

## SWAMI VIVEKANANDA'S VISION OF MAN

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'Go and play football. *Moksha* is attained not by reading the *Gita*, but by playing football.' This is how a child rends the philosophy of Swami Vivekananda to me. I smile and observe: Yes, only add the word 'merely' before 'reading', and please don't sell away your copy of the *Gita* to buy a football. It is the *Gita* that tells you how to play football. And unless you know the rules of the game, you can't play well.

Swami Vivekananda gave us a dynamic interpretation of the ancient philosophy of Indian humanism. He was a poetic visionary, a revolutionary thinker, and a practising philosopher. He revitalised our tradition, spoke a new language and inspired the young and the old alike. You have slumbered long enough, he proclaimed, it is now time to wake up. Hence the clarion call: Awake, arise, and stop not till the goal is reached.

The greatest sin is weakness, he declared: Weakness is the sole cause of suffering. We are miserable only because we are weak, We lie, steal, kill and commit other crimes only because we are weak. We die because we are weak. Where there is no weakness, there is no death, no sorrow. The panacea? Strength, and strength alone for the world's disease. Strength against ignorance, exploitation, oppression, and against the tyranny of other sinners. Hence he exhorted: Stand up, be bold, be strong. Take the whole responsibility on your own shoulders, and know that you are the creator of your own destiny, Fear, brooding, self-pity, is degradation, which is the offspring of the 'sin of our own making.

The source of this strength? Nothing mysterious, supernatural or unpredictable. All the strength and power lies in man himself: Summon up your all-powerful nature, oh mighty one, and this whole universe will lie at your feet. It is the Self that dominates, and not matter. In the Self is infinite energy, infinite zeal, infinite courage, and infinite patience; all the great things are achieved by the Self alone. The Self must expand, go forward and dominate over the world of matter.

In the twentieth-century world of freedom, initiative, assertion and aggression, it is easy to accept the relevance of these thoughts and words without much excitement. But in the nineteenth-century India of British colonialism, it was a new gospel indeed, and many people simply gaped in awe at this revelation of their own potential. Swamiji gave a dynamic turn to the interpretation of man and his nature. There is no parallel in history to this dynamic reinterpretation outside India except in the humanistic interpretation of man and nature in the Renaissance which, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries of European thought, revolutionized the total history of the Western world.

A comparison of Swami Vivekananda's interpretation of the *Vedanta* and the Renaissance interpretation of Christianity will be interesting.

The Christian myth tells us that man was created in the image of God in the original integrity of knowledge, emotion and action. He had direct experience of God and His will, and he loved this childlike knowledge as good and beautiful simultaneously. Hence all his actions were in conformity with the will of God, and this was original virtue. He was in a state of innocence and naturally he was

placed in Paradise. His innocence had not yet been tried and tested under the stress and strain of temptation. Man was immortal because he was not yet subject to sin and death.

Then came temptation in the form of the devil. He seduced woman, and she seduced man, to disobey God. So man fell from his original state of innocence and lost the integrity of knowledge, emotion and action. Sin and death entered man's world, the poles of the earth were distorted, and paradise changed into a living hell, an earth groaning under the weight of sin and crime committed by this fallen biped called the human being. When Darwin declared in the nineteenth century that man had descended from the ape through the process of evolution, Christian theologians should not have felt disturbed. Our greatest grandfather when he was expelled from Paradise was nothing more than a human animal. No chance of survival for him, personal or social, no chance of redemption except through the grace of God. And woman certainly was worse than man. For a whole millennium, this view of man and his world prevailed, until the Renaissance struck and broke through the dark ages into enlightenment.

This is how it happened: When man fell, all was not lost. God allowed him to retain 'some remnants of the divine image', 'notions in the understanding', and 'motions of the imagination', which are the principles of arts and sciences, philosophy and religion. In the words of St. Augustine, the Divine Grace uses this 'dim glimmering of light unput-out in men' as an instrument of virtue and the fulfilment of its eternal purpose.

The Renaissance concentrated on this potential illumination hidden somewhere in the labyrinthine caverns of the human mind. It proclaimed this potential divinity of man through the poetry of Marlowe, Spenser and Shakespeare. Here is Shakespeare's Hamlet musing over man's divinity:

What a piece of work is man! How noble in reason! How infinite  
in faculties! in form and moving, how express and admirable! in  
action, how like an angel! In apprehension, how like a god! the  
beauty of the world! the paragon of animals!

The last words remind us of *Prajapati's* presentation of *Devas* for a dwelling as described in the *Aitareya Upanishad*. The post-Renaissance achievements of the Western world are a testimony to this new realization of the infinite power of man.

Swami Vivekananda's was a similar feat of interpretation so far as the *Vedanta* tradition of Indian philosophy is concerned.

*Vedanta* means the end or final aim of the *Veda*. From the fortieth and chapter of the *Yajur-Veda* which forms text of the *Ishopanishad*, through the other *Upanishads* to the *Brahma-Sutra* and the commentaries thereon, the tradition is faced with the problem: What is the Ultimate Reality, the *Brahman*? Is it one or many? Are the individual souls and the All-Soul numerically, qualitatively and essentially identical or different? If they are the same, why do they appear to be many? Of all the commentaries on the *Vedanta*, the most the most important is that of *Shamkara*.

The fundamental proposition of the *Vedanta* as enunciated by *Shamkara* is that the *Atman* or soul of man is identical with the *Brahman*. Since the infinite and eternal cannot consist of parts, nor be subject to change, it follows that everyone of the many is essentially *Brahman*, entire and indivisible. Nothing really exists besides *Brahman*. 'There is only one, without a second.' The

experience of the manifold world of perception is born of ignorance, *avidya*, which prevents the self from knowing that the empirical world of phenomena is illusion, *Maya*, or delusion. It disappears on closer examination, or evaporates like a dream image which seems real to the sleeper but vanishes in waking hours,

*Shankara* maintained the concept of the two levels of truth, the higher truth represented the mystical experience of release and identity with *Brahman*, and the ordinary level of common-sense experience which affirmed the multiplicity of phenomena. The Upanishad itself had proclaimed the truth of the one, constant, ultimate Reality as also truth of the facts, the flux, the world of change, the plurality of the forms of the manifestation of the One. It had also declared that the knowledge of the One was *vidya*, and the perception of the many was *avidya*. It had enjoined that one who pursued both *vidya* and *avidya*, *sambhuti* and *vinasha*, really knew; the rest were in the dark. Thus one could arrive at the one ultimate Reality through the intermediate and the many.

Then came the dark ages of our history. Pseudo-divines flourished and distorted the right perspective. Without having practically experienced the one and only one, they announced their supposed identity with it. *Darshana*, the experience of philosophy, was replaced by intellectual gymnastics. In theory they reviled the phenomenal world as illusion, while in actual practice they revelled in the exploitation of the simple folk. Intellectual pretension, hypocrisy and bigotry were accompanied by an ethics of inaction, nihilism and fatalism, all leading to laziness, self-pity, and, lastly, slavery. When the British established their rule over this land, they described it as a 'decomposed society', 'a race debased by three thousand years of despotism and priestcraft', and one that believed not in God but in 'monsters of wood and stone'. This was the state of society in India comparable to the Europe of the Dark Ages, fifth to fifteenth century.

Swami Vivekananda appeared on this scene of despair and proclaimed his gospel of the Indian Renaissance.

Swamiji was a hard realist, an uncompromising practical man. First he accepted the social realities with the religious practices of the time; idolatry, for instance. But he challenged the foreigner who had no business and no justification to opine on our practices for political advantage. He demanded a reason for what the foreigner said, and dismissed it summarily as bullying tactics.

Yet idolatry is condemned! Why? Nobody knows. Because some hundreds of years ago some man of Jewish blood happened to condemn

it! That is, he happened to condemn everybody else's idols except his own. If God is represented in any beautiful form, or any symbolic form, said the Jew, it is awfully bad; it is sin. But if He is represented in the form of a chest, with two angels sitting on each side, and a cloud hanging over it, it is holy of holies. If God comes in the form of a dove, it is holy. But if He comes in the form of a cow, it is heathen superstition; condemn it! That is how the world goes. (1)

And the world shall not go on like this, he declared. He rejected the idea of sin:

Vedanta recognizes no sin, it only recognizes error. And the greatest error, says the Vedanta, is to say that you are weak,

that you are a sinner, a miserable creature, and that you have no power and you cannot do this and that. Every time you think in that way you, as it were, rivet one more link in the chain that binds you down, you add one more layer of hypnotism on your own soul. Therefore, whoever thinks he is weak is wrong, whoever thinks he is impure is wrong and is throwing a bad thought into the world. (2)

His words on the ideal were simple, positive, unmistakable:

My ideal, indeed, can be put into a few words, and that is: to preach unto mankind their divinity, and how to make it manifest in every movement of life. (3)

The romantic is one, says Hume, who does not believe in the fall of man, and in this sense, Swamiji was a romantic. In the history of Indian literature he occupies a place similar to the place of Milton, Blake and Rousseau in Western literature.

The rest of his message follows from his declaration of the divinity of man: Pray for strength, of the body as well as mind, work for social reconstruction, go out and serve man as God, and sacrifice your all for the nation and mankind, for therein you shall find your true Self.

Sitting in a luxurious home, surrounded with all comforts of life and doling out a little amateur religion may be good for other lands, but India has a truer instinct. It instinctively detects the mask. You must give up. Be great. No great work can be done without sacrifice.

Thus, he called for a renewal of religion, rejuvenation of society and regeneration of the whole nation--man-making philosophy and theories, man-making education, and above all, the will to act and achieve:

What our country now wants are muscles of iron and nerves of steel, gigantic will, which nothing can resist, which can penetrate into the mysteries and secrets of the universe and will accomplish their purpose in any fashion, even if it meant going to the bottom of the ocean and meeting Death face to face. (4)

Here is an expression of the invincible will of the Greeks, the vaulting aspirations of the Elizabethans, the romantic revolution of the nineteenth century and, above all, a call for the gigantic structures of modern science and technology.

Control-room? The sanctum sanctorum, the soul of the Man-God, wherein the Master plays the hectic game with perfect equanimity, in perfect joy.

(1). The Complete works of Swami Vivekananda (Calcutta: *Advaita Ashrama*, 1973).

Vol, 3, p. 218.

(2). Complete Works, Vol.2 (1976) p.295

(3). Complete Works, vol. 7 (1972) p. 501

(4). Complete Works, vol. 3, p. 190