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Swami Vivekananda's Ethics of Religion

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Swami Vivekananda's Ethics of Religion

A Contribution to a Modern Concept of Religion and Inter-Religious Relations*

By

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Religious unification or separation?

Many religious people believe that the integration of world society is of the greatest importance for mankind. They think that the religions of the world should strive to attain this goal through multi-religious agreement, through inter-religious dialogue, even through the merger of their organisations. Religious unification is supposed to be an effective instrument to encourage world society and to guarantee social peace. Religious differentiation, however, is dubious to these people. It would lead to social splintering and would ultimately be anti-social and extremely dangerous, especially to the economic unification of the world. The people who advocate religious unification look upon the progressing cultural, political and economic unification of the world as a model for religious unity. Therefore, many religious people believe that a unified global religion, or at least a union of world religions, should be implemented today. Options of this kind, however, are utopian in the extreme - confronting the ever-expanding conflicts between the established international religious organisations.

Pragmatists who espouse the doctrine of religious unification therefore propagate the following fundamental tenets:

* Paper read at the Vivekananda Congress 'Vision 2000', Washington, D.C., 1992, and at the Catholic Dharmaram Vidyakshetram, Bangalore (India), 1996. Extended German version: [THEION](#) - Annual for Religious Culture, vol. III, Frankfurt am Main 1994.

1. All religious people believe in the same god or whatever the ultimate reality may be called.
2. Each religion may believe in the ultimate reality in its own way.
3. No religious community is allowed to make converts.
4. Everybody should remain in his original religious community forever.

These tenets are in reality nothing but a kind of a cartel agreement. And this agreement should establish an inter-religious combine, which had to stop competition between the religious organisations and to prevent the individual to leave his original religion. The basic supposition of this concept, however, is that religion today has mainly to be seen as an organised, congregational and institutionalised one. And because of this historical error they are only interested to keep the status quo of the established religious organisations. The propagation of that cartel agreement is rooted in the fear, that the established religions wouldn't survive the radical religious revolution at the end of the 20th century.

Swami Vivekananda's concept of Ishta-religion

It was Swami Vivekananda, who first by intuition recognised this spiritual revolution of the streamline and propagated that new development in traditional terms. According to him true religion is always individualistic. Therefore he says: "We see [then] that a congregational religion can never be" (The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, Mayavati Memorial Edition, Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1984 seqq., vol. IV, 56). That anti-congregational concept of religion reflects Swami Vivekananda's basic idea of modern human beings' inner world: Today only the single human being has to take care of his own salvation, of his last determination, of his inner reality. Evidently Swami Vivekananda says: "The *real* work of religion must be one's own concern." (IV, 56) Consequently any religious congregation and by no means any kind of world unity religion have any importance for the salvation of the individual. On the contrary: Swami Vivekananda warns to engage in such supra-individual kinds of religions; all this only blocks the real spiritual evolution and leads to frustration, disappointment and conflicts: "If you want to be religious, enter not a gate of any organised religions. They do a hundred times more evil than good, because they stop the growth of each one's individual development. ... [Religion] is only between you and God, and no third person must come between you. Think what these organised religions have done!" (I, 474) And he goes on: "If you and I organise, we begin to hate every person." (I, 474) Religious hatred is the fruit of 'organising' religion which means creating a collective religious culture dominating the individual. In order to nip the things in the bud Swami Vivekananda gives warning of danger himself: "Why should I create a disturbance by wanting to tell everyone what my idea is? Other people would come and fight me. They cannot do so if I do not tell them; but if I go about telling them what my ideas are, they will oppose me." (IV 56)

Why does Swami Vivekananda contradict all organised religion and by that the organised inter-religious dialogue, too? He, who took part of the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago hundred years ago? We had already heard: "Religion must be one's own concern." (IV 56) And if "I have an idea of my own" then, so says Swami Vivekananda, "I must keep it sacred and secret, because I know that it need not be your idea" (IV 56). Swami Vivekananda even extends his idea by saying that the open propagation of the own individual religion is an obscenity hurting soul and God: "This Ishta should be kept secret, it is between you and God" (IV 56). "Ishta" - according to Swami Vivekananda - is the basic concept of modern religion. Only the Ishta-concept has got the key how "all the various religions of the world can be understood." (IV 51) In this way Swami Vivekananda radicalises the traditional Ishta-theology; it becomes theology at all. This Ishta-theology explains the nature of each religion in the fol-

lowing way: "This theory of Ishta, therefore, means allowing a man to choose his own religion" (IV 54). The essence of the modern, even of all religion, is that in reality it's a "chosen way" (IV 53). And if they do understand themselves as Ishta-religions, as chosen ways by the individual, only then they are true religions. As regards to Swami Vivekananda the authority of a religion isn't based on a supra-individual truth, but only on the free choice of each individual human being. No father, gurudev, pontiff or leader, not even a family, a clan, a caste, a sampradaya, a church or even society itself have the authority to teach true religion: "What right has my father to put all sorts of nonsense into my head? What right has my master or society to put things into my head?" (IV 55)

Out of this fact that each religion obtains authority only through the free choice of the individual, Swami Vivekananda logically argues: "I must teach myself religion" (IV 55). The basic guru of the modern Ishta-religion is consequently the single human being himself, he or she has to be a self-taught person, an autodidact in religion!

The question of supra-individual and individual authority

Therefore other human beings or organisations aren't able and aren't allowed to become authorities, neither they have even good ideas. Reasonably Swami Vivekananda says: "Perhaps they are good but they may not be my way." (IV 55) And therefore nobody has the right to dictate any human being religious rules: "I have no right to say what shall be your ideal, to force any ideal on you" (IV 56). Here Swami Vivekananda doesn't speak of a violent indoctrination of religious communities; he only speaks of the *individual* which suffers from violent indoctrination of other people. Therefore even the own religious community, the own families, the own jati, the own people or nation are not allowed to dictate doctrines and rites to their individual members. If they don't allow the individual the free choice in spiritual affairs, then family religion, jati religion, sampradaya religion and national religion will become horrible agencies, which pervert the valuable heritage of religion: "How many beautiful things which have become wonderful truths have been nipped in the bud by this horrible idea of a family religion, a social religion, a national religion, and so forth" (IV 55). If supra-individual religious potentates, communities and organisations start to rule the individual proclaiming their own doctrines and rites as absolute religious patterns, everybody has to obey and to practice, then they will produce evil and superstition: "Think of what a mass of superstitions in your head just now about your childhood's religion, or your country's religion, and an amount of evil it does, or can do." (IV 55)

In former times the conscience accepted that religion was prescribed and prefabricated by supra-individual authorities. Normally in those times the conscience told the people: Follow the orders and commands of the pope, the shankaracharyas, the bishops, the acharyas, the church, the sampradaya, the jati, clan and family. Then you will live and die as a good child of God.

This concept was convincing because collective systems were the real social substance of everybody. In reality there were no substantial individuals - only human members of congregations; and these congregations administered the very real truth, the very real basis of the existence of everyone. However, in industrialised areas and in areas which are affected by industrialisation, especially in the urban parts of the society, there is no more an immediate substantial congregation directly and totally supporting the individual. The modern ideology or weltanschauung has drawn the moral consequence that nobody should surrender his spiritual questions and answers to an alien authority. And we can see that this revolution of mod-

ern conscience has the psychological effect that in the long run nobody can follow an alien authority, even if he would enforce himself or would be manipulated.

Through this Ishta-religion the modern human beings bring about a spirituality, which enables them to unfold their own eternal and indestructible shakti. And that kind of shakti is necessary in a world which day and night is asking the individual's energy to realise all the abstract-external obligation of social life.

The new function of supra-individual religion

As the individual has to choose his own religion has to be his own teacher and has to be the religious authority only, the question arises: what is the use of religious teachers and communities? The *guru* Swami Vivekananda makes it perfectly clear to all other gurus: "My duty should be to lay before you all the ideals I know of and enable you to see by your own constitution what you like best and which is most fitted to you" (IV 56). As there are so many ideals the Ishta-oriented teacher shouldn't glorify his own ideals and enforce them on his disciples; just the contrary is asked. But he should not only present all his ideals; his main task should be to encourage the individual to find out by himself that ideal which fits him best.

The next step the teacher has to take, after the individual has found out his specific ideal, is to urge his disciple to accept and to preserve that religion. So the *guru* Swami Vivekananda says to his readers in the '*Addresses on Bhakti-Yoga*': "Take up that one suits you best and persevere in it. This is your Ishta, your special ideal." (IV 56) Or: "I can never teach you anything: you will have to teach yourself; but I can help you perhaps in giving expression to that thought." (IV 55) Speaking to the gurus and communities he compared the individual with a child: "A child teaches itself. But you *help* it to go forward in its own way. What you can do is not of the positive nature, but of the negative. You can take away the obstacles, but knowledge comes out of its own nature. Loosen the soil a little, so that it may come out easily. Put a hedge round it; see that it is not killed by anything, and there your work stops. The rest is a manifestation from *within* its own nature" (IV 55). All the religious teachers and organisations which want to take care of the development of human souls have to be real spiritual servants and not religious rulers.

This concept of religious service, teaching and care taking is radical indeed: Spiritual guidance is not allowed to talk someone into a special religion (e.g. Vaishnava religion or Roman Catholic Religion or what else religion); spiritual service has to be selfless. To give an example: a sufi pir helps an individual who is from catholic background to find his Ishta-religion - and this may be shaiva religion.

The basic function of modern spiritual service is not the propagation of prefabricated ideas which the individual has to be converted to - in order to get salvation. The aim of religious service has to be: pastoral assistance in developing the natural religion of an individual. All religious servants and service agencies fulfill the adequate historical mandate only if they keep strictly under the guidance of the individual. Such a religious service shouldn't be mixed up with a service - dominating hierarchies used to offer. To set an example: the Roman pontiff officially calls himself *servus servorum Dei*, i.e. servant of God's servants. But his kind of service means serving the individual through ruling, because the pope as institutionalised Vicar of Christ and highest shepherd has the right to order what the individual has to believe and to do. Swami Vivekananda's understanding of spiritual service stresses just the opposite. According to him that organisation or person who wants to serve the individual has absolutely

to respect the believer's or disciple's authority. So the real teacher will never decide instead of his disciples even if they would ask him fervently.

The reason of subjugation of supra-individual religion

The reason of such radical attitude of Swami Vivekananda is mainly not based on the idea that the human beings have to be free in their religious affairs; he is stressing much more the opposite unfolding his ethics of Ishta-religion: "That way, which your nature makes it absolutely necessary for you to take, is the right way" (IV 52). Swami Vivekananda doesn't propagate religious arbitrariness; the concept of a spiritual supermarket fundamentally contradicts his idea of Ishta-religion. The individual is religiously not empty and hollow. It has his religion in his own nature, has a natural religion, as Swami Vivekananda says. Therefore the individual can't create his religion ex nihilo; it has to follow his own nature.

As another consequence of this idea of natural religion we can see that socialisation and implantation of collective and alien religion is not possible. True individual religion which as such is substantial and autonomous can deserve our absolute respect only if it originates in the essence of the individual himself. Real religious freedom means the chance of unfolding one's own religious nature and protection against alien religious tutelage: This kind of religious freedom is the highest value of human beings: "Therefore, better die working out your own natural religion than following other's religion, however great it may appear you" (I 474).

Swami Vivekananda's defending of radical spiritual individualism is rooted in his idea of the basic constitution, the nature of human beings, which can't be changed: "All attempts to herd together human beings by means of armies, force or arguments, to drive them pell-mell into the same enclosure and make them worship the same God have failed, and will fail always, because it is constitutionally impossible to do so." (IV 54)

Ethics of Ishta-religion

We saw there is no abstract religious liberty possible; there is only the duty to fulfil one's own natural religion. Hence there follow Swami Vivekananda's ethical principles on true religious behaviour:

1. Nobody is allowed to press his own religion upon other individuals;
2. the individual is not allowed to follow the religion of other people against his own nature;
3. other people are only allowed to help the individual in finding his own natural religion;
4. the individual has strictly to follow his own nature.

Ishta-religion: anti-social?

If today religion has use and power only as long as it's radically individualised and extremely differentiated, then we can ask whether religion has got any use for social integration. This question is answered by Swami Vivekananda in the following sentences: "If there are twenty forms of religion in the world, it is very good; if there [are] four hundred, so much the better - there will be the more to choose from. So we should rather be glad when the number of religions and religious ideas increase and multiply, because they will then include every man and help mankind more. Would to God, that religions multiplied until every man had his own religion, quite separate from that of any other! This is the idea of the Bhakti-Yogi" (IV 37). The more religion is individualised, the more people are included in the world of spirituality. Not religious unification, but religious separation is a real help for mankind, for social integration.

Swami Vivekananda's sentence: "The salvation of India, therefore, depends on the strength of the individual, and the realisation by each man of the divinity within" (V 416) is true even in regard to the whole mankind today. However: "Each individual has to work out his own salvation (i.e. his own natural spirituality; the author), there is no other way ..." (V 415) So we understand Swami Vivekananda's conclusion: "All healthy social changes are the manifestations of the spiritual forces working within, and if these are strong and well adjusted, society will arrange itself accordingly" (V 415). Extreme individualisation of religion brings out those healthy social changes which promote social integration.

Defence of Ishta-religion

We know that Swami Vivekananda is refusing any use of congregational religion flatly. So we have to rise the question whether organisations referring religion have to vanish or whether they can have a useful or even a necessary function for Ishta-religion? In the eyes of Swami Vivekananda congregational religion has the tendency to become a military system: "It is like soldiers in a barrack. Shoulder arms, kneel down, take a book, all regulated exactly." (IV 56) But such a militarization of religion contradicts the natural one; a uniform religion is against human nature. And therefore Swami Vivekananda raises the question: "How can human beings stand this religious drilling?" (IV 56) His answer to such a drilling religion is very clear: "What is the result of this mummery and mockery? It is making a joke of religion, the worst of blasphemy" (IV 56). He doesn't hesitate to state what a catastrophe congregational religion has wrought: "These mummeries have driven out religion" (IV 56). Not devils or atheists or materialistic life style have caused irreligiosity and the loss of spirituality: the congregational religions put their own doctrine upon the individual and oppress his natural religion. They are not concerned about the individual's own destination; they are not interested in his spiritual autonomy; they only want followers of their own ideas. The fundamental disregard of the individual's natural religion really leads to the destruction of serious religiosity. But if Ishta-religion can't be organised neither as a moderate nor as a militaristic congregation then it's very delicate and can easily be shattered. Therefore this religion depends on protection and support of powerful social organisations. But these are not allowed to make any pretences to religious rule. So Ishta-religion needs something like trade unions - voluntary organisations which defend the individual's religious independence and fight for his chance to experience spiritual alternatives. For example, for many years the Vishwa Hindu Parishad has been fighting for the right of the Hindus to get the chance of unfolding - under their own guidance - their individual religion and to protect them against intimidation, deformation and exploitation. And as a modern socio-cultural organisation it helps to establish an adequate cultural environment for Ishta-religion. Vishwa Hindu Parishad is no church or sect or governmental temple committee ruling and exploiting the religiosity of individuals - it's quite the reverse: a new type of cultural organisation which support the growth and the development of Ishta-religion by fighting for religious liberty, independence and self-determination of religion. Political parties which try to develop modern society by religious-ethical motivation are very useful, provided they actively create a sympathetic social environment of Ishta-religion. Supporting religion by such a policy promotes indirectly spiritual shakti. Shakti leads to selfless fulfillment of social duties and this strengthens the social health. The so-called secularist parties very often exploit the traditional religious resources of shakti and don't do anything for their renewal or preservation. They are not interested in a high developed Ishta-religious culture; they prefer religious pattern out of date. They spoliage the religious endowments and in this way institutionalise the non-reformability of traditional religion. Such a policy intends to create circumstances that religion becomes something like opium of the people or an exotic attraction for tourists. But the serious consequences of such a glaring abuse of religion are obvious: the growing spiritual disorientation of the individuals, the progress of crude material-

ism, and the triumph of mass manipulation that means intensification of the inherited weakness of modern personality or in other words its social demolition. Time has gone when governments and political parties as well as sacred communities and their hierarchies could *rule* the religions. If however those leaders try to do it again, then they have to use unfair and immoral methods of manipulation and repression. And then social disintegration follows immediately.

Conclusion

In his address at Paramakudi Swami Vivekananda puts out the basic significance of religion for social integration: "Your spirituality, ..., will have to form the basis of a new order of society." (III 161) Spirituality will do the best for world society if there is religious differentiation as much as possible: "Let each person in the world be separate, if you will; the one principle, the unity will be behind. The more prophets there are, the more books, the more seers, the more methods, so much better for the world" (VI 16). In order to encourage the individual, he enthrones the man in the street as the supreme spiritual authority. For that purpose he is even ready to transgress the most sacred taboo: the authority of rishis, avatars, holy scriptures, mantras and tantras as examples of the holiest authorities of all congregational religions: "You must not merely learn what the rishis taught. Those rishis are gone, and their opinions are also gone with them" (III 447). The application of that very heretical opinion seems even more heretical: "You must be rishis yourselves. You are also men as much as the greatest men that were ever born - even our incarnations" (III 447). The reason of such a provocation is obviously nothing else than Swami Vivekananda's basic conviction that the individual disposes of enough own shakti by his own nature so that he has to create his own means and methods for the solution of his own basic problems: "What can mere book-learning do? What can meditation do? What can the Mantras and Tantras do? You must stand on your own feet" (III 447-448).

Now we are able to formulate Swami Vivekananda's historical socio-religious law and his extremely modern vision 2000 at the beginning of this century. The law runs as follows: The more religious differentiation, the more individual strength; the more individual strength, the better the world. His vision: Through radical differentiation there will be individual religions only so that at last the hidden spiritual unity can realise all its power; and all spiritual servants will serve the natural religion only; and the individuals will freely fulfill their social duties and accept the other ones as brothers and sisters. More and more social integration and social solidarity will follow because natural religion will have grown into a matured shakti.