Philosophy: The Ideal of Universal Religion
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PHILOSOPHY

The Ideal of Universal Religion

Excerpts from a talk by Swami Vivekananda in which he offers that yoga is the essential unity that underlies the the worldâ□□s diverse faiths

B Y S W A M I V I V E K A N A N D A

WHAT THEN DO I MEAN BY THE IDEAL OF A UNIVERSAL RELIGION? I do not mean any one universal philosophy, or any one universal mythology, or any one universal ritual held alike by all; for I know that this world must go on working, wheel within wheel, this intricate mass of machinery, most complex, most wonderful. What can we do then? We can make it run smoothly, we can lessen the friction, we can grease the wheels, as it were. How? By recognizing the natural necessity of variation. Just as we have recognized unity by our very nature, so we must also recognise variation. We must learn that truth may be expressed in a hundred thousand ways, and that each of these ways is true as far as it goes. We must learn that the same thing can be viewed from a hundred different standpoints, and yet be the same thing.

Hundreds of attempts have been made in India, in Alexandria, in Europe, in China, in Japan, in Tibet, and lastly in America, to formulate a harmonious religious creed, to make all religions come together in love. They have all failed, because they did not adopt any practical plan. I have also my little plan. I do not know whether it will work or not, and I want to present it to you for discussion. What is my plan? In the

first place I would ask mankind to recognise this maxim, â□□Do not destroy.â□□ Iconoclastic reformers do no good to the world. Secondly, take man where he stands, and from there give him a lift. If it be true that God is the centre of all religions, and that each of us is moving towards Him along one of these radii, then it is certain that all of us must reach that center. And at the center, where all the radii meet, all our differences will cease; but until we reach there, differences there must be.

There are thousands and thousands of varieties of minds and inclinations. A thorough generalization of them is impossible, but for our practical purpose it is sufficient to have them characterized into four classes. First, there is the active man, the worker; he wants to work, and there is tremendous energy in his muscles and his nerves. His aim is to workâ□□to build hospitals, do charitable deeds, make streets, to plan and to organise. Then there is the emotional man, who loves the sublime and the beautiful to an excessive degree. He loves to think of the beautiful, to enjoy the aesthetic side of nature, and adore Love and the God of Love. Then, there is the mystic, whose mind wants to analyze its own self, to understand the workings of the human mind, what the forces are that are working inside, and how to know, manipulate and obtain control over them. Then, there is the philosopher who wants to weigh everything and use his intellect even beyond the possibilities of all human philosophy.

To become harmoniously balanced in all these four directions is my ideal of religion. And this religion is attained by what we, in India, call Yogaâ□□union. To the worker, it is union between men and the whole of humanity; to the mystic, between his lower and Higher Self; to the lover, union between himself and the God of Love; and to the philosopher, it is the union of all existence. This is what is meant by Yoga. The man who seeks after this kind of union is called a Yogi. The worker is called the Karma Yogi. He who seeks the union through love is called the Bhakti Yogi. He who seeks it through mysticism is called the Raja Yogi. And he who seeks it through philosophy is called the Jnana Yogi. So, this word Yogi comprises them all.

Now first of all let me take up Raja Yoga. What is this Raja Yoga, this controlling of the mind? In the present state of our body we are so much distracted, and the mind is frittering away its energies upon a hundred sorts of things. As soon as I try to calm my thoughts and concentrate my mind upon any one object of knowledge, thousands of undesired impulses rush into the brain, thousands of thoughts rush into the mind and disturb it. How to check it and bring the mind under control is the whole subject of study in RajaYoga.

Now take Karma Yoga, the attainment of God through work. Karma Yoga teaches us how to work for workâ□□s sake, unattached, without caring who is helped, and what for.

There is then the Bhakti Yoga for the man of emotional nature, the lover. Bhakti Yoga teaches them how to love, without any ulterior motives, loving God and loving the good because it is good to do so, not for going to heaven, nor to get children, wealth or anything else. It teaches them that love itself is the highest recompense of loveâ□□that God Himself is love.

We lastly come to the Jnana Yogi, the philosopher, the thinker, he who wants to go beyond the visible. His soul wants to go beyond all that into the very heart of being, by seeing Reality as It is; by realizing It, by being It, by becoming one with that Universal Being. That is the philosopher. This is what this Jnana Yoga teaches. It tells man that he is essentially divine. It shows to mankind the real unity of being, and that each one of us is the Lord God Himself, manifested on earth. All of usâ□□from the lowest worm that crawls under our feet to the highest beings to whom we look up with wonder and aweâ□□all are manifestations of the same Lord.

Lastly, it is imperative that all these various Yogas should be carried out in practice; mere theories about them will not do any good. Religion is realization; not talk, nor doctrine, nor theories, however beautiful they may be. It is being and becoming, not hearing or acknowledging; it is the whole soul becoming changed into what it believes. That is religion.

Swami Vivekananda gave the lecture â□□The Ideal of Universal Religionâ□□ in New York on January 12, 1896.