



Homage to Swami Vivekananda

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In the last 118 years, since Swamiji's triumph at the Parliament of Religions in 1893, many scholars, savants and leaders have paid homage to him through their speeches or writings.

The rise of Protestantism in Western Europe in the 16th century and the emergence of modern sciences in rapid strides since the 18th century brought to the fore a few tendencies: agnosticism, atheism, doubt about religious doctrines and religious leaders, and more of the habit of practicing religion only nominally. These trends had engulfed a significant part of literate men and women by the end of 19th century with the presence and consolidation of colonial British and French powers in Asia, Africa and North America and they are still in force.

When Swamiji said in Chicago that Hindus wanted to experience the divine reality and did not rely simply on doctrines, his pronouncement seemed too many as a noble way of destigmatizing religion, while to others across religions, it was tantamount to blasphemy. The message, however was not unheard of in India. The Gita says: "There is little use of the pond when there is the water of flood everywhere; similarly there is little use of the Vedas for the wise person having the transcendental knowledge." There are similar ideas in Shankaracharya's compositions and in Uttara-Gita. The ideas have eloquent resonance also in the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna. In his lectures and conversations, Swamiji was never tired of projecting this ideal as the goal of the spiritual quest in the bosom of any religion whatsoever.

Sri Ramakrishna used to say that Naren (the pre-monastic name of Swamiji) belonged to the category of yogis whose path was the realization of the undifferentiated Brahmin, the Absolute. The monism harps on the unicity of existence of which the greatest corollary is that man is essentially one with Brahman. This teaching has its echo in Kashmir Shaivism, which holds that man in bondage is the mitigated Shiva, and that when released from bonds, he is one with Shiva. On the basis of his Nirvikalpa Samadhi, Swamiji arrived at the conviction that the 'potential divinity of the soul' is the verities and raised himself much above the level of speculative philosophizing. How atypical sounded this truth of divinity of the essence of man's individually to people who had learnt from teachings given from pulpits that the human being is sinful and that the human being has incurred automatically the 'original sin' of Adam and Eve!

The spiritual insight, the vast scholarship, the intellectual effort to find commonality among diverse facets of the highly ramified religion called Hinduism, and his travel in different lands including the Indian sub-continent, made Swamiji a master in the art of reconciliation. While enunciating or bringing to the fore the ancient principles of spirituality, moral codes, social customs, and philosophy, he used this supreme art, and relegated the ideas which were untenable in his days, to the bin of obscurity. Thereby he toned up Hindus and showed a way to members of other religions who opted for remaining religious

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as well as modern. Subhas Chandra Bose wrote: "Swamiji harmonized the East and the West, religion and science, past and present. And that is why he is great. Our countrymen have gained unprecedented self-reliance and self-assertion from his teachings."

If Hinduism is a republic of religions, Sri Ramakrishna's life and teachings fortified its unitariness. The composer of the Gita had presented a unique wholeness to Sanatana Dharma. But this task which has to be undertaken after the lapse of several centuries again and again, remained unattended for a long time. Swamiji broadcast boldly his idea of reconciling the three major strands of Vedanta right in the bastion of orthodox Brahmins of South India. The seven defining characteristics of Hinduism discerned by Swamiji. Sister Nivedita was alluding to Swamiji's speech dated 27th September 1893 in Chicago when she wrote, "It may be said that when he began to speak it was of 'the religious ideas of the Hindus', but when he ended, Hinduism had been created." Normally, such a creation entails the two stages of deforming and reforming. Swamiji did not create Hinduism in that sense. He simply culled its salient features and put them in a way comprehensible to modern man. In Swamiji's Hinduism, Shudras and women were given a place of honour.

It is a fact that Swamiji was a universalistic. He saw the good and positive points in many non-Hindu religions, yet he upheld and cherished what he considered the spiritual treasure of Vedanta lying in Hinduism, treasure which is matchless. His vision was that India would give this treasure of wisdom to the West from which she would take modern science and technology.

Many millions in the West, even today, regard Hinduism as an erroneous religion replete with untenable doctrines and primitive social customs, and as the handiwork of the Satan, as the sole specimen of polytheism in the modern world. It took a great courage and talent, twelve decades back, to talk about Hinduism in the milieu of affluent Christians in the West. Swamiji was not simply lecturing; he incarnated the essence of Hinduism. Like his guru,

he was not interested in proselytizing Christians or non-Hindus into Hinduism or Vedantism. But he believed deeply and sincerely that people adhering to the Abrahamic religions would be free from the clutches of dogmatism through the exposure to Vedanta, and that, through the revindication of Vedanta, the Hindu society would be able to shed the harmful excrescences imposed on it by law-givers; and through this process, the world be a better place to live in.

When Shankara was triumphing over his adversaries in philosophical debates, there was a revolution in Hinduism. Many post-Shankara philosophers, however, could not accept the monism of Shankara and introduced their own versions of Vedanta. But one outcome was stable. All post-Shankara founders of sampradayas would have to write a commentary on Brahma-sutras and show that they were in line with Vedantic thought. The effect was anomalous; the doctors of Hindu sampradayas were Vedantic of various hues while the vast masses did not know what Vedanta meant. The non-application of Vedantic ideas in Hindu society for centuries was the root cause of its weakness. Swamiji wanted to democratize broad and basic ideas of Vedanta and apply them for solution of problems faced by the Hindu society and India. Swamiji's contribution to Hinduism and India has been summed up in the words of Rajaji, "Swami Vivekananda saved Hinduism and saved India. But for him, we would have lost our religion and would not have gained our freedom. We therefore owe everything to Swami Vivekananda."

Swamiji's achievements dazzle us. Sri Ramakrishna prayed to the divine Mother, "Mother, please bind him (Naren) with Your Maya, otherwise he will discard his body through Samadhi." The Maya, which had a hold on Swamiji's mind was, in the language of Bhagavata Purana, Vidya-Maya which is a tool in the hands of great teachers of humanity. Swamiji appeared as a human being. But we must remember that his activities and teachings were an integral part of a divine plane of which the major components were the lives of his guru and of Sri Sri Ma Sarada Devi.
