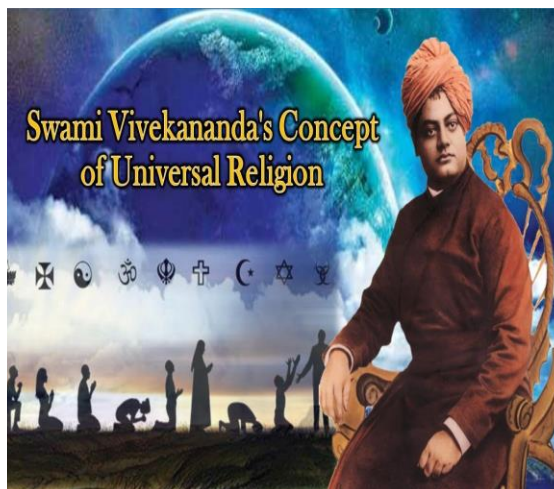


Swami Vivekananda's Concept of Universal Religion



The Universal Religion is the need of the day. It was first conceptualized by Swami Vivekananda. On September 27, he, in the course of his illuminating addresses, placed before the learned audience, the concept of Universal Religion and the way to its realization with his most prophetic and luminous moods. He declared, "The Christian is not to become a Hindu or a Buddhist, nor a Hindu or a Buddhist to become a Christian. But each must assimilate the spirit of the others and yet preserve his individuality and grow according to his own law of growth. If the Parliament of Religions has shown anything to the world it is this:

It has proved to the world that holiness, purity, and charity are not the exclusive possessions of any church in the world, and that every system has produced men and women of the most exalted character. In the face of this evidence, if anybody dreams of the exclusive survival of his own religion and the destruction of the others, I pity him from the bottom of my heart, and point out to him that upon the banner of every religion will soon be written, in spite of resistance: "Help and not Fight", "Assimilation and not Destruction", "Harmony and Peace and not Dissension". The mighty words which were addressed by Swamiji on *Universal Religion* to the entire humanity over the heads of the official representatives in the Parliament made a tremendous appeal to the conscience of the people at large. Thus, did Vivekananda conquer the West by dint of his intellectual acumen, devotional fervour and spiritual powers. Resounding triumph at the Parliament was a *turning point* in his life.

A New Concept – The Concept of Universal Religion

Universal Religion is based on the concept of universal brotherhood and fellow feelings. In *Universal Religion*, there is one God who is omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient, and eternal. He is the source of infinite energy. We derive energy and power from Him only. He said, "Each soul is potentially divine. The goal is to manifest this divinity within by controlling nature, external and internal. Do this either by work or 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. Apparent contradictions and perplexities in every religion marked



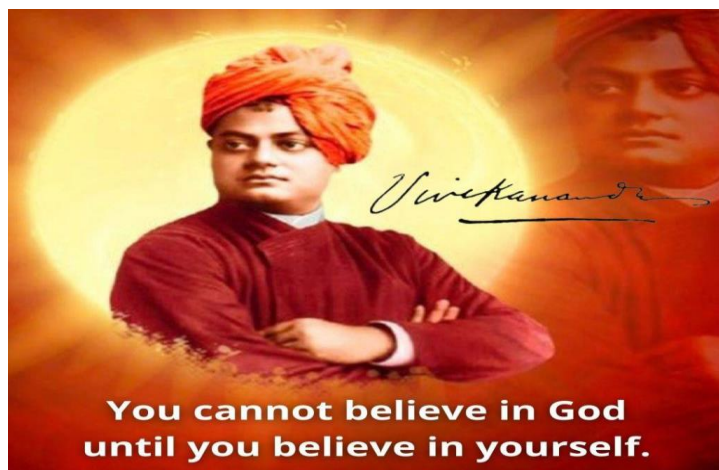
at the different stages of growth notwithstanding, the end of all religions is realization of God in the soul. And That is Universal Religion.”

What were the reasons for Swamiji’s advocating for *Universal Religion*? Realizing that many spiritual organizations having faith in different religions were engaged in constant spiritual struggle with one another, he felt the need for propagating the concept of Universal Religion. He said, “Nothing has made more 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 one another than religion. Nothing has built more charitable institutions, hospitals for men and even for animals than religion; nothing has deluged the world with more blood than religion.” He saw many persons, philosophers, students who were trying to bring about harmony in the midst of jarring and discordant sects. He observed that all the religions of the world were not really contradictory. On the contrary, in all the great religions of the world, there is a tremendous life power and all the religions are supplementary to each other. Each religion takes up one part of the great unifying truth and spends its whole force in embodying and typifying that part of the great truth. It is, therefore, addition not exclusion. His idea was that all the religions were different forces in the economy of God, working for the good of mankind. He said, “The philosophers of earlier age dreamed of such *Universal Religion*. The *Universal Religion* exists in the world, but we are not capturing it. It is because the priests are not preaching the universality of religion; they are preaching only the religion they believe to exist. The priests are behaving like this for their own interest. Priests alone cannot be blamed, some people who are very conservative and on whom the priests depend for their livings do not want that the priests would propagate the concept of *Universal Religion* than individual religion.”

Swamiji’s concept of an ideal religion is unique. According to him, it must be broad and large enough to supply food for various grades of the mind. To capture the idea of such a broad religion, we shall have to go back to the time when religion began and take them all in. We have to take in all that has been in the past, enjoy the light of the present and open every window of the hut that will come in the future. He explained, “In every religion there are three parts. First, there is a philosophy which presents the whole scope of that religion, setting forth its basic principles, the goal and the means of reaching it. The second is mythology, which is philosophy made concrete. It consists of legends relating to the lives of men, or of supernatural beings. The third is the rituals made up of forms and ceremonies, various physical attitudes, flowers and incense, and many other things, that appeal to the senses. You will find that all recognized religions have these three elements. Some lay more stress on one, some on another.”

In *Universal Religion* for which he advocated, there is one universal philosophy; one universal mythology having similarity and harmony. In rituals there should be universal symbols which can command general recognition and acceptance. Even if there is no universal philosophy or any universal mythology or any one universal ritual, we can recognize the natural necessity of variations. Accepting and recognizing the variations means that truth may be expressed in many ways, and that each of these ways is true. “If each of us is moving towards Him along one of these radii, then it is certain that all of us must reach that centre. And at the centre, where all the radii meet, all our differences will cease; but until we reach there, there must be differences. All these radii converge to the same centre. One, according to his nature, travels along one of these

lines, and another, along another; and if we all push onward along our own lines, we shall surely come to the centre.”



This centre point, according to Swamiji, is the place where God exists. Swamiji said, “Give up what is evil and give up what is good. What remains then? Behind good and evil stands something which is yours, the real you, beyond every evil, and beyond every good too, and it is that which is manifesting itself as good and bad.” According to him this is real ‘I’, the self, the real manifestation of God and knowing myself is, according to him, knowing God.

Swamiji told the whole world that the concept of *Universal Religion* as explained in Vedanta philosophy gives us the universal approach of religion. He said though we, the Indians, have thousands of Gods and Goddesses, they are only the appearances of that supreme Lord. We are solely the worshippers of one Infinite God who expresses and manifests Himself in multiple ways. The Hindus know that the images are not God. But these images help them to keep their mind fixed on their object of meditation. Vedanta teaches us that all the rituals, prayers, sacrifices and everything which we generally call religion are only the external part of religion, and realization of self is the only way which leads to God. Swamiji believed that God is the common factor of all religions and He is in our heart. Our intellect, reason and arguments have nothing to do in this matter. Only direct perception and realization of one’s own self, will pursue the goal.

If we analyse and interpret various lectures and writings of Swami Vivekananda, we will find that the main theme of his various lectures is the human beings, their development, their evolution and their repletion. Romain Rolland, after analyzing the lectures delivered by Swamiji at the Parliament of World Religions, had commented, “Each time he repeated with new arguments but with the same force or conviction his thesis of a *Universal Religion* without limit of time or space uniting the whole credo of the human spirit, from the enslaved fetishism of the savage to the most liberal creative affirmations of modern science. He harmonized them into a magnificent synthesis, which, far from extinguishing the hope of a single one, helped all hopes to grow and flourish according to their own proper nature. There was to be no other dogma but the divinity inherent in man and his capacity for indefinite evolution.”

The concept of Universal Religion universalizes our consciousness helping us realize that we are a part of the whole, that this whole is a part of a greater whole, and that this greater whole is a part of a still greater whole, right up to its forming one single totality. Once we know that, we begin to become aware that in reality there cannot be any separation between us and something greater than us of which we are a part. This is the beginning. Now, we must come to the point not only of thinking this but of feeling it and even living it, and then the wall of ignorance tumbles: one feels this unity everywhere and realizes that everybody is only a more or less

fragmentary part of a whole much vaster than an individual, which is the universe. Then one begins to have a more universal consciousness. And when one realizes this universal consciousness, he would understand the concept of *Universal Religion*.