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*Vivekananda's Vision of Religion: A Brief Survey of Hinduism and Islam***Abu Siddik***Falakata College, Jalpaiguri, (W.B.), India***Abstract**

Vivekananda is not only a pioneer religious visionary he is a great orator, writer, social reformer, a patriot, and a maker of modern heterodox India. This dynamic multifaceted personality has been far ahead of his time. Like Kabiguru Rabindranath Tagore he believed in the assimilation of the best from each and every religion – Christianity, Islam, Jainism, Buddhism, Judaism and so on. His concept of God, as I argue, is akin to that of Islam. Islam considers God as omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, shapeless, pure power, who is immune from the cycle of birth and death. God is eternal, anadi. “Say: He is Allah, the One. Allah, the Unique. He does not give birth. Nor was He given birth to. There is no equal to Him”. (al-Ikhlās, Kidwāi 1). God is supreme who sits in the driver’s seat and the entire cosmos is regulated by His holy power. Vivekananda’s concept of God or Brahma is the same.

Today Vivekananda is being hijacked by political parties and a few intellectuals for their vested interests. His saying – say with pride that I am Hindu is being misinterpreted by taking it out of context. Vivekananda equals a Hindu with an Indian citizen. He never believed in sectarianism. His famous story of the pond of well in his Chicago lecture is well reminiscent of his syncretised religious vision. Though he is a Hindu monk, nowhere he is confined to Hinduism only. His vision is universal religion. He is energetic, revolutionary, and extremely conscious of the maladies of untouchability, poverty, superstition, illiteracy, and pathetic position of women in society of colonial India. He has shown the West through his 1893 Chicago lectures the mystic and ennobling eternal spiritual power of Hinduism in its true sense. Through this paper I want to stress that Vivekananda, though often claimed to have championed the cause of Hinduism, is for the whole humanity, and not for the Hindus only. And after Vivekananda there are perdurable similarities between Hinduism and Islam, especially so far as the cardinal concept of God is concerned.

Key Words: Vivekananda, Hinduism, Islam, Visionary, God

According to Swami Vivekananda the ultimate aim of Hinduism is to have moksha so that rebirth is checked and man could have an eternal life by mingling Jeebatama with Paramatma or God. How can it be achieved? There are roughly four ways – Knowledge, Work, Prayer and Meditation. We can restrain

our inner and external anxieties by following one or all the ways. If we can practice the said ways with extreme admiration of God we can reach Him, Brahma, which is the ultimate truth. The basic concept is that if we follow the ways wholeheartedly, our affinity of this maya world will get day by day loosened, and

there will come a day when we can be freed from the affection of this earthly world, or the world will not be “too much with us” in Wordsworthian sense though in a different context, and our ego will perish and we will be capable to get transported to the Eternity. So far we are affectionate to this earthly world and earthly ways of life; we are ‘jeebatma’. It is a kind of coarse life. And when we will be able to negate our ego or ahang (pride), we will be ‘Shiv’ or Brahma. And one who can shed his ego which centres on I, he will be a Brahma, and thereby jeebatama which is mundane, ordinary, coarse will be transformed into the ultimate and eternal Paramatma, which is shapeless, pure, omniscient, omnipresent and omnipotent.

Vivekanada said that our minds are always hankering after earthly pleasures. This is natural. We are all materialistic. In words of Wordsworth, the world is too much with us. We are mad pursuing materialistic inert objects. This apparent world is a hindrance toward the goal of achieving moksha, the ultimate reality. That’s why we have to strive hard and hard to follow the four ways, mentioned earlier, to concentrate and tame our minds toward the God. One can do it by work, knowledge, prayer, by meditation, by going to church and masjid. These are all external but supportive paraphernalia to reach the ultimate destination that is God. All religions take the support of externals in its own way to cross the uphill road to reach to God. Vivekanada has shown us with a simple example how the roads to the God is different from one religion to other for layman’s understanding. We all eat food, but one eats by sitting on an assan (mattress), one eats on dining table, one eats with hands, and one eats with spoons. The aim is the same, to

nourish the body. So each religion has its own specialities and externalities, but the aim is the same. This is the syncretistic religious vision of Swami Vivekananda. All religions are true, only the ways and praxes differ. This is a simplified version of Vivekananda’s vision of religion.

Vivekanada opines that man should work, whatever work it may be, with sincerity and devotion. God should have to be loved for love’s sake only, not for any ulterior motives, namely, earthly prosperity or life – afterlife bliss and divinity. But man is doing that, and there is no harm in it. But the best way is to love God for God’s sake only. That’s why our ideal prayer should be like this: hey God I don’t want asset, son or knowledge, I will go through innumerable trials and tribulations but my only prayer is to love you for love’s sake. He opines that superstition is man’s hardened enemy. But the worst is bigotry which rules the roost of contemporary world religions. About idolatry of Hinduism he explains that to Hindus idols are merely images which help them to concentrate on God. An idol is not God, or Iswar, Vivekananda’s favourite word, and he or she is not omnipresent or omniscient. He opines that idolatry is the first step towards God. “It is the attempt of undeveloped minds to grasp high spiritual truths” (Vivekanada Rachana Samagra 20). The next step is mental prayer or meditative prayer, that is prayer sung by the minds only, and the last is the vision of God. Here I think Islam is doing the second one that is prayer to God without external images. But there is also problem we love the computerised photos of Mecca and Medina, the Prophet’s affiliations. Moreover, in every mosque there is an arched shape structure (Quibla) placed in the western wall, though

there is not an idol inside it as in the way of the Hindus, but that structure is certainly indicative of the direction of prayer to Muslims all over the world. Vivekananda affirms that worshipping idol is only a means to reach to the ultimate truth. And if one can internalizes God without the externals it is good, but idolatry is not to be considered as something horrible. It is not that the help is necessary for everyone, but that those who do not need it have no right to say that it is wrong. "Nor is it compulsory in Hinduism." (20). So in pure Hinduism idolatry is not must, but an optional one. Here Islam and Hinduism go hand in hand.

Vivekananda opines that Hinduism is a universal religion whose sun will shine upon the followers of "Krishna, and of Christ, on saints and sinners alike; which will not be Brahminic or Buddhistic, Christians or Muhammeden, but the sum of total of all these" (20). Hinduism will be a religion which will have no place for "persecution or intolerance" in its polity. He pities the man who "dreams of the exclusive survival of his own religion and the destruction of others" (24). To have access to God one does not need to forsake his own religion. His suggestion is that a Christian does not need to a Hindu or a Buddhist, nor a Buddhist or a Hindu to a Christian. The same analogy if we keep the spirit of the sentence is applicable to a Muslim also. What is needed is to assimilate the best of each religion, keeping one's own religion intact. His address at the final session of 27th September 1893 comes to an end with "Help and not Fight", "Assimilation and not Destruction", "Harmony and Peace and not Dissension" (24).

Now I come to Islam. The word Islam in the Arabic of the Qur'an means "complete devotion /submission to God" (Haleem xxii), unmixed with worship of any other. Qur'an urges the Christians and the Jews to practice their religion. They are given the prestigious title of 'People of the Book', and it appeals to them 'Say, "People of the Book, let us arrive at a statement that is common to us all: we worship God alone, we ascribe no partner to Him, and none of us take others beside God as lords" (qtd. in Haleem xxv). According to the author God addresses Muslims, Jews, and Christians with the following: "We have assigned a law and a path to each of you. If God had so willed, He would have made you one community, but He wanted to test you through that which He has given you, so race to do good: you will all return to God and He will make clear to you the matters you differed about" (qtd. in Haleem xxv). By the same analogy Qur'an certainly cannot forbid the Hindus to follow their own religion. The statement can be applied to all world religions. The aim is same surrender to God. But crucial point is that Islam does not recognise, as the Christians do in reference to Jesus, Prophet Muhammed as God. And unlike Krishna who claims to be the divine incarnation of God, the Prophet is a human being and only the last messenger of supreme God. Christians think Jesus as their supreme God. Hindus claim so about Krishna. But if we follow Vivekananda all the worshipping deities are not Gods. They are the ways to the ultimate God. They are the ladders to reach to the highest Paramatma. Islam considers God as omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, shapeless, pure power, who is immune from the cycle of birth and death. God is eternal, anadi. "Say: He is Allah, the One. Allah, the

Unique. He does not give birth. Nor was He given birth to. There is no equal to Him". (Al-Ikhlās, Kidwāi). God is supreme who sits in the driver's seat and the entire cosmos is regulated by His holy power. Vivekananda's concept of God or Brahma is the same.

Vivekananda is dead against the notion of persecution and intolerance. Even our classical texts such as Sudraka's *Mricchakatikam*, and Mudraraksasam and Kalidasa's *Meghadutam* robustly celebrate Indian heterodoxy and toleration. India's legacy of toleration is also firmly attested by Samrat Ashoka and Akbar and the mediaeval mystical poets such as Dadu, Kabir, Ramdas (Sen 19). But what we witness is the persecution of minorities everywhere – Israel, India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, China, not to mention the racial based on religion invectiveness of the first and second world countries. Islam is alleged that it spreads through sword. Obviously it happens sometime. And in the context of India invaders are in most cases Muslims. But that Islam spreads only by swords cannot be generalized. Take the case of our state West Bengal with a population of 27% Muslims. Now it is proved that 98% of Bengali speaking Muslims are converted from lower caste Hindus, shudras. Who are responsible? Not Muhammed or so called barbaric Islamic force but the inhuman cruelty of upper caste Hindus on their fellow brethren. And accordingly Nirad C. Chaudhuri reiterates Vivekananda's stand on this polemic issue with utmost clarity:

“The Muhammadan conquest of India came as salvation to the down-trodden, to the poor. That is why one-fifth of our people have become Muhammadans. It was not the sword that did it all, it would be the height

of madness to think that it was all the work of sword or fire (qtd. in Chaudhury 468).”

Forgetting the basic motto of religion we are all busy in throwing mud to one another. We are guided in religious issues by what Sen calls an extremely narrow and downsized view of world history. The religious issues which contemporary world is irking pathetically is all about the externalities of religion - whether one is wearing scanty dress, or burqa, or keeping beard or bearing other religious symbols. We are busy with symbols only, not with the inner soul of the man. Both the print and electronic media is flooded with the news of religious violence, communal clash, and sectarian violence. The world is witnessing a tremendous surge of religious violence. There is no need to cite examples. In India alone from 2005-2009, over 4000 religious violence occurred. Is it Vivekananda's religious vision? Billions of dollars are being spent to maintain the externalities of religion by the fanatics. In India more than 50% people go to sleep without eating bread at night. Millions of child labourers do not pain us. The destitute are everywhere. If Vivekananda is to be followed, inhumanity is to be abolished first. Vivekananda is not only for the few intellectuals who will go on conferencing on him availing all the luxury of life; he is more for the decrepitude subalterns. He is not for a particular religion. He is the man of the masses irrespective of his caste, creed and religion and country. He is an indomitable power who cannot be confined within a coterie of people of Ramakrishna Math and Mission.

Vivekananda has a tendency to cite the name of a particular religion and criticize it, but then in the flow of the same speech clarify

that he is referring the religion as it practiced as negative, and in no way he is alluding to the religion in its doctrinal sense which was, in his opinion, positive. He is critical of Islamic invasion of India, and it is historically established fact. But he praises the concept of Islamic brotherhood, though he comments that it is not universal. Qur'an stresses on the casteless character of Muslims. Today Muslims are being divided into hundreds of castes by social scientists. But even today a zola, considered to be in the lower rung of society can pray with a sophisticated Muslim together. This immense strength of brotherhood is recognised by Vivekananda himself. And the seriously prejudiced allegation that Muslims spread by holding Qur'an in one hand and the sword in other seem to me an exaggeration, simply because to a Muslim Qur'an is sacred so it cannot be held in left hand, and the sword to be certainly held in right hand. This statement cannot be taken literally. Perhaps he makes use of it to refer to the Muslim invaders, and not the Muslim plebeian. He praised Shahajahan for the love of his artistic sensibility, and he also pays esteem to Akbar for his liberal and tolerant mind. Hindu-Muslim clash is a hindrance to the innate ethos of perennial India, he knows that well. He has many Muslim friends and disciples. And he concludes that a new India can be built not by a separation of Hindu and Muslim but cemented and congealed with a Vaidantic heart, and an Islamic body. (Chintanayak 280-281).

In conclusion I want to emphasise that no religion is implacably pure and perfect. Each religion paves the way for a particular way of life as encapsulated by Vivekananda's guru Ramakrishna immortal saying, "jato math

tatopath". And each religion leads to the God. The aim is the same, the ways are different. Vivekananda reiterates his guru:

"As 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 Thee."(Nikhilananda n. pag.)

It is an altruistic vision of religion. Now 150th celebration of Vivekananda is being observed worldwide with sheer enthusiasm and fanaticism by "nationalist" Hindus. But the pitiable fact is that we have failed to understand his reach and range of his religious vision. If not, why is religious violence escalating day by day? Whether one reveres the externals of religion is less important, devotion or in other words surrender to God is the most demanding task. And surprisingly and interestingly religious violence centres round the externals of religion, and not on the basic concept of Allah, Brahma, God, or Iswar. The basic spirit of all religions is the same. If we admit it and practice it in our day to day lives, I think, the misunderstanding and misconception of all religions will eradicate. And a new dawn will usher in the world. But is it possible, given the current nexus between politics and religion in contemporary scenario that is seriously undermining that possibility?

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