VIVEKANANDA'S UNIVERSAL RELIGION: FROM ADVAITIC IDEALISM TO ETHICAL HUMANISM

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Abstract

Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902) remains one of the most influential voices of modern Hinduism. Many people think of his idea of a "Universal Religion" as a form of metaphysical inclusivism based on Advaita Vedanta.This paper examines Vivekananda's concept of Universal Religion by foregrounding its ethical rather than purely metaphysical character.Vivekananda turned Vedantic non-duality into a moral code of service and social change. For him, to recognise the divine in all beings meant that religion must manifest as action: feeding the hungry, educating the marginalised, and uplifting society. This paper aims to uncover the ethical dimension of Vivekananda's universalism mainly in three views: religion as lived ethics, service as spiritual practice, and social reform as the natural outcome of universal values. It utilises his writings and the work of other scholars to place his ideas within the context of late nineteenth-century colonial India, compares them to those of modern reformers, and demonstrates both the strengths and weaknesses of his approach. The study comes to the conclusion that Vivekananda's universalism must be understood less as a set of beliefs and more as an ethical praxis. It provides a model of religion as moral duty that is still useful for today's community work and social justice.

Keywords: Vivekananda, Universal Religion, Ethics, Service, Social Reform, Advaita Vedanta, Universalism

Introduction

Religion and ethics were inseparably intertwined in the thought of Swami Vivekananda. Vivekananda was a disciple of Sri Ramakrishna and a herald of Vedanta to the West, Vivekananda reinterpreted Advaita philosophy for a modern, global context. His concept of a Universal Religion, articulated with fervour at the 1893 Chicago Parliament of Religions, has garnered significant acclaim as a forerunner to pluralism. However, reducing his vision to metaphysical inclusivism obscures a crucial element, as Vivekananda's universalism was fundamentally ethical in nature.

For Vivekananda, each soul is potentially divine, and to realise this divinity, one must serve humanity. Religion, he declared, was "not in doctrines, not in dogmas, nor in intellectual argumentation, but in realisation; not in learning, but in being and becoming" (Vivekananda, n.d., Vol. 2). Such realisation was not abstract mysticism but active service: "Service to man is service to God" (Yatiswarananda, 1959, p. xxxiii).

This paper explores Vivekananda's universalism as ethical praxis. It argues that three interrelated aspects define this vision, such as religion as lived ethics, service as spiritual practice, and social reform as the embodiment of universal values. After analysing his Vedantic foundations, the discussion highlights how service and reform were integral to his reinterpretation of Hindu thought in colonial India. Further, it also examines how his teachings is significant with contemporary efforts to foster interfaith understanding and promote social justice in a diverse world.

Theoretical Foundations of Vivekananda's Universalism

Advaita Vedanta and the Oneness of Existence: Advaita Vedanta formed the philosophical foundation of Vivekananda's thought. Drawing on Śaṅkara's doctrine of non-dualism, he affirmed that Brahman alone is the ultimate reality and that this divinity is present in all beings. "Each soul is potentially divine" (Vivekananda, n.d., Vol. 1, *Raja Yoga*).This metaphysical view shaped his universalism: if the divine is present everywhere, then every religion, individual, and community reflects some dimension of truth. Vivekananda believed that the ontological unity demands ethical responsibility, i.e., to deny another's dignity was to deny one's own divine nature. Thus, metaphysical non-duality became the moral ground for social equality and interreligious harmony.

Universalism as Ethical Inclusivity: Unlike rigid exclusivism, Vivekananda's universalism sought harmony among religions. When Vivekananda proclaimed in Chicago that "we accept all religions as true" (Vivekananda, n.d., Vol. 1, *Response to Welcome*), he was making more than a philosophical assertion. He was also advancing an ethical position: if all paths lead to the divine, then no community can be despised and every person deserves respect. Rambachan (2015) emphasises that Vivekananda reworked Advaita into a theology of liberation, where non-duality implied social equality. In this reinterpretation, spiritual realisation and moral obligation became inseparable because the realisation of Brahman was incomplete without the practice of compassion and justice.

Religion and Ethics

Religion Beyond Dogma: Vivekananda rejected the idea that religion consists merely of rituals or fixed doctrines. For him, religion was revealed through ethical conduct. This view is captured in his remark, "It is good to be born in a church, but it is bad to die there" (Vivekananda, n.d., Vol. 2, *Bhakti or Devotion*). Religious organisations were helpful places to start, but their main goal was to bring out the holy in people and motivate them to do the right thing. He always said not to confuse dogma with realisation, saying that outward obedience often takes the place of real spiritual growth. For Vivekananda, the direct experience of the divine within oneself was where the lines between religions ended. Rituals and texts were only useful if they made people more compassionate, strong, and free inside. By shifting the focus from external authority to inner transformation, Vivekananda redefined religion as a dynamic, experiential pursuit rather than a fixed system of belief.

Ethical Living as Realisation: The authenticity of religion, Vivekananda insisted, was measured by the fact that ethics were the best way to tell if a faith was real. Being kind, honest, brave, and willing to help others were not extras; they were at the heart of faith. It's not about books or ideas, but about being good and doing good. His idea of universal religion was different from abstract philosophy because it was based on morality. That's why he thought moral virtue was the live sign of Advaitic realisation, the proof someone really understood that everything is one. For Vivekananda, ethical living was not merely a social obligation but an expression of spirituality itself. Service was, in this sense, meditation put into action. By grounding morality in the divine nature of the self, he showed how inner realisation must take shape in outward responsibility. His universalism therefore moved beyond abstract inclusivism and became a form of practical humanism, bringing spiritual insight and moral action together.

Service as Spiritual Practice

Service to Man as Service to God: Perhaps Vivekananda's most enduring phrase is seeing God in the poor. As he points out that "who has served and helped one poor man seeing Shiva in him, without thinking of his caste, or creed, or race, or anything, with him Shiva is more pleased than with the man who sees Him only in temples?" (Vivekananda, n.d., Vol. 3, *Lectures from Colombo to Almora*). Because he understood that service was not charity but worship. By serving others, one served the divine. Further he said that "if you cannot worship your brother man, the manifested God, how can you worship a God who is unmanifested" (Vivekananda, n.d., Vol. 2, *Practical Vedanta and Other Lectures*). This understanding led Vivekananda to regard social service as a spiritual discipline equal in importance to prayer or meditation. He rejected the notion that spirituality required withdrawal from the world, locating holiness instead in compassion. Acts of service, for him, were ways of encountering the divine presence already residing in others. In this sense, philanthropy was not merely secular benevolence, but a sacred duty, fusing devotion, ethics, and self-realisation into one unified path.

Institutionalising Service

The Ramakrishna Mission: Vivekananda founded the Ramakrishna Mission in 1897 to make this goal a reality. Its motto, "Átmano mokshártham jagad hitáya cha" (for one's own salvation and for the welfare of the world), showed how he combined faith with service. It became an important part of its goal to help people during famines, floods, and plagues. He said that religion wasn't something to hide away from, but something to get involved with. Vivekananda understood the Mission not merely as a charitable organisation but as a spiritual order in which service itself functioned as prayer. Every act of compassion became a sacred act, and every worker a servant of humanity. By embedding kindness in everyday life,

he gave concrete expression to Advaita's abstract idea of oneness. As this organisational model showed, realising the divine could happen in groups as well as one-on-one, it rooted faith in social duty.

Service and Self-Realisation: Service was also transformative for the server. By overcoming egoism and realising the unity of all beings, service became a path to self-realisation. Thus, ethics and spirituality were mutually reinforcing. He called this process "Practical Vedanta," where one practices non-duality not through speculation but through empathy. Every act of unselfish service weakened the illusion of separateness and affirmed unity with the divine. Thus, service was not a diversion from spiritual pursuit but its direct continuation. Through such action, one moved from knowing oneness intellectually to experiencing it existentially.

Social Reform and Universalism

Critique of Caste and Superstition: Vivekananda criticised the ossification of caste and the burden of superstition that had weakened Hindu society. "Our religion is in the kitchen, Our God is the cooking-pot, and our religion is, "Don't touch me, I am holy". If this goes on for another century, every one of us will be in a lunatic asylum", he lamented, referring to ritual purity obsessions (Vivekananda, n.d., Vol. 3, *Lectures from Colombo to Almora*). For him, real faith wasn't about strict social differences, but about realising that we are all one. He did not agree with any religion that divided people based on their birth or rite status, saying that went against the heart of Advaita. He thought that real faith had been replaced by superstition, which had turned religion into a machine for following rules. His criticism was not an attack on tradition; it was a call for it to be brought back to life through kindness and reason. Through going back to the basic idea of spiritual unity, Vivekananda hoped to free Hinduism from the control of priests and the stagnation of society.

Education and Empowerment

Education was a central component of his reform agenda. He envisioned an education system that built strength of character, moral courage, and self-reliance: "We want that education by which character is formed, strength of mind is increased, the intellect is expanded, and by which one can stand on one's own feet" (Vivekananda, n.d., Vol. 3, *Conversations and Dialogues*). Universalism here meant equal access to the means of self-realisation. Vivekananda's ideas about education combined spiritual growth with practical skills so that people could become both awakened and responsible members of society. Rather than just gathering facts, he saw education as a way to awaken inner power. He thought that learning was a holy way to find the divine in oneself. oneself. By connecting learning with moral character, he presented education as the basis for both national renewal and human dignity.

Reform as Ethical Praxis

In all these dimensions, social reform was not separate from universalism but its natural expression. If all beings are divine, society must reflect that truth in its pursuit of justice, equality, and compassion. For Vivekananda, spirituality divorced from social concern was hypocrisy; realisation demanded engagement with the suffering world. Reform was thus not an external project but a form of collective self-realisation, where moral action affirmed the unity of life. He saw national awakening as both ethical and spiritual, rooted in selfless service. In this synthesis of religion and reform, he offered a model of social ethics that transformed metaphysical oneness into moral obligation.

Comparative and Critical Perspectives

Contrast with Other Reformers: Compared with Rammohan Roy, who emphasised rational theism, and Gandhi, who later stressed nonviolence and satyagraha, Vivekananda's distinctive contribution was linking Advaitic metaphysics with organised service. DeMichelis (2004) places him at the heart of "Neo-Hinduism," where spirituality was reinterpreted as active engagement. Vivekananda believed that spiritual awakening was the key to social rebirth, while Gandhi and Roy focused on moral defiance and reason. He turned the inner feeling of togetherness into a moral code for the good of the country and all people. This combination let him combine thought and action, bringing religious goals and public duty

together. Consequently, his reformism bridged the gap between mysticism and modernity, offering a vision of religion that could energise both individual transformation and social regeneration.

Ethical vs. Metaphysical Universalism

Vivekananda's universalism was less about doctrine and more about ethics. In a philosophical sense, his claim that all faiths are true leaned toward inclusivism. But his stress on service and acceptance gave it moral meaning. Gregg (2019) says that his "universal Advaita" accepted other ways while still rooted them in Vedanta. This kind of charity was balanced by a sense of order. Metaphysical non-dualism was turned into moral duty by Vivekananda. This made meditation available to people who were not intellectual leaders. He changed the subject from hypothetical doctrine to real goodness, arguing that truth must show itself in actions. Still, his dependence on Advaita's hierarchical system made it harder for him to be pluralistic because it made Vedanta seem like the most complete of all religions. Still, this ethical turn in philosophy was a big step toward combining religion with social awareness, turning inner peace into service to others.

Limitations

Critics have noted certain limitations in Vivekananda's thought. He often expressed his ideas in broad terms and did not always fully address entrenched structural issues such as caste privilege. As a result, his universalism could at times appear more idealistic than practically grounded. But what made it strong was that it could move people to do the right thing and bring people together. He rarely talked about formal oppression or economic differences that made real equality hard to achieve. His emphasis on personal virtue and character formation was insightful, but it did not always extend to a sustained analysis of social structures. Moreover, while inclusive in language, his universalism sometimes carried the confidence of a Hindu revivalist outlook. Even so, his appeal to unity and selfless service offered a moral framework that continues to inspire interfaith cooperation and civic ethics in the present.

Contemporary Relevance

Interfaith Cooperation Through Service**:** Vivekananda's morals are similar to those used in modern community projects. Patel (2018) says that groups working together on service projects is a good way to encourage cooperation between different faiths. Feeding the hungry or teaching kids together is a better way to show acceptance than talking about doctrine. When people work together in this way, faith differences don't divide them, they bring them together. Vivekananda's model of "Practical Vedanta" saw this shift from religious argument to working together on moral issues coming. He replaced vague tolerance with mutual duty by focusing on service as a point of agreement. This approach continues to shape modern interfaith organisations, which find in shared compassion a more enduring basis for unity than intellectual agreement.

Civic Life and Social Justice

Varshney's study of intercommunal networks in India in 2002 shows that shared public institutions keep people from getting violent. The moral base for these kinds of networks could be Vivekananda's philosophy of acceptance. His stress on equality and respect for others goes beyond what is said today about human rights. He didn't see social unity as a political system. Instead, he saw it as a moral requirement that came from the fact that people are divine. So, justice was both social and spiritual, because it showed that all people have the same Self. His ideas connect moral theory and political ethics by putting a religious sense of duty at the heart of social fairness. In the diverse societies of today, this kind of vision pushes people to turn their spiritual understanding into real political participation.

Global Humanitarianism

 Because of things like poverty, migration, and environmental damage, Vivekananda asked people to see the holy in those who are on the outside. This is a clear call to humanitarian ethics.His universalism urged religious traditions to demonstrate their value through kindness and justice rather than exclusion. By affirming the sacredness of all life, he extended religious

concern beyond national and ethnic boundaries. In this sense, his vision anticipated modern humanist ideals that link faith with global solidarity and mutual care. His theory says that helping other people is the greatest form of prayer, whether it's in response to poverty, forced migration, or damage to the environment. Vivekananda's universalism connects spiritual awareness with the most important needs of human health in this way, making it a moral basis for modern global ethics.

Conclusion

Swami Vivekananda's Universal Religion is often celebrated for its pluralist metaphysics, but its enduring significance lies elsewhere. Grounded in Advaita Vedanta, it proclaimed the oneness of existence. However, more importantly, it translated that oneness into an ethic of acceptance, service, and reform. Religion, for Vivekananda, was not in speculation but in action; not in temples alone but in schools, hospitals, and relief camps.

So, for him, universalism was a moral practice: to see the divine in everyone meant to serve everyone. His vision was too idealistic and didn't always take into account how unfair things were in society. However, it was good at getting people to do the right thing and inspiring groups like the Ramakrishna Mission.

His morals are still useful in pluralistic communities today. For interfaith unity, social support, and aid work to continue, we need a bigger picture than just tolerance. This kind of view can be found in Vivekananda's universalism, which should not be read as theological inclusivism but as moral duty. It tells us that the real test of faith is not how well it fits with metaphysics, but how well it helps people.

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