

Religious Philosophy of Swami Vivekananda and Sri Narayana Guru

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RELIGION OCCUPIES the most important part of the life of human beings and it is the chief differentiating characteristic of a human being. Religion indicates what is highest in a human being and lifts a person in some way to the universe, or the infinite and eternal, of which one is a part. Religion aims chiefly at creating a refined way of life. It satisfies the inward craving of a person who is leading an animated life and wishes to attain a spiritual consolation, solace, and peace. The aim of religion is the factual realisation of the harmony between the aspiring soul and the integrating principle.

Religion is considered to be the binding force which binds an individual to a definite chain and unites the individuals. But in the present scientific age, the value of religion is being ignored by many who try to underrate its importance.

Many contemporary thinkers like Swami Vivekananda, Mahatma Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore, S Radhakrishnan, and Sri Narayana Guru had presented religion according to their views. The study of their views will enable the growing generation to understand the strength and greatness of their religious ideas. This article limits its scope to only two of the

contemporary thinkers, Swami Vivekananda and Sri Narayana Guru.

Swamiji and Narayana Guru were the spiritual emancipators of India. They took inspiration from the Indian philosophical traditions, especially Vedanta. On the basis of which they presented a new design for life: a model contentment, compassion, balance, and harmony. Both of them accepted religion as one of the most important aspects of human life.

Both of them tried to base a religion on the rational ground by accepting reason as the final guide even in the field of religion and the aim of religion as realisation. One of the most important things in these two rishis is that they conducted and participated in religious conferences. The religious ideas of these two rishis suggest some new ideas and could throw new light on religious concepts.

Religious Philosophy of Swami Vivekananda

More than any other Hindu religious leader of the modern era, with the exception of Mahatma Gandhi, Swamiji is famous in the Western world for his eloquent defence of Hinduism and his

charismatic personality. He was a disciple of Sri Ramakrishna. He practised intense spiritual disciplines under the supervision of Sri Ramakrishna for several years. Swamiji's life was short; some months short of forty. Within this short span of life, he left a rich legacy of spectacular achievements in the religious and cultural history of the world.

Swamiji had realised that no religion in the world was as liberal and catholic as Hinduism. In his response to the welcome given at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893, Swamiji said: 'I am proud to belong to a religion which has taught the world both tolerance and universal acceptance. We believe not only in universal toleration, but we accept all religions as true'.¹ In his conversation to the educated West on the various aspects of religion, he upholds the Vedantic tradition and attempts to defend Hinduism and its continuing contribution to the spiritual life of the world. Like his master Sri Ramakrishna, he also emphasised the unity of all essential goals of all religions. 'As the different streams having their sources in different places all mingle their water in the sea, so, O Lord, the different paths which men take through different tendencies, various though they appear, crooked or straight, all lead to Thee' (4).

He explains that religion does not consist in erecting temples or building churches or attending public worship. As well as it cannot be found in books, words, lectures, or organisations. Religion is realisation. Religion does not consist in subscribing to a particular creed or faith but in spiritual realisation. So, spiritual realisation is religion. He said: 'I shall try to bring before you the Hindu theory that religions do not come from without, but from within. It is my belief that religious thought is in man's very constitution, so much so that it is impossible for him to give up religion until he

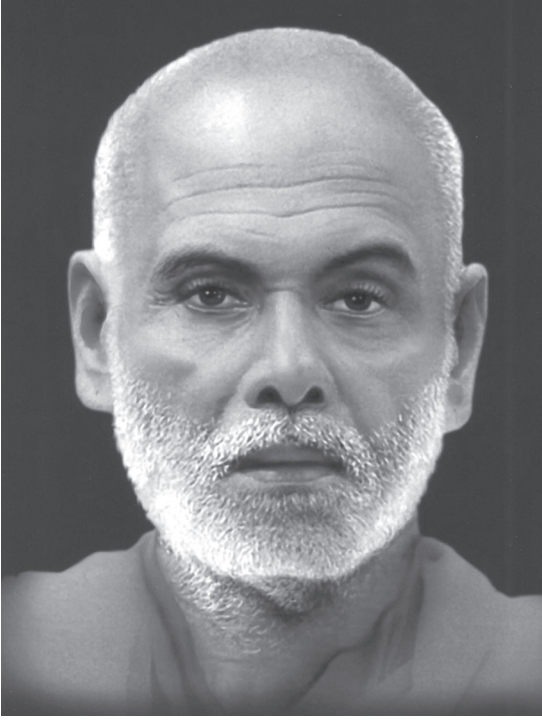
can give up his mind and body, until he can give up thought and life' (3.1). Religion is inseparable from humans and their lives. It is within every human being.

Each and every one should understand God within their soul through self-realization. ... It is realization in the heart of our hearts. It is touching God; it is feeling God and realizing that I am a spirit in relation with the universal Spirit and all its great manifestations. In a simple manner, his way of understanding of religion is that man must realize God, feel God, see God, and talk to God. That is the religion. To him material prosperity and wealth is not an important thing. But the wealth of the spiritual thought in brain that is needed to the human progress.²

Universal Religion

Swamiji also looks at the various religious traditions from a pragmatic point of view. For him, various religions represent human being's spiritual struggles over social struggles that are represented in different nations by different social organisations. As long as the world exists, the different world religions will also continue to exist. The differences between various world religions are good for all human beings. 'Thinking beings must differ; difference is the first sign of thought. If I am a thoughtful man, certainly I ought to like to live amongst thoughtful persons where there are differences of opinion'.³

Swamiji emphasised the concept of 'Universal Religion', but he never developed that idea into a cohesive theory. He addressed himself to the apparently contradictory nature of world religions. He believed that in essence, they are not contradictory but supplementary. 'Each religion, as it were, takes up one part of the great universal truth, and spends its whole force in embodying and typifying that part of the great truth. It is, therefore, addition, not exclusion' (ibid.). All religions are different forces in the economy of



Sri Narayana Guru (c. 1856–1928)

God, working for the good of all, and not one can be destroyed.

Swamiji did not believe in a future universal religion, but in a universal religion which is already existing and in which each world religion comprises one inseparable part. This universal religion about which philosophers and others have dreamt in every country already exists. It is here, as the universal brotherhood of human beings. Swamiji emphasised the fraternity of all religions in the past, present, and future through this universal religion. He accepts all religions in the past and worships with them all. He worships God with every one of them. He says we stand in the present but open ourselves to the infinite future. We take in all that has been in the past; enjoy the light of the present, and open every window of the heart for all that will come in the future.

According to Swamiji, there are two modern

theories of religion. They are the spirit theory of religion and the evolution of the idea of the infinite. The former upholds ancestor worship as the beginning of religious ideas whereas for the latter; religion originates in the personification of the power of nature. To Swamiji, human being gets the first glimpse of religion through dreams. In the dream, when the body is apparently dead, the mind will function. The mental works will continue even after the dissolution of the body. This according to Swamiji is a more natural explanation of the supernatural. Through this dream idea, the human mind rises to the higher conceptions. The religious prophets reach a state of mind, which is neither waking nor sleeping but experience a new series of facts in the spiritual kingdom.

Swamiji declared that all the controversies about religious truths were the results of ignorance. All religions in this world were different paths for reaching the same goal. Through various paths, all religions try to realise the same reality in their own ways. It was the privilege of Swamiji to speak the truth of Vedanta on the platform of the World Parliament of Religions and it was also the fortune of the West to hear the spiritual truths realised by Indian seers.

He realised the fact that religion was the inner heart of India. He firmly believed that the existence of India can be saved only by preserving its religion and spirituality. He declared that 'In each nation, as in music, there is a main note, a central theme, upon which all others turn. Each nation has a theme: everything else is secondary. India's theme is religion' (5.210). Swamiji wanted to break all barriers between religions and remove all conflicts and oppositions. Religion must be limitless and infinite like God.

Thus the religious teachings of Swamiji are quite useful because these provide human beings

with precious gems by means of which one can better one's individuality. Swamiji's fundamental teaching is the doctrine of the oneness of existence. This doctrine is the cure of all evils in individual, social, national, and international fields. A peaceful interpersonal relationship can be established by practising this doctrine. His teachings are much useful for India as well as for the entire world even today.

Religious Philosophy of Sri Narayana Guru

Sri Narayana Guru was a wisdom teacher of India whose life followed the ancient and immemorial pattern of oriental saints and prophets. His basic stand was that of a non-dualist Vedantic visionary. This made it possible for him to appreciate the value elements of all traditions and to view all religions with the attitude of a devoted lover of beauty, goodness, and truth. Hence his philosophy is at once traditional and modern, as well as scientific and religious; which makes it all comprehensive, universal, and unitive.

Narayana Guru uses the terms *arivu*, Atman, Brahman, and God synonymously to denote the one ultimate Reality. Guru defines God as *satyam*, *jnanam*, *ananda*—truth, knowledge, and happiness. God alone exists; all that appear as forming the world are simply manifestations of the one God. Guru installed various deities such as *Vinayaka*, *Shiva*, *Devi*, *Subramaniam*, and so on, in the temples and composed hymns in praise of them. His praising many gods does not mean that he admits to more than one God. Guru sees many gods as representing the one Brahman or *arivu*. Guru's view on religion is elucidated through his works such as *Atmopadesha Shatakam*, *Arivu*, *Darshana-mala*, *Daiva Dashakam*, *Advaita Dipika*, and *Brahmavidya Panchakam*.

Individuals always do everything for

self-happiness. Religion is not meant for the welfare of the inner world of the human being alone. Physical and spiritual betterment should result from religion. The founders of all religions have aimed at realising the Absolute. Their faith, therefore, is one itself and not more. Speaking about religion, Guru once said, 'Which be the religion, it suffices if it makes a better man'. Therefore, it can be argued that Narayana Guru left the choice of religion with the people and their individual tastes, depending on whether it would make them good people in the world. Guru says: All religions aim at one thing when rivers join the sea they lose their separateness. The function of all religions is to turn the hearts of people upward and onward. When that is accomplished they will discover the truth for themselves. Here we refer to some stanzas of *Atmopadesha Shatakam*:

The One Religion of the Guru

Of all closed static groupings in society the one most fraught with danger to man is the formation of rival religions on a relativist, dualist basis. Conflicts become possible under such conditions. When what contributed to such a life of internal strife within men in the formation of wrongly motivated religious groups is once discovered and eliminated from religious life; all falls into unity, by analogous tendencies becoming revealed in different groups or religious formations.

Moses and Jesus differ in their outlook as also the Old Testament from the New Testament, through the value-sets implied in each. Vedism likewise differs from Vedantism. Analogously, on the other hand, the obligatory aspect represented by the Ten Commandments can be found in the Pentateuch as well as in the Christian Bible. Taboos and bans prevail here and there, overtly or tacitly, in all religions, and exclusive fanaticisms are possible in every case where orthodoxies might clash against rival

orthodoxies.’ The delicate way of Wisdom in their matter is discussed by the Guru in Verses 44 to 49, inclusive which we shall examine here.

In order to be able to lay bare the philosophical implications of the One Religion that is in the mind of the Guru, let us read this sequence of six verses in a selected order of our own. The topic covered by each can be enumerated as follows:

(A) All Religions have the Overall Aim of Happiness

All religions, when viewed horizontally as different from others in expression reveal many features that make for contrast. When we take a verticalized inclusive or contemplatively dialectical view of all religions understood together, a mutual agreement or transparency of context reveals itself between them, because the overall aim and end of all religions, however diverse, is none other than happiness in life, here or hereafter, or both. Verse 49 enunciates this unequivocally as follows:

Every man at every time makes effort in every
way
Self-Happiness to secure, thus in the world
Know there is this One Religion alone, known
thus and
Avoiding evil, one should his inner self attune.

(B) The Deep Mutual Adoption implied in Religious Affiliation

...

The possibility of adopting a religion as one’s own is itself, as the Guru points out, only a recognition of the homogenous parity in the participation of the self and the non-self factors involved. By itself this possibility belongs to the pure Self, and when understood in such a pure perspective, is fully dignified and conducive to Self-realization. The danger, however, is that this pure nature of bipolar adoption becomes misapplied. Then *adhyasa* or superimposition mutually of non-Self factors on the self and vice-versa takes

place. Herein alone the danger lurks. We read in verse 48:

The dweller within the body, from its own status
as pure being,
In respect of each possible thing, treats all
As ‘that is mine’ or ‘this is mine’ transcending
bodily sense,
All are in reality realized, when we think of what
this means. ...

(C) Rival Religions Really Plead for the Same Value

We see that the protagonists of any religion dream of uniting all humanity under one faith. ... Hindus might want the entire world to become Hindu and so on. If each religious zealot only realized that, in this kind of plea, all sailed in the same boat, rival antagonisms could be minimized. This travesty implicit in the unwise rivalry between religious groups such as Unitarians and Trinitarians, causing much trouble that can be avoided, is alluded to with telling effect in Verse 47.

All plead but for one religion to prevail,
Which the disputants fail to remember withal,
Those wise ones freed from disadoption of another’s faith
Can know here wholly the secret of all this.

(D) The Nature of the Irony Implicit in Religious Rivalry⁴

Many religions in their content are essentially one. Those who argue for against any particular religion are compared to the well-known story of a few blind men seeing an elephant—the one who feels the elephant’s leg claims that the elephant looks like a pillar; the other who feels its tail says, it is broom-like; the third feeling the ears, asserts that the elephant is like a winnowing fan in shape. None of them is wrong, but none of them is right either. What each acquires is simply a partial knowledge and this always allows room for disputations. So it is with the defenders of religions as well. One religion becomes respectable

and another despicable only because of the partial understanding of religion each one has. To quote the Guru's own words:

Ignoring that in substance various religions are the same,
Like the blind men in respect of an elephant,
fools wander
In this world, imitate not their way,
And not agitated like them, one should calmly settle down! (132).

It is not possible to defeat any religion through fighting, for every religion has for its strength at its core the high-value factor that makes it a religion. One religion attacking another, for this very reason, results not in the destruction of the targeted religion, but only of the persons who fight. The discriminating, therefore, always keep themselves away from such fights.

Verse 45 stresses the need to see the underlying unity of religions. ...

One religion is not good enough for another
and the doctrine cardinal
Stated in one, according to another's calculations
is found defective,
Until that day the unitive secret herein is known
with certitude
There shall continue to be confusion prevailing
in this world. ...

Verse 46 underlines the fact that persecution only makes unilateral faith firmer. The martyrs to any deep belief prove the irony of the situation in the history of any religion and this is contrary to what might be expected by mechanistic reasoning. ...

Victory by flight is impossible here, one as
against one,
No religion by fighting gets exterminated, not
knowing this
The opponent of a stranger faith,
His own doom shall be in vain fight for,
beware! ...

The apocalyptic touch of the last line above gives a prophetic touch to the Guru's philosophy (133).

Conclusion

Swamiji and Guru have the same opinion that religion was not theoretical but can be applied in daily life. They gave a practical demonstration of Advaita in real life. The unique trend of their philosophies is that religion was brought down from the whimsical heights to the midst of the masses. In their views, we have seen a lot of similarities and slight differences. But their formation of a new ideal of universal religion and one religion can be called universal love or universal brotherhood. It has given an equal value for all the religions of the world, as they truly exist. Their identification of truth was absolute and scientific, and they showed that religion can be practised by each and everybody. They made all understand that it is not necessary to have a vast literary knowledge, but the practice—it is very much needed. Therefore, it can be applied to all nations, all societies, and individuals. It is the harmony of all religions and one of the best solutions for the prevalent religious conflicts in the world, and to make the people aware that essentially all religions are one and the same. ☪^{PB}

References

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