

What Religion Do We Need?

Swami Vivekananda wrote in a letter to Sister Nivedita: ‘Religions of the world have become lifeless mockeries. What the world wants is character. The world is in need of those whose life is one burning love, selfless.’

He gave a new religion, genuine and full of life. He said, ‘The old religion said that he was an atheist who did not believe in God. The new religion says that he is the atheist who does not believe in himself. But it is not selfish faith, because the Vedanta, again, is the doctrine of oneness. It means faith in all, because you are all. Love for yourselves means love for all, love for animals, love for everything, for you are all one. It is the great faith which will make the world better.’ In this religion, ‘Unselfishness is God.’

Was this message really new? Yes, for its dynamism, ease of access, and application-orientation. It was there in the books, but it had to be unearthed, as it were, by Sri Ramakrishna for modern man. The fundamental truths were in the Vedanta and other scriptures, never practically applied on a large scale in society. ‘I do not believe in a God or religion’, said Vivekananda, ‘which cannot wipe the widow's tears or bring a piece of bread to the orphan's mouth. However sublime be the theories, however well-spun may be the philosophy – I do not call it religion so long as it is confined to books and dogmas’.

Though he based his teachings on the truth of Universal Oneness discovered long back, he made a tremendous proclamation, which is indeed new in potential and spirit: ‘The poor, the illiterate, the ignorant, the afflicted – let these be your God. Know that service to these alone is the highest religion.’

To Swami Akhandananda, who was organizing an orphanage, he wrote more about this religion, ‘Teach them so that they may be moral, manly, and devoted to doing good to others. This indeed is religion. Hang your intricate philosophical speculations for the present. In our country at present we need manhood and kindness.... What other God – the creation of your mind – are you then going to worship! Let the *Vedas*, the *Koran*, the *Puranas*, and other scriptures now rest in peace 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 aspect of religion.’

Vivekananda was not a mere talker of religion, but ‘Love and Compassion’ personified. He said, ‘I love the poor, the ignorant, the downtrodden, I feel for them – the Lord knows how much.’ The lion among men, Vivekananda used to shed profuse tears for them when alone and spent many a sleepless night thinking for them. His life was one of suffering and dedication for their uplift.

Remember the last days of Sri Ramakrishna on earth. Unable to swallow food due to the painful condition of cancer in the throat, he said he was eating through so many mouths of people! Swamiji said: he would lie down on the ground and weep for the suffering people. And Swamiji learnt Religion sitting at the feet of such a man.

After coming to Dakshineswar at the prime of youth, Sri Ramakrishna, not content with an ordinary life, gradually got absorbed in a fervent search after the highest truth. In the

beginning he approached nature and knocked its doors. The door was opened to the simple, child-like young man. Afterwards he followed many time-tested methods of realizing higher truths one by one and found that they all eventually led to the same realization. During this period of about twelve years he was intensely absorbed in practising various methods prescribed by different religious systems of the world. But, after this discovery, his mind gave up all that, barring the kernel of Religion.

His mind, from this time on, got focused primarily on Man. He emphasized on the divinity of Man. He taught about the immanence of God – the Oneness of all that exists. He taught us the worship of God in Man. This was the last phase of his life – when he appeared as the World Teacher of this age. He was madly calling pure hearted young men and women who would take his message far and wide for the good of the world. And they came. He made world-movers out of them – the ordinary looking boys of schools and colleges.

He himself anointed Narendra as the leader of the group. He taught him day after day, sometimes at closed door sessions. Not all were prepared to understand his new message in the proper light, so this caution. He wrote in a piece of paper: “*Naren shikshe dibe*” – Narendra will teach (the world). And, in course of time, his teachings spread throughout the world through Narendra.

Let us listen a little more to the teacher: ‘I am no metaphysician, no philosopher, nay, no saint. But I am poor, I love the poor.... Who feels there (in India) for the two hundred millions of men and women sunken for ever in poverty and ignorance? Where is the way out? Who feels for them? ... Let us unite our wills in continued prayer for their good.... My heart is too full to express my feeling; you know it, you can imagine it.’

‘Feel, my children, feel; feel for the poor, the ignorant, the downtrodden; feel till the heart stops and the brain reels and you think you will go mad – then pour the soul out at the feet of the Lord, and then will come power, help, and indomitable energy. Struggle, struggle, was my motto for the last ten years. Struggle, still say I.’

Let take up this Religion of feeling and struggle for others. If we build our character to realize its true fervour, the emancipation of the downtrodden will not elude us for long.