

## **The Religion We Want**

These days there are many young men who are not interested in religion or spirituality. Some of them even do not have high regards for any religion. One reason may be ignorance. Another is obviously the onslaught of rank materialism and its concomitant hedonism. But these are surely not all. If we probe into traditional religions in practice, we shall be left with no doubt of their hollowness. And youths can easily see through masks.

Swami Vivekananda said, 'Religions of the world have become lifeless mockeries. What the world wants is character.' [*Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, Vol.7, p.501*] And to him character was the essence of religion, not beliefs and dogmas, rites and rituals. Temples, mosques, churches, scriptures, worship, rituals, etc. constitute the external aspect of religion, its non-essential part. Even philosophy is not its core. Religion, in its truest sense, is the realization of oneness of all. It gives us the capacity to feel intensely for all and work incessantly for others' welfare. He clarified the practical implication of such a Religion in a letter, 'Philosophy and Yoga and penance – the worship-room – your sunned rice or vegetable offerings – all these constitute the religion of one man or one country; doing good to others is the one great, universal religion.' [*CW, Vol.6, p.403*]

The Mahamandal, therefore, does not focus its attention on the external non-essentials of religion. Moreover, beliefs and rituals are different for different religious sects, whereas the Mahamandal is for all young men. They may belong to Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Sikhism, Buddhism, Jainism, etc. or no such religious sect at all. The Mahamandal would tell them only about the universal essence of Religion. In the words of Swami Vivekananda, 'Try to be pure and unselfish – that is the whole of religion.' 'To be good and to do good – that is the whole of religion.' [*CW, Vol.6, p.244-245*] Assimilation of such ideas into our very nature is character building. The primary work of the Mahamandal is to reach out to all young men throughout the country, give them such positive and universal ideas, and show them how they can build their character by applying the ideas in everyday life.

In 1890, Vivekananda, then a little known wandering monk, wrote to a boy of Calcutta, 'Be moral. Be brave. Be a heart-whole man. Strictly moral, brave unto desperation. Don't bother your head with religious theories. Cowards only sin, brave men never, no, not even in mind. Try to love anybody and everybody. Be a man and try to make those immediately under your care... brave, moral, and sympathising. No religion for you, my children, but morality and bravery.' [*CW, Vol.5, p.3*]

In 1897, Vivekananda returned to India after his first visit to the West. That year famine engulfed large stretches of our country. Swami Akhandananda worked hard at a nondescript rural area to help distressed people and started an orphanage. In a letter Swami Vivekananda gave him some important guidelines: 'Teach them so that they may be moral, manly, and devoted to doing good to others. This indeed is religion. Shelve your intricate philosophical speculations for the present. In our country we at present need manhood and kindness.... "He is ever manifest as Love in all beings." What other God – the creation of your mind – are you then going to worship! Let the Vedas, the Koran, the Puranas, and all scriptural lumber rest now for some time – let there be worship of the visible God of Love

and Compassion in the country.... Admit boys of all religions – Hindu, Mohammedan, Christian, or anything... and teach them only the universal side of religion. [CW, Vol.6, p.410-411]

Swami Vivekananda based his teachings on the Vedantic truth that divinity is inherent in every human being and that its manifestation makes us grow purer and stronger and nearer to others. He taught us that the worship of divinity in the human form is the highest worship. And he advised his followers to shun ceremonials and ‘preach this worship of the universal aspect of the Godhead – a thing that was never undertaken before in our country.’ [CW, Vol.6, p.264]

Some may have strong inclination towards worship and ceremonials. And that may be helpful for spiritual growth of some individuals. Yet, these are personal methods of self-development, and not universal. What is good for one may be poison for another. So, let us never try to impress others to follow the methods specifically suitable for certain individuals. Especially in organizations like ours, ‘Everything must be sacrificed, if necessary, for that one sentiment, universality.’ [CW, Vol.6, p.285]

What Swamiji wanted to bring in our national life is the idea of citizenship inspired by the twin ideal of service and sacrifice. We are working towards this objective. ‘The idea of the sacrifice for the common weal is not yet developed in our nation,’ he said in an interview. [CW, Vol.5, p.224] Religion for the weak is to be strong, for a people in inertia it is activity. So, he said, ‘We want that energy, that love of independence, that spirit of self-reliance, that immovable fortitude, that dexterity in action, that bond of unity of purpose, that thirst for improvement. Checking a little the constant looking back to the past, we want that expansive vision infinitely projected forward; and we want – that intense spirit of activity (*Rajas*) which will flow through our every vein, from head to foot.’ [CW, Vol.4, p.404] This is the spirit we must strive to arouse in youths.