Swami Vivekananda and Neo-Hindu Universalism

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SOME of the most important problems in contemporary philosophical theology arise from the new dialogue among world religions. This dialogue raises issues as to the generic meaning of religious truth and as to the relationship between any religion and the culture in which it develops. And every theology must now show its relevance to cultures other than the one in which it was developed and must indicate a basis for coexistence with quite different religions which also claim to be true.

One of the most serious attempts ot provide a universal framework for religious thought and for the practice of religious toleration comes from Swami Vivekananda and his followers in the Ramakrishna Mission, which he founded in India during the late nineteenth century.[1] This Neo-Hindu point of view has proved attractive to many people in the West including such literary figures as Aldous Huxley, Christopher Isherwood, and Gerald Heard. Anyone who has taught courses in comparative religion will be aware of its appeal to American university students.

Here we examine this proposed framework, giving particular attention to factors which stimulated the Swami to advocate it. We will conclude with a critical assessment of the proposal, hoping by this to imply elements necessary in a more adequate framework for interfaith relations.

I

Sri Ramakrishna, the extraordinary mystic who inspired the founder of the Ramakrishna Mission, spent his life as a priest of a temple to the goddess Kali in the suburbs of Calcutta. He was illiterate and not a scholar even in the scriptures of his own faith. But ecstatic mysticism and shrewd common sense combined to give him a personal force which attracted a number of able young men from colleges in Calcutta.

Ramakrishna's knowledge of other faiths and other cultures was limited to what he could learn in conversations in his native Bengali. But after a period of having the Bible read to him he "wished to realize the Mother according to the path prescribed in the Bible."[2] He then had a mystical experience while gazing at a picture of the Virgin Mary and the child Jesus. He later had an experience of complete merger into the being of Christ.

At another time, Ramakrishna received initiation into Islam from an itinerant Sufi mystic. "Within three days he reached the goal of the Islamic Faith, attaining to the realization of a luminous person with a long beard and a face deep and serene."[3]

This capacity to induce mystical ecstacy with the symbols of faiths other than his own seems to have been as far as Sri Ramakrishna went in searching for some kind of transcultural truth or good. He never had to face a direct challenge from faiths critical of his own.[4]

With Swami Vivekananda, the real

[1] Its frequently stated mission is to unite East and West and "thoroughly overhaul modern civilization." See *The Life of Swami Vivekanada,* by his Eastern and Western Disciples (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 6th ed. 1960), p. 443, and Swami Nirvendanda in *The Cultural Heritage of India* (Calcutta: Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, 2nd ed. 1956), Vol. IV, p. 719.

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[2] A. C. Das, *A Modern Incarnation of God* (Calcutta: General Printers, 1958), pp. 147-148.

[3] *Ibid.,* p. 140.

[4] Marie Louise Burke, *Swami Vivekananda in America: New Discoveries* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1958), p. 589.

founder of the Ramakrishna Mission, the case was quite different, though even in his case the emphasis upon a universal faith grew slowly. Biographical materials issued by the headquarters of the Ramakrishna Mission indicate that this emphasis developed during Vivekananda's first trip to the United States, when he spoke to a parliament of religions held in connection with the 1893 Chicago World's Fair. He made this trip to raise money for the support of his newly organized order of monks in India.[5] Following a favorable reception at the Fair, he began a tour, lecturing on Hindu manners and customs. Stung by frequent misconceptions of his country and his religion, and by criticisms from Christian missionary groups, he began an increasingly vigorous polemic, not only defending Hindu culture but asserting its superiority over other cultures and religions. This polemic continued to the end of his life, becoming even more intense after his return to India and during a second trip to the United States. But in time he began to alternate polemic with espousal of a modern form of Hinduism which he called Vedanta, which he held was a universal philosophy integrating all world faiths.[6]

In his role as a polemicist, Vivekananda assured a Detroit audience that "morally... India is head and shoulders above the United States or any other country on the globe."[7] On his return home, he told the Indians that

> unlike the Asiatics, the Westerners are not deeply spiritual. Religious thoughts do not permeate the masses ... The immorality prevalent among Western peoples would strike the Indian visiting London or New York... The lower classes are not only ignorant of their scriptures and immoral, but are also rude and vulgar.[8]

It would seem that the defects of Western society reveal the inadequacy of its religious base in a way that unfavorable conditions in Hindu society do not.

> On metaphysical lines no nation on earth can hold a candle to the Hindu ... Hinduism is a religion and Christianity is not; because in this beastly world it is blackguardism and that alone that **prospers**; virtue always suffers... However advanced the Western nations are in scientific culture, they are babes in metaphysical and spiritual education.[9]

In 1894, however, the Swami began to add a new note; he saw his faith as including all faiths. In a letter from New York to his followers in India he wrote

> Now I will tell you my discovery. All of religion is contained in the Vedanta, that is, in the three stages of Vedanta philosophy, the Dvaita (theistic dualism), the Vishishtadvaita (personalistic theism), and Advaita (non-dualism). These are the three stages of spiritual growth in man. Every one is necessary. This is the essential of religion: The Vedanta applied to the various ethnic customs and creeds in India, is Hinduism. The first stage, i.e., Dvaita, applied to the ideas of the ethnic groups of Europe, is Christianity; as applied to the Semitic groups, Mohammedanism; the Advaita as applied in its Yoga perception form, is Buddhism. Now, by religion is meant the Vedanta...[10]

Swami Vivekananda saw many practical and theoretical implications in his new universal framework for faith. It

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 566.

[6] The Swami believed that his synthesis of faiths had support from this traditional system of Indian philosophy. But this religious use of the term seems to have originated with him. In India it is now widely used in the sense which he gave it.

[7] Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 196. Throughout his life, intensely felt nationalism mingled with his religious utterances. Cf. "Of all the nations of the world, the Hindus are [also] the handsomest and finest of feature. I am not bragging nor saying anything in exaggeration because they belong to my own nationality, but this fact is known all over the world." *Complete Works* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 7th ed. 1959), Vol. V, p. 466.

[8] *The Life*, p. 561. Also see "Vulgar, physical and materialistic ideas [underlie] the whole of Western civilization." Quoted in Burke, *op. cit.*, p. 386.

[9] *The Life*, p. 616.

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 345.

would first of all contribute to specific problems of the emerging Indian nation.

> The one common ground we have is our sacred tradition, our religion. That is the only common ground, and upon that we shall have to build. In Europe, political ideas form the national unity. The unity in religion, therefore, is absolutely necessary as the first condition of the future of India. There must be the recognition of one religion throughout the length and breadth of this land. [11]

In the second place it will be the basis for integration of "Eastern" and "Western" culture. By Eastern culture the Swami always seems to have meant Hinduism, since he felt that Chinese and Japanese civilizations were largely derived from it. The Eastern contribution to cultural integration is primarily in terms of Eastern spirituality, though on occasion he claims for the East a large share of the origins of science as well. There can be no hope for a primary spiritual contribution from the West. Where it exists, Western spirituality is a pale shadow of the East. The exchange cannot go the other way. [12] The West will contribute that "materialism" which is elsewhere cited as its principal limitation. [13]

II

The views of Swami Vivekananda are still of great importance in both India and the West. They deeply affected the Indian nationalist movement and the Hindu-Moslem relations which were one aspect of it. Academic philosophers like President Radhakrishnan have to some extent understood the earlier history of Indian philosophy and even developed their own systems of thought in the light of these views. [14] They are to a large extent the views which Western educated Hindus will bring to any interfaith dialogue. They are frequently urged as the only philosophical basis for world peace or interfaith accord. [15] Such views surely deserve the most careful critical evaluation.

It seems that the Swami misunderstood the nature of his reception in America and England. It is easy to understand why. The Ramakrishna Mission now emphasizes that he was given audience and hospitality by a number of distinguished religious liberals in both countries. But it should be noted that by the last decade of the nineteenth century there were large numbers of Americans and Englishmen prepared to consider unorthodox religious views, listen to criticisms of Western imperialism, and seek appreciative understanding of other cultures. The young Vivekananda could not have understood all of the currents in Western thought contributing to these attitudes. He seems to have concluded that they were all due to his brief work, and that they implied acceptance of his specific theological framework as well. He came to this conclusion in spite of the fact that many knew so little about his cultural background as to mistake him for a Buddhist. In the years since Vivekananda's death Indian legend has enlarged this picture of a growing domination of "Vedantic" thought over the religion and philosophy of the West.

III

But what of the value of Vivekananda's proposed universal framework of thought? It may be criticized on four grounds. In the first place, one may doubt whether it has actually served as a basis for toleration within India

[11] *Complete Works,* Vol. III, pp. 286-287.
[12] *Ibid.,* Vol. VI, pp. 448-449.
[13] *The Life,* p. 393. Also see quotations in Burke, *op. cit.,* pp. 166, 590-591.
[14] Quoted in S. J. Samartha, *Introduction to Radhakrishnan* (New York: Associated Press, 1964), p. 15.
[15] "Only Advaita (non-dualistic) Philosophy can save mankind," quoted in Burke, *op. cit.,* p. 603. *The Life,* p. 305, points out that "the validity of the Advaita has been proved as a necessary scientific conclusion (sic) and in it alone can errors cease and happiness come."

itself. Many Hindus, including many who call themselves Vedantins, would not accept his account of Vedanta nor the use he makes of it. There is also evidence that contemporary Hindu apologists have exaggerated the degree to which religious toleration was characteristic of Hindu history. The history of the half-century following the Swami's death is particularly distressing, though anyone aware of the history of the West in this regard may hesitate to draw the issue.

More relevant is the fact that, to the extent that it has been practiced, tolerance seems to have stemmed from the traditionally stratified social order, rather than from an operative awareness of the Vedanta as the Swami understood it. Traditionally, each man was born into a particular station with particular duties. Each man had his own particular temperament (balance of **gunas**) and ordained way of life (**dharma**) with which action in past lives (**karma**) caused him to be born. While stewardship in his present life may bring about a different future birth, he cannot greatly change the role he plays in this life. Tolerance may indeed result if we implicitly believe that each man has a unique **dharma** which he may fulfill well or poorly but cannot fundamentally change. By this view men are born Hindus or Moslems, just as they are born into a particular caste. It is so wise to tolerate what you cannot change that one can understand the Hindu sense of outrage at the thought of conversion. To give up one's religion is to deny one's race and nation.

This explanation of Hindu tolerance in terms of the traditionally stratified social order is now being tested. As urbanization and industrialization are inevitably extended, there is an increase in social mobility as well. This should influence some change in thought as well as in ways of life. We may hope that greater freedom will add to a sense of individual dignity. But a negative corollary may well be increased intolerance and social friction, because people are no longer sure who they are born to be and because they are no longer willing to attribute differences to the fact of birth.

In the second place, we must question whether Vivekananda's universal scheme really transcends its ethnic origins. During his lifetime his native Bengal was a center of intense nationalism. It is not surprising that he should reflect these feelings. One who is sympathetic to the freedom movements which ended the era of colonial rule in Asia and Africa will view this nationalism as a valid social concern. But even so, one may be anxious about any nationalism which claims a religious basis. And it makes it more difficult for a person with a different ethnic background to accept the Swami's claim to present a universal framework of thought.

Of course religious ethnocentrism is not peculiar to Hinduism. In another context it would be appropriate to discuss ways in which Christianity has historically been a "Western" ethnic religion, even an ideological instrument of political or economic interests. But, as the Swami himself recognized, Christianity and Buddhism are not in essence ethnic faiths; they have a catholicity which leads them to incorporate values from many cultures.[16] One should also consider the strong traditions within Christianity working toward a separation of church and state and, especially, the strong contemporary movements against vestiges of an ethnic, narrowly Western Christianity.

Vivekananda and his followers within the Ramakrishna Mission, however, seem to see no conflict between claims to provide a universal gospel and the services of the movement as a defender of Indian nationalism and Hindu particularism. We have noted the call for "recognition of one religion throughout the length and breadth of this land." The Swami speaks again and again of

[16] Quotations in Burke, *op. cit., pp.* 600-601.

the "Hindu race" and the "Hindu nation." [17] In spite of the fact that independent India chose to become a "secular" state (thus contrasting itself with Islamic Pakistan), such unself-conscious concepts in what purports to be a liberal Hindu reform movement may still produce in India's religious minorities an understandable sense of alienation. Swami Vivekananda's conception of the relationship between religion and national freedom was quite different from those of Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore. The Swami's views seem to have been more influential.

There are many examples of specifically Hindu assumptions made by the Swami which make it difficult for his Vedanta to be a universal gospel. He shows great concern for the Hinduization, even Indianization, of his Western converts. Discussing their place in the caste system, he suggests that they form a new caste of their own and marry among themselves. [18] In the years since Vivekananda's death, the specifically Hindu cult aspects of the Ramakrishna Mission have grown greatly. Temples have been erected to Sri Ramakrishna, to his wife the Holy Mother, and to the Swami himself. The use of images in their worship has been encouraged. These cult practices have no doubt brought the Mission closer to its Indian devotees. They make it more exotic to those non-Hindus whose faith it purports to include.

In the third place, we would question the role which the Swami assigns to Western civilization. The weaknesses of that civilization, including its elements of invidious materialism, have been criticized by Western writers themselves. Many of the Swami's criticisms were drawn from these writers, who were simply calling into question Western practice of Western ideals. He was receptive to these criticisms because he came from an area where traditional values had been disrupted by a civilization whose own values he was not yet fully able to enjoy. When he went to the West he viewed it in the light of traditional Hindu values and wounded national pride. Such practices as "women on the stage" were less scandalous to morally sensitive Europeans than they appeared to a Hindu of that time. Possessions which were and are marks of opulence and class distinction to an Indian are often simply conveniences to a person from the West. But it is today an established doctrine of the Ramakrishna Mission that Western civilization is synonymous with materialism and the endless quest for sensuous gratification.

Even a Westerner who is most eager to understand Asian civilizations and the moral and religious insights developed in them may feel repelled by an Asian assumption that his own culture has no such insights to share. Western science grew in part from spiritual values and ways of looking at the world. Technology has liberated men from soul-shriveling drudgery and given them access to intellectual, aesthetic, and spiritual values once limited to special classes in society. The West must be criticized for using its positive freedoms for trivial and destructive ends. But Western "materialism" is not altogether invidious. It expresses and creates some genuinely spiritual values. Both Indians and Westerners need to explore more sensitively, and with better information, the unique values which others have discovered.

Finally, we question Vivekananda's assumption that his Vedanta is the complete fulfillment of all other religions and systems of thought. This assumption is so unquestioned by the Swami's contemporary followers that it is hard for them to see that a critic of it may not reject tolerance itself. But even many other Hindus do not want their faiths to be seen as simply immature perceptions of that full truth which is to be found only in Advaita (non-dualistic) Vedanta.

[17] *The Life,* pp. 309, 450, 651.
[18] *Complete Works,* Vol. V, pp. 233-235.

While compatible with Hindu assumptions, this view as to the relations among religions has not always been held by Hindus. The development which the Swami made of it is a clear counterpart of the Christian fulfillment view which he encountered at the Chicago parliament of religions. It is interesting that he was outraged by its Christian expression. One of the organizers of the parliament said

> We believe that Christianity is to supplant all other religions, because it contains all the truth there is in them and much besides, revealing a redeeming God. Though light has no fellowship with darkness, light does have fellowship with twilight. God has not left himself without a witness, and those who have the full light of the cross should bear brotherly hearts toward all who grope in a dimmer illumination. [19]

A contemporary devotee of the Ramakrishna Mission excoriates this as "patronizing complacence" and "patronization taken for enlightened love."

The "fulfillment" theorist, whether Vedantin or Christian, does not see that his "inclusion" of other points of view does not take in these points of view in at all the same way their devotees hold them. Transmuted by Vedantin assumptions and fitted into an Advaita framework, Vivekananda's versions of Christian theism or naturalistic humanism bear no resemblance to positions actually held by their advocates. This Vedantin position in itself deserves our respect; it may even be true. It is not, however, a position transcending all conflicting claims to truth.

Philosophies and religions which are world-regarding, find truth in history, and give supreme value to personality, are not parts of another system which finds truth through world-renunciation and in a timeless and impersonal Absolute. We do not close our minds to the spiritual attainments of its followers by simply noting that the latter view is a different one. Vivekananda may account for our common experiences with a more adequate philosophy; a follower of the Vedanta will not, however, contribute to religious toleration by telling another what he "really" believes.

From a Christian or Moslem standpoint, the Swami's exuberant "I am God!" will not be recognized as a higher standpoint reconciling all religious differences. [20] However liberal their spirit, this must be seen by Christians and Moslems as blasphemy fraught with grave moral dangers. Otherwise they cease to be Moslems or Christians. It is hard for even the most openhearted Christian to engage in real dialogue with a Hindu who thinks that he has "included" the Christian faith by "realizing the Mother according to the path prescribed in the Bible." And a Moslem might feel equally alienated from a Hindu who assured him that "realization of a person with a long beard and a face deep and serene" is the goal of Islam.

IV

Swami Vivekananda and his followers in the Ramakrishna Mission deserve great respect for services to their country and for contributions to the practice of religious tolerance. Our criticisms of their effort to develop a universal philosophical perspective which will serve as a basis for such practice is testimony to the wide influence which their ideas have had.

Our criticisms, however, have wider implications for other attempts to develop philosophical perspectives from which we can deal with religious and cultural diversity. We are here suggesting that any monistic philosophy has an immediate plausibility which it cannot sustain on closer examination. A genuinely universal philosophy is needed. It will have to account for plurality and uniqueness on more than a provisional basis.

[19] Burke, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

[20] *The Life*, p. 440.

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