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Religion and Morality in Vivekananda's Thought

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ABSTRACT

Is Vivekananda's Religion and its relation to the morality are significant? Is Religion a mere traditional concept or is it relevant today in the midst of materialistic world? Vivekananda's Religion is a universal experience of transcendent reality where Religion has no place for superstition and dogmatism. It takes the practical aspects of man. Ethical life is the life of activity which requires an ideal for every individual march forward to achieve this goal. Religion provides that universal ideal and this is able to justify ethics. Vivekananda says that Religion is intimately connected with morality. Though it is not possible to have Religion without morality, yet Religion is something more than morality. So Religion must have an ethical foundation. Ethics is not the end but the means to the end. The end is the state of Divine life, which is called true Religion. There are two moral principles of unselfishness and strength for moral development which aims at achieving the ideal of basic oneness of humanity in God. These two moral principles urge man to serve the other people. If a man realizes the oneness in him he feels the presence of God in him. So to serve man is to serve God. To serve man is to remove the miseries of his fellow man, which is much more relevant today in the materialistic world. He insisted on the power of every individual. When an individual change, the entire society will be changed. Morality is the worship of impersonal God. It cannot be developed from the fear of a personal God. Here Vivekananda's view is different from the traditional one, because love can not come through fear. Its basis is freedom. Self-abnegation is necessary; it is the centre point of moral teaching. Through this self-abnegation a man goes beyond moral struggle. He then sees the same Divinity is being manifested in every existence. This is the self-realization of man. There is fourfold path to the perfection of own self. According to Vivekananda, they are- Jnana Yoga (The way of Knowledge), Bhakti Yoga (The way of Devotion), Karma Yoga (The way of Action), and Raja Yoga (The way of Psychology).

Key words: Religion, Morality, Ethical principles, Human spirit, Yoga, Divinity.

Introduction:

Swami Vivekananda's overall aim was to rejuvenate humanity all over the world, as much in East as in West through the life giving principles of Religion contained in the Vedanta. Religion without morality is an abstract idea. Religion is always mixed up with the principles of morality. In this paper I tried to show Vivekananda's view of Religion and its relation to the morality. Is it mere the interpretation of traditional concept of religion or not? Is it relevant today in the midst of materialistic out look of this world?

The Religion of Man

Vivekananda's new interpretation of Vedanta which is known as 'practical Vedanta' gives us a new principle of growth. He says that it is the nature of man to think and that is why he is different from animal. Man as a thinking being he is not bound to surrender himself to the authority. Thus emphasis on reason alone and not on any authority constitutes the Vedantic teaching, the basis of ethics of such a system. The new understanding of Vivekananda's Religion is that it is a universal experience of transcendent reality which frees religion from the hold of superstitions, dogmatism, priest craft etc. This nature of religion makes Vivekananda's religion a universal appeal. According to him, a man is absolutely free to choose his religion. In the same tone Bertrand Russell also says that, "a man's religion could not be determined for him by authority but must be left to the free choice of each individual"¹

In every religion there is a struggle towards freedom. If a man is not free to do his action he will not be considered as a moral agent. Freedom is the groundwork of morality. Vivekananda laid greater emphasis on individual freedom and will power. No external authority or institution can be superior to man's inner spiritual power. It is the inexhaustible source of courage and creativity. But how can one achieve this stage? Is there any principle through which we can achieve our goal of life, Of course, it is the method of ethics in Vivekananda's thought. Now we proceed forward for ethical principles.

The sources of Ethical Principles in Vivekananda's Thought

Vivekananda insisted on the practical aspects of Vedanta and he derives the ethical principles from the Vedas and Upanishads. As Amiya P. Sen remarks "the ethical positions of Swami Vivekananda were more conditioned by his loyalties to Vedanta, rather than his Vedanta being modified by ethical concerns"². According to Vivekananda the first principle of ethics is renunciation unselfishness which is derived from Vedanta. Vedanta teaches us to struggle for achieving higher ideals i.e., to seek a deeper expression of the infinite. It takes up the individual but its relations are to the infinite and it takes up society also-because society is made up of individuals grouped together and as it applies to the individual and his eternal relations, it must necessarily apply to the whole of society. Thus we see that there is the necessity of spiritual religion for mankind. That is why religion is intimately connected with morality in Vivekananda's thought.

¹ Bertrand Russell, *Principles of Social Reconstruction*, Umwin Hyman Ltd.1916,p-22.

² Amiya P.Sen, *The Indispensable Vivekananda*, Pauls Press, New Delhi, 2008 ,p-48.

There can be no ethical ideal without the struggle towards the infinite. Utilitarian standard 'the greatest happiness for the greatest number' can not explain the ethical relations of man. If happiness is the goal of mankind, why should I not make myself and others unhappy? What prevents me? Why should we do good? We must have an ideal. Ethics itself is not the end in itself but the means or path to the end. If the end or ideal is not there why should we be ethical? Here "Religion provides that universal ideal and thus is able to justify ethics. Moreover a religious sense which somehow bases itself on an awareness of unity of everything makes ethical practice both convenient and easy".³ Now we shall concentrate our view on the relation between Morality and Religion.

The relation between Morality and Religion

According to Vivekananda the religion is intimately connected with morality. Though it is not possible to have Religion without morality yet Religion is something more than morality. So Religion must have an ethical foundation. Like Vedanta Philosophy Vivekananda also says that every soul has behind it the infinite power that it tries to manifest. But this process of self manifestation is delayed by the form of selfishness and vices. Ethical life removes this obstacles but it is not Religion in itself. As soon as the obstacles are removed divinity manifest itself gradually. This state of divine life is called true Religion. Vivekananda insisted on the two moral principles –unselfishness and strength in the field of moral development. The idea of unselfishness is based on the idea of the basic oneness of humanity in God.

Vivekananda believes that the human soul is the dwelling place of God. His philosophy is that God must not be searched out from anywhere but He must be searched out from among the people. "The only God to worship is the human soul in the human body. Of course, all animals are temples too, but man is the highest, the Taj Mahal of Temples. If I can not worship in that, no other temple will be of any advantage".⁴ This is the essence of Religion according to Vivekananda. He further explained that "Religion is the manifestation of the Divinity already in man".⁵ So man's duty is to remove miseries of his fellowmen by all means and the duty of the Government in a democratic set-up is to ensure that the socio-economic condition of the masses is bettered, social evils are removed, and social security is provided to all and to bring the poorer section of the society above the poverty line.

So, Vivekananda wanted that the duty of man is to make material development and then he should proceed for his spiritual development by the process of purification of mind and body which is dependent upon selfish and welfare activities. Thus he remarked, "After so much austerity I have understood this as the real truth –God is present in every Jiva, there is no other God besides that 'who serves Jiva, serves God indeed'.⁶

Morality is a relative term. Vivekananda puts the question that 'Is there anything like absolute morality in this world?' He replies that such idea is superstition. We have no right to judge everyman in every age by

³ B.K.Lal, *Cotemporary Indian Philosophy*, Motilal Banarasidas, Delhi, 2005, p-42.

⁴ *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Kolkata, Advaita Ashram, 6th Impression, 2008, Vol-3, p-281

⁵ Paramatmananda, Swami, *Swami Vivekananda and His Advice to Students*, Kolkata, Ramkrishna Vedanta Math, August 2002, p-28.

⁶ *Ibid*, p-29

the same standard. The great misfortune that may fall upon the world if all mankind recognize and accept one religion, one universal form of worship, one standard of morality. Variety leads to progress while unity is the death knell of everything. Thus mere unity without variety will certainly be the death blow to all religious and spiritual progress. Vivekananda observes that our Upanishads provide us the basis of morality for which the world is striving. The teaching of oneness of existence is the basis of all morality. All the confusing state of affairs i.e., the feeling of hatred, jealousy, and unmanliness is rooted in our doctrinal and authoritative teaching of oneness of existence.

According to Vivekananda variation is the sign of life. It is impossible to aim for absolute sameness. Wherever there is life, difference and distinctions are inevitable. The aim of ethics is to bring unity amidst diversity.

Religion is realization

Religion is higher than the ethical stage. So it is not mere intellectual cognition. It can not be understood in the ordinary sense of the world. It is not mere groping in darkness but intense realization. Religion is more real than this world of sense. Religion appears to be non-essential only to those to whom everything seems to be transitory. The man of the sense-world can not apprehend the real nature of religion. Religion is the matter of noumenal world. The realm of the world of God is beyond the tendencies of the senses.

According to Vivekananda “morality is not the goal of man but the means through which this freedom is attained. Through the process of yoga says Vedanta we can realize this divinity from within. Hence morality and ethics will all range themselves in their proper places”⁷

Morality is the worship of impersonal God rather than personal one. It can not be developed from the fear of a personal God. Because love can not come through fear. Its basis is freedom. When we really begin to love this world, then only we realize the meaning of brotherhood or mankind. Thus the soul in essence is the same in all forms. The unity of soul is the sole substance of Humanity and is the ground of ethics and morality. We are all one in this sense of unification which implies that to hurt one’s brother is to hurt oneself. Vivekananda says “all religion is to be based on morality and personal purity is to be counted superior to Dharma. In this connection it ought to be known that Achara means purity inside and outside”⁸ Through purity we can embrace all. We can love all beings. We can realize the truth of existence. This realization of unity of all existence is our goal and can be achieved through purity of heart. No force can be applied to this process. By the will power we must make them spiritual instead of animal. Therefore, it is clear that chastity is the corner stone of all morality and religions.

According to Vivekananda man is made up of three qualities; brutal, human and godly. Virtues tend to increase the divinity in us. Vice increase the brutality in us. We must destroy the brutal nature and nourish the godly activities, i.e, the stage of *Sachchidananda* (Pure bliss).

⁷ *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Kolkata, Advaita Ashram, 6th Impression, 2008, Vol-5, p-282

⁸ *Ibid*, Vol-3, p-360

Ethical life is the means to realize the nature of God. It comes from within the heart of man. Vivekananda cites the very life of Buddha as an example of highest moral ideals. His life is the combination of the greatest heart with the highest intellectuality. Self-abnegation is the centre of all morality. The more the real self manifests, the apparent self (Present self) passes away. It is the true self-abnegation. This is the basis, the center point of moral teachings.

Thus, when a man achieves this stage of abnegation, he goes beyond moral struggle. He then sees the same divinity is being manifested in every existence. Such a man is said to be the living God. It is the life of fearlessness and oneness with the divinity.

The virtuous life implies culminates in fearlessness and strength. Strength is the sovereign virtue, that everyman needs. It is not possible to practice any virtue without strength. Hence, Vivekananda remarks that strength is goodness, the basic foundation for the practice of other virtues. He has given importance to physical strength and moral strength. Real strength comes from the realization of the true self of man. The strong faith in divinity of the self is enough to give strength. These are the principles of ethics found in Vedanta, which can be carried out in every sphere of life. These principles of Vedanta for the ideal of religion help mankind to be ready and be able to help or to serve others.

Thus Vedanta teaches us to know God that is present in every being and is felt as more real than the senses. To see God and feel consciously his presence in every being is the most practical religion. Without this moral basis religion becomes short of spirituality. When Vivekananda has talked of religion he used the beautiful expression to characterize his content. He calls it man-making religion. He asserts that Vedanta has a life giving message to one and all.

This view of Vivekananda is similar to Radhakrishnan. Radhakrishnan observes that human spirit is the part of the eternal spirit. A man is not satisfied with his finite nature. He always seeks the path to unite himself with the eternal. It is not possible to manifest the infinite through the finite. When man learns to give up this manifestation, renunciation starts. This renunciation, this giving up is the background of ethics. "It is true that this is the only path to Religion. Renounce and give up...."⁹ Renunciation stands for religious action. Religious action does not mean only performances of religious rites. It means doing things for the perfection of one's own self and for others.

Paths to Religion

The perfection of own self is possible through the various paths, i.e., by the path of Yoga. The word yoga normally associated with two kinds of meaning. It may be union or it may stand for a kind of a discipline. Vivekananda incorporates both these meanings in his sense of the word yoga. Thus, the path leading to the realization is the path of Discipline and Union. Vivekananda talks of a fourfold path to salvation. They are: Jnana Yoga (The way of Knowledge), Bhakti Yoga (The way of Devotion), Karma Yoga (The way of Action), and Raja Yoga (The way of Psychology).

⁹ *Ibid*, Vol-2, p-100

i) **Jnana Yoga**: - The way of knowledge is based on the realization of the bondage of every human, which is due to their ignorance. Ignorance, according to Vivekananda, is the ignorance of the real nature of things and the real nature of the human Spirit, ignorance is the inability to distinguish between the real and the unreal. Therefore, knowledge must be based on the awareness of the distinction between the real and the unreal. Self-knowledge, knowledge of the Brahman, knowledge of the unity of everything- all these are different names of the discriminatory knowledge.

The practice of concentration on the nature of the truth is necessary. It is the process of controlling the body, the mind and the senses. After this concentration, the entire energy of the body can be concentrated in the direction of knowledge. As soon as the concentration will become intenser, the individual may attain the stage of Samadhi where all distinctions will vanish and he will have a realization of oneness, of perfect unity. This is the aim of Jnana Marga.

ii) **Bhakti Yoga**: - This Bhakti Marga is the way of knowing God through intensity of feeling. According to Vivekananda that strong emotions have the capacity to awaken and activate the potential divine power of man. Ordinary emotion or love can be converted into Divine love or Supreme Devotion, this is the Bhakti Yoga. This Bhakti Yoga, Vivekananda says, is the way of pure love in which the object of love or devotion is not the finite or the limited, but the Supreme. This love will be universal love, love for all, because this will be based on the realization of oneness of everything.

The Bhakti Yoga progresses through different stages. The first step is the idol worship because the ordinary man is not able to concentrate on the subtle expression of God. So he started his prayer through external worship. The second step is to prayer and repetition of God's name, chanting of religious hymns. In the third stage the silent meditation starts in the place of prayer. Then in the final stage the distinction between a devotee and God vanishes, the devotee becomes almost one with the supreme. This is a kind of inner realization, the vision of essential oneness of everything.

iii) **Karma Yoga**: Vivekananda says, "Karma Yogais a system of ethics and religion intended to attain freedom through unselfishness and by good works. The Karma -yogi need not believe in any doctrine whatsoever. He may not ask what his soul is, nor think of any metaphysical speculation. He has got his own special aim of realizing selflessness, and he has to work it out himself."¹⁰

Vivekananda's Karma Yoga does not recommend asceticism or a flying away from the world. Man has to remain in the world, in the midst of evil and good, Pain and suffering. And he has to work-has to keep on working as well as he can. He also asserts that the Karma Yogi has to work for unselfishness, which means that his work has to be non-attached. This message of Vivekananda has a present relevance for the modern Karma-Yogi. A man should do his work selflessly and for the welfare of others. His action will be regarded as Niskama Karma of Bhagavatgita. A continuous doing of selfless work or constant practice of non-attachment in all actions of life enables a man to rise above his self and to have a feeling of oneness with everything. This is the objectives of Karma-Yoga.

¹⁰ Swami Vivekananda, *Karma Yoga*, Advaita Ashram, Mayabavati, Almora, 1930, pp-131-132

iv) **Raja Yoga:** The Raja Yoga is the way to the realization of immortality by controlling the mind and the body. It is controlling the mind and the body by subjecting them to certain physical and mental disciplines. It is the most direct and the quickest method of attaining salvation. That is why it is called as Raja Yoga, the king of all yogas. Raja Yoga requires certain Yogic exercise of the psycho-physical nature which will be under complete control of the individual. So this method is not for the weak as it requires an immense faith in oneself and also physical and mental strength. It gradually enables the yogi to acquire certain excellences or be able to practice complete concentration leading to the realization of unity with the Divine.

These four ways of self-realization are not divided in water-tight compartments. Vivekananda gives perfect liberty to the individual for choosing and pursuing the course that he likes best. Vivekananda asserts that realization requires a very radical regeneration of the individual; he must be transformed morally, religiously and spiritually. Therefore whatever be the way, the entire energy of the soul has to be put into it.

Conclusion

In Vivekananda's thought we find that Morality and Religion can support each other on a broad based principles. Morality harnessed a man to attain the stage of Religion. Both Religion and Morality can overcome every conflict within its domain and can have the same starting point of multiplicity. In Religion it is the realization of oneness and in Morality it is goodness that is possible because of this Oneness. There is a state beyond good and evil and that is our state of Divinity. It is higher than good. Good is only lesser differentiation than evil. Thus Religion comes when the actual realization of our soul begins. With the dawn of religion, morality begins. We shall be truly moral only when have realized religion. So Religion is the foundation of Ethics.

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