

# Vedanta

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**Swami Vivekananda and the Role of  
Intercultural Dialogue in Saving Our  
Human Heritage**

*Jeffery D. Long*

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**Ramakrishna and Vivekananda**

*Sir John Stewart-Wallace, C.B.*

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## Divine Wisdom

### Illustrated Tales and Parables of Sri Ramakrishna - 2



#### **THERE ARE MEN AND MEN**

MEN may be divided into four classes: those bound by the fetters of the world, the seekers after liberation, the liberated and the ever-free.

Among the ever-free we may count sages like Narada. They live in the world for the good of others, to teach men spiritual truths.

Those in bondage are sunk in worldliness and are forgetful of God. Not even by mistake do they think of God. The seekers after liberation want to free themselves from attachment to the world. Some of them succeed and others do not.

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## Editorial

### Swami Vivekananda's vision of social progress - 2

In our previous editorial we discussed about Swami Vivekananda's synthetic vision of Human Progress which is comprehensive in scope, combining the deepest spiritual dimension with the most practical aspirations at the level of physical manifestation seen in society. This human centric vision will enable every human being to thrive and grow according to his highest spiritual aspiration through society's aid and support. This vision can be expressed as a single emergent whole, based on Swami Vivekananda's own realization of Truth – both at the microcosmic level and the macrocosmic level. His vision of social or human progress can be thought of as a multi-layered one (i) progress at a spiritual or human fulfilment level (ii) progress at the mental level and (iii) progress at the level of physical manifestation in society. We shall try to explore each of these three dimensions briefly, also noting that each level of manifestation is both independent and yet shaped by the deeper dimensions.

#### **Swami Vivekananda's vision of Human Progress at the spiritual level or that of human fulfilment:**

Swami Vivekananda saw that the purpose of society is not to merely perpetuate itself (a tacit assumption held by most social scientists) but to enable more and more human beings in seeking and realizing the Highest Truth about existence. This seeking and realizing of the Highest Truth he saw, not as a journey of negation of life but as a positive journey of greater and more complete human fulfilment. "This universe" says Vivekananda, "is simply a gymnasium in which the soul is taking exercise"<sup>1</sup>. Hence, according to him, social progress is nothing but a process of

spiritualisation of man. Oswald Spengler, a German historian and philosopher of history, too echoes this idea and interprets culture or true social progress as a 'spiritual phenomena' rooted in a definite 'landscape'. According to him, "culture is a spiritual orientation of a group of people who have achieved some unitary conception of their world which is reflected in and which shapes all their activities, such as art, religion, philosophy, politics and economics." <sup>2</sup>

Thus, Swami Vivekananda wanted that society be designed not just for making available sensory pleasures for all or the creation and accumulation of various investments and tools that support comfort and leisure, to those who can afford it. Rather he believed that the essential design of society must be organized around the maximum number of people being able to consciously awaken to their inner divinity, and to their infinite potentialities as human beings. He said, "The more advanced a society or nation is in spirituality, the more is that society or nation civilized. No nation can be said to have become civilized, only because it has succeeded in increasing the comforts of material life by bringing into use lots of machinery and things of that sort. ... In this age as on the one hand people have to be intensely practical, so on the other they have to acquire deep spiritual knowledge." <sup>3</sup> This vision at the level of human fulfilment leads naturally to Swamiji's vision of Human Progress at the mental level which will be discussed next.

### **Swami Vivekananda's vision of Human Progress at the mental level:**

Swami Vivekananda wanted Advaita Vedanta and the message of the Upanishads to move from dry, abstract philosophy, to become the core intellectual/ moral matrix in which culture and society are rebuilt. He said, "The dry, abstract Advaita must become living — poetic — in everyday life; out of hopelessly

intricate mythology must come concrete moral forms; and out of bewildering Yogi-ism must come the most scientific and practical psychology — and all this must be put in a form so that a child may grasp it”<sup>4</sup>

He therefore saw human progress as a movement from a mass of rituals, complex ideas of human hierarchy and division, combined with constraining and limiting ideas about individuals and society, to a fresh, clear, vision of human beings as essentially divine and a recognition of this divinity in all beings.

He wanted this clear, universal vision, to be assimilated into society at all levels in the form of living ideals practiced by human beings according to their stage of development and life situation. He furthermore wanted an evolution in the various modes of thinking and the methods of work and organization dominant in humankind. This would, in turn, mean an assimilation of the principles of Advaita Vedanta into the institutional architectures that gives shape and form to society, impacting the very design of social structures.

Furthermore, he wanted this vision to permeate into art, music, dance, drama, nay, all forms of human expression – so that all of society is able to connect with and recognize the essential divine nature of human beings, as the new basis for all inter-human dealings in society.

Swami Vivekananda believed that human progress would then constitute the creation of a society which is designed to strengthen human beings at all levels – physical, mental/psychological, and spiritual and where all forms of negative constraints that diminish human beings and keep them deluded in a limited vision of themselves are completely washed away. He said, “They speak of democracy, of the equality of all men, these days. But how will a man know he is equal with all? He must have a strong brain, a

clear mind free of nonsensical ideas; he must pierce through the mass of superstitions encrusting his mind to the pure truth that is in his inmost Self. Then he will know that all perfections, all powers are already within himself, that these have not to be given him by others.”<sup>5</sup>

Thus, mental progress of society would also constitute a progress from sectarianism, bigotry, discrimination, and the perpetuation of all forms of mental slavery, to universality of spirit, strengthening of all human beings, and the shared social recognition that all human beings are essentially free.

### **Swami Vivekananda’s vision of Human Progress at the physical level:**

Swami Vivekananda’s vision of economic growth is not a mad rush for “more growth” but a journey to a more equitable society where all people have the capability to earn a ‘decent’ living for themselves. His vision of progress in terms of social well-being is not simply increasing the availability and access to social infrastructure such as education, healthcare, sanitation, transportation, etc., but also wants progress in terms of the design and delivery of such social infrastructures. This means that social infrastructures and services cannot be technology or provider-centric but must instead be human-centric i.e., keeping the hierarchy of human goals – from the lowest level of basic comfort and convenience to the highest level of manifesting the possibility as human beings – as the primary purpose of those who deliver such systems.

His vision of progress in terms of physical, social and political freedoms similarly goes beyond the ideas of “freedom granted by law” to the idea that such freedoms must enable human beings to become free of all forms of debilitating divisions, constraints, and discriminations from the society in which they live.

## **Conclusion:**

In this discussion, we began with Swami Vivekananda's vision of social progress at a universal, impersonal scale, and its reflexive relationship with human progress at an individual or collective, personal scale. We also recognized that human progress at the individual or collective personal scale is critical for human beings to deal with and align themselves to social progress at the universal scale. We also explored thereafter, the contours of such a human progress: how human progress can take place at the spiritual level, at the mental level, and at the physical level. It is only through Swami Vivekananda's spiritualized vision of society and human beings that we can meaningfully reconcile a near cosmic scale impersonal Social Progress with human progress at the scale of individuals and communities. He concluded, therefore, that "the history of civilization is the progressive reading of spirit into matter" <sup>6</sup>

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## References:

1. (CW:1:308)
2. Pg. 66, *History – Its Philosophy, Theory and Methodology* by Satish.K.Bajaj, Indian Institute of Language Studies.
3. (CW:6:462)
4. (CW:5:104)
5. (CW:8:94)
6. (CW:8:429)

# Swami Vivekananda and the Role of Intercultural Dialogue in Saving Our Human Heritage

Jeffery D. Long

## Introduction

The urgency of Swami Vivekananda's vision of intercultural and inter-religious harmony for the survival of the human species is greater now than ever. This paper will explore the details of this vision, particularly in regard to inter-religious dialogue, with a special concern to dispel widespread misconceptions about Swami Vivekananda's message. The critics of what some have called Swamiji's "radical universalism" have, in many cases, misunderstood or distorted his religious pluralism as a teaching that "all religions are the same." They have then attacked this straw-man position, which in fact bears little or no resemblance to Swamiji's actual teaching on this subject.

A closer and more careful reading and analysis of Swami Vivekananda's lectures and writings reveal that his views are actually far more nuanced than popular distortions would suggest. Rather than making the simplistic and false claim that "all religions are the same," Swamiji carves out a true middle path between the extremes of absolutism and relativism into which worldviews typically fall. His teaching of the harmony of religions involves a twofold assertion: first, that there are areas of commonality and overlap on a deep philosophical level which the world's religions share, and secondly, that beyond this common ground, there are also distinctive truths that each world religion offers humanity. These truths, despite being distinct and diverse, are best seen not as contradictory, but as complementary. By revealing its subtlety, Swami Vivekananda's understanding of the world's religions as embodying diverse, but complementary, perspectives on our

shared reality can be shown to have even more profound relevance to humanity's contemporary situation than is widely known.

### **The Impact of Swami Vivekananda's Teaching During the Last 150 Years:**

The impact of Swami Vivekananda upon humanity during the 150 years since his birth is almost impossible to calculate. Swamiji's philosophy of religious pluralism, or, as it is also known, the harmony of religions, proclaimed in his first address to the Parliament of the World's Religions in 1893, developed in his later lectures, and drawn from both the teaching and the example of his master, Sri Ramakrishna, energized the interfaith movement of his time. Through the influence of the Vedanta Society and the intellectuals who were drawn to it – figures like Christopher Isherwood, Aldous Huxley, and Huston Smith—this philosophy has shaped mainstream American views on religious diversity.

As I mentioned in a presentation that I gave last year on the occasion of the 175<sup>th</sup> birth anniversary of Sri Ramakrishna, in a controversial 2009 *Newsweek* editorial with the eye-catching title, "We Are All Hindus Now," Lisa Miller cites survey data indicating that 65 percent of Americans believe that "many religions can lead to eternal life." The same survey data tells us that 30 percent of Americans identify themselves as "spiritual but not religious," while 24 percent believe in reincarnation, or rebirth: a number which includes a surprising 37 percent of white evangelical Christians.<sup>1</sup> Other reputable polls yield comparable numbers in response to similar questions.

The teachings and the life of Sri Ramakrishna would very likely be unknown in the West, but for Swamiji's global travels. Swamiji opened the floodgates, allowing a variety of Hindu spiritual

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<sup>1</sup> Lisa Miller, "We Are All Hindus Now," *Newsweek*, August 31, 2009

teachers to come to the West, such as Paramahansa Yogananda, A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, and the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, among others. In addition to these teachers who visited the West, the overall atmosphere of acceptance of and interest in Hindu spiritual teaching that Swamiji helped to cultivate served to make available to Westerners the teachings of Sri Ramana Maharshi and Sri Aurobindo, who were both based in India, but who both nevertheless had large followings in the West.

This steady stream of spiritual teachers and teachings, in turn, has made a range of Hindu beliefs, practices, and imagery more available in North America than is otherwise conceivable. Thus if one takes a stroll through a shopping mall and browses through the various stores, one increasingly finds clothing and home decorations adorned with images of Lord Ganesha and other Hindu deities. The greatest hit song by a member of the most popular rock band ever—"My Sweet Lord," by George Harrison, of the Beatles—includes the Hare Krishna mantra, and Mick Jagger's new group, SuperHeavy, has had a recent hit with a song called "Satyameva Jayate." Julia Roberts has "come out" as a Hindu, while other Western celebrities are drawn to both Hindu and Buddhist spiritual paths, wear *Om* jewelry, and sport Sanskrit tattoos, as do growing numbers of young people (including a good many of my students).

How did all of this happen? How does a nation whose people overwhelmingly identify themselves as Christian, and where religion and religious affiliation continue to be hot-button political issues, reach a point where a majority of its people are willing to assent to the ancient Vedic claim that "Truth is one, though the wise speak of it in various ways"? How did nearly one in four Americans come to believe in karma and rebirth? How did

Hinduism become “cool”? Clearly, such a widespread cultural shift must have a complex variety of causes. No account of the gradual transformation of the American religious landscape would be complete, however, without some reference to the life and work of Swami Vivekananda.

In India, Swamiji’s philosophy of selfless service has led to the emergence of the massive education and relief efforts of the Ramakrishna Mission. His impassioned and patriotic calls to all Indians made a profound impression on the mind of Mahatma Gandhi and numerous other leaders across the spectrum of India’s independence movement. In fact, the young Gandhi made an effort to see Swami Vivekananda during the meeting of the Indian National Congress in Calcutta in 1902. Swamiji, however, was unfortunately on his death bed at the time, and was not able to receive visitors.

### **Swami Vivekananda and the Interfaith Movement:**

It is probably with regard to the interfaith movement, however, that the vision of Swami Vivekananda has had its greatest impact and still has its greatest relevance today. One could say that the very idea of a single human heritage, rather than an Indian heritage or a Western heritage, or any other parochial notion inheritance, owes a good deal to the life and teaching of Swami Vivekananda.

To be sure, Swami Vivekananda did not invent interfaith dialogue. The historic first Parliament of World Religions in 1893 was the product of a religious progressivism already in place during his time. This progressivism had been fueled, in North America, by the work of thinkers influenced by Hindu thought, such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, as well as the founders of the Theosophical Society. But even if Swamiji did not invent the interfaith movement, he can certainly be said

to have infused it with an energy and an intensity which it did not previously have. As a disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, Swamiji envisioned and embodied interfaith dialogue in a way that was far more radical than most conceived of it in his time. Even many of the participants in as progressive a body as the Parliament of the World's Religions saw the chief function of interfaith dialogue to be "preparing the way for the reunion of all the world's religions in their true center—Jesus Christ."<sup>1</sup> Swamiji resisted all such parochialism and proposed, in its place, the idea of the world's religions as "different streams having their sources in different places" that "all mingle their water in the sea" that is the shared divinity of all beings.<sup>2</sup> Rather than insisting on the unique truth of a single cultural source, religion, or authoritative text, Swamiji saw truth as being present everywhere. He conceived, almost a century before people started using the word "globalization," of a *human* heritage made up of the many cultural streams, each originating from the unique genius of a particular people and place, but feeding into the ocean of the common human experience.

### **Going Beyond Tolerance: Swamiji's Ideal of Acceptance**

Swamiji envisioned inter-religious relations that would go far beyond the secular ideal of tolerance, in which practitioners of diverse traditions merely co-exist, toward an ideal of acceptance. In his famous first address at the Parliament of World Religions, he says of the Hindu tradition, "I am proud to belong to a religion which has taught the world both tolerance and universal acceptance. We believe not only in universal toleration, but we accept all religions as true."<sup>3</sup> Tolerance is of course preferable to

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<sup>1</sup> Goldberg, p. 76.

<sup>2</sup> Vivekananda, Volume 1, p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> Vivekananda, Volume 1, p. 3.

intolerance, but it is a lesser virtue when compared with acceptance. In a 1900 lecture titled “The Way to the Realisation of a Universal Religion,” Swamiji draws a stark distinction between the lesser virtue of tolerance and the greater virtue of acceptance, saying, “Our watchword, then, will be acceptance, and not exclusion. Not only toleration, for so-called toleration is often blasphemy, and I do not believe in it. I believe in acceptance. Why should I tolerate? Toleration means that I think that you are wrong and I am just allowing you to live. Is it not blasphemy to think that you and I are allowing others to live? I accept all religions that were in the past, and worship with them all; I worship God with every one of them, in whatever form they worship Him.”<sup>1</sup>

As I sometimes ask my students, if one of your friends were to say to you today, “I tolerate you,” would that be a compliment? How do we feel if someone tells us that they merely tolerate us? What gives them the right to decide who is allowed to exist and who is not? And what gives us the right to do that to another? We would of course not want to face the alternative of intolerance, which is all too prevalent in the world today. But tolerance alone is not enough. We can tolerate someone while ignoring them. But to truly see the divine in all, which is what Vedanta teaches us to do, we must go beyond the minimum requirement of tolerance and move toward acceptance. We must see the other not as other, but as our very own.

Indeed, this is the teaching, not only of Swami Vivekananda, but also of our Holy Mother, Sarada Devi, who tells all of us, “Learn to make the world your own. Nobody is a stranger. The whole world is your own.”<sup>2</sup> This is true acceptance.

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<sup>1</sup> Vivekananda, Volume 2, pp. 373-374.

<sup>2</sup> Dasgupta, p. 122.

One can perhaps draw a parallel between these three states of being—intolerance, tolerance, and acceptance—and the ancient Vedantic (and Buddhist) teaching of the three levels of truth: falsehood (corresponding to intolerance, which sees the other as a threat that cannot be allowed to exist), relative truth (corresponding to tolerance, which sees the other as a being with its own integrity and value that must be allowed to exist despite its problematic otherness), and absolute truth (corresponding to acceptance, which realizes the ultimate non-duality of self and other).

### **The Internal Logical Consistency of the Harmony of Religions:**

There are some who criticize Swamiji's teaching of the harmony of religions, who either see it as saying simplistically that "all religions are the same," when clearly they are not, or who deride it as a form of relativism—the view that everything is true, and therefore nothing is true. Relativism, a form of skepticism, is rooted in the idea that we can never really know the truth, and therefore all attempts to express truth are of equal value. But the harmony of religions is rooted in the awareness—realized by Sri Ramakrishna through his many *sadhanas*—that truth can be realized, and that this is indeed possible by means of a variety of paths: the many systems of belief and practice that make up the shared human inheritance.

Contrary to the claims of some critics who, even today, deride the perspective that he offered, Swamiji was fully aware of the logical, philosophical problems involved in claiming that all religions are true. He even posed this question himself. "How can all these varieties be true? If one thing is true, its negation is false. How can contradictory opinions be true at the same time?"<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Vivekananda, Volume 2, p. 365.

One approach to this question is to argue that the various contradictions among the teachings of the world's religions are superficial, or merely apparent, and that there is a much deeper agreement and harmony among the religions than appears to be the case at first glance. Swamiji hints at this approach when he asks, "Are all the religions of the world really contradictory? I do not mean the external forms in which great thoughts are clad. I do not mean the different buildings, languages, rituals, books, etc. employed in various religions, but I mean the internal soul of every religion."<sup>1</sup> This suggests that one might be able to discern an inner essence of religions—their "internal soul"—that they share, distinguishing this inner essence from that which is superficial, or merely external.

This is the idea of the perennial philosophy championed by Aldous Huxley and by other intellectuals influenced by the Vedanta movement, such as Huston Smith. It is the idea of the "metaphysic that recognizes a divine Reality substantial to the world of things and lives and minds; the psychology that finds in the soul something similar to, or even identical with, divine Reality; the ethic that places man's final end in the knowledge of the immanent and transcendent Ground of all being."<sup>2</sup>

The perennial philosophy that Huxley describes is essentially Vedanta. Vedanta "recognizes a divine Reality substantial to the world of things and lives and minds"—the infinite Brahman. It includes "the psychology that finds in the soul something similar to, or even identical with, divine Reality" in the form of its teaching of the non-duality of the Atman and Brahman—*tattamasi, aham brahmasmi, sarvam khalvidam brahma*. And its ethic places our "final

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid.

<sup>2</sup> Huxley, p. vii.

end in the knowledge of the immanent and transcendent Ground of all being.” Swamiji taught that Vedanta was not only a Hindu system of philosophy, but that it is a universal philosophy underlying all religions and philosophies. To be sure, it is a philosophy that finds particularly clear and powerful expression in the teaching of the *Upanishads* and the *Bhagavad Gita*. But it is nonetheless a universal, human inheritance.

Some have questioned, though, whether this response to the question of the many disagreements among the world’s religions is too simplistic. By reducing the religions of the world to those areas where they agree with one another and with Vedanta philosophy, does one not do violence to their rich diversity? Is this truly acceptance, or is it forcing the other into our own preconceived mold, perhaps in a way that would preclude any real dialogue, where we might learn something different from the other?

Swamiji anticipates the potential charge that this approach reduces every religion to a common denominator without respecting their genuine differences. “Every religion has a soul behind it, and that soul may differ from the soul of another religion; but are they contradictory? Do they contradict or supplement each other?—that is the question.”<sup>1</sup> Swamiji does not affirm that all religions are the same. Each religion is distinct. It has its own “soul.” And while contradictions may indeed obtain among the doctrines and the practices that have been formed on the basis of its core ideals—not only among religions, but even within the same religion, leading to division and sectarianism—Swamiji poses the question: Do the core insights of the various religions necessarily conflict? Or might these central ideals be logically compatible—in Swamiji’s words “supplementary”? Might it be that each religion

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<sup>1</sup> Vivekananda, Volume 2, p. 365.

represents a core ideal, and that these ideals are not contradictory, despite each being distinct? Might they even be mutually affirming?

Swamiji takes a side on this issue: “I believe that they are not contradictory; they are supplementary. Each religion, as it were, takes up one part of the great universal truth, and spends its whole force in embodying and typifying that part of the great truth. It is, therefore, addition, not exclusion. That is the idea. System after system arises, each one embodying a great idea, and ideals must be added to ideals. And this is the march of humanity.”<sup>1</sup>

Swami Vivekananda’s approach to religious diversity has definite implications for human conduct in the face of the great variety of beliefs and practices that exist. When one encounters a religious or philosophical claim that is contrary to one’s own view, the proper attitude to take is to adhere to one’s own view, but simultaneously to be open to the possibility that a kernel of truth—a genuine insight into an aspect of reality that one has not yet considered—must rest at the core of the worldview of the other. This is not relativism—throwing up one’s hands in despair and asking rhetorically, “Well, who really knows the truth?” Nor is it absolutism: clinging to one’s view while rejecting all others.

Pravrajika Vrajaprana summarizes Vivekananda’s approach to religious diversity when she writes that, “The world’s spiritual traditions are like different pieces in a giant jigsaw puzzle: each piece is different and each piece is essential to complete the whole picture. Each piece is to be honored and respected while holding firm to our own particular piece of the puzzle. We can deepen our own spirituality and learn about our own tradition by studying other faiths. Just as importantly, by studying our own tradition well, we are better able to appreciate the truth in other tradition.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid, pp. 365-366

<sup>2</sup> Vrajaprana, pp. 56-57

Swamiji's emphasis on the fact that the ideals of the religions do differ is important to highlight, particularly given the fact that critics of religious pluralism have often attacked this position with the argument that it is absurd to assert that all religions are "essentially the same" when they are very clearly quite different from one another.<sup>1</sup> As Vrajaprana points out, "This is not to say that all religions are 'pretty much the same.' That is an affront to the distinct beauty and individual greatness of each of the world's spiritual traditions. Saying that every religion is equally true and authentic doesn't mean that one can be substituted for the other like generic brands of aspirin."<sup>2</sup> A religion is like a medicine: not all medicines are alike, but all have the power to heal—or to harm, if taken under the wrong conditions.

To say the world's religions are distinct, but that their central ideals are logically compatible, is quite different from saying that they are the same. Swamiji's teaching on religious pluralism affirms the differences among the world's religions: that the ideal to which each is oriented is distinct. These ideals, however, like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, are each "part of the great universal truth." They are not the same, nor are they interchangeable. But their basic truth can be accepted and affirmed, and practitioners of each tradition can learn from and share the insights of the others.

This is a point that Swamiji also emphasizes: that inter-religious dialogue is an important part of the process of spiritual evolution for each person in every religious tradition. The specific form that this process will take will differ from person to person, and of course from tradition to tradition. But all will benefit spiritually by engaging in it. "Do I wish that the Christian would become

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Morales.

<sup>2</sup> Vrajaprana, pp. 56-57

Hindu? God forbid. Do I wish that the Hindu or Buddhist would become Christian? God forbid. The seed is put in the ground, and earth and air and water are placed around it. Does the seed become the earth, or the air, or the water? No. It becomes a plant, it develops after the law of its own growth, assimilates the air, the earth, and the water, converts them into plant substance, and grows into a plant. Similar is the case with religion. The Christian is not to become a Hindu or a Buddhist, nor a Hindu or a Buddhist to become a Christian. But each must assimilate the spirit of the others and yet preserve his individuality and grow according to his own law of growth.”<sup>1</sup>

Having been drawn, myself, from the practice of the Roman Catholic Christian tradition in which I was raised to the practice of Hinduism, I do not believe that Swamiji is here disallowing the fact that one might be drawn to a particular tradition and begin to practice and identify with it, even if it is different from the tradition into which one was born. But he is saying that it is not necessary for everyone to practice the same tradition.

The ideal of a “universal religion” of which Swamiji speaks is not one of a single religion conquering and replacing all others. It is an ideal, rather, of what one might call a commonwealth of religions, each learning from and assimilating ideals of the others while continuing to develop in its own distinctive way. “My idea... is that all these religions are different forces in the economy of God, working for the good of mankind; and that not one can become dead, not one can be killed. Just as you cannot kill any force in nature, so you cannot kill any one of these spiritual forces. You have seen that each religion is living. From time to time it may retrograde or go forward. At one time, it may be shorn of a good

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<sup>1</sup> CW 1, p. 24

many of its trappings; at another it may be covered with all sorts of trappings; but all the same, the soul is ever there, it can never be lost. The ideal which every religion represents is never lost, and so every religion is intelligently on the march.”<sup>1</sup>

### **Conclusion:**

Swami Vivekananda’s ideal of universal acceptance, of diverse religions as being not so much contradictory as complementary, as forming distinct pieces of a vast jigsaw puzzle, as participating, each in its own way, in a broader, transcendent vision of the reality that we all share and inhabit, is even more relevant today than it was when he first articulated it, over a century ago. It has, fortunately, become an influential ideal in the Western world, as the opinion polls suggest. But it is not yet shared by all.

I am often struck by the fact that Swami Vivekananda’s first address in Chicago, at the Parliament of World Religions, was delivered on September 11, 1893—exactly 108 years to the day before the notorious attacks on my own country on September 11, 2001. The number 108 of course has great significance in the Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain dharma traditions. Perhaps humanity was offered a chance to mend its ways when Swamiji gave his vision to the world on that day in 1893 and failed the test.

Swamiji said at the end of that address, “I fervently hope that the bell that tolled this morning in honour of this convention may be the death-knell of all fanaticism, of all persecutions with the sword or with the pen, and of all uncharitable feelings between persons wending their way to the same goal.”<sup>2</sup> Let us pray that it will not take another 108 years for Swamiji’s hope to be realized.

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<sup>1</sup> CW 2, p. 366

<sup>2</sup> Vivekananda, Volume 1, p. 4.

As long as there is religious bigotry, and as long as violence is carried out in the name of religion, the need for Swami Vivekananda's vision will be pressing and urgent. This becomes all the more evident when one takes into account the destructive capacities that our ever-increasing technological abilities make available to an ever-widening pool of actors on the global stage. The urgent need to save our human heritage by promoting the Vedantic vision of universal acceptance compels us, in Swamiji's words, to, "Arise, awake, and stop not until the goal is reached!"

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## Ramakrishna and Vivekananda

Sir John Stewart-Wallace, C.B.

*[We give below the first part of this article. It deals with Ramakrishna and his message. The second and concluding part, dealing with Vivekananda and how he carried this message to the world, will appear in the next number]*

Ramakrishna and Vivekananda were the greatest universalists of the nineteenth century. Ramakrishna, a very babe and suckling in the learning and ways of the world, relighted the torch of the eternal Oneness in the middle of that century. By Vivekananda, his great disciple, it was carried at the end of the century to Europe and to America. There it was acclaimed by the greatest among modern Western scholars as a great light on the road from man to God. That light of universalism has spread widely and with ever-increasing pace in the twentieth century; so far as the Ramakrishna movement is concerned it is now doing so in an organized and responsible way. The great Ramakrishna Mission at Belur, near Calcutta, with its thousands of adherents, lay and professed, with its own publications, its own religious, educational and social work and its world-wide contacts, has stretched its arms far beyond India. Flourishing Vedanta Centres in America and Europe, and in London itself, are now springing up. This great Mission is an embodiment of the perennial philosophy that has sustained mankind through the centuries. A growing number of earnest men and women, who in their search for God have been forced, and often forced with deep anguish of spirit, to reject the limiting creeds of orthodoxy, begin to see in the universalism of Vedanta proclaimed by the Mission a great hope which, without doing violence to their integrity of mind, gives them vision of a

unitive knowledge of God for which the religious soul so ardently prays.

Ramakrishna was in no way the founder of a new religion. He was the mightiest of the modern exponents of the universalism revealed in the Vedas four thousand years before him. The light of the highest teaching, the same yesterday, today and forever, is from time to time obscured by the passions of man. When that happens, the Bhagavad-Gita tells us, a new messenger of God is sent into the world to lead men back to sanity and to saving truth. Ramakrishna was acclaimed in India as being in this great succession in the nineteenth century, just as the great Chaitanya, sometimes described as his immediate predecessor, was acclaimed in the fifteenth century. That century was a time of ethical, moral and religious horror. Chaitanya could not find rest for his soul in the orthodoxy of a debased Hinduism. Though a Bengali brahmin, a learned theologian and a Sanskrit scholar, he soared in religious aspiration far beyond the formulas of Hinduism and sought for a universal God transcending all particular faiths and religions, high and holy as these in their time and place might be. No man, he said, could have the vision of God till he had shed all preconceived teaching and conceptions of Him. He finally found salvation in the gospel of universal love revealed to him by the experience of mystic union with the God of whom the cosmos itself was but a shadow, yet who was open to every seeking soul whatever his race, religion, or caste. Neither the outcaste, the publican nor the sinner was shut out. Like Jesus, centuries before him, he rose to the height of: " Neither do I condemn thee, go and sin no more ". These great Masters did not seek to bring the punishment of physical death to sinners but to open up for them the good life; and to open it up so abundantly that, like the woman taken in adultery, we feel their

touch to be so divine that it rescues the sinner from committal of the sin.

Ramakrishna was born in 1836 in Bengal of impoverished but very pious parents. He was delicate, of small stature and of a uniquely sensitive disposition, peculiarly open to experiences of ecstasy. Indeed, he records of himself that his first experience of ecstasy was at six years old when, overcome by the beauty of some white cranes flying out of a dark cloud, he fell unconscious to the ground.' Throughout his life Ramakrishna retained this extreme sensitivity and passed a great part of his time in samadhi, the supra-consciousness of deity vouchsafed to the saints. His extreme emotionalism is apt to form a barrier to the full appreciation of him by many Europeans, to whom all such manifestations are apt to be repellent. In charity and in wisdom we must remember, however, that the artist, the poet, and the great saint cannot be as men of coarser fibre. The English public school has immense virtues and has conferred immense benefits throughout the world, but its stuff is not the stuff of which artists, great poets and saints are commonly compound. Samadhi is beyond emotionalism. It is vision given by the perfect contemplation of God and (Christians would add) given by the grace of God. In that vision all emotionalism and the illusion of the ego, or the differentiated self, both of ourselves and of others, are completely lost. Weak mortals as we are, tied and bound and lost in the fleeting passions of this world, we cannot even dimly imagine the spiritual heights attained by a life so completely of the spirit that all consciousness of ourselves and of our physical life completely vanishes. Pleasure and pain, hope and despair, life and death and all the opposites that so overwhelmingly hide God from us, cease to be. Ramakrishna passed a large part of his life in samadhi to the exclusion of all consciousness of the body, or its life in space and

time. In samadhi he was indeed dead to the world. We do well, therefore, to study with humility what he had to tell us of that spiritual life so far beyond our own capacity to realize. He gives us some insight into the blessedness of the saints when he says: "A man who has once tasted the bliss of God finds this world utterly unworthy and unsatisfying ". Yet he insisted that the world was not to be left while any duties in it were unfulfilled. So far was his call to the religious life from emotionalism that, martinet that he was, he would accept no one as a disciple unless and until the disciple had discharged all his duties in the world, especially to parents, to wife and children ; and this though he proclaims that to lead a religious life in the world was to stay in a room with only a feeble ray of light. He would have none of the doctrine that peace was to be sought in the forest if duty were left undone. Only with all worldly duties fulfilled might the aspirant take the world-renouncing vows and enjoy the bliss of God. Even to his admitted disciples he joined the Christian saints in warning against trust in visions, or other physical manifestations of the divine, as being apt to spring from subjective emotionalism. It is commonly asserted about him that he possessed Yogic powers of the highest order, yet he would only use these powers in the rarest cases.

Similarly, though he believed himself to be a divine Incarnation, he discouraged all reference to it, as seekers after God must attain to Him through their own experience, not through any powers in anyone else. Wholly uneducated and untutored in any academic sense, Ramakrishna passed his youth in poverty. When twenty years of age, he succeeded, on the death of his eldest brother, to the priesthood of a Kali temple at Dakshineswar, on the Ganges, where that goddess was worshipped as the Divine Mother. This temple had been founded and maintained by a wealthy widow, Rani Rasmani, of inferior caste, but who in her own way was

something of a great woman with the instincts of a true universalist. From the largeness of her soul she had directed that rooms should be reserved in her foundation for visiting members of all religions. Advantage of this was taken by representatives of many faiths and, as we shall see, this universalist provision had very direct consequences on Ramakrishna himself.

With all his emotionalism, Ramakrishna at once threw himself into the service of the Divine Mother, seeking that She would reveal Herself to him. But to his despair, for long the vision did not come. He lost all self-control. In the agony of his search, " a madman of God ", he would writhe on the ground to the scandal of visitors to the temple. At last the great illumination came. He has described it for us himself:

"One day I was torn with intolerable anguish; I was writhing with pain. A terrible frenzy seized me at the thought that I might never be granted the blessing of this Divine vision. I thought if that were so, then, enough of this life. A sword was hanging from the sanctuary of Kali. My eye fell on it and an idea flashed through my brain like lightning—the sword! It will help me to be done with life. I rushed up to it and seized it like a madman and, lo! the whole scene—doors, windows, the temple itself—vanished. It seemed as if nothing existed any more. Instead I saw an ocean of the Spirit, boundless, dazzling. In whatever direction I looked great luminous waves were rising. They bore down on me with a loud roar. They engulfed me. I was suffocated. I lost all natural consciousness and I fell. . . . How I passed that day and the next, I know not Round me rose an ocean of ineffable joy. And in the depths of my being I was conscious of the presence of the Divine Mother."

From this description we learn that, while all consciousness of the body and of earthly life is lost in samadhi. unconsciousness in the ordinary sense does not supervene. Normal, physical consciousness is superseded by a supra-consciousness of the Infinite and Ineffable so overwhelming as to block out the world and all that appertains to it. To the world, however, especially to the European world, these fits of unconsciousness, the shiverings, the stiffening of the body as if dead, the visions, all appear to come from hallucinations calling for treatment as lunacy. And indeed, Ramakrishna might have passed from history to a madhouse, had he not overcome this and attained the wholeness or holiness of a synthesis revealing in him the highest intellectual and mystic powers. The cure did not come at once, however. He had to be sent home to his mother, who prescribed marriage for him and, following the Indian custom of child-marriage, obtained for him as bride an infant of six years old, Sarada—afterwards to become the Holy Mother of the Ramakrishna Order and to be venerated almost as a goddess. Never was she his wife in any carnal sense, for in the spiritual world in which Ramakrishna lived, men and women are as the angels in heaven and are neither given nor taken in marriage.

Calmed by the influence of his mother, he returned to his duty as a priest. The old symptoms, however, returned in intensified form. The full influence of his protectress, Rani Rasmani, was required to preserve him in his post at all. On her death, when he was twenty-five, his worldly future looked dark indeed. But there is a divinity that doth shape our ends. At that moment, as if by a miracle, the Bhairavi Brahmani, a wandering brahmin nun, came to the temple and, recognizing his divine capacity, became his first guru. She brought him back to the centuries-old Indian bhakti path of devotion and prayer to God and enabled him to achieve all his

realizations under the guidance of the bhakti scriptures. He now attained to communion with God conceived as a person, in calmness, in safety and full health of mind. But the heights of the nirvikalpa samadhi, the final union with the formless God, had yet to be scaled. Just at that moment, as if by another miracle, Tota Puri, a wandering sannyasin, who after forty years of preparation had attained the final revelation of the Impersonal Absolute, came to the temple and, recognizing in Ramakrishna a soul ripe for the harvest, instructed him in Advaita Vedanta, or pure monism, and how to realize it in the ecstasy of nirvikalpa samadhi. After deep suffering and profound struggle and eleven months' teaching from Tota Puri, the final attainment was his. It is said that for many months after the departure of Tota Puri he remained in a state of physical unconsciousness in ecstatic union with the Absolute. But for the care of a devoted nephew, who fed and attended to the unconscious body, he would have died. Gradually, he was forced down from the nirvikalpa samadhi by many months of violent dysentery and excruciating pain. The body called him back to the body. This he attributed to the Divine Mother commanding him to return to service on earth. That call he obeyed and became the sane and balanced Ramakrishna, simple and serene, so marvellously equipped after so much suffering and direct experience of the divine, to give his message to the world. And India was ready for it His fame as a holy man began to spread widely. People flocked to him. monks, sages, sannyasins, sadhus, the great leaders of religious thought and of many religions, as well as those young and old seeking for salvation. Among these young seekers was Vivekananda, destined to become the world-famous disciple who carried his message to America and Europe. From his intercourse with many religions in this way, and from his insatiable spiritual search, Ramakrishna was led to explore the

paths to God of different religions. The universalist urge in him made him ask himself the exquisitely humble question: "Have they got wells of God from which I have not drunk?" He came to see, in the words of Aurobindo, that all sects are forms and segments of a single integral truth, and that all disciplines labour in their different ways towards one supreme experience. He came, in consequence, to see that he must love God in all sorts and conditions of men and, above all, that he must love God as manifested in all their gods. His temple, with its thronging cosmopolitan visitors, representing all the faiths of the world, gave him further rich insights into God. One day, in 1866, he saw a lowly figure, Govinda Rai, at the temple prostrate in prayer, and with fine sympathy recognized that the praying figure had also realized God. Govinda is said to have been a kshatriya by birth, learned in Persian and Arabic, who had embraced the teaching of Islam as given by the Sufis, the mystics of Persia. Ramakrishna at once besought Govinda to initiate him into the path of Islam. He entered into the Moslem forms completely. He clothed himself as a Moslem; he lived outside the temple and, banishing from his consciousness the Hindu faith, prayed to Allah with a concentration so pointed that a vision of Allah was granted to him. In the vision he realized Islam as a path to God, sacred as the Hindu path, and saw Allah as a manifestation of the Formless God.

In the same way, he entered into the disciplines and worships of other religions, including Christianity. About seven years after the vision of Allah, the New Testament was read to him. For the first time, he became aware of the teaching of Jesus. Soon afterwards he saw a picture of the Madonna and Child. To his consciousness the picture came to life, and for many days he again lost awareness of the Hindu path and steeped himself in the

adoration of the Christ. Finally, he had the Beatific Vision of Jesus coming to him as Love Incarnate in eternal union with God. He at once lost all physical consciousness and in nirvikalpa samadhi realized union with Brahman, the Eternal Absolute.

As a result of these supreme realizations, Ramakrishna was able to say: " I have practised all religions—Hinduism, Islam, Christianity—and I have also followed the paths of the different Hindu sects. I have found that it is the same God towards Whom all are directing their steps, though along different paths He then gives us what Jesus would have called a parable of the Kingdom of Heaven. A reservoir of water, he said, has many different points from which the water may be drawn. At one, Hindus draw water in pitchers and call it jal; at another, Moslems draw water in leather bottles and call it pani; at a third Christians draw and call it water. Can we imagine that the water is not jal but only pani or water? No, no; the substance is One under different names, and everyone is seeking the same substance; nothing but climate, temperament and name vary. Let each man follow his own path. If he sincerely and ardently wishes to know God, peace be unto him! He will surely realize God '.

Ramakrishna was great enough to say: " Do not trouble yourself about doctrine. It is the spiritual in a man that counts". So balanced was he that he added: " A devotee ought not to be a fool". " You must love the tiger but you need not embrace him Extremely practical as he was, he also said: " Religion is not for empty bellies ". And he so inspired his great disciple Vivekananda that, after his death, Vivekananda undertook the great mission in India not only for the souls of the Indian masses, but also to save their bodies from unspeakable squalor, starvation and death. " It is now my firm conviction ", said Vivekananda, " that it is futile to preach

religion amongst the masses without first trying to remove their poverty and suffering". Ramakrishna anticipated the great saying of Bernard Shaw that it is no use talking to a man about his soul while there is hunger in his eye.

These high insights, visions and manifestations to Ramakrishna are unique in the history of the Great Ones who appear as the very incarnations of the Godhead itself. They elevate him to a place amongst the greatest of the Prophets and reveal him as the Arch-Prophet of a coming transcendentalism, when it will be perceived that for sincere believers all religious experience is in essence the same. He believed himself to be a divine Incantation specially sent to earth for the purpose of revealing this truth to men. He appears as a very embodiment of the great spirit of Jesus of Nazareth centuries before him. In the Gospel of St. John, and in language very infants in learning can comprehend, the great consummation of universalism is foretold: " The hour cometh when ye shall neither in this mountain nor yet at Jerusalem worship the Father. . . . God is a Spirit and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth ". This is among the greatest universalist sayings in all the scriptures of mankind. Our prayer is that the great consummation may be beginning dimly to take shape in the present age, and give twentieth century mankind, as it shudders in terror of the hydrogen bomb, the sure and certain hope that in the great universalist faith salvation may be found not only for the soul but for the body as well. If the world were united in the worship of the One and we had all become members one of another there could be no more war.

Jesus proclaimed that the paths of worship were many, independent of time and space, limitless as spirit. Ramakrishna's gospel was the same. Every path, he said, followed in humility, in

prayer and in self-renunciation, led to God. He would have denied utterly that there is only one name given under heaven whereby man can be saved (words never used by Jesus). The noble teaching of the Vedanta as expounded by Ramakrishna is that, even though buried in sin, man is essentially divine; and that by leading the dedicated life, he can resurrect the divine spark within, be liberated from the tyranny of sin, and raise himself to the great company of the saints. The opportunity for salvation is universal. Indeed, Ramakrishna believed himself, as we have seen, to have been sent into the world to proclaim this great truth and to reconcile it with human reason by his dualism and monism — adapted to the mental equipment of different grades of men. Ramakrishna's aim went far beyond a mere tolerance of one religion by another, or a mere meeting together in mutual respect and appreciation. These are all but stages on the road. The end of the road is a transcendence of the many in the high universalism of the One. The Eucharist universal will be celebrated not only with the twelve disciples, but with the vast crowds of witnesses from every age and race and religion, numberless as the sands of the seashore.

Ramakrishna died in 1886. Confined as his physical life had been to the banks of the Ganges, he might have passed, his message forgotten, to the limbo of the nameless dead. But a light which is set on a hill, we have high authority for saying, cannot be hid. As if by another of the seeming miracles which marked his life, a great disciple, destined to become world-famous, arose to carry his message throughout the world. His name was Vivekananda.

(To be concluded)

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# The Message of Swami Vivekananda and Its Relevance to Unesco Today

Bikas C. Sanyal

**A**t the close of the nineteenth century, Swami Vivekananda gave a warning to the Western world that it was sitting on a volcano of materialistic consumerism. At any moment the volcano could erupt, destroying the important treasures of the human race. The volcano did erupt; not once, but twice within a period of only five decades.

At the end of the second World War, amidst the ruins of the devastated countries, the nations which had emerged victorious became aware of the omnipresent pain and the threat of new forms of mass destruction. They began to realise that they bore a collective responsibility for the safeguard of the future of our species.

They established the United Nations Organisation, and with it, a specialised agency for education, science (including the social sciences), and culture (including communication), and named it UNESCO. The latter was assigned the task of contributing to peace and the common welfare of mankind through the educational, scientific, and cultural relations of the peoples of the world. Consequently, the constitution of UNESCO rest upon the basic premise:

That a peace based exclusively upon the political and economic arrangements of governments would not be a peace which could secure the unanimous lasting and sincere support of the peoples of the world and that the peace must, therefore, be founded, if it is not to fail, upon the intellectual and moral solidarity of mankind. It was as though the founding members were listening to what Swamiji had said five decades before: It would not be enough to

satisfy mankind's material needs. Its intellectual and moral urges must also be met, and they should be met with a holistic approach to promote the common welfare of mankind. It shall be called to attention that the constitution of UNESCO claims that:

Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that defences of peace must be constructed.<sup>1</sup>

In the following sections, we shall examine (i) the commonalities of the ideas of Swami Vivekananda, promoted through the Ramakrishna Mission, and those of UNESCO, promoted through its own programmes of action; (ii) how UNESCO's programmes on education, science, social science, culture and communication transcend some of Vivekananda's ideas; and finally (iii) what lessons UNESCO could derive from Vivekananda's messages in our present day world, which is passing through a crisis of violence, terrorism, and communalism, all in the name of religion.

**Objectives of the Ramakrishna Mission and those of UNESCO:**

Vivekananda founded the Ramakrishna Mission on May 1, 1897, giving it the following aims and objectives:

To impart and promote the study of Vedanta and its principles as propounded by Sri Ramakrishna and practically illustrated by his own life, and of Comparative Theology in its widest form.

(i) To impart, promote and undertake the study of and research in the arts, sciences, technologies and industries in all their branches both basic and applied.

(ii) To undertake scientific research in the area of medical sciences.

To train teachers in all branches of knowledge above mentioned and enable them to reach the masses.

To carry on educational work among the masses.

<sup>1</sup> *ibid.*

To establish, maintain, institutions, libraries, auditoriums, orphanages, workshops, laboratories, hospitals, dispensaries, houses for the aged, the infirm, the invalid and the afflicted, relief and rehabilitation works, and any other educational, medical, cultural, and social welfare services and training institutions of a like nature.

To print and publish and to sell or distribute gratuitously or otherwise, journals periodicals, books, or leaflets that the Association may think desirable for the promotion of its objects.

To carry on any other work which may seem to the Association capable of being conveniently carried on in connection with and calculated directly or indirectly to promote the before-mentioned objects.<sup>1</sup>

We shall observe that six of the seven objectives mentioned above deal with education, science, and culture; all areas dealt with under UNESCO's operation as seen below:

The purpose of the Organisation is to contribute to peace and security by promoting collaboration among the nations through education, science and culture in order to further universal respect for justice, for the rule of law and for the human rights and fundamental freedoms which are affirmed for the peoples of the world, without distinction of race, sex, language, or religion, by the Charter of the United Nations.

**To realize this purpose of the Organisation will:**

Collaborate in the work of advancing the mutual knowledge and understanding of peoples, through all means of mass communication and to that end recommend such international agreements as may be necessary to promote the free flow of ideas by word and image;

<sup>1</sup> Ramakrishna Mission: *Constitution: Aims and Objects*, Belur Math, Howrah, India, May, 1897

**Give fresh impulse to popular education and to the spread of culture:**

By collaborating with Members, at their request, in the development of educational activities;

By instituting collaboration among the nations to advance the ideal of equality of educational opportunity without regard to race, sex or any distinctions, economic or social;

By suggesting educational methods best suited to prepare the children of the world for the responsibilities of freedom;

**Maintain, increase and diffuse knowledge:**

By assuring the conservation and protection of the world's inheritance of books, works of art and monuments of history and science, and recommending to the nations concerned the necessary international conventions;

By encouraging co-operation among the nations in all branches of intellectual activity, including the international exchange of persons active in the fields of education, science and culture and the exchange of publications, objects of artistic and scientific interest and other materials of information;

By initiating methods of international co-operation calculated to give the people of all countries access to the printed and published materials produced by any of them.

3) With a view to preserving the independence, integrity and fruitful diversity of the cultures and educational systems of the States Members of the Organisation, the Organisation is prohibited from intervening in matters which are essentially within their domestic jurisdiction. <sup>1</sup>

The similarities of the two constitutions prepared with a gap of almost five decades are striking. Vivekananda's ideas were so far-sighted that the world-body collecting the best intellectual

<sup>1</sup> UNESCO, *Constitution*, Article 1

minds of the world had little new ideas to offer. This reminds us of the assessment of Vivekananda made by Dr. J. H. Wright, Professor of Greek at Harvard University: 'Here is a man who is more learned than all our learned professors put together.'<sup>1</sup>

The objectives of UNESCO are to be realised in cooperation with its member states, 172 in number, irrespective of their ideological, social, and religious background. Vivekananda had his own ideas in respect of the means of achieving the objectives set for the Ramakrishna Mission. He said:

Help and not Fight

Assimilation and not Destruction

Harmony and Peace and not Dissension

...each must assimilate the spirit of the others and yet preserve his individuality and grow according to his own law of growth.<sup>2</sup>

UNESCO accepted this same spirit as the way to achieve its own objectives. We shall briefly narrate below the activities of UNESCO today and try to identify the extent to which Vivekananda's ideas are being reflected in these activities.

**UNESCO's Activities in Education, Science (and Social Science), and Culture (and Communication) in its Member States<sup>3</sup> in Relation to Vivekananda's Ideas in these Areas:**

The constitution of UNESCO says:

The wide diffusion of culture and the education of humanity for justice and liberty and peace are indispensable to the dignity of man and constitute a sacred duty which all the nations must fulfil in a spirit of mutual assistance and concern.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Life* i. 405-06

<sup>2</sup> *C.W.*, i. 24.

<sup>3</sup> UNESCO *What is UNESCO?*, UNESCO, Paris, 1991

<sup>4</sup> UNESCO, *Constitution*, preamble.

UNESCO has elaborated its programmes of action in education, science, and culture on a practical basis indicated below.

**UNESCO's Activities in Education:**

Education has been the priority of the organisation's programme of activities. Vivekananda said: 'If the poor boy cannot come to education, education must go to him.'<sup>1</sup> This has always been the aim of UNESCO's work in the area of education. Universalisation of primary education and eradication of illiteracy have been the two most important items on its agenda. The 'World Conference on Education for All' held in Jomtien, Thailand, in March 1990, reinforced this programme. Teacher training, access to education for girls and women, nutritional education, education for peace and international understanding, environmental education, language teaching, and vocational training are some of the programmes covered by the organisation in the field of education. Vivekananda said that

With five hundred men, the conquest of India might take fifty years; with as many women, not more than a few weeks.<sup>2</sup>

Recognition of women's capacity to change society has been an important characteristic of the organisation, as was appreciated and demanded by Vivekananda. He asserted: 'The uplift of women, the awakening of the masses must come first, then only can any real good come about for the country, for India.'<sup>3</sup> The message applies to the whole world and the organisation is attempting to follow suit as is evident from the above listed programmes.

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<sup>1</sup> *C.W.*, iv. 363

<sup>2</sup> Sister Nivedita, *The Master As I Saw Him*, Calcutta: Udbodhan office, 1977, p.260

<sup>3</sup> *C.W.*, vi. 489-90

**With respect to the content of education one can also observe the ideas of Vivekananda:**

Education is not the amount of information that is put into your brain and runs riot there, undigested all your life.

We must have life-building, man-making, character –making assimilation of ideas. <sup>1</sup>

Real education is that which enables one to stand on one's own legs.<sup>2</sup>

Education for self reliance has been one of the principal objectives of the organisation's programme. Hence, the organisation's educational programmes have attempted to emphasize how to help people help themselves.

**Programmes in Science and Technology:**

One of Vivekananda's objectives for the establishment of the Ramakrishna Mission was 'to impart, promote and undertake the study of and research in the arts, sciences, technologies and industries in all their branches, both basic and applied.'<sup>3</sup>

The following are some of the programmes UNESCO has set up: The intergovernmental oceanographic commission (IOC) tries to improve understanding of the sea's role and resource potential, and the World Climate Research is as one of its supported programmes. Man and the Biosphere (MAB), launched in 1971, has helped create 293 Biosphere reserves in 73 countries to be protected because they represent the principal types of ecosystems in the world. The goal is to promote a world philosophy of harmony between man and his environment.

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<sup>1</sup> *ibid.* iii. 302.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.* vii. 147-48

<sup>3</sup> *Ramakrishna Mission: Constitution: Aims and Objects*

The International Geological Correlation Programme (IGCP) attempts to improve knowledge in the field of geology, geophysics, and the distribution of mineral and energy resources, and it so far engages 92 countries.

The International Hydrological Programme (IHP) attempts to promote the rational use and management of the earth's water resources, which have been getting scarce in recent years. Programmes on the study and reduction of natural hazards (earthquakes, cyclones, floods, volcanic eruptions, etc.) and the 'Programme to prevent desertification and improve the management of arid lands' are among other scientific activities of the organisation.

### **Culture and Communication:**

UNESCO's programmes on culture have emphasized the protection of the world's natural and cultural heritage, highlighting the interdisciplinary nature of its approach. By 1991, one hundred and seventeen countries had ratified the convention on the subject, and three hundred and thirty-seven sites have now been placed on the World Heritage list (more than fifteen belonging to India). The 'Integral Study of the Silk Roads: Roads of dialogue' is a vast project studying the land and sea routes which linked East and West, promoting, cultural, scientific, and technological exchanges. Preservation of oral tradition, folk art, international protection of copyright, promotion of books and reading, and improvement of the status of artists are some other activities covered by the organisation.

In respect of communication, UNESCO's main objective is 'to promote free flow of ideas by word and image' through its 'International Programme for the Development of Communication' (IPDC) set up in 1980. UNESCO has also developed an 'International Informatics Programme' (IIP) to train computer

specialists and reduce inequalities in this field between industrialised and developing countries. The General Information Programme (PGI) is the focal point of UNESCO's activities in the areas of scientific and technical information, documentation, libraries, and archives. This programme also serves as the framework of UNISIST – creating methods, rules and standards necessary for the creation of computable information systems and services and for their interconnection within a world scientific information system.

### **Activities of UNESCO in the area of the Social and Human Sciences:**

Vivekananda's ideas for human development could very well be the core of UNESCO's social and humanistic programmes. All his sayings and messages relate to the welfare of mankind and to the promotion of universalism. His sayings, such as:

Feel for the miserable and look up for help – it *shall come*.

Say, the ignorant Indian, the poor and destitute Indian, the brahmin Indian, the pariah Indian, is my brother.

The uplift of the women, the awakening of the masses must come first, and then only can any real good come about for the country, for India.

We must try our best to destroy ignorance and evil. Only we have to learn that evil is destroyed by the growth of good.

Material civilisation – nay even luxury- is necessary to create work for the poor. I don't believe in a God who cannot give me my bread here, giving eternal peace in heaven.

No civilisation can grow unless fanaticism, bloodshed, and brutality stop.

It is spiritual culture and ethical culture alone that can change wrong racial tendencies for the better.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *C.W.*, v.26; iv. 480; vi. 489-90; v. 125; *Letters*, p.174; *C.W.*, iii. 187; iii. 182

All these sayings provide the foundation of UNESCO's activities in the social and human sciences. The principal characteristics of the programmes under this head are: combating all forms of discrimination and racial prejudice, including handling problems of youth and women – the victims of unemployment and economic and social disparities; teaching of human rights at all level of formal and non-formal education; and above all, attempts to build a world of peace and harmony by propagating universalism and tolerance. While in the development of culture it emphasises protection of cultural identity within the framework of national harmony, in its interdisciplinary research on social and human sciences, concepts are clarified and programmes designed and articulated for building a world where people can live in peace and amity.

#### **Importance of Vivekananda's Message in Today's World:**

In his address in the Parliament of Religions Vivekananda asserted:

Sectarianism, bigotry, and its horrible descendant, fanaticism, have long possessed this beautiful earth. They have filled the earth with violence....But their time has come; and I fervently hope that the bell that tolled this morning in hour of this convention be the death knell of all fanaticism, of all persecutions....<sup>1</sup>

Alas, the world is not yet free from religious fanaticism. The lands of Moses, Jesus, Mohammed, Buddha, and Vivekananda – are all still plagued with violence and are so in the name of religion. Why is this so? During the Cold War, the world was divided between two ideologies: communism and capitalism. These ideologies were protective shields that camouflaged social discrepancies in the heart of society. At the end of the cold war and the rejection of communism (and thus the elimination of one

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<sup>1</sup> C.W., i.4

of the societies' protective ideologies) by the former Soviet Union, it appears that the hidden evils, e.g. racism, ethnicity, and communalism, are coming back with increased force. The other explanation which I owe to Mrs. Kapila Vatsyayan, is that for too long, the world bodies have attempted to aggregate the parts to make a whole. 'For too long chasms and schisms been built first, divisions made, and then bridges constructed.' We have not begun as a world community by a concept as a whole, whether micro or macro, and then identified the parts. If man is the centre of development (as UNESCO considers in its programmes and as Vivekananda asserted: 'Religion is the manifestation of the divinity already *in man*' or 'Education is the manifestation of perfection already *in man*') there cannot be a man without the totality of the environment, natural, physical, emotional, and spiritual. But it is this environment that he now threatens to destroy. This may need 'a redefinition of the terms of culture, education, science information, mass media, and above all, the two crucial words, development and progress.'<sup>1</sup>

Vivekananda was concerned with these problems even in his time. That is why he put emphasis on the manifestations of 'divinity' and 'perfection' already in man. But the process of these manifestations is hard to follow. Here again, he has his own words of optimism and encouragement: 'Be not in despair; the way is very difficult, like walking on the edge of a razor; yet, despair not, arise, awake, and find the ideal, the goal.'<sup>2</sup> UNESCO must pursue its noble mission!

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<sup>1</sup> Kapila Vatsyayana: 'UNESCO: Culture and, or Development?' in *UNESCO in Retrospect and Prospect*, edited by U.S. Bajpai and S. Viswam, India

<sup>2</sup> *C.W.*, ii. 124

## Leaves from an Ashrama 65

### Never Was there any Delusion

Swami Vidyatmananda

In her informative book, *Swami Vivekananda: His Second Voyage to the West*, Marie Louise Burke quotes from a letter which Swami Saradananda wrote to Mrs. Sara Bull in 1899. I don't know when I have read anything that did me so much good as these several lines:

The Ramakrishna Mission has been reopened and I have been invited to give my talks again from the coming Sunday. I don't know how far I will be able to impress others just at present, with my downfallen spirit. I feel such a desire to go to the old Sannyasin life or to go away to some other country where I can be my own master. But I see I must never do it. It would be unfaithfulness to Sri Ramakrishna and the Swami too.

This is Swami Saradananda speaking, a direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, a realized soul, and known during the first decades of the 1900's as a stalwart of the Ramakrishna movement.

That persons of such stature can be discouraged (Mrs. Burke also documents Vivekananda's heaviness of spirit during much of 1898 and 1899) is a comfort. It is reassuring to know that sometimes even saints feel like quitting. I shall remember this and not feel so desperate when such moods strike me.

However, the more interesting part of the letter is the conclusion: But I see I must never do it. It would be unfaithfulness to Sri Ramakrishna and the Swami too.

Jesus asked his disciples to take up their cross and follow him. And we know that they did so. The early Christians were immensely enthusiastic and enduring. They rejoiced in overcoming the evils of life. They were not discouraged by

persecutions; they did not consider giving up even when threatened with death.

Shall we, their modern equivalents, disciples of today's counterpart of Jesus, be less zealous? For although Swami Saradananda felt discouraged, he also discriminated intelligently and in so doing overcame his feeling. Shall we not be utterly faithful, too, not giving in to black moods, keeping on gamely? A sadhu, declared Swami Turiyananda, is one who endures to the very end.

What does it mean, then, being faithful to Sri Ramakrishna and Swamiji? Not the bearing of a cross in the same sense as in the first centuries after Christ; not the conserving of the Master's memory and message through the founding of a church. But something more appropriate for this Electrical Age: the awakening to the Divinity that runs through the whole universe and is our own essence also. For another useful passage in Mrs. Burke's book is her discussion of what she considers Vivekananda's final message--the smashing truth, as he called it in a conversation with Sister Nivedita, that the monistic idea is the crowning verity. Fill the mind with it day and night: 'I am It. I am the Lord of the universe. Never was there any delusion.' Meditate upon it with all the strength of the mind until you actually see these walls, houses, everything, melt away--until body, everything, vanishes. 'I will stand alone. I am the One.' Struggle on.

Striving to realize that smashing truth is, I see, what it means for us to be faithful to Sri R. and the Swami too.

## Shaping the Future of Humankind – What We Can Learn from Swami Vivekananda?

**H**umankind is at a crossroads. In the political and social spheres we find rising fundamentalism, increasing bigotry, and a visible spirit of exclusion and division among various groups. Yet, spirituality and the spirit of enlightened citizenship have been some of the greatest forces for accelerated social evolution over the centuries.

Similarly, in the technological and economic spheres we find the almost irreversible drive towards integration, globalization, and the creation of a ‘world culture’ that brings people together. Yet, it is use of technology for violence and the economic motive that have led to the most horrible wars and conflicts between various human groupings across ages.

Which is the direction that humankind will take? What can we, in our respective spheres of work and thought, do to help shape the evolution of societies?

The Ramakrishna Vedanta Centre, Bourne End, Buckinghamshire, UK offers a series of lectures/seminars/workshops from December 2 to December 6, 2018 that explore this theme, in the light of Swami Vivekananda’s celebrated lectures at the Chicago Parliament of Religions, 125 years ago.

The lectures/workshops will focus on specifics based on the Universal ideas propounded by Swami Vivekananda. How can we design new institutions, new work cultures, new educational models, new models for community empowerment and build new approaches to help human beings empower themselves to find solutions to the challenges they face?

These lectures will be delivered across multiple locations including the inaugural event at Mahatma Gandhi Hall, 41 Fitzroy Square, London, W1T 6AQ on Sunday 2<sup>nd</sup> December 2018 from 4 pm to 8 pm.

Speakers will include Prof. Shaunaka Rishi Das, Director, The Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies, Emily Buchanan, eminent BBC TV and Radio Journalist, V. Srinivas, Founder CEO, Illumine, Mumbai, Hindol Sengupta, University of Oxford, Dr Shailendra Vyakarnam, Cambridge University, Dr Mukulika Banerjee, London School of Economics and many others.

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## **Programme for November - December 2018**

Sunday discourses begin after a brief period of meditation.

At the

**Ramakrishna Vedanta Centre, Bourne End at 4:30 pm**

|     |    |                                                                                                                       |                                             |
|-----|----|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|
| Nov | 4  | Sister Nivedita and Kali                                                                                              | Swami Purnananda<br>Vedanta Society Ireland |
| Nov | 11 | Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna 21                                                                                          | Swami Sarvasthananda                        |
| Nov | 18 | The "Maya" lectures;<br>Class Notes - 5                                                                               | Swami Tripurananda                          |
| Nov | 25 | Day Retreat                                                                                                           |                                             |
| Dec | 2  | 125 <sup>th</sup> Chicago Address Annivesary at Mahatma Gandhi Hall<br>41 Fitzroy Square, London W1T 6AQ from 4:00 pm |                                             |
| Dec | 9  | Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna 22                                                                                          | Swami Sarvasthananda                        |
| Dec | 16 | Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna 23                                                                                          | Swami Sarvasthananda                        |
| Dec | 23 | No Talk                                                                                                               |                                             |
| Dec | 24 | Christmas Eve Celebration                                                                                             |                                             |
| Dec | 30 | Holy Mother's Puja                                                                                                    |                                             |

### **Day Retreat**

With Swami Veetamohananda, Centre Vedantique Ramakrichna,  
France and Pr. Brahma-prana, Ramakrishna Vedanta Society  
of North Texas

at the Vedanta Centre, Bourne End, on 25<sup>th</sup> November  
from 10:00 am until 7:00 pm

### **Christmas Eve Celebration**

Talk on Jesus by Swami Sarvasthananda at 3:30 pm  
Carol Service and Readings  
Vesper Service and Refreshments

### **Holy Mothers's Puja**

Sunday 30<sup>th</sup> December  
at Bourne End at **3:30 pm**  
Talk by Swami Sarvasthananda 5:15 pm

**continued from the front cover**

The liberated souls, such as the Sadhus and Mahatmas, are not entangled in the world, in 'woman and gold.' Their minds are free from worldliness. Besides they always meditate on the Lotus Feet of God.

Suppose a net has been cast into a lake to catch fish. Some fish are so clever that they are never caught in the net. They are like the ever-free. But most of the fish are entangled in the net. Some of them try to free themselves from it, and they are like those who seek liberation. But not all the fish that struggle succeed.

A very few do jump out of the net, making a big splash in the water. Then the fishermen shout, 'Look! There goes a big one!' But most of the fish caught in the net cannot escape, nor do they make any effort to get out.

On the contrary, they burrow into the mud with the net in their mouths and lie there quietly, thinking, 'We need not fear any more; we are quite safe here.' But the poor things do not know that the fishermen will drag them out with the net. These are like the men bound to the world.

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*Editor:* Swami Sarvasthananda

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The ideal of faith in ourselves is of the greatest help to us. If faith in ourselves had been more extensively taught and practiced, I am sure a very large portion of the evils and miseries that we have would have vanished. Throughout the history of mankind, if any motive power has been more potent than another in the lives of all great men and women, it is that of faith in themselves. Born with the consciousness that they were to be great, they became great. Let a man go down as low as possible; there must come a time when out of sheer desperation he will take an upward curve and will learn to have faith in himself. But it is better for us that we should know it from the very first. Why should we have all these bitter experiences in order to gain faith in ourselves? We can see that all the difference between man and man is owing to the existence or non-existence of faith in himself. Faith in ourselves will do everything.

--- Swami Vivekananda



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