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Religion and *Dharma*: The teachings of Swami Vivekananda

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Indian has gone ruined in the past centuries. We have lost our individuality. India is passing through a transitional age between feudal society and modern industrial society. This gap is evident in our attitude to individual, society, and nation. When our national aim must therefore be to get over this transitional period as quickly as possible, reducing the agony which is inevitable in this period; when our aim must be to create India as a modern, powerful, industrial State, we are dragging the religion, caste, sects, communities, ignoring the individual, the masses, the society and nation as a whole. The result is crime, terrorism, poverty, cruelty, discrimination, exploitation and dislocation. In order to get over this transitional period as quickly as possible, reducing the agony which is inevitable in this period, a powerful cultural struggle, that is, a struggle in the realm of ideas needs to be waged. This cultural struggle must be waged by combating feudal backward ideas caused by narrow approach to religion, caste, sects, communities, and replacing them with modern scientific ideas among the masses. Our nineteenth century social thinkers visualised the social degeneration, seeing our inadequate education system, the pitiable condition of the masses, the narrow lanes of religion, the less privileged location of women, and tried to sensitise the society. Their responses to society and nation as relevant as they were in their own days. The present paper aims at reflecting upon the thinking of Swami Vivekananda how he formulated his ideas of religion to create a better society, and how his ideas are relevant in the contemporary sense.

Swami Vivekananda raises some very obstinate questions. He questions the religion which cannot reduce the misery of the poor. "Religion has degraded in the past centuries. Our religion fails to reduce the misery of poor. How will they grant salvation who cannot feed a hungry mouth with a crumb of bread? How will those who become impure at the mere breath of others purify others?" (6.320)

Vivekananda also explores that the religion has reduced to merely 'Don't-touchism'. He calls this kind of religion as 'devil's dance'.

The whole truth about religion and spiritual practices is that only their religion is pure, rest is impure. It is beastly, demoniac and hellish religion. Every religion has a book. People worship a man as the lord of the world. Every religion has incarnations- Hindus, Christians, Buddhists, Mohammadens, Jews. Their veneration revolves around some person. Every religion believes that it is alone the truth. All religions are tremendously fanatic. The more a sect hates other sects, the greater is its success and the more people it draws into its fold. People only ask for material things. "In their prayer spirit is not separated from matter...the whole thing is becoming a sham. And the years are rolling on and nothing spiritual is attained...You degrade religion to your low level and seek matter in the name of spirit." (8, 119) He defines religion as "the manifestation of the natural strength that is in man." (8,185)

The present religion has entered into a 'cooking-pot'. This religion is neither the path of knowledge nor the path of reason. The degeneration of the world is due to the lower classes being despised by the upper classes. The lower classes of India have much greater capacity for work and self-reliance than the upper classes. Vivekananda argues

They are the backbone of the nation in all countries. If these lower classes stop work, from where will you get your food and clothing? If the sweepers of Calcutta stop work a day, it creates a panic. And if they strike for three days, the whole town will be depopulated by the outbreak of epidemics. If the labourers stop work, your supply of food and clothes also stops. And you regard them as low-class people and vaunt your own culture! (7,148)

Swami Vivekananda's plan is to reach the masses of India. He believes in spreading religion from door to door. He addresses his countrymen:

Go from door to door amongst the poor and the lower classes and teach them religion...No good will come of sitting idle and having princely dishes, and saying, 'Ramakrishna, O Lord!'-unless you can do some good to the poor. Go to other villages from time to time, and teach the people the arts of life as well as religion...You have read-*matradevo bhava, pitradevo bhava*-Look upon your mother as God, look upon your father as God- but I say *daridradevo bhava, murkhadevo bhava*-The poor, the illiterate, the ignorant, the afflicted, let these be your God. Know that service to these alone is the highest religion. (6.288)

Vivekananda criticizes that men have turned the women into mere manufacturing machines by binding them by hard rules. Although change can be seen gradually, but still women are being taught to be subdued. And if one does not raise the women, who are the living embodiment of the Divine Mother, a nation cannot rise. In the Vedic and Upanishadic age, women had taken the places of Rishis through their skill in discussing about Brahman. *Gargi, Maitreyi* and other ladies of revered memory were entitled to spiritual knowledge. They were competent for knowledge and devotion. But, in the contemporary world

of degradation, women are deprived of their rights. Indians have become hypocrites and do not respect women in the name of religion. A girl of eight years old is married to a man of thirty years, and the parents are jubilant about it. And if there is a protest against it, then the plea is put forward, 'Our religion is being overturned.' What kind of religion is this which does not think that how girls can become mothers without attaining puberty? It is the devilish thinking which has changed the religion. *Grihya-Sutras* should be read in which the marriageable age of the girl is given. It is explicitly expressed there that the girls must be married before attaining puberty.

Swamiji believes that country and that nation which do not respect women have never become great, nor will ever be in future. "The principal reason why your race has so much degenerated is that you have no respect for these images of living images of Shakti....there is no hope of rise for that family or country where there is no estimation of women, where they live in sadness. For this reason, they have to be raised first; and an ideal Math has to be started for them." (7,21)

Religion means to be pure and unselfish. Addressing the youth of the country, Vivekananda says that the secret of religion lies not in theories but in practice. To be good and to do good-that is the whole of religion. "Not he that crieth 'Lord', 'Lord', but he that doeth the will of the Father." (6.245) Don't- touchism is a form of mental disease. We have to follow the teaching of '*atmavat sarvbhuteshu*'- Looking upon all the beings as your own self'. Doing good to others is the one great universal religion. There is no greater *dharma* than the service of living beings. If this *dharma* can be practised in the real spirit, then "*muktih karfalyate*"- Liberations comes as fruit on the very palm of one's hand". (6.502)

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