



Advocacy for Religious Plurality in Vivekananda's Speech

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Abstract

This research examines Swami Vivekananda's speech delivered in the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893 AD. It has been evaluated in the light of Mortimer Jerome Alders's Truth in Religion: Plurality of Religion and Unity of Truth. While evaluating Vivekananda's advocacy for plurality of religions for the global peace and order, the researchers concerns on his resistance to religious fanaticism and orthodoxy. For the study of his resistance to the exploitation and extermination adopted by the westerners in the shield of religion calling it "Civilizing Mission", the researcher takes his essay The East and the West as the major reference. The study argues that Vivekananda's appeal for the celebration of religious plurality counters the bigotry and fanaticism in the name of religion. It is assumed that this article has a deep substance to understand Vivekananda's advocacy for plurality of religions, emphasizing on the tenets of pluralism in Hinduism and historical repercussions of religious hegemony.

Keywords: *plurality of religions, resistance, bigotry, fanaticism, exploitation, Indian philosophy*

Introduction

This research seeks to explore how Swami Vivekananda presents Indian Philosophy of harmony in the USA and questions the cultism that spreads discord and revenge. Religious extremism and radicalism result into communal hatred, violence and even terrorism. The event of September 11, 2001 in New York and its repercussions give a sharp focus on the issues such as relationship among religious, cultural and national identity; multicultural societies and widespread 'Islamophobia'. In 1893, Swami Vivekananda addressed the Parliament of Religions in Chicago highlighting

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pluralistic approach of Hinduism and its significance for universal fraternity. The researcher studies his entreaty for pluralism in the speech and tries to excavate his intention of defying supremacy of any faith by close reading of his essay “The East and the West”. Vivekananda’s purpose is to shed light on the cosmopolitan nature of Hinduism but he appeals for people of various cults to unite for the common cause of humanity. He advocates for developing acceptance, tolerance and respect to others’ religious faiths. The message delivered by Vivekananda turns more relevant at present. Religious hatred in subtle form may take blatant form at any time. The researcher argues that an appeal of Vivekananda for celebration of religious plurality counters the prejudice and extremism in the name of religion. It also challenges dogmatism and superiority of any particular faith and establishes Indian Philosophy of human welfare.

Literature Review

It seems safer to comprehend the holy intention of various religions instead of debating over the truths. The divinity is realized only by an enlightened person because it is not available in rituals. Rituals are for the exercise of higher journey but not the end. In *Truth in Religion: Plurality of Religions and the Unity of Truth* Mortimer Jerome Alders (1990) worries, “An approach to the study of religion is concerned with defending the truth of one religion against the claims of others, which it rejects as false” (p.42). The Religious studies which favors one at the cost of another’s existence turns detrimental for humanity. The religious practices that beget hatred cannot be termed as religion. It is the blasphemy of the very religion. Vivekananda challenges to show the single expression through the whole order of Sanskrit Philosophy that intends to save the Hindus only and harm others. Vivekananda refers the declaration of The Lord in Vedic scripture in his incarnation as Krishna, “I am in every religion as the thread through the strings of pearls. Wherever thou see extraordinary power rising and purifying humanity, know thou that I am these” (Vivekananda, 2005, p.47). It is supposed Krishna incarnates to purify humanity and serve humankind. He is not assigned for the service of the Hindus only. The concept of the Lord, divinity and service to humanity lies in every religion. Vivekananda further emphasizes, “ The Brahma of the Hindus, the Ahura Mazda of the Zoroastrians, the Buddha of the Buddhist, the Jehovah of the Jews, the Father in the heaven of the Christians, give strength to you to carry out your noble ideas” (Shastri,1899, p.48). He presents common ground of

religious unity implying that the essence of every religion turns similar. He addresses to the mass, “But if anyone hopes that the unity will come by the triumph of any one of these religions and the destruction of other, to him I say: Brother, yours is an impossible hope” (Shastri, 1899, p. 50). Rituals vary but the motif of every religion nearly matches. Mortimer Jerome Alders (1990) opines, “The form of worship differs from one religion to another in its specific rituals, ceremonials, and sacrifices. In all religions, the religious practices involve a separation of the sacred or holy . . . and the profane” (p.45). As holy intent of every religion seems common, it calls for unity of every religion. Rituals are constructed according to the convenience of people to represent their faith in manifested form.

The way of terming another religion as satanic and backward pushes people towards the labyrinth of never ending enmity. Holiness, purity and chastity are not the exclusive property of particular religion. The idea of considering one religion holy and another profane divides the world. The intention of religion is unity. There is strict adherence among conformists that their faith is confirmed. They express the fear of contamination of their pure faith by the contact to other faiths. Vivekananda answers to those people metaphorically, “The seed is put in the ground, the earth, and the air and the water are around. Does the seed become the earth, the water or the air? No, it becomes a plant; it develops after the law of its own growth” (Shastri, 1899, p. 50). The receptive character of the Hinduism has been termed as the celebration of plurality. He states, “Unity in variety is the plan of nature, and the Hindu has recognized it. Other religious groups lay down certain fixed dogmas and try to force society to adopt them” (Shastri, 1899, p.45). Again, the rituals of the Hindus through the worshipping of images, which refers many centers, shows respect to plurality. Though Vivekananda (2005) has not indicated any religious groups in the speech, in his book *The East and the West*, he expresses his dissatisfaction to western tendency of encroaching others’ resources in the name of civilizing missions. He has termed westerners as having the nature of *Asura* and Indian as *Devas* bringing the reference of Purans. It describes *Devas* as, people having faith in their soul, in the God, and in the afterlife while *Asuras* give importance to this life and devotes themselves to enjoying this world and trying to have bodily comfort (Vivekananda, 2005, p.38). He assumes the doom of a nation if there is not any binding idea. The binding idea mainly germinates from religion and culture that develops as national character. When Mugals tried to attack on the national

character of India going against the common culture that caused their downfall. But the westerners were very clever. The British, before they came to India, made the thorough study of Indian culture and religion. They did not go against the culture directly. So, they could rule long time taking advantage of soft and welcoming nature of *Devas* in India. Vivekananda (2005) comments on western character as follows:

Maddened with the wine and newly acquired power; devoid of discrimination between rights and wrongs; fierce like wild beast, henpecked, lustful; drenched in liquor, having no idea of chastity and purity; nor of cleanly ways of habits; believing in matters only, with the civilization resting on matter and its various aggrandizement of self by exploiting others' countries, others' wealth, by force, trick and treachery; having no faith in the life hereafter, whose *Atman*(Self) is the body, whose whole life is only in the senses and creature comforts: Thus, to the Indians, the westerner is the demon (*Asura*). (p. 6-7)

Vivekananda vehemently opposes the *Asura* nature of the westerners who come carrying the Bible in their hands. He has not opposed the Bible but the *Arusa* nature of those carrying the Bible with the purpose of robbing resources. The researcher assimilates one African proverb, "When they came they had the Bible in their hands and we had lands, later they took our lands and we have the Bible in our hands."

Hegemonic attitude in the name of religion creates one powerful and another weak community. Pluralistic attitude in religion helps for respecting all despite variations. Westerners adopted hegemonic attitude polluting their very notion of holy ideas with infiltration of *Asura* nature. Vivekananda is critical to India as well. After the spread of Buddhism in India, there was competition to get 'Nirvana'. The Hindus compete with Buddhist that even increases the number of *sannyasis* within Hinduism who gave up craving to material achievement. Buddha spread the theory of causation of our karmic fruits. He encouraged people preaching that nothing was more desirable in life than *Mokshya*. Hinduism talks about four aims of life: *Artha* (Material possession), *Kama* (Pleasure and love), *Dharma* (Religious and moral duties) and *Mokshya* (redemption or spiritual release). The first three aims are for all people and the last one is for the person who wishes to get spiritual contentment. But the Buddhism focused on *Mokshya* without attaining the first three aims of life which made India fragile paving the ground for *Asura* to play upon the fragile nature of then India. Vivekananda (2005)

argues, “Without enjoyment, renunciation can never come; first enjoy then you can renounce. Otherwise, if the whole nation, all of sudden, takes up *sannyas*, it does not gain what it desires, but it loses what it had into the bargain” (p.12). The competition of the Hindus with Buddhist was counterproductive for the national character of India because it paved the way for *Asura* to impose their hegemony playing upon poverty, starvation, malady and backwardness of India. Ironically, India is highly fertile land and it is rich with natural resources. But the failure of India to adopt the four aims of life of the Hinduism created platform for the westerners to inter India and impose their hegemony. The policy of Lord Macaulay to establish schools for spreading their language and culture made India slowly dependent to the British. Vivekananda (2005) further argues, “We are courting our ruins in two ways-namely, we are throwing away what we have as our own, and laboring in vain to make others’ ideas and habits ours” (p.42). As it is said, “Master’s tool cannot dismantle his own mansion”, the British made their soft policies to suppress India through hegemony establishing their missionary schools especially in Calcutta and Darjeeling. Vivekananda (2005) further adds, “. . . India is still surviving because she has her own quota yet to give to the general store of the world civilization” (p.9). Still, India is the treasure house for *Vedic* knowledge, scholarly myths, yoga, meditation and *Ayurvedic* medicine. Western scholars like Max Muller and Josheph Campbell made India their home to excavate the *Vedic* and mythical asset of India.

The inevitable battles for the cause of humanity and for the protection of the weak are valorized in the Indian Philosophy. In Mahabharata, the victory of Pandavas over Kauravas shows the victory of righteousness. Similarly, the invasion over Ravana in lanka by Ram and his team seems for the right cause. Vivekananda is conscious that westerners might show the legendary battles of Mahabharata and Ramayana to present Indians as violent. He appeals to the westerners to read the Ramayana stating:

Ramchandra is a civilized Aryan King who fought with more civilized Ravana. The civilization of Lanka was rather higher than that of Ayodhya. Ramchandra’s alleys were backward monkeys. Ramchandra did not annex the kingdoms like Vali and Guhaka and races of Lanka are still enjoying their territories. (Vivekananda, 2005, p.110).

In sharp contrast, he questions the westerners’ exploitation and extermination over the weak:

You have settled on their lands, and they are gone forever. What is the history of your America, Australia, New Zealand, Pacific island and South Africa? Where are those aboriginal races there today? They are all exterminated; you have killed them outright, as if they were wild beasts. It is only where you have not the power to do so and there only, that other nations are still alive. (Vivekananda, 2005, p.112)

The deep knowledge to Vivekananda about the Bible supports him to justify his claim that the westerners are going against the intention of the Bible creating their own deviated myths. The researcher does not explain about the knowledge of Vivekananda about the Bible. It seems the Bible appeals to spread the good message of the lord to awaken ignorant people from all over the world but the follower started religious convergence campaign and termed other as uncivilized. In the later phase, they started exploitation over the weak calling them ignorant.

Establishing the supremacy of one religious philosophy challenging the existence of others turns harmful. The feeling of rising to the supreme position defeating others turns against the idea of equality. Spiritual people believe that only God is supreme and we are here to fulfill the allotted tasks and none can be supreme though there are hierarchies of people. Vaneesa Cook (2019) cites C. Wright Mill, who states, “Spiritual socialists addressed the whole person as sacred agent of God . . . white supremacy, a glaring problem of the United States, has no place in the kingdom of God” (P. 4). The debate over the supremacy of God no longer remains provided that people accept that there might be different deities. Gandhi states, “I have broadened my Hinduism by loving other religions as my own” (Nicholas, 2014, P. 329). Respect to others’ philosophy does not pollute the philosophy one holds. Gandhi states, “I have advanced from tolerance to equal respect to all religions” (Nicholas, 2014, P. 324). Demonizing others’ religions and instigating them for conversion of religion does not give solution. It plants the seed of hatred. Vivekananda opines,

The Christians is not to become a Hindu or 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 (Nicholas, 2014, p. 329).

Planned and schemed conversion of religion devalues the faiths of others. However, Individual choice of conversion cannot be opposed.

Spirituality should inculcate the feeling of pluralism. Spirituality emerges from consciousness. Consciousness has relation to *Brahma* that guides for righteousness. But sometimes the term ‘Spirituality’ can be used by the people to exploit others. Spirituality refers to inquiry to self for truth and justice. V. Kelly and M. Kovalson (1973) opine, “The spiritual life of society is not only the production of ideas, but also the functioning of social consciousness . . . interaction with individual consciousness” (p. 220). But the superiority ruins the spiritual alertness. Romain Rolland (2007) cites Vivekananda, who deplores the idea of universal philosophy, “Is there one universal philosophy? Not yet. Some will even draw the sword to compel others to believe as they do. This is not through wickedness, but through a particular disease of human brain called fanaticism” (p.12). As the belief system determines the culture of people, the culture can be made harmonious by allowing various thoughts and believes to flourish unless they are against human dignity.

Self-transformation by self- realization serves as a major motto of the Hinduism. The meeting of *Atma* to cosmic soul (*Brahma*) is the highest achievement of an individual. For the attainment of *Brahma* there are no readymade ways. There are no words or theories. One has to travel on his journey from an ordinary sensual existence to cosmic existence. Vivekananda (2005) asserts, “The Hindu religion does not consist in struggle and attempt to believe a certain doctrine or dogma, but in realizing- not believing, but in being and becoming” (p.41). For instance, *Guru-shishya* (teacher-students) tradition prepares students to realize himself under the supervision of teacher. It is not delivery from the teacher and acquisition of knowledge in the students. Similarly, it is not the accumulation of knowledge about yoga but realization of change after practicing yoga. In *Philosophies of India* under the title “The Meeting of East and West” Heinrich Zimmer (1992) asserts, “The chief aim of Indian thought is to unveil and integrate into consciousness . . . *atma* is forever changeless beyond time and veiling net of causality “(p.3). Human bodies are transitory but eternal *atma* dwells in bodies with the potentialities of further transformation. Zimmer(1992) opines, “We cannot borrow God. We must effect His new incarnation from within ourselves” (p.2). The potentiality of divine realization in oneself can be taken as the power of the Hinduism. Incarnation of godly power in human form comes from self realization and discovery, rather than from dogmatic beliefs. As people possess the ability of divine transformation, Hinduism is separated from particular cult and belief

system, it embraces pluralistic approach. Hinduism believes in self-realization, not in persuasion. In “The Pluralistic Style and Demands of Intercultural Rhetoric: Swami Vivekananda at the World Parliament of Religions” Scott R. Stroud (2018) opines, “Religion seems doubly problematic for persuasive endeavors seeking to be both pluralistic and persuasive” (p.248). When there is an intention of persuading other to convert and follow one religion, the plurality of the religion is dead. It becomes purposeful and kills self realization. Stroud (2018) cites Sally Gear, “Any act to persuade is an act of violence. The act of violence is in the intention to change another” (p. 264). Planned conversion of religion by means of monetary or other benefits is against the spirit of plurality of religion. The beauty lies in the celebration of diversity of religions, not in hegemonic mentality of religious conversion.

Methodology

The research follows the qualitative research design accessing and assessing data from both primary and secondary sources. Selected books, scholarly journals, and internet sources are used. The study does not fall under the debate of various religious philosophies. Instead, it highlights an advocacy of Swami Vivekananda for religious plurality that shows the significance of respecting various faiths for universal peace. Critical, analytical and interpretative methods are used for analyzing data. The research uses the theoretical perspective regarding ‘Truth’ developed by Mortimer Jerome Alder (1990) from his book *Truth in Religion: Plurality of Religion and Unity of Truth*. For evaluating the perspective of Vivekananda against religious hegemony, the researcher takes Vivekananda’s book *The East and The West* (2005) the backdrop of analyzing his speech.

Analysis

Hinduism is presented as *sanatan* faith for universal bliss practiced from immemorial time in Vivekananda’s speech. He establishes his credibility to stand as advocator of world peace. He presents India as the land for the idea of toleration. He thanks for the reception stating, “I thank you in the name of the most ancient order of monks in the world . . . the mother of religions . . . I am proud to belong to a religion which has taught the world both tolerance and universal acceptance”(Shastri, 1899, p.31). He portrays India as a place to shelter refugees on humanitarian grounds. He

brings historical background. He claims, “We have gathered in our bosom the purest remnants of Israelites, remnants which come to southern India and took refuge with us in the very year in which their holy temple was shattered to pieces by Roman Tyranny” (Shastri, 1899, p. 31). Shattering temple indicates the hole in the communal fabric of the faith. Spiritual wound caused by the demolition of holy temple becomes repugnant and it begets revenge. The vicious cycle of revenge pushes to terrorism. Human casualties can be forgiven earlier than the destruction of religious and national heritages. The attack in Pentagon is an attack in the very nose of the USA administration. To assimilate it hypothetically, if any invader attack religious site- Pashupatinath or administrative building- Singha Durbar, wound remains for hundreds years. How far the message delivered by Vivekananda applies in the present India seems one of the concerns. The debate over Babri Mouque and Ram temple in Ayodhya teases the holy ideas presented by Vivekananda but the researcher does not study the impacts of his message at present in this research, rather focuses on his vision to challenge the western episteme to view Indians as backward and uncivilized in the contemporary times. The historical references of sheltering the persecuted and refugees of another religious community and nation by India justifies that India took all people of the world under universal brotherhood in the past influenced by *Sanatan* religion.

Various religious practices in the world are taken as the different routes to reach the same destination. People may have their own choice of taste of food but the ultimate purpose of taking food is to supply calories. People may argue that the choice of taste can be different but the Truth does not have choices. In *Truth in Religion: Plurality of Religions and the Unity of Truth*. Mortimer Jerome Alders(1990) argues:

Truths of religious belief and the truths of science or philosophy are not truths of the same kind. The former are truths of the imagination and are poetically true; the latter are truths of reason and are logically and factually true. Therefore, they cannot come into conflict or be incompatible. (p. 102-103)

Faiths are not to be proved by any facts and logics. They are for creating ethics in a society. The truth of morality cannot be measured in figures and facts. There might be various righteous ways of establishing morality in a society. Whatever the way is; if morality, order and peace are intact, that is the truth. Vivekananda mentions the hymn which he used to repeat since his boyhood that goes like this, “As the different

streams have their sources in different places and mingle their water in the sea, O Lord, so the different paths which men take through different tendencies . . . all lead to thee” (Shastri, 1990, p.32). The courses can be long or short, zigzagged or straight. But the destination is the same. Vivekananda claims that Hinduism is open to people who aspire to meet the God following any righteous way. He cites one excerpt from *the Gita*, “Whoever comes to me, through whatever form I reach him, they are all struggling through path that in the end always lead to me” (Shastri, 1990, p.32). Forgetting the fact that the destination is the same, people involve in sectarianism and fanaticism causing bloodshed.

Narrow- minded attachment to one’s faith and negation to others’ faith ridicules the faith itself one holds. Myopic view resulted by superiority complex does not value others’ space. Vivekananda has explicated one metaphor of frogs. The fable goes like this:

There was a frog in a pond who thought that his pond was the whole universe because he could not go to other side of the pond after several leaps. He thought that he possessed the greatest pond. One day another frog came to the pond from the sea. The former asks a question to the latter whether the latter has as big pond as he has or not. Both claimed that their water mass was bigger and started to quarrel (Shastri, 1990, p.48-49).

Vivekananda states, “I am a Hindu and I have a little well and thinking that the whole world is my little well. The Christian sits in his little well and the whole well is his world. The Mohammad sits in his little well and thinks that is the whole world” (Shastri, 1990, p.49). When one’s mind is filled with preoccupied baggage of faith, one cannot have space to value other’s faith. The trend of valorizing one’s faith and demonizing others’ turns nefarious. It threatens tolerance and conciliation creating rifts in relationship. If the metaphor of the fable is taken just as a myth and attacked it claiming a frog does not speak. It turns as a defamation to sea of faith and pollutes the order of a society. Myths carry the essence metaphorically because they make abstract ideas concrete and understandable to common people. Libel to myths, mixing it with scientific evidences, invites disorder crushing the truth of morality. However, the myths that block human progress should be dismantled with collective consciousness for common benefits and prosperity. Human consciousness helps to segregate valuable

faiths and baneful dogmas.

Idol worship of the Hindus is often attacked as superstitious and ridiculous. Vivekananda argues that complex ideas come in images and symbols. If images and symbols serve as physical manifestation of invisible ideas, it is not wrong to regard them as a way to reach to the ultimate truth. Vivekananda urges, “The Hindus have associated the ideas of holiness, purity, omnipresence, and all other such ideas with different forms’ (Shastri, 1990, p.44). We cannot think without images. Images help to climb the ladder of our understanding of higher level of realization. The journey of life serves for the journey to divinity. Vivekananda seems against the idea of devoting whole life to the idols and never rising higher. He emphasizes on achieving divinity through realization and takes images as the supporters in the preliminary stage of realization. Though the trend of worshipping images is widely practiced in Hinduism, other religions that are against the idea of idol worship are also not free from the concept of realizing invisible through images. Vivekananda debates:

Superstition is the enemy of man, but bigotry is worse. Why a Christian does go to Church? Why is the cross holy? Why is the face turned towards the sky in prayer? My brethren, we no more think about anything without a material image . . . material worship is the lowest stage, struggling to rise high, mental prayer is the next stage, but the highest stage is when the Lord has been realized . . . “the child is a father of a man”. Would it be right for the old man to say that childhood is a sin? Nor is image worship compulsory in Hinduism. If a man can realize his divine nature most easily with the help of an image, would it be right to call it a sin? . . . to the Hindu, man is travelling not from error to truth. . . but from lower to higher truth. (Shastri, 1990, p.44- 45)

As a child learns letters with images, a common man can soar to higher level of understanding learning from images in the beginning. Moreover, worship to various regalia or images like images of gods or goddess, animals, plants, rivers, mountains etcetera convey the message that god may present in various forms. It inspires to live in harmony with nature taking all living beings and non-living things as the elements of our survival. It negates anthropocentric view but respects pluralistic approach of taking all living beings and non-living things as components of life.

Conclusion

Vivekananda points out plurality of religions as a way of universal peace and order. He assumes Hinduism to be the mother of religions and pioneer in plurality both in form and content. The worshipping of multiple gods and images in the Hinduism manifests plurality. Reincarnation of gods as different *avatars* highlights the plural existence of gods in course of time. Obsession to one's faith and hatred to others' faith cause bigotry and fanaticism. This invites the vicious circle of revenge making the world insecure. Hegemonic attitude of any religious group cannot be tolerated. Resistance to hegemony might be termed as terrorism by the powerful side and the real terrorism begins. Triumph over one religious community by another is neither desirable nor possible. Historical exploitation and extermination of the weak in 'Civilizing Missions' deserves criticism. It must be discouraged. Vivekananda defends the Indian Philosophy against the backdrop of ethnic cleansing, and shattering of holy places by the powerful. His ideas are relevant in today's sectarianism world of religion for keeping peace and harmony of people intact.

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