Inspirers for a Modern Hinduism
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COMMENTARY

Inspirers for a Modern Hinduism

Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda revived and renewed our religion's spirituality

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Over the last ten years the Vivekananda Centre London, of which I am the director, has worked hard to present and promote a wholesome image of Hinduism in the academic arena of the United Kingdom. The work has produced handsome dividends; we are now in a very strong position to influence the Department of Education, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority as well as many of the university boards in the way they portray Hindu teachings in schools and colleges throughout the country. The source of our authority and inspiration are the spiritual giants of contemporary Hinduism, Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda. Let us share our experiences with the readers.

A few months back we were asked to make a presentation of Hinduism to over 100 Christian ministers at King's School in Canterbury Cathedral. The session generated a very visible thrill in the audience who felt a tremendous affinity with Hinduism. About a month back we conducted assemblies at Watford Grammar School, addressing about 1,400 English boys between the ages of 11 and 18. In the middle of the presentation, without any prompting the boys started to applaud, they had to be asked to stop applauding so that the session could continue! Last week we were asked to address many heads of religious education from some famous schools like Eton. We talked at length about the role of Hinduism in religious education; one could feel the atmosphere in the lecture room becoming charged up. At the end of the session, one lady came over and, in the process of thanking, said, "I have been living in a spiritual desert. Thank you for bringing me out." Whilst she was talking, tears welled up in her eyes and she started to weep. We ask ourselves, why are we able to touch and influence so many hearts, and not just Hindu hearts? The answer

is very simple. We are successful because our presentations draw from the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda.

Who are these personalities and what is their status in Hinduism? At the end of the last century The Times of India carried out a poll to find out who their readers considered was the "Spiritual light of India in the past century." The overwhelming winner was Swami Vivekananda. The spiritual force that drove and guided him was Sri Ramakrishna. This article examines the uniqueness of the teachings of these personalities and their relevance in reviving and refreshing the message of spirituality not only for Hindus but for the whole of mankind.

Experiential religion: Youngsters in the West are dissatisfied with religion which has to be purely a matter of belief; they need more, much more. They are looking for experiential religion. This shows a real awakening, a real desire to experience religion. We sometimes ask our Hindu audience, "Who are the figures of authority in Hinduism? Are they the priests who are so apt in carrying out elaborate liturgy?" The reply we get is that they are not. "Are the figures of authority the storytellers who recount our Hindu histories?" Though mythologies are wonderful tools for making spiritual teachings colorful, these storytellers are not the figures of authority in Hinduism. We continue to inquire, "Does the authority of Hinduism perhaps lie with the pundits? Do these scholars who are so well versed in the scriptures and who are so good at reconciling the various strands of Hindu philosophies hold the authority of Hinduism?" Certainly not, would be the correct Hindu response. The authority of Hinduism lies only with those glorious personalities who have first-hand experience of God. These personalities do not conjure up a God through mental gymnastics or through book learning, nor do they seek accreditation from universities to gain status within the Hindu tradition. The only stipulation required to be a person of authority in Hinduism, or to be truly literate in Hinduism, is this single but very stringent requirement of first-hand experience of God.

Sri Ramakrishna (1836-1886) is one such personality who makes this claim. Not only does he confirm God experience through one pathway prescribed by the Hindus but through a vast number of pathways both from the Hindu and non-Hindu traditions. This is a first in the history of mankind. Arnold Toynbee, the well-known historian, in his foreword to the life of Sri Ramakrishna says, "Religion is not just a matter of study, it is something that has to be experienced and to be lived, and this is the field in which Sri Ramakrishna manifested his uniqueness. His religious activity and experience were, in fact, comprehensive to a degree that had perhaps never before been attained by any other religious genius, in India or elsewhere." The source of everything wonderful and grand and authoritative in the Hindu

tradition becomes visible in the life and teachings of Sri Ramakrishna. Religion cannot be just a matter of belief; it has to be a matter of realization. In a science-oriented world where verification is the buzz-word, such pronouncements about religion supported by experience generate acceptance even from the hard line atheistic lobbies.

The divinity of man: A dynamic teacher will attract dynamic disciples. This was the case with Sri Ramakrishna. This fountainhead of spirituality required a very able disciple to carry his message to the rest of the world. This able disciple was none other than Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902). The aspect of contemporary Hinduism that we emphasize in our presentations is: the divinity of mankind or spiritual humanism. This idea was emphasized in the strongest terms by Swami Vivekananda. Addressing Western audiences, he said, "The Hindu refuses to call you sinners. Ye are the children of God, the sharers of immortal bliss, holy and perfect beings. Ye divinities on earth. Shake off the delusion that you are sheep, you are souls, immortal spirits, free, blest and eternal." When we present this aspect of Swami Vivekananda's teachings, the Western audience is visibly thrilled. No one had ever equated them with divinity! We are not material beings aspiring to spiritual ideas so that we can improve our material status as the humanist claims; we are essentially spiritual beings caught on a material journey, affirms Vivekananda. Materialistic humanism stands no chance against this brand of humanism which can best be called spiritual humanism. Sri Aurbindo commented on Vivekananda's taking this message to the West, "The going forth of Vivekananda marked out the heroic soul destined to take the world between his two hands and change it, was the first visible sign to the world that India was awake, not only to survive but to conquer."

The life of Sri Ramakrishna reflects the evolution taking place within Hinduism. He was once found weighing up the word daya, or compassion, with the word seva, or service. Sri Ramakrishna concluded, daya is not the right attitude for modern Hindus; the correct attitude has to be seva. Who are we to show charity to others? Our job is to serve others as God. Or as he put it: serve jiva (individual souls) as Siva. We hear this message thundered again and again by Vivekananda who proclaimed: The highest worship of God is not worship of images; the highest worship of God is through service to mankind. This particular method of translating religion into practice appeals very strongly to the Western youth we interact with.

Religious pluralism: Professor Ninian Smart, perhaps the most authoritative figure in the field of religious education in the United Kingdom, in his book on world's religions comments, "Swami Vivekananda can be said to be the chief spokesperson

for the modern Hindu ideology. This ideology presented Hinduism not as a backward religion but at the forefront. It was this Hindu who saw his own pluralistic faith as a foreshadowing of the emerging World Religion. With Swami Vivekananda Hinduism as an all-India religion came into being. It is with Vivekananda that Hinduism for the first time gained self-conscious integrity. Various strands of Hinduism that appeared so baffling began to make marvellous sense." Vivekananda came on the world stage in 1893 at the first-ever parliament of religions and, ironically, his first address was given on 9/11. The theme of that first speech was religious pluralism. He quoted the Siva Mahimanstotra, "As the different streams having their sources in different places all mingle their water in the sea, O Lord, the different paths which men take through different tendencies, various though they appear, crooked or straight, all lead to Thee." The Vivekananda Centre continues to present these ideas of religious pluralism to many religious groups. Though there is resistance from the evangelical lobbies of some of these religions, the astute lobbies within these religions are beginning to appreciate the ideas of religious pluralism. We have ensured that the new syllabus for teaching world religions in the United Kingdom has incorporated the ideas of religious pluralism as an essential part of religious education.

The theological challenge on the issue of pluralism comes from the Abrahamic faiths in the guise of equating pluralism to relativism. We respond by saying pluralism is certainly not relativism, or an attitude of "there is no absolute, hence anything goes." Pluralism merely asserts the contextual nature of religious expression. As we are all different, the way we view and approach God will necessarily be different; this is not a statement of compromise but a statement of fact. It cannot be otherwise. These views are gaining acceptance. Recently at a meeting of the religious education council of England and Wales we pointedly asked the Archbishop of Canterbury, "Why do you say, 'We Christians must tolerate other religions?' Is the word tolerate correct? Religious pluralism would disagree with such usage." The Archbishop responded in a gracious manner by saying, "The word tolerate was not right, as it suggests a concessionary attitude towards other religions." What a wonderful response from the head of the Anglican Church. The ideas of pluralism sown by Swami Vivekananda in the West are now beginning to bear fruit in this dramatic manner.

Religious pluralism does not imply that "all religions are the same." In no place in the hundreds of lectures given by Swami Vivekananda do we find any such a naive comment. All religions are different, hence the need to invoke pluralism. The idea of religious pluralism is resisted by some orthodox Hindu groups, who turn the Mahimanstotra hymn on its head and suggest that "maybe the streams do not come down from the same mountain top maybe they come down from different mountain tops." indirectly implying that Hinduism is radically different from other

world religions. If that is the case, then these groups should go up their mountain tops and stay there and stop bothering the rest of mankind. Such a narrow ideology has no room in the modern world. This brand of Hinduism has sacrificed its universal component and appeal.

If it is not possible to reconcile the truth claims of various religions, or between the sectarian movements within the same religion, then all religions are doomed. The challenge from the rationalists of playing one religion against another or one sectarian movement against another will have won. If we press hard any theologian of any world religion to give us some definite "proof or validity " to their religion, in the final instance they all point to their prophet and say, "Because he says so." Religious truths are not validated by debates or discussions, neither are they validated by scriptural injunctions. The only way they are validated is through very intense, personal experiences. This is what the Upanishads teach. The only way religious pluralism, too, can be validated is not through long-winded discussions between scholars of different faiths, but through the validation of this claim by a personality who can claim the same God experience using different pathways prescribed by different religions or by different movements within the same religion. The only personality who has synthesized vastly different spiritual experiences is Sri Ramakrishna. One moment he is in the dvaita mood sporting with the Divine Mother, in the next moment he is engulfed in the bliss of advaita and reports swimming in the ocean of satchidananda. Sri Ramakrishna represents this essential synthesis between vastly differing strands within Hinduism as well as between Hinduism and other world religions.

Hinduism looks upon itself to be a living religion, constantly evolving and refreshing the message of spirituality to suit the changing needs of its people. It has received many knocks; sometimes they came from outside; many a time they came from within. Hinduism has shown its resilience by reacting strongly to all such attacks. Every time it has dug deeper within itself and produced a more comprehensive, a more grandiose response that has engulfed the world with a tidal wave of spirituality. This time around the wave had to be more majestic than ever before. It had to weave together vastly differing approaches promoted within Hinduism with many non-Hindu approaches. It had to draw from the depth of experience and the breadth of vision of ancient and modern sages to replenish the spiritual needs not only of the Hindus but of the rest of mankind. We pay our tribute to Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda, the personifications of this spiritual wave India has unleashed on the world stage.