

Vivekananda: A Harbinger of Harmony

[Presidential Address at Belur Math on 28 January 2014.
Vivekananda's 150th Birth Anniversary
International Seminar]

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May the Lord of the universe, the remover of evil, whom the devotees of Shiva worship as Shiva, the Vedantists as Brahman, the Buddhists as Buddha [and we may add, the Christians as the Father in heaven, the Jews as Jehovah, the Muslims as Allah], the followers of Nyaya (logic) as the Divine Agent, the Jains as Arhat, the followers of Mimamsa (ritualists) as Karma -- grant us peace, bliss and harmony.

On behalf of the Ramakrishna Order, I heartily welcome the distinguished representatives of different religions who have come to Belur Math today to represent their respective faiths, on this auspicious occasion of Swami Vivekananda's 150th Birth Anniversary. Perhaps you have noticed that each speaker is scheduled to speak for 20 minutes. Some years ago an Episcopalian minister in America gave me this piece of advice: 'Swami, no soul can be saved after 20 minutes.' What he meant was that whatever you have to say, say it within 20 minutes.

The main focus of this international seminar is the Harmony of Religions. Swami Vivekananda was truly a harbinger of this harmony. His life was short

-- 39 years, 5 months, and 24 days -- but his message is long lasting. He himself prophesied that his message would continue for 1,500 years.

The Origin of Vivekananda's Concept of Harmony

Vivekananda's concept of harmony is rooted in four sources: the scriptures, his guru, his motherland, and his own realization.

1. The Scriptures

Vivekananda found the seeds of the harmony of religions in various Hindu scriptures, such as:

'Truth is one, sages call It by various names.' (Rig Veda)

'Whosoever comes to me, through whatsoever form, I reach him. All men are struggling through paths which in the end lead to me.' (Gita)

'As the different streams, having their sources in different places, all mingle their water in the sea, so, O Lord, the different paths which people take through different tendencies, various though they appear, crooked or straight, all lead to Thee.' (Sivamahimnah Stotram)

'Each human body is a temple of God, and each soul is nothing but God.' (Upanishad)

It is to be noted that thousands of years ago, when these messages of harmony were given, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam did not exist.

2. His Guru

Sri Ramakrishna, Vivekananda's guru, was the prophet of harmony in this age. Every one of his actions and all his teachings demonstrated the principle of harmony. For example, Ramakrishna harmonized the life of a true sannyasin with the life of a true householder. He was unique in the religious history of the world as he realized God through Hindu practices, then practised Christianity and Islam and experienced the goal of those faiths also. In so doing, he demonstrated the harmony of religions. Finally, he

declared the message of harmony for this present age when he said: *yata mat tata path* -- as many faiths, so many paths.

Vivekananda stated in his lecture 'My Master': 'I learnt from my Master that the religions of the world are not contradictory or antagonistic. They are but various phases of one eternal religion. That one eternal religion is applied to different planes of existence, is applied to the opinions of various minds and various races. There never was my religion or yours, my national religion or your national religion; there never existed many religions; there is only one. One Infinite Religion existed all through eternity and will ever exist, and this Religion is expressing itself in various countries, in various ways. Therefore we must respect all religions and we must try to accept them all as far as we can.... For years I lived with that man, but never did I hear those lips utter one word of condemnation for any sect. He had the same sympathy for all sects; he had found the harmony between them.'

3. His Motherland

During his itinerant days, Vivekananda travelled all over India, and he made some observations about people of the Hindu faith. He saw that although Hindus are diverse -- their languages, social customs, religious practices, dress, food habits, and skin colour are all different -- they are all Hindus. He also discovered the common bases of Hinduism: (a) all Hindus believe in the authority of the Vedas; (b) the concept of God may differ among the Hindus, but all believe in God; (c) all believe creation moves in a wavelike motion through eternity; (d) all believe in the immortal nature of the Atman, which is pure and perfect, beyond the body and the mind; and (e) all believe in the doctrine of karma and reincarnation.

Once, in Madras, Vivekananda said that the three main schools of Vedanta -- dualism, qualified nondualism, and nondualism -- are not contradictory but complementary. In the end, all souls merge into that One without a second. When someone remarked that nobody had ever said that before, Vivekananda replied, 'I was born for this, and it was left for me to do.'

4. Vivekananda's Realization

One day at Dakshineswar Vivekananda mocked the Vedantic experience of oneness. He said to Ramakrishna: 'How can this be? This jug is God, this cup is God, and we too are God! Nothing can be more preposterous!' At that moment Sri Ramakrishna touched him.

Vivekananda later said: 'The magic touch of the Master that day brought a wonderful change over my mind. I was stupefied to find that there was really nothing in the universe but God!' Later, in Cossipore, he attained *nirvikalpa samadhi*, the culmination of the Vedantic experience. During his itinerant days in the Himalayas, he realized that the microcosm (the internal world) and the macrocosm (the external world) are built on the same plan. The experiences of both these worlds should be in perfect harmony with Truth.

The Importance of the Parliament of Religions

The Parliament of Religions, held in Chicago in 1893, was an epoch-making, historical event in the religious history of the world. The American people brought religious leaders from all the various religions together on the same platform. This had never happened before. Although Swami Vivekananda represented Hinduism and Vedanta, he created through his talks a beautiful harmony among all the religions. This Parliament was held as part of the Columbian Exposition, in which the American people wanted to demonstrate the achievements of science and technology. It was held in commemoration of the 400th anniversary of Columbus's discovery of America.

The magnitude of that Parliament of Religions is noteworthy: It continued for seventeen days, with three sessions each, and each session averaged more than two and a half hours. There were 115 speakers from all over the world. Swamiji was so popular that he spoke six times at the Parliament. The Congress of Religions took place in a hall that combined Columbus Hall and Washington Hall, and which had a combined capacity of 7,000 people.

In spite of opposition from the leaders of various Christian denominations, including the Archbishop of Canterbury, the advisory committee adopted ten objectives for the Parliament of Religions. Some of these were: 1. To bring together in conference, for the first time in history, the leading representatives of the great Historic Religions of the world. 2. To show to people, in the most impressive way, what and how many important truths the various Religions hold and teach in common. 3. To inquire what light each Religion has afforded, or may afford, to the other Religions of the world. 4. To discover, from competent people, what light Religion has to throw on the great problems of the present age. 5. To bring the nations of the earth into a more friendly fellowship, in the hope of securing permanent international peace.

During the Parliament most of the other representatives were trying to glorify his or her own faith. However, Swamiji's concluding remark of his first speech created a wonderful atmosphere of harmony. He said: 'I fervently hope that the bell that tolled this morning in honour of this convention be the death knell of all fanaticism, of all persecutions with the sword or with the pen, and of all uncharitable feelings between persons wending their way to the same Goal.'

I sincerely believe that these objectives are as pertinent today as they were 120 years ago. When we open our newspapers in the morning, we see that there is so much unrest and violence all over the world -- often in the name of religion. I offer my humble appreciation to the organizers of this present parliament that has given us a chance to imbibe the spirit of mutual love and understanding, peace and harmony, which are badly needed in this present strife-stricken world.

Nowadays, in the main cities all over the United States and Canada and other parts of the world, you will find inter-religious councils or interfaith partnerships. This concept began after the advent of Ramakrishna and after the Parliament of Religions in 1893. Swamiji said that within seven years of Sri Ramakrishna's passing in 1886, his universal message encircled the globe.

One of our friends who has done much to build a bridge between the religious and philosophical thoughts of the East and the West is Huston Smith, who was a former president of our St. Louis Vedanta Society. We are sorry he cannot be with us today. Huston Smith once told me: 'Swami, while I was writing the chapter on Hinduism in what was to become my book, *The World's Religions*, I read and meditated on ten pages of *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* each day, and I credit those meditations for the acclaim that has greeted that chapter.'

Another friend who has also done wonderful work in this regard is Father Francis Clooney of Harvard University. He is here today and is our keynote speaker in this parliament. These two people -- Huston Smith and Father Clooney -- have done tremendous work in the United States, trying to bring Eastern thought to the West, and Western thought to the East.

On 30 December 1894 Swamiji said: 'I have a message to the West, as Buddha had a message to the East.' What was that message? That message was Vedanta. Many years later, a Jewish intellectual who had heard Vivekananda speak at the Parliament told Swami Nikhilananda, 'After hearing Swami Vivekananda, I realized that my religion was also true.' In the 1960s, Eastern religions came in waves to America, but Swamiji was the first Hindu monk to carry the message of the East to the West. Professor C.T. Jackson wrote: 'Looking back a century later, Vivekananda clearly deserves credit as the founder of American Hinduism and the pioneer teacher who paved the way for all Eastern teachers who have followed since the 1960s.'

Swamiji was a universal person and his message was universal, but he also presented his message for the East, which we find in his lectures from Colombo to Almora. In those talks he tried to awaken the self-esteem, self-confidence, and the national consciousness of India. In the West, he gave his beautiful message through his four yogas -- karma, bhakti, jnana, and raja. He reminded Westerners that they are not sinners. On 19 September 1893, Swamiji read a paper on Hinduism, in which he said: 'Ye divinities on earth -- sinners? It is a sin to call a man so; it is a standing libel on human nature.'

Vivekananda in the West

Shortly after Ramakrishna passed away, when his monastic disciples were living almost in poverty at the Baranagore monastery, Swamiji one day told his brother disciples, 'You will see that our names will be recorded in history.' Now it is a fact and his words came true.

In 1964 Carl Thomas Jackson received his Ph.D. from the University of California at Los Angeles; his thesis was titled *The Swami in America: A History of the Ramakrishna Movement in the United States, 1893-1960*. In 1988 Eleanor Stark got her Master's degree in American History and wrote a book on Swamiji, *The Gift Unopened: A New American Revolution*.

In 1976, during the United States Bicentennial Celebration, the Smithsonian Institution in Washington D.C., had an exhibit called 'Abroad in America'. There were pavilions dedicated to 26 foreigners who came to the United States and made a substantial contribution to American heritage. Swami Vivekananda was the only one from India. I saw that exhibition. It was undoubtedly a great recognition of Swamiji's contribution to the West.

Swami Vivekananda redefined religion for the Western people. He said that religion is realization. Religion is being and becoming. Religion is the manifestation of divinity already in human beings. The old religions said that one was an atheist who did not believe in God. The new religion says one is an atheist who does not believe in oneself. In this way, Swamiji brought about a revolution in the field of religion.

The United States is a new nation. The American people are lovers of new ideas; they want to know something new. They found something new in Swamiji. The United States is a grand field for Vedanta. Why? Because two things are in the blood of the American people: love of freedom and love of democracy. The presiding deity of the United States is the Statue of Liberty, which you will find in the New York harbour. Vedanta says freedom is the song of the soul. Throughout almost all of the Vedantic literature, you will find at the end, *jivanmukti* -- freedom while living. Regarding democracy, the Vedantic concept of God is a democratic concept of God. One of our Upanishads says: *Deho devalaya proktah sa jiva kevala shiva* -- Each human body

is the temple of God and each being is truly God. Each soul is potentially divine.

Interreligious Relations

How can we remove fighting, misunderstanding, mistrust, and ill feeling from organized religions? Religion is not at fault. Politicians and fanatics use religion for ulterior motives. We find the same wonderful golden rule in all religions, but very few observe that rule. Buddhism says: 'Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful.' Christianity says: 'Do for others what you want them to do for you.' Islam says: 'No one of you is a believer until he desires for his brothers that which he desires for himself.' Hinduism says: 'Whatever you consider injurious to yourself, never do to others. This is the essence of dharma.'

The problem is that we talk about religion and talk about God, but we do not practise religion. The Vishnu Purana says: 'Those who talk about God, but do not do their duties and practise religion, they are enemies of God. This is because God has to incarnate to demonstrate religion to these hypocrites.'

Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan quoted the biting words of Swift in his book *The Hindu View of Life*: 'We have enough religion to hate one another; but we have not enough religion to love one another.' Our common enemies are not religions: our enemies are atheism, agnosticism, materialism, scepticism, secularism, hedonism, and finally, apathy. Apathy and indifference towards religion are rampant today. People care more for money, enjoyment, and their bodies than they do for religion or God. This is a peculiarity of this modern age that those of us working in the field of organized religions see.

A good relationship among the various religions is vital, because if we do not learn to live together, we shall die together fighting among ourselves. Swami Nikhilananda said: 'Religions as human institutions cannot be absolutely perfect, but God is perfect. Religion is not God, but shows the way to God. As clocks should be corrected from time to time by the sun, so also religions. The corrections are made by the mystic saints who directly

commune with God, and not by the theologians, who are only the interpreters of the scriptures.'

Vivekananda visualized the religion of the future, where science and religion will meet and shake hands, poetry and philosophy will become friends, reason and faith will embrace each other, and the heart and the intellect will forget their conflicts forever.

The Religion of the Twenty-First Century

The main focus of religion in the nineteenth century was reason, and in the twentieth century it was humanism. If religion cannot do any good to human beings, what good is that religion? If anybody asks me: What type of religion will play a vital role in the twenty-first century? My answer will be 'mysticism'. Mystics commune with God through love and contemplation. They are in every religious tradition and they are a class by themselves.

In October 1992 there was a conference on Great Contemporary Mystics held in Avila, Spain. I was invited to speak on Sri Ramakrishna. I quoted that famous saying of Ramakrishna: 'All jackals in the world howl in the same way.' In other words, the mystics of different religions may speak different languages but their experience of Oneness is always the same. A medieval Indian mystic wrote: 'There may be different kinds of oil in different lamps, the wicks also may be of different kinds, but when they burn, we have the same flame and illumination.'

Nowadays some people say, 'We have read enough, we have heard many sermons, but now we want experience.' This is the popular sentiment in the West. We live in an age when creeds are shaken, dogmas are questioned, and traditions are dissolving. Don Cupitt, a famous English scholar, wrote in his book *The Sea of Faith*: 'In this 21st century, religion will not be held by the doctrines and dogmas.' People are seeking direct experience. When one experiences God, one sees unity in diversity -- God in every being and everything. One of the Upanishads says: 'When one experiences the Atman, one cannot hate anyone.' Once Rabia, a Sufi mystic, was asked, 'Do you love

God?' 'Yes,' she replied. 'Do you hate Satan?' 'No.' 'Why?' 'Because God did not keep any room for hatred in my heart.'

For this present age, Swami Vivekananda taught a religion that is constructive and not destructive, scientific and not fanatical, practical and not theoretical, rational and not superstitious, universal and not parochial. We see this in Swami Vivekananda's concluding remarks at the Parliament of Religions: 'Help and not fight,' 'Assimilation and not destruction,' 'Harmony and peace and not dissension.'

How can we help each other? During natural catastrophes we always come together, forgetting our caste or creed or religion. India has made a wonderful contribution to this world: It has given shelter to all religions. India is called Bharata: *Bha* means light, *rata* means immersed, the country that is immersed in the light or consciousness of God. Moreover, it is the birthplace of four of the religions of the world: Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism.

India also gave shelter to the Zoroastrians, who settled in the western part of India. When the Jewish people were persecuted, some came and settled in India. One of the oldest synagogues in the world is found in Cochin. Then came Christianity: the oldest Christian community in the world was established in India by the Apostle Thomas about 25 years after the death of Jesus. Regarding Islam, I believe it was during the tenth century that Muslims began to settle in India. Now India has the second largest Muslim population in the world, next to Indonesia.

How do we assimilate the spirit of other religions? Swami Vivekananda said during the concluding session of the Parliament: 'The seed is put in the ground, and earth and air and water are placed around it. Does the seed become the earth, or the air, or the water? No. It becomes a plant. It develops after the law of its own growth, assimilates the air, the earth, and the water, converts them into plant substance, and grows into a plant. Similar is the case with religion.... Each must assimilate the spirit of the others and yet preserve his individuality and grow according to his own law of growth.'

In this connection, I remember that someone once asked Huston Smith: 'You are a Methodist minister. Why do you meet with Muslims, Hindus, and people of other faiths?' He replied: 'You know, I take my own food, but other religions I take as a food supplement, like a vitamin. It does not disturb my system at all. It energizes me; it gives me more strength.'

How can we create a harmony of religions? As we mentioned earlier, Sri Ramakrishna demonstrated that harmony in this age. He did not care for monotone music. He said: 'I play the flute with seven holes and make different ragas and raginis. I enjoy food made of different dishes.' On December 9, 1898, during the installation ceremony of Sri Ramakrishna's relics in Belur Math, Vivekananda prophesied: 'It will be a centre in which will be recognized and practised a grand harmony of all creeds and faiths as exemplified in the life of Sri Ramakrishna, and religion in its universal aspect alone will be preached; and from this centre of universal toleration will go forth the shining message of good will, peace, and harmony.'

Belur Math is truly holy ground. Here on this land Sri Ramakrishna himself walked while visiting the lumber yard of Captain Upadhyaya. Holy Mother also came here several times, and all sixteen disciples lived here or often visited this place. It is really a very special place. After inaugurating the Belur monastery, Vivekananda lived three years and eight months, and he stayed in his room here one year, six months, and twenty-six days. His spirit is still active and inspiring millions.

Symphony of Religions

Although I am not a connoisseur of Western music, I sometimes go to the symphony. I watch a hundred musicians onstage with their instruments: each one of them contributes to the music, and thus all create the symphony. If the violinists, or flutists, or drummers, or any individual group thought that only it should be onstage, then it would be a different type of performance, which might be appreciated by a few but not by the majority. It is the duty of the conductor to arrange the music in such a way that each musician takes part in the symphony and gives joy to the audience.

To me, God is the great conductor in the symphony of life. He created all religions; He manifests Himself in all religions; He listens to the prayers of people of all religions; and He bestows His grace on all His children. We would not care for a God who was only for the Hindus, or Muslims, or Christians, or Buddhists, or Jews, or any other individual faith.

In 1984 a Catholic interviewer of a TV station asked me, 'Swami, are the Hindu God, Christian God, Jewish God, or Muslim God different?' I replied: 'When you see the sun, can you say that it is a Hindu sun, a Christian sun, a Jewish sun, or a Muslim sun?' 'I got the answer,' he said.

In this memorable convention celebrating Swami Vivekananda's 150th anniversary, let us listen to the wonderful music of harmony and try to practise it in our daily lives. This is the only way we shall be able to get rid of narrowness, bigotry, superstition, violence, and disharmony. The nearer we are to God, the closer we shall feel to other religions. In God we all meet. Krishna said in the Gita, 'I am the thread that runs through the pearls, as in a necklace.' Each religion is one of the pearls.

In conclusion, I bow down to all religions and their representatives on this platform. These representatives have come from different parts of the world to contribute their precious voices to this symphony. This symphony will not be presented in vain. History will record it as a landmark for posterity.