

A Study of Universal Religion and Swami Vivekananda

Prakash Mandal., *Ph.D. Scholar*

Vivek Kumar Pal., *Supervisor*

NIILM University, Kaithal, Haryana.

Abstract

This study examines the concept of universal religion in the philosophy of Swami Vivekananda and explores its significance in bridging spiritual traditions, human values, and global harmony. The research analyses Vivekananda's interpretation of Vedanta, his vision of religious unity, and his efforts to present Indian spiritual thought as a universal philosophy beyond sectarian boundaries. The study also highlights his role as a mediator between Eastern and Western philosophical traditions, particularly through his historic participation in the Parliament of Religions at Chicago in 1893. A doctrinal and historical approach has been adopted by analysing primary and secondary sources related to Vivekananda's writings, speeches, and philosophical interpretations. The findings reveal that Vivekananda's concept of universal religion is based on the unity of existence, acceptance of diverse religious paths, spiritual realization, and practical application of Vedantic principles in human life. His philosophy emphasizes tolerance, service to humanity, and the manifestation of inner divinity as essential elements for individual and social transformation. The study concludes that Vivekananda's vision of universal religion remains relevant in contemporary times for promoting intercultural understanding, peace, and spiritual harmony among diverse communities.

Keywords: Universal Religion, Swami Vivekananda, Vedanta Philosophy, Spiritual Unity, Religious Harmony, Indian Philosophy, Humanism

INTRODUCTION:

This journey was a significant milestone in his life, and the numerous events and experiences connected to his travels are captivating explorations into the diverse richness and reflecting his

profound character and remarkable abilities in 1893 Vivekananda travelled to America to participate in the parliament of Religions scheduled to take place in Chicago that September. He was neither officially invited nor registered as a delegate. He managed to enter the Parliament despite some challenges. When it was his opportunity to speak to the distinguished gathering, he stood up like the dawn and addressed the ‘Sisters and Brothers of America’. That heartfelt appeal captivated the Parliament and the western nations. Transcending unchanging beliefs and restrictive doctrines, he preached of unity and globalism; his words arrived like a revitalizing breeze to an asphyxiated populace. He spent several months in America giving lectures, teaching, and assisting Westerners in their study of Indian Philosophy.¹

He then travelled to Europe and England. He had turned into a link of comprehension between the East and the West. Vivekananda showcased the Sanatana Dharma of India at the Parliament of Religions, convened in Chicago in 1893. He succeeded in captivating the individuals from western nations with the inclusive, non-sectarian religion and philosophy of India, and they warmly embraced Vivekananda, showing a keen interest in understanding Indian religion and philosophy. He believed in the Sanatana Dharma and its noble concepts and universal ideals, which eventually captivated the hearts of the Western people. In 1897,² he came back to India. The country came together united to pay tribute to him. The people recognized in him a new Sankara who had emerged to infuse life and energy into the homeland. Vivekananda urged his compatriots to embrace the Indian national ideal of renunciation, awakened their pride in being Indian, and revealed how spiritual culture was the key to India’s eternal existence. He transformed ‘Bharat’ into a ‘Prabuddha Bharat.’ However, he went beyond merely advising and preaching.⁶ He was competent Vivekananda was still under forty when he attained Mahasamadhi. However, his age should not be measured in solar years. For, in merely ten years of public service, he had instilled in human awareness concepts that many require one thousand and five hundred years to fully develop. His life’s work has an Indian dimension, as well as an international aspect. In each of the areas, his contribution has been distinctive. Vivekananda, a remarkable figure, devoted his entire life to the genuine betterment of humanity. In the vigour of his ideas, humanism is the primary

element that should be prioritized. The main focus of his motivational speeches for everyone was humanity—its growth, advancement, and realization. Vivekananda's perspective in his philosophy is comprehensive in both nature and essence. His philosophical goal is to foster an awareness of global civilization by integrating the key insights that various cultures currently possess. This philosophy holds great importance today in fostering worldwide harmony.³

Vivekananda dedicated his life to promoting the spiritual unity of all humanity. He was a thinker who sensed, appreciated, engaged with, and lived life intensely in every detail. His teachings connect to spiritual and physical experiences, emphasizing the development of purity and strength. Vivekananda discussed the natural and harmonious growth of the hidden abilities within humans. His heartfelt plea to the world was clear and unmistakable. For him, the goal of all education and training should focus on developing the individual and fostering personal growth. He fully recognized the industrial advancement of the West, but his philosophy encompassed something deeper. He believes that the same divine presence is behind everything.⁷

He claimed that a rational and intelligent man may possess great wealth and power, yet he might not attain peace of mind unless he realizes his divine essence. This transformation of the individual into a complete person is what Vedanta refers to as the spiritual development of humanity. Vivekananda, the renowned disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, emphasized this sacred message of his guru beyond the socio-political progress of the West. Vivekananda dismissed both emotionalism and mysticism. He was completely a rationalist. He was very drawn to the persona of Keshab Chandra Sen, the prominent leader of the Brahmosamaj. He saw it as a reflection of himself for the moment.⁴

However, this type of existence; absence of spiritual richness could not bind him securely to that establishment for an extended period. He stepped back and started to reach out to the heads of various religious groups, asking, "Have you ever encountered God?" "but received no satisfactory response. Finally, Sri Ramakrishna pleased him with a straightforward response, stating that numerous stars are visible in the night sky but none when the Sun comes up. Thus, one cannot claim that stars are absent from the sky in daylight. A person may not discover God during times

of ignorance, but that does not imply that God does not exist. He was greatly impacted by the way of life Sri Ramakrishna led. He discovered a mentor who welcomed uncertainty and rejected blind obedience.⁵

This trait of his master left a significant impression on Vivekananda. Additionally, his master's teachings to perceive the truth from various viewpoints fostered in Vivekananda a freedom of thought, resulting in self-sufficiency and respect for truth. It is claimed that Vivekananda serves as a commentator on Sri Ramakrishna. However, he, with immense intellect and profound insight, made such a unique contribution that his commentary transformed into a philosophy in its own right. Vivekananda understood that for Vedanta to transform into a universal religion, its teachings needed to be made very practical. Holiness, purity, and charity are not solely owned by any Church globally. The answers to every issue, whether national or international, are found in the awakening of every soul to recognize the divinity inside. He strongly believed that only the ancient heritage of India could enhance world civilization.⁸

REVIEW OF LETRATURE:

Religion is viewed as a connection to a higher experience and God, but realization of Deity is necessary for true value, as noted by Alexander. Various definitions from scholars like Max Muller, E.B. Tylor, and Frazer illustrate different aspects of religion, from belief in spirits to propitiation of superior powers. The meaning of "dharma" has evolved to encompass man's privileges, duties, and obligations. In Indian philosophy, the Vedantic perspective posits that all theistic religions must ultimately yield to the supreme spirit. Vivekananda emphasizes that all religions encapsulate the stages of Vedanta philosophy essential for spiritual growth, while the understanding of religion is still in progress, leading to incomplete definitions.⁹ Western views are typically theistic, with figures like Flint and William James asserting that anything beyond God is irrational and impossible. Galloway defines religion as man's faith in a higher power, addressing emotional needs through worship and service. The definition of religion by Galloway, focusing on faith in a power greater than man, aligns well with theism. While some logicians dispute the role of emotion in religion, Galloway associates it with emotional satisfaction and security, echoing Freud's view that

belief in God provides a sense of security against human helplessness. A comparative study of major world religions indicates that, despite some non-essential differences, they share fundamental truths, reflecting a unified desire for the supreme among their teachings.¹⁰

He writes in 1895 to the organizers of 'Brahmavadin', a magazine proposed to be started in Madras, "Now I will tell you my discovery. All of religion is contained in the Vedanta that is in the three stages of the Vedanta philosophy, Dvaita, Visishtadvaita and Advaita; one comes after the other. These are the three stages of spiritual growth in man. Everyone is required. This is the essential of religion. Hinduism is the application of Vedanta to the various Indian ethnic practices and beliefs. The first stage, Dvaita, is Christianity when it is applied to the ideas of European ethnic groups, Islam when it is applied to Semitic groups, and Advaita when it is applied in its Yoga perception form is Buddhism. Now, by religion is meant the Vedanta; the application must vary according to the different needs, surroundings and other circumstances of different nations.⁴ You will discover that philosophy is the same for the Saktas, Saivas, and others, and that they apply it to their particular cults and forms. ¹¹The concept of a personal God like Krishna, Siva and Kali was contrary to the western mind. The rationalist became concerned about the apparent contribution that advocating Advaita and worshipping a family God like Vishnu made in every way made.¹² Really there is nothing more surprising in worshipping an image of God than in accepting a piece of paper as money. It is symbolism, pure and simple, and symbols run this world of Maya. The thorn of Maya has to be extracted by means of another thorn of a personal God, and then both are to be thrown away. Vivekananda stated, "The personal God is the totality of all souls, not the human alone," to explain this symbolism. The will of the totality nothing can resist. It's what we know as Law. That's what we mean when we talk about Siva, Kali, and so on.⁵

METHODOLOGY:

The methodology to be applied in present research will be doctrinal as well as empirical which involve collections of data from primary and secondary sources like various statutes, books, international convention and discussions. Primary data is collected by the help of questionnaire

method. Secondary data is collected by books, newspapers. Secondary data is also collected by online sources. This methodology will apply for all objectives.

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The study's method holds significant importance in research work. It is the method of exploring the issue. A research project can achieve success if a suitable approach is utilized. In this research, a historical approach was utilized to ensure the study was organized and efficient. As stated by Best and Kahn (1992). P.24) "Historical research delineates what existed." The procedure includes examining, documenting, analyzing, and interpreting past events to find generalizations that aid in comprehending both the past and present, and to some degree, in predicting the future.

Therefore, historical research goes beyond simple counting past events; it also aids in comprehending the present and predicting the future, albeit to a limited extent. It has been correctly noted (Ibid, P. 57) that historical analysis can focus on a person, a concept, a movement, or an organization. Nevertheless, none of these items of historical study can be viewed separately. Individuals cannot be examined historically without taking into account their engagement with the ideas, movements, and institutions of their era. Consequently, examining Educational Philosophy and its significance for the contemporary Indian education system could effectively be categorized as historical analysis and conclusions. The historical method was determined to be appropriate for this study as it effectively meets the study's objectives.

Concerning the historical approach. Mehlman (1952, P. 252) states, "Historical research seeks to illuminate past concepts, movements, and practices that could assist in addressing current issues." The historical method of educational research involves techniques that utilize historical records,

documents, and artifacts. It addresses issues pertaining to certain aspects of past life and seeks to critically uncover the truth.

OBSERVATION & RESULT:

Study of Universal Religion and Vivekananda

Hinduism, commonly referred to as the Aryan religion, is a form of religion. This Aryan faith lacks a specific deity but relies on the essential and spiritual principles that regulate and uphold our spiritual existence. It cannot be considered sectarian; instead, it is universal as it encompasses the principles of all faiths globally. The principles presented by the Vedas are vast and boundless in their extent, and it can be argued that all the world's religions are fundamentally rooted in the universal concept of the Vedic faith. Many of the foundational principles and doctrines of Buddhism are present in the significant teachings of the Upanisads, and elements of Christianity can also be observed in the teachings of Lord Buddha. Jesus, the Christ, is believed to have arrived in India via Central Asia with his disciples, where he explored and absorbed Buddhist religious principles and practiced the Yoga-sadhana of Hinduism. In the mysterious life of Jesus, Russian traveler Nicholas Notovitch recounted a manuscript kept in the Hemis monastery of Ladakh, which contains a genuine narrative of Jesus, the Christ's, unknown life.

In all honesty, universal religion involves more than merely believing in a collection of doctrines or dogmas, or in a personal God. This faith does not simply indicate a worship of any type of the Divine; it only represents a fear of or respect for God. It does not rely solely on complete adherence to Divine commands; rather, as Professor Max Muller states, it exists in the understanding of the Infinite via all revelations that can shape the moral character of humanity. The awareness of the Infinite or the understanding of the Absolute Being, revered through various forms and titles, is the fundamental aspect of all faiths.

The idea of a universal religion illustrates humanity's spiritual journey, which is expressed through different religions globally. These religious groups have been perpetually arguing with each other.

Every religious group asserts the sole right to exist. It regards its own teachings and its own structure as superior to all others. Despite the conflicts, the majority of significant religious sects persist in existence. These conflicts actually bolster the sects to grow and thrive rather than diminish them. Vivekananda believes it is a pointless endeavor to unify all of humanity under a single approach to spiritual thought. If we all share the exact same thoughts, there will be no thoughts left to consider. The factions and disputes are necessary. It is ‘the conflict of ideas, the distinction of ideas that stimulates thought.’ Sects will exist as long as humanity contemplates. There must be diversity. To Vivekananda, variation signifies life. However, a question emerges: How can all these variations be accurate?..... In what way can opposing views be valid simultaneously?

Spiritual renewal is the central theme of this faith. Based on the preceding discussion, it can be concluded that universal religion represents the broadest idea affirming the singular nature of religion for all people globally. Describing universal religion, Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa stated that the world's religions are neither contradictory nor opposed to each other. There are different stages of the singular Eternal Religion. M.K. Gandhi stated, “I do not value Hinduism more than any other faith, but rather the religion that goes beyond Hinduism, transforming one's essence, linking one inseparably to the inner truth, and continually cleansing.” Sri Ramakrishna once remarked, “There has never been my religion or yours, nor my national religion or yours.” There have not been numerous religions; there is solely one.

. That is religion. Naturally, the tide turns, and what has come to the rescue? The study of comparative religions may be the answer. The study of various religions reveals that, in essence, all religions of the world are one. According to Vivekananda, there are three distinct stages of ideas regarding the soul or god in the study of the various religions of the world. First of all, every religion acknowledges that, in addition to the body, there is a part of something that is said to be immutable, eternal, and never dies—i.e., pure immortal by nature—and that this part does not change like the body. The essential part of us lacked a beginning and an end. We are able to sense the very existence of another eternal Being that has no beginning or end—God, who stands above

all of us and this eternal nature. People generally seem to talk about the beginning of the world, the beginning of man. The beginning of the cycle is simply referred to as the "beginning." That which has a beginning must also have an end, as the beginning also indicates the end. The beginning of a cycle is the beginning of creation. The soul of man will never die, but the body will one day. Another set of ideals for perfection may emerge from the soul's concepts. At first, the soul as a whole is complete. Man makes himself unclean through his own actions. But he can get back to his old, pure nature. Some claim that all fables and symbols contain these points. However, a thorough examination of these statements reveals that they all teach that the human soul is perfect by nature and that man must regain that purity. However, the question of how it would be possible arises. It is without a doubt through God's knowledge. We have been seeing that all the religions of the world teach the eternal existence of the soul, and its tendencies are dimmed, but its original purity is to be regained by the knowledge of God. Again, a question can be put – what is the idea of God in these various religions? The fundamental concept of God was not clear or vivid. It is evident that the most ancient nations held beliefs in various deities like the sun, earth, fire, and water. If we look at the ancient Jews, we can see that many gods who are enraged fight. Then we get Elohim whom the Jews and the Babylonians worshipped. Next, we have a single supreme God. This idea of course, differs from tribe to tribe. Each of them claims their own God to be the greatest. The medium through which these races attempted to demonstrate it was combat. The one was able to do the best fighting seemed thereby that its God was the greatest. These races were more or less savage. However, better and better ideas gradually overtook the older ones. Those 176 old ideas have been put on hold. None of these religions came into existence overnight; they all developed over time. Everyone was found out bit by bit. The next idea that we can get is monotheism, or the belief in a single, all-powerful, all-knowing God who is the creator of the universe. This one God is believed to be extra-cosmic; he has been dwelling in the heavens. He is shown to have the gross ideas of his creators: he had two sides, a bird in his hand, and so on. However, it is important to note that the one God of the world, also known as the God of gods, has replaced the tribal gods forever. However, all he is is an extra-cosmic God. He can't be approached; nothing can get close to him. In the new Testament it has been taught, 'Our Father who art in

heaven' – God in the heaven is separated from men. While he is in heaven, we have been living on earth. Humankind receives instruction regarding God's immanent nature later. He is not only God in heaven, but on earth, also. He is the human God within each of us. In the philosophy of the Hindus, there is evidence of a similar level of God's proximity to humans. But let us not stop therein. We, again get the stage of non-dualism where every man can realize that the God he has been worshipping is not merely the Father in heaven and on earth but that 'I and my Father are one.' In his soul, man begins to believe in himself as God. He realizes that he is nothing more than a lesser version of God. The reality in me is He; the reality in Him is I. In light of non-dualistic philosophy, the gap that existed between God and man has been closed in this way. As a result, men may possess the heavenly kingdom once they realize God. 177 The various stages of development are supremely necessary with a view to attaining purity and perfection. The changing systems of religion are at bottom founded on the similar notions. Jesus Christ puts that the kingdom of heaven has been within man. Again he says, 'Our Father who art in heaven.' How can these two sayings be reconciled? As a result, Christ was conversing with uninformed religious people. It was necessary to speak in the people's own languages in order to communicate with them. The masses looked for such concrete ideas that can be grasped by their sense ability. It's possible for a world-renowned philosopher to remain a child of religion. A man of highly developed state of spirituality can only realize how the kingdom of heaven may exist within him. In this way, it can be seen that the direct contradictions and puzzles in all of the world's religions point to different stages of development. Therefore, we, the human beings possess no right to blame any one for his religion. Forms and symbols are essential at various stages of development, and the souls are able to comprehend these languages at each stage. In relation to his concept of universal religion, Vivekananda presents the following idea: religion is not made up of doctrines or dogmas. The belief in dogmas or doctrines is not an important thing, but what we realize.

The various creeds are the historical developments of the formless truth while the source is one and inviolable. Every human being is co-related with the society he lives in. If one individual is detached from his traditional roots he becomes abstract. It is evident that every religion is a

dynamic movement. No historical religious tradition can have truth absolute and changeless. The truth is 192 all-pervasive by nature, forming the fundamental basis of every religion in the world. This unique reality has been being interpreted by different ways in different languages.

CONCLUSION:

Vivekananda was a traveller and thinker who moved freely between the two great worlds of the East and the West, as well as between the past and the present. His outlook was never restricted by the limitations of age, race, tradition, or geography. He refused to live within a closed and stagnant intellectual world and did not hesitate to question customs, beliefs, and doctrines merely because they had been inherited from the past. Rather than depending upon the declining structures of earlier traditions, he courageously confronted the challenges of his own age and the rapidly changing social conditions. While drawing inspiration from the ancient wisdom of India, he emphasized the universal spirit of humanity. His respect for tradition never prevented him from welcoming ideas from every possible source. His vision extended beyond the narrow boundaries of race, colour, and nationality toward a broader and more humane future. His profound love for India and his firm belief in the greatness of Indian civilization never developed into racial superiority, blind nationalism, chauvinism, or an inferiority complex.

Vivekananda strongly emphasized the fundamental unity of the world and the spiritual reality underlying all existence. According to him, an awareness of this unity eliminates the sense of separateness from human thought and expands the scope of the human spirit. Such spiritual awareness has a profound influence on individual life as well as society. It enables a person to experience the vastness of existence, the richness of life, and the deeper unity that lies beneath apparent differences. It reveals an ideal harmony behind the divisions and contradictions visible in ordinary life. The realization that the true nature of human beings is universal spirit constitutes spirituality. When a person attains spiritual awareness, he or she becomes inwardly awakened, rises above the limitations of the ego, and transcends the barriers imposed by space and time. Through higher consciousness, the individual discovers the deeper reality of his or her own being.

Spiritual practice therefore encourages people to turn inward and develop a broader and more meaningful approach to life.

Vivekananda possessed a rare historical insight comparable to that of Raja Rammohan Roy and, in another context, his contemporary Rabindranath Tagore. He sought to understand the fundamental forces shaping modern Indian society, particularly its spiritual foundations and its strong tendency toward universalism. At the same time, he recognized the contradictory forces that produced isolation, sectarianism, narrow-mindedness, and limited forms of social consciousness. He believed that these tendencies functioned like a gradual disease weakening the essential strength of society. Vivekananda maintained that India had a significant mission to fulfil for the benefit of the world. According to him, the ancient sages, seers, poets, philosophers, artists, and other creative personalities of India had devoted their lives not merely to the interests of a particular nation or race but to the service of humanity as a whole.

Vivekananda was deeply conscious of the divinity present in every human soul and firmly valued individual freedom. He never accepted the idea of surrendering his intellectual integrity by following any path blindly. Instead, he encouraged questioning, reflection, and independent judgment. He also did not want his followers to accept his teachings without examination. As a rebellious and independent thinker, Vivekananda approached religion with an open mind and rejected dogmatism. He did not attempt to impose one particular doctrine or religious belief upon humanity. Rather, he presented himself as a free seeker who encouraged people to discover truth through their own experience and understanding.

His ultimate aim was to liberate humanity from every form of bondage—social, intellectual, psychological, and spiritual—and to help human beings attain the highest purpose of life. In this connection, Vivekananda argued that no individual has the right to determine what another person's ideal should be or to impose one's own ideal upon others. Instead, people should be exposed to different ideals and allowed to examine them according to their own nature, abilities, and inclinations. Each person should choose the ideal that is most suitable to his or her own constitution and then pursue it with dedication and perseverance. This principle is closely

associated with the concept of **Swadharma**, meaning the individual's own appropriate path or duty.

Vivekananda advocated the idea of genuine individualism. For him, true individuality does not exist in opposition to universality; rather, it finds its fullest expression within it. The individual must develop a strong and authentic personality while remaining conscious of the universal dimension of human existence. Every society and every individual must move toward universality through assimilation, reconciliation, and mutual understanding rather than through exclusion, rejection, or denial of others.

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