



## ***Vivekananda's Concept of Religion***

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**S**OCIAL NETWORKING SITES do not generally mention the users' religion. What is religion? Is it necessary? Is it a set of rules to abide by, a set of beliefs, or an indiscriminate following by the not-so-privileged people? The word 'religion' is derived from the Latin *religare*, which means that which binds. Yet, apart from other meanings of obligation and reverence, it has come to mean a set of practices that liberate a person. Thus the irony of religion starts at its very definition. However enthusiastic and universal that definition may sound, does everyone believe in this meaning? It is clear that religion is a sea of dichotomies and contradictions, struggles and victories, strengths and weaknesses, bondage and liberation—it is a portrayal of the evolution of humankind.

Today, conventional identities based on religion and cultures are being questioned and new identities are evolving. Thus when traditional constructs are eluding us, we may well question the need for religion in this digital age. The answer can be seen in the words of a thinker: ‘The rebirth of religion does not happen in times of political conservatism. Quite the opposite. It flourishes in hyper-technological times such as our own, in periods of major moral decline, when great ideologies are on their last legs. It’s then that we need to believe in something. It was when the Roman Empire was at the height of its powers, when its senators were frolicking openly with prostitutes and wearing lipstick, that Christianity took root. It’s a matter of natural rebalancing.’<sup>1</sup> This ‘rebalancing’ forces us to understand religion as a humanizing factor in this world.

Coming across someone of a different religion, culture, language, or nationality is a thousand times more likely today than in earlier generations. Therefore, we also need to understand religion to live in peace with fellow humans who have different religious affiliations. We need to urgently re-examine religion, and if necessary, find a new workable and cogent definition of it. Swami Vivekananda has given us such a definition and it is for us to understand and apply it to the religious and social field.

### **Keynotes of Religion**

Popular ideas about religion are often narrow and misleading. Some ideas, however, point to a brighter and broader possibility. Vivekananda gave us a broad and yet minimal definition of religion: ‘Each soul is potentially divine. The goal is to manifest this Divinity within by controlling nature, external and internal. Do this either by work, worship, or psychic control or philosophy—by one, or more, or all of these—and be

free. This is the whole of religion. Doctrines, or dogmas, or rituals, or books, or temples, or forms, are but secondary details.’<sup>2</sup> This definition needs a careful analysis to find its relevance in the contemporary context. The keyword in this definition is ‘soul’. It is interesting and intriguing that the subject was a soul to Vivekananda, not merely a human being. When we are busy fighting today for the rights of various identities based on gender and other factors, here is a portrayal of religion, an institution known to exist only among humans, as something belonging to each soul. Coming from a tradition that believes every living being is a soul, Vivekananda definitely meant ‘soul’ to apply to every living being. That is why he said: ‘In the lowest worm, as well as in the highest human being, the same divine nature is present. The worm form is the lower form in which the Divinity has been more overshadowed by Maya; that is the highest form in which it has been least overshadowed. Behind everything the same divinity is existing, and out of this comes the basis of morality’ (1.364).

The next keyword of this definition is ‘potentially divine’. Apparent failings or imperfections are relegated to non-importance and ‘each soul’ is said to have the acme of perfection, divinity, already lodged within oneself. With the assertion of this potential divinity, the immediate conundrum that crops up is the observance of failings. How do you explain the now frequent rapes and shooting by psychopaths, with all their ‘potential divinity’? To avoid rushing to pronounce this definition flawed, Vivekananda comes with the successive sentence bringing sense and pragmatism to the idea of potential divinity of souls. The next words, ‘manifest this Divinity within’ shows the necessity to turn the potential into kinetic or unmanifest to manifest. Divinity is inherent but not always pronounced. This explains the dichotomy of good and evil, and the layers in between,

that we are used to seeing in this world. There is another keyword 'the goal'. When put in absolute terms, like in this definition, 'the goal' assumes an overarching importance. This goal is not an interim one but a lifetime goal. Beginning with the common denominator of 'soul', the definition extends the commonality to the lifetime goal of all living beings. This sentence proclaims that all living beings have the same lifetime goal of achieving manifestation of the hidden divinity.

The next part of the definition deals with various means to manifest the potential divinity. It calls us to 'be free', and that is the next keyword. In contrast to the extant definitions of religion, both popular and academic, Vivekananda's definition does not bring any sense of bondage with it. On the other hand, we are assured of our potential divinity and are beckoned to start a journey to manifest this divinity and 'be free'. While religion is almost always viewed as a bunch of mythical, social, and cultural constructs binding an individual, Vivekananda's definition erases the bindings and stresses freedom. Some sociologists concur with this definition. We need a religion that is not structural but liquid and functional, catering to every subject. Summarizing the thoughts of the sociologist of religion Georg Simmel (1858–1918), a social thinker writes:

Simmel does not find religion able to fulfill the spiritual need of his time. The major problem is that his contemporaries look at religion as a set of claims. Religion has become a large, bureaucratic system that does not give room for the sincerity, subjectivity, and the expressive need that seems to accompany the new type of modern individuality. Simmel represents a romantic trend and emphasizes symbols, meaning, the unique, and subjective sincerity. He suggests a radical reconstruction of the spiritual life. One must fully grasp the meaning of the idea that religion is not a set of beliefs but an 'an attitude of the soul' or a perspective, a way of looking at the

world. Simmel shares the scepticism towards dogma, which was prevalent at his time, where the idea is that faith itself is more important than the object of faith. For him, reality is divided between the subjective and the objective, and a third realm is created by the interaction of human beings that may serve as a bridge between the two. In this way, religion is a reality capable of bridging the rift between the subjective and the objective. One may say that Simmel suggests an objectless religion, although he would hardly characterize it as a secular religion, which Victoria Lee Erickson does. The reason is that secular religion clings to a specific content, which Simmel rejects.<sup>3</sup>

Vivekananda's definition of religion relegates all 'secondary details' to secondary importance. These secondary details are generally considered the 'specific content' of religion. The spiritual is relinquished for the material. It should be the other way round. What is to be focused on is the 'attitude of the soul'. It is both interesting and reassuring to find thinkers like Simmel arrive at conclusions similar to those of Vivekananda's, albeit from very different points of departure set in equally different cultural contexts.

### ***Freedom and Strength: The Litmus Test***

One of the underlining aspects of Vivekananda's concept of religion is that it should lead to freedom. 'Liberty is the first condition of growth,'<sup>4</sup> and it is the deciding factor of one's success in attaining lifelong goals. In the footsteps of his master, Sri Ramakrishna, Vivekananda advocated a catholic path to understanding one's personality. He was so liberal in the prescription of methods to 'be free' that he was open to new spiritual practices being adopted by the monastic organization he created, the Ramakrishna Math, after his passing. A prophet is known by the path he shows. Buddha is known for the eightfold path; Mohamad for his path of solidarity; Christ for his path

of love. Sri Ramakrishna, the prophet of harmony and renunciation, and his illustrious disciple, are known for being open to all paths to freedom.

Along with freedom, strength was the *sine qua non* of religion according to Vivekananda: ‘strength is life, weakness is death’ (2.3). Religion should not be a weakening, binding, or frightening force. He exhorted: ‘Mystery mongering and superstition are always signs of weakness. These are always signs of degradation and of death. Therefore beware of them; be strong, and stand on your own feet’ (3.279).

‘And here is the test of truth—anything that makes you weak physically, intellectually, and spiritually, reject as poison; there is no life in it, it cannot be true’ (3.224–5). Religion is not weakening mysticism or lifeless mockery.

To Vivekananda religion was not sombre and binding but exuberant and liberating. This view is ascribed to by some other thinkers too: ‘The Nazis used to shout “*Gott mit uns*” (“God is with us”), and were full of pagan religiosity. Once atheism becomes a state religion, as in the Soviet Union, there is no longer any difference between



a believer and an atheist. Either of them become fundamentalists, extremists. ... It isn't true that religion is the opiate of the masses, as Marx claimed. Opium would have neutralized the masses, anaesthetised them, put them to sleep. Actually, religion stirs up the crowds: it is the cocaine of the masses.<sup>5</sup> This 'cocaine' impels one to do things, good or evil. As Vivekananda said:

Though there is nothing that has brought to man more blessings than religion, yet at the same time, there is nothing that has brought more horror than religion. Nothing has made more for peace and love than religion; nothing has engendered fiercer hatred than religion. Nothing has made the brotherhood of man more tangible than religion; nothing has bred more bitter enmity between man and man than religion. Nothing has built more charitable institutions, more hospitals for men, and even for animals, than religion; nothing has deluged the world with more blood than religion.<sup>6</sup>

Though religion has shed a lot of blood, it is also the lifeblood of many cultures, particularly in India: 'In India, religious life forms the centre, the keynote of the whole music of national life' (3.220). Vivekananda wanted a reshaping of religion, not its destruction, keeping it at the centre of all growth.

### **Why Do Non-believers Differ?**

To understand non-believers, we need to examine the thought of some such thinkers, both past and present. During the course of this analysis, it will become evident that these thinkers base their findings on models of religion other than Vedanta, or even Buddhism. Vivekananda also had the same objections against the extant religions and redefined religion taking it closer to Vedanta.

Bertrand Russell was probably one of the most scientific non-believers of all time. He

believed that the very system of belief was unwarranted. According to him, if there was a truth in a statement, it had to be accepted. If there was no truth in a particular statement, it had to be rejected. Belief by itself had no meaning. Russell wove his argument around a wonderful illustration now famous as 'Russell's Teapot':

Many orthodox people speak as though it were the business of sceptics to disprove received dogmas rather than of dogmatists to prove them. This is, of course, a mistake. If I were to suggest that between the Earth and Mars there is a china teapot revolving about the sun in an elliptical orbit, nobody would be able to disprove my assertion provided I were careful to add that the teapot is too small to be revealed even by our most powerful telescopes. But if I were to go on to say that, since my assertion cannot be disproved, it is intolerable presumption on the part of human reason to doubt it, I should rightly be thought to be talking nonsense. If, however, the existence of such a teapot were affirmed in ancient books, taught as the sacred truth every Sunday, and instilled into the minds of children at school, hesitation to believe in its existence would become a mark of eccentricity and entitle the doubter to the attentions of the psychiatrist in an enlightened age or of the Inquisitor in an earlier time.<sup>7</sup>

The religion taught by Vivekananda can be practised and its truth found by anyone who does rational experiments in spirituality, much like observations through a telescope. Vivekananda's religion does not require catechism!

Russell's position has since become the classical stand of non-believers, both agnostics and atheists. While Russell was an agnostic, thinkers such as the noted evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins are pronounced atheists. It is interesting to note that almost all of the non-believers have not considered Vedanta, eloquently preached by Vivekananda, as a thought system. Either they

were unaware of it, as in most cases, or had conveniently ignored it, as in the case of Indian non-believers. We understand this if we look at the reasons for non-belief given by Bertrand Russell or others. Recently, Richard Dawkins unfolded his arguments against religion:

The natural temptation is to attribute the appearance of design to actual design itself. ... The temptation is a false one, because the designer hypothesis immediately raises the larger problem of who designed the designer. The whole problem we started out with was the problem of explaining statistical improbability. It is obviously no solution to postulate something even more improbable. We need a 'crane', not a 'skyhook', for only a crane can do the business of working up gradually and plausibly from simplicity to otherwise improbable complexity. The most ingenious and powerful crane so far discovered is Darwinian evolution by natural selection. Darwin and his successors have shown how living creatures, with their spectacular statistical improbability and appearance of design, have evolved by slow, gradual degrees from simple beginnings. We can now safely say that the illusion of design in living creatures is just that—an illusion (188).

Dawkins bases his reasoning on the arguments for God found in Semitic religions, especially Christianity. He does not consider the cosmological model of Vedanta. Had he taken into account Vedantic understanding, he would have immediately understood that Vedanta has a better concept of the 'illusion' he talks of. Also, there is no designer in Vedanta, and the cyclical evolution and involution are very scientifically explained, more cogently than the Darwinian model. Vedanta is the best 'crane' here. How could Dawkins miss that? But he is not alone. Almost all non-believers ignore Vedanta. It is as though they have developed a 'blind spot' to Vedanta. While the task of understanding Eastern

religious traditions may be stupendous, that definitely cannot be an excuse for overlooking them. Explaining the apathy of media persons towards religion, a scholar writes: 'Ignoring religion has also undercut the coverage of some Iraqi politicians. In the aftermath of the Iraq War, journalists and diplomats often reinforced each other's preconceived notions and consistently misread the political scene.'<sup>8</sup> Religious complexity compounds the effects of reportorial secularism: American religion is extremely diverse, making sweeping generalizations problematic. The great variety of faith traditions, the internal divisions within each, and other nuances of religions itself make good reporting difficult. Thus, reporters are often at a loss even to identify a target' (88).

Ignorance of Vedanta makes non-believing thinkers reinvent the wheel and suppose that they have arrived at an understanding of a workable religion sans conflict and write the 'Good Book.'<sup>9</sup> The study of Vedanta would have saved these thinkers all the trouble, besides they would have been instrumental in taking Vedanta to a larger audience. All the reasoning against religion given by these non-believing thinkers is the very reason one should study Vedanta, as Vedanta does not have any of these shortcomings. For instance, Vedanta leads its adherents on a path of scientific and steady unfolding of one's personality without any rigidity. Alain de Botton, obviously not acquainted with Vedanta says: 'Religions have



been wise enough to establish elaborate calendars and schedules which lay claim to the lengths as well as depths of their followers' lives, letting no month, day or hour escape without administration of a precisely calibrated dose of ideas. In the detailed way in which they tell the faithful to read, think, sing and do at almost every moment, religious agendas seem at once sublimely obsessive and calmingly thorough. ... How free secular society leaves us by contrast. It expects that we will spontaneously find our way to the ideas that matter to us and gives us weekends off for consumption and recreation. Like science, it privileges discovery.'<sup>10</sup>

Alain de Botton is unaware, though not so blissfully, that Vedanta leads one to precisely such spontaneous 'discovery'. There is no regimen or drill in Vedanta, and it is this freedom from the 'rut of regularity'<sup>11</sup> that Vivekananda preached. One wonders whether these scholars do not really know of Vedanta or are consciously ignoring it.

Another example of this unexplained studied ignorance is the analysis of a philosopher who tells about, 'something central to my atheism: it is neither a conscious rejection of belief in God, nor a rejection of the possibility or desirability of a form of transcendence or rapture that takes me outside of myself or beyond myself. It is merely the absence of God on my imaginative landscape as a possible source of such things. God, for me, as perhaps for [Thomas]

Hobbes, is invisible in a very particular sense. God plays no role in my imaginative, reflective, or even emotional understanding of an engagement with the world around me.'<sup>12</sup> Considering that the author here talks of God in the limited sense of a God with form, or a theistic God, it is astonishingly ignorant for a responsible philosopher to jump to such sweeping conclusions without having studied Vedanta. Vedanta as preached by Vivekananda directs a person to study oneself and make choices in life. However, rationalists who have not taken time to study Vivekananda, claim that all religions are dogmatic: 'So, in the end, my central policy recommendation is that we gently, firmly educate the people of the world, so that they can make truly informed choices about their lives. Ignorance is nothing shameful; imposing ignorance is shameful.'<sup>13</sup> A little study of Vivekananda would have shown this philosopher that not all religious thought is 'shameful'.

Towed by Western thinkers, some Indian scholars have taken to the academic fad of dismissing all Indian thought, especially ancient thought. Continuing in the line of a breed of scholars who have taken upon themselves to shout down anything having its source in a Sanskrit text, some thinkers like Meera Nanda believe intelligence and religion do not go together. According to her, intelligent people should not profess any religious affiliation. Further, she believes that all intellectual tradition has its roots in the West, particularly in Marxism. That the East has much more analytical traditions like Nyaya is a fact she has completely ignored. She writes annoyingly:

What passes as 'the left' in India today includes well-known personalities and social groups that I call 'reactionary modernists'. These groups are mostly associated with neo-Gandhian communitarians, who share the postmodernist and postcolonial suspicion of reason and the

Enlightenment, but *not* the postmodernist critique of existentialism. Thus, while they accept the postmodernist idea of cultural embeddedness of all ways of knowing (which reduces modern science to a mere ‘ethnoscience’ of the West), their view of ‘Indian mode’ of knowing and relating is essentially a Hindu, non-dualist mode, and their view of Indian community is an idealized dharmic, wholist community. (Can they be called ‘contingent postmodernists’ or ‘strategic postmodernists’?). I call these intellectuals, including internationally acclaimed stars like Ashis Nandy, Vandana Shiva, Partha Chatterjee, Gayatri Spivak (in parts), Gyan Prakash, Dipesh Chakravarty, Veena Das, Claude Alvares and their numerous fellow travellers and followers, reactionary modernists because they seek to model their alternative modernities on the ‘innocent’, ‘genuinely archaic’ and supposedly subaltern modes of knowing and living, completely ignoring the fact that these same local knowledges are, more often than not, patently irrational, obscurantist and downright oppressive to the same subaltern on whose behalf these intellectuals claim to speak. Their *de facto* advocacy of Hindu tradition notwithstanding, these intellectuals retain an aura of progressive left politics because of their association with the classic left causes (anti-imperialism, multi-culturalism, feminism and environmentalism), although in my opinion, they are actually the bridge between the nationalist elements of the anti-capitalist left and the full-blown, fascist religious right.<sup>14</sup>

Meera Nanda’s criticism is at once, naive, overarching, reductionist, and dogmatic. She needs to understand that one can be intelligent and yet religious if one finds a religion that answers to reason as do many thoughts of the Far East. Enlightenment or intelligence is not the sole possession of the ‘left’. One can study postmodernism, Marxism, and all other ‘isms’ and yet have an independent understanding of things. ‘Cultural embeddedness’ is not the copyright of ‘postmodernism’. A

rational critique is also not limited to the post-modern ambit. And, to say that anti-imperialism, multi-culturalism, feminism, and environmentalism are solely connected to Marxism or leftist thought, is definitely taking things too far.

Many Indian scholars like her are aware of Vedanta and Vivekananda but are adamantly stubborn to open up to newer vistas of knowledge of mainstream science, which they claim to represent. She says: ‘Like other reactionary modernists before them, neo-Hindu philosophers seem to accept the challenge of the Enlightenment. ... But, and here is the rub, they define the non-sensory, intuitive or mystical experience, the so-called “pure reason”, to be actually referring to real, causal entities and/or energies, which can be directly “seen”, or “heard” by altering your consciousness through yoga: mystical insight is interpreted as an empirical experience of natural order’ (157). Of course, true to her nature, here too Nanda betrays an adamant ignorance regarding mathematical extrapolations of science based on the limited empirical evidence of cosmological phenomena or the discipline of altering human neural networks called neuroplasticity. This superstitious stubbornness is what Vivekananda was up against:

In modern times, if a man quotes a Moses or a Buddha or a Christ, he is laughed at; but let him give the name of a Huxley, a Tyndall, or a Darwin, and it is swallowed without salt. ‘Huxley has said it’, that is enough for many. We are free from superstitions indeed! That was a religious superstition, and this a scientific superstition; only, in and through that superstition came life-giving ideas of spirituality; in and through this modern superstition come lust and greed. That superstition was worship of God, and this superstition is worship of filthy lucre, of fame or power. That is the difference.<sup>15</sup>

Vivekananda’s religion, which is essentially a rereading of Vedanta, is not based on any text,



'RISE OF CONSCIENCE', BY SURAJIT MISTRY  
WATERCOLOUR (WASH)

personality, dogma, or doctrine. It does not even stress a rigid set of practices. It has no definite pattern, symbology, mythology, or ritual. The centre of this religion is the living being and its reason. Equipped with such reason, the living being is asked to embark upon the quest to find the truth, the truth at all levels. This is not against science but only true to the spirit of scientific enquiry.

Vivekananda was fed up with weakening theories and practices of the extant religions, which soaked up all enthusiasm and energy of its followers leaving them as inert as a mass of

jellyfish. To him the old religions had become a burden and the new religion, a necessity. The new religion was his perspective on Vedanta. He said: 'The old religions said that he was an atheist who did not believe in God. The new religion says that he is an atheist who does not believe in himself' (2,301).

### ***Religion: Public and Private***

Vivekananda highlighted both the public and the private aspects of religion. On the societal level, he wanted India to hold on to religion as the basis of all its development: 'Whether you




believe in spirituality or not, for the sake of the national life, you have to get a hold on spirituality and keep to it' (3.153–4).

While there is lot of disagreement on the social function of religion, its private or individual function is accepted by most thinkers. Vivekananda stressed the importance of experiencing religion: 'Religion is realisation; not talk, nor doctrine, nor theories, however beautiful they may be. It is being and becoming, not hearing or acknowledging; it is the whole soul becoming changed into what it believes. That is religion' (2.396). On similar lines, some sociologists have stressed the need for religion to develop as an avenue for seeking peace by the individual. They affirm the need for a private space even within organized institutions for the individual to express one's religion:

In modern, functionally differentiated societies, religious experiences of any sort have been assumed to be confined either to a recognized religious institution or to the privacy of one's own ecstasy. Religious institutions have become the sole social repository of mystery, according to this view, keeping it safely domesticated and out of public view. I would argue, however, that this is a very incomplete inventory of the presence of religion in society. *If we take structured-yet-improvised episodes of social interaction as our basis and recognize the necessary intersectionality of all such episodes, there is no a priori reason to assume that religious episodes will only happen in religious institutions or in private seclusion.* If it is true that all social contexts contain multiple narratives, that schemas from one social arena can be transposed onto another, then it must be true that under certain conditions religious narratives may appear in settings outside officially religious bounds. No matter what the presumed functional arena, narratives of transcendence might intervene.<sup>16</sup>

In sum, the goal of a human being, according

to Swami Vivekananda, is to arrive at a doubt-free understanding of its personality, and religion is this metamorphosis of the chrysalis into the butterfly, of the weak into the strong, of the confused into the enlightened. This is the core of religion; all other readings are mere veneers of this kernel. All unrest caused in the name of religion will be quieted if we focus on the kernel and let each individual have the freedom to adorn this kernel with a patina of one's own liking. 

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