then religion will play its real role in the society by uniting the peoples. Practically viewing, such an environment may highly be beneficial for the world people and so it may be highly desirable. Vivekananda's concept of universal religion is, therefore, not a new religion with a new Scripture and new liturgy; it is a new approach to religion, a new spiritual and moral ideal. It not merely prescribes tolerance, it stresses on acceptance of other religions as true thereby making religion a principle of human harmony.

Religion is essentially a relation which is not formed with the objects of senses and not even by intellect as realized by the empirical consciousness. Thus relationship is basically spiritual relationship which brings to us, the subject of the highest expression of love, devotion, beauty and sublimity, holiness and steady light of knowledge to be related with or projected upon certain objects which are also not limited and finite, mundane and temporal but a universal and abiding spiritual reality. The core of religion is or should be spiritual realization. This spiritual realization which can be treated as native to mankind belongs to each and every man. Every man possesses in his essence divinity and so realization can be said to be the birthright of all.

The professed religions irrespective of time and nation have generally degenerated into sectarian groups fostering rivalry and internal hindrance which divide and antagonize men. The so-called religious sects staying away from extending love and holiness are out to create a lot of narrow walls around them and common hate among innocent followers. According to each and every religion, God has offered his exclusive expression to his own prophet, Buddha, Krishna, Christ or Muhammad with the hope that all others would follow blindly his steps, or suffer spiritual privation. Religion with its 'Thou shalt renounce' is the direct opposite of the new commandment, 'thou enjoy', on which all our major and minor prophets have agreed. Religion cannot be accepted as signifying a particular creed or faith but in a state of spiritual realization. Each and every religion 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 in regard to a spiritual life. All the religions of the world must understand that this building of life and character and spiritual transformation is the essence of religion. We can see in Vivekananda's philosophy that spirituality gets prime importance through which he does not mean the changing manners and customs but the idea of oneness of all. The more the religions of the world rise to spiritual realization the more conflicting or quarrelling forms and clear cut differences are bound to vanish. The different religions of the world must come together, walk together and work out some common criteria to avoid mutual conflicts, misunderstanding, misconceptions, prejudices, superstitious beliefs. And if they are not to continue the position of conflict or competition, they should develop a spirit of comprehension which will break down superstition, misunderstanding and bind them together as various representations of a single truth. The reality is one and all pervasive by nature, underlying as the immanent core of each and every religion of the world. This unique reality has been being interpreted by different ways in different languages.

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