

**MORALITY TO OVERRIDE RELIGION :  
WORKING OUT A LEAD FROM  
SWAMI VIVEKANANDA\***

Every great thinker bequeaths something not only to his posterity but to his contemporaries as well. What he bequeaths is generally expected to produce some enrichment in the life of the bequeatee. When something material is bequeathed, the enrichment of the bequeatee is quite often automatic. For example, if a man bequeaths that his treasure of one million rupees would pass on to his nephew after his death, as soon as he dies, the nephew becomes a millionaire by himself doing nothing. If he is reckless, he may become a pauper the next day by losing the entire amount in an unlucky game of dice. But the moment he owned the money he became rich because to own a million rupees is to be rich. The situation is not so straightforward in the case of non-material goods, say, in that of thoughts or values. The reason is twofold : The bequeatee does not get, say, the thoughts bequeathed automatically. To own them, to let them enrich his life-style, or his thinking, he has to have a proper understanding of what they mean and imply and to implement them in his way of living in the right manner. If he simply parrots them, or carries them *in* his head as he carries a headload *on* his head, they do not become *his* thoughts and produce no enrichment of his life. If he takes pride for possessing them, his pride would be comparable to that of the blind son of dead painter for possessing his father's paintings. More importantly, effective transmission or utilization of thoughts requires that the *nisus*, the thrust, of the thinker's way of thinking be gotten hold of not only appreciatively but also creatively and critically. If one succeeds in this venture, he gets from

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\* Extensively revised version of the paper entitled 'Moralizing Religion', read at the ICPR Seminar on "Swami Vivekananda : Retrospective and Prospective": Hyderabad. March 23-25. 1994

the thinker some valuable guidelines for improving the quality of his existing way of life as well as for shaping his future in a manner which not only he considers desirable, or the thinker would have considered desirable, but which anyone else is likely to, i.e., in a manner which is desirable on public, objective, grounds.

An understanding of a thinker's thoughts, which is creative,—and consequently critical because it cannot be creative if it is not critical,—is necessary because everything which he has said cannot be, or need not be, used as a guideline. Even the thinker does not intend that it should be. The lead, or leads, which are to be derived from his thoughts should not only be in keeping with his intention, with the *nisus* of his thinking, but also relevant or pertinent to the time, to the demands and exigencies of the time, in which they are to be utilized. Such an exercise may take the *thinker beyond the time* he lived in. We may then even go *beyond him*, beyond the boundaries of his thoughts. Every thought, or system of thoughts, has its boundaries because it is the thought, or system of thoughts, of a human being, a finite creature, however great a thinker he may be. No great thinker would ever mind such goings beyond him. If he does, he would be dogmatic and therefore not a great thinker. Dogmatism is an antidote to all great thinking. Only by taking him beyond his time, or by going beyond him, we immortalize him in a meaningful way. This process may begin in his lifetime and continue after his death. But he may also be ignored when he is alive and taken note of only after, or much after, his death. Using a Nietzschean phrase, he may be posthumously born.

Swami Vivekananda was not born posthumously. His thoughts were not merely taken note of, but become popular and respected all over the world in his lifetime. But till date we have not exhausted all, or even the most relevant leads his thoughts can give. This is not surprising because the thoughts of a great thinker are capable of throwing up different types of leads which perceptive minds may pick out according to their existential needs. But what is surprising is that his thoughts have been mainly used in the country of his birth for adding a cosmetic shine

to its image and not for rejuvenating its valuestructure, as he would have wished.

Swamijee is basically a religious and moral pragmatist, and one of a very elevated kind. He is not of the humdrum variety. A very important, or the most important, lead his works provide pertains to the *character of the religious attitude itself*, i.e., to the way one should fashion, shape, or develop his attitude towards his, or for that matter, any, religion, or religious consideration. It is extremely relevant to the present social situation in India, and perhaps more relevant today than it was in the Swami's time.

On more than one occasion he has emphasized that religion is a social institution, an agent of social change and growth, and not merely one of personal salvation. Rather, for him, it is *only*, or primarily, through its functioning healthily as a social institution that it functions as a viable agent of the religious individual's own spiritual salvation. Many have claimed that religion is fundamentally a means for personal salvation, and it is only as a gesture of condescension, or benevolence, that a religious *sadhaka* participates in schemes of social welfare. It is this trend of thinking which, in an extremist form, is exhibited in, what Sri Aurobindo calls, the ascetic denial. The ascetic denial recommends for the *sadhaka* withdraw from all social involvement and commitment, in effect, withdrawal to oneself, to complete solitude. The Swami, being a *sanyasi*, cannot deny the importance of religion, or its role, in helping a *sadhaka* to attain salvation or moksa. But personal salvation is not, for him, an isolated, self-contained, objective of religious *sadhana*, nor the latter a purely personal affair. Unless religious *sadhana* is fortified with a strong moral and social will, a will to involve oneself regularly in efforts to promote social well-being, it cannot be a viable agent for moksa. To use religion properly as a means for personal salvation, to be religious in the true sense of the term, is to use it as an agent of social welfare, an agent of the amelioration of the existing human condition. The religious person, even a *sanyasi*, therefore, should vigorously involve himself in, and not withdraw from, social participation.

A social institution functions healthily if it works as an

agent of social cohesion and upliftment, as a promoter of co-operativeness and willingness to understand sympathetically others' needs and view-points, aiming at making available to every one, without any discrimination, happiness the world permits of without compromising the dignity of its inhabitants as free individuals. This means that it has to function under the overall control or guidance of morality. Therefore, when Swamiji emphasizes the social role or context of religion, or of religious life, he means that religion has to be in keeping with morality. That is, if a situation arises in which a religious belief or practice conflicts with an accepted or justified moral principle, the former should yield to the latter, and not *vice versa*.

That morality is so important that religion cannot supersede or override it is highlighted by two claims which he quite often makes, namely, (a) that the Vedanta is practical and (b) that religion should not contradict reason. By emphasizing the practical nature of the Vedanta he intends to assert that the Vedantin must not remain an ascetic, cut off from social involvement, but should contribute to the good of the society, i.e., to the alleviation of human suffering, as far as practicable. By emphasizing the concordance of religion with reason he intends to make religion free from dogmatism. As dogmatism is very often a cause of immorality, even in this emphasis the importance of morality is uppermost in his mind.

If the Swami's principle of the non-supersession of morality by religion, or that of the supersession of a religious belief by a moral consideration in case there is a conflict between the two, is made an effective principle of social life, or of religious life for that matter, it can solve in a fair manner some outstanding, or long-standing, issues. Take, for example, the alleged Vedic injunction that a woman cannot study the Vedas, or recite a Vedic verse. Off and on, some religious leader reiterates it and then a furor is created. But generally the debate centres round the issue of whether or not the injunction has actually been made by any Veda. Some scholars claim that it has not, while some, who say that it has, try to give to it an interpretation not too unpalatable. But all this is scholastic, a scholastic way to sidetrack the main issue which is substantively

moral. The real issue is whether or not it is morally right to debar a woman from studying a Veda, or from reciting a Vedic verse, and if it is not morally right, and if any Veda issues the injunction, the injunction should be rejected. That is, when there is any conflict between a moral principle and any Vedic injunction, positive or negative, it is the latter and not the former which should yield. The thrust of Swami Vivekananda's thinking about religion, I am sure, is in this direction, and not in the direction of defending the Vedic, or any religious, authority at any, even moral, cost. No sane, rational, person would think of, controverting this approach to religion and its relationship to morality.

The claim that a religious principle should not contradict reason needs a little more discussion. It may be taken to mean that (a) it should not be formally inconsistent or self-contradictory. For example, the principle, saying that it is wrong to kill any animal but not wrong to kill one whose killing is prescribed by a Vedic scripture ('वैदिकी हिंसा हिंसा न भवति'), promulgated by any authority whatsoever, would be self-inconsistent and therefore against reason. If killing any animal is wrong, even killing one whose killing has been required, or sanctioned, by a scripture, even a Veda, would also be wrong. To affirm the former and deny the latter would be self-inconsistent.

It may also mean (b) that it should not be counter-productive in the sense of obstructing the achievement of the goal of religious life. It is irrational for an agent to use a means to achieve an end when he knows or believes that it is going to obstruct, or is not going to, or not likely to, be of any help in the latter's achievement. This is the instrumental sense of irrationality (and rationality). Obviously, if the use of a religious principle is irrational in this sense, it is irrational, or against reason, and should be dropped. But this type of irrationality gets its point from the axiological status of the end. If an end is desirable, commendable, in its own right, it is irrational and also condemnable, on the part of an agent, to use a means to achieve it which is obstructive or ineffective. But if it is undesirable, or condemnable, in its own right, then to achieve it to use a means of the above type would be irrational but commendable. The agent would be irrational in the use of the means because he would be

using it while knowing or believing that it is not going to help him in achieving the end, but he would be doing something commendable because he would thereby be avoiding, or making unlikely, the achievement of something not worth achieving. Therefore, to hold that no religion, or no religious principle, should go against reason in the instrumental sense would have a valid point only if the end or goal of religion is worth having in its own right. This means that it must be morally right or good to achieve it because nothing achieving that which is not morally right or good can be in its right worth having.

It seems to me that the Swami would require religion to be free from both kinds of irrationalities, i.e., formal inconsistency and instrumental inappropriateness (coupled with the condition that its goal be necessarily of a morally commendable character). By emphasizing the concordance of religion with reason he, in effect, reiterates the importance of morality for religion. Being a *sanyasi* he applauds the dignity of religious life but takes pains to show that it owes its dignity very much to its enrichment with morality.

That morality can supersede religion in case of a conflict between the two has a very salutary implication for secular social life. Religion is generally taken to be something sacred, more sacrosanct than other human phenomena, say, politics. Therefore, if a moral consideration can supersede a religious consideration when the two conflict with each other, it should surely supersede a political consideration when the latter conflicts with it. That is, if the Swami's direction is properly understood and followed, politics has to be in conformity with morality and to be superseded, if the need be, by morality, and in no case it should be allowed to supersede morality. But in current political life it is the reverse which generally happens. A political party takes action against a member of it, who works against a candidate of the party even if the latter is morally corrupt, on the ground that he has indulged in anti-party activities. But it rarely happens that action is taken against a politically influential or useful member on the ground of his having indulged in immorality. Party, i.e., political, considerations supersede moral considerations, and not vice versa. Political life is the field in which the Swami's lead needs to be most seriously taken and meticulously followed because

it offers tempting exigencies for tolerating, encouraging, or indulging in, immoralities. A Swami who does not believe in the overriding character of moral considerations, or does not have the will to go by a moral as against a political consideration, cannot bring in political life any improvement by joining active politics. That this is true is clear even to a casual observer of the present—day Indian political life. Gandhi realized quite in the early years of his political career the potentialities of political life to motivate adoption, and (pseudo-) justification, of immoral practices in the fake name of national interest, and therefore never missed an opportunity to emphasize that the link between politics and morality should never be severed. Nothing can be more vocal on this point than his declaration that he would not like to achieve India's freedom from the British subjugation if its achievement involved the use of immoral means.

There is a built-in tendency in a religious conviction to make one a little dogmatic, rigid, or what we call, a fundamentalist. To hold a religious belief is to hold it with conviction and commitment, to hold it as unfaultable. If I believe that Krisna is an avatara, I cannot also believe that what he claims to have done he might not have done, nor that what he has done is not morally right. For example, I cannot believe that he did not create the four castes (चतुर्वर्ण) when he says he did, nor can I believe that the real duties of these castes are different from those which he says he has assigned to them. That god, or an incarnation of God, cannot tell a lie, or make a false claim, or do something wrong, is, for a believer in god, a substantive, unfalsifiable, truth. A Ramabhakta cannot believe both that Rama killed Sambuka and that his killing him is wrong. If god is such and such, it is wrong to say, or even to think, that he is not such and such, and therefore anybody who does that does what he ought not to have done. If one only believes that he *may*, or *may not*, be such and such, he cannot have the kind of reverential devotion (आस्था) to god which goes with a sincere theistic faith. The theist's belief that god is such and such, howsoever extensive the area covered by 'such and such' may be, must be categorical and definitive.

It is only respect for morality and rationality, or simply for morality (as morality is a rational affair); which can tone

down, or rub off, religious rigidity. It is only one's respect for morality which can give him the (moral) courage to say that Rama did not kill Sambuka, or that, if he did, what he did was wrong and therefore he cannot be called an avatara, or that such a god need not be revered the way it is.

The Swami's emphasis on morality is prominently visible when he says that one should see 'Siva in the poor, that to serve Siva is to serve the poor, to ameliorate his condition. This is so because poverty is an evil, a cause of suffering, and freeing anyone from his suffering a moral good. A religious person who serves the poor serves god more truly than he who worships it in a temple, but ingores the sufferings of the temple sweeper. A religious consideration, taken to be too sacrosanct to be superseded, or toned down, by a moral consideration may encourage one to ignore human suffering, and to feel wrongly that he is justified in doing that. For example, if he believes that the poverty of the poor is a punishment to him given by god on account of some sins committed by him, and that though poverty is a moral evil causing a lot of suffering, and it is morally right to alleviate the suffering, if he believes that a religious consideration is never to be overridden by a moral one, he may feel motivated to ignore the suffering of the poor, thinking he deserves to suffer. He may as well believe that to interfere with his condition would amount to interfering with god's law, a law which should never be infringed. But if he believes in the overriding authority of a moral consideration, he would not hesitate to go ahead in alleviating the suffering of the poor. He may then change his religious belief, ignore it, or invent some other escape route, but would not justify ignoring the suffering. The Swami puts this truth in a sweeter, softer, manner, when he says that Siva is to be seen in the poor, the suffering individual.

Is the in-principle acceptance of the overriding character of morality, in case of a conflict between it and religion, or the requirement of the concordance of religion with (reason or) morality, going to destroy religion's identity by getting it engulfed in morality? Certainly not. Everything religious is not morally relevant. Whether one worships Siva or Visnu is morally neutral. It becomes morally relevant when it has some social implication.

For example, suppose a Siva-devotee thinks that, on the Sivaratri day, he ought to propitiate the deity by pouring on the lingam one hundred litres of cow's milk, when that is the total quantity of milk available in the neighbourhood. This would mean that, if he executes his plan of worship, the milk-fed babies would have to starve on that day. His religious principle 'I (or one) ought to pour one hundred litres of milk on the Sivalingam on the Sivaratri Day becomes morally relevant because it conflicts with the moral principle 'Milk-fed babies ought not to be deprived any day of their daily ration of milk.' In such cases the moral principle overrides the religious principle, and I am claiming that giving to it this sort of authority is in accordance with the Swami's conception of religion.

One may say that the principle of pouring one hundred litres of milk on the lingam is not really a religious principle. But why is it not? The only plausible reason is that it is not defensible on any moral ground and conflicts with a sound moral principle. In fact, religious principles, which are morally relevant, i.e., those about which the question of concordance or discordance with some moral principle or principles can be raised, derive their authority from their concordance with morality, or negatively speaking, are able to retain whatever authority they have only as long as they are not discordant with morality. Therefore, the question of destroying religion's identity by requiring it to have concordance with morality, whenever concordance is relevant, does not arise. Rather, it seems to me that Swami Vivekananda would prefer religion's concurring with morality even if it makes it lose its identity, or dissolve itself in the latter. And, even if *he* would not, we should, because only by ensuring of its concordance, only by moralizing it, we can reasonably hope its functioning as an effective agent for the amelioration of the human condition, the condition of an individual, or of a society.

I have not so far referred to any philosophical lead obtainable from the Swami's works because, as I have said in the beginning of the essay, he is basically or mainly a religious and moral renovator. His aim was not to present a hard-core philosophical theory, and he has not given one in any area of philosophy, not even in philosophy of religion, nor a new argument or

reasoning for an old theory or conclusion. It is not proper to call him a neo-Vedantin philosopher as some have done. 'Neo-Vedantin' is an adaptation from 'neo-Hegelian'. But the Swami is not a neo-Vedantin in the sense in which, for example, F. H. Bradley, Bernard Bosanquet, or T. H. Green is a neo-Hegelian. He has not done to the Vedanta what anyone of the latter has done to Hegel's philosophy. Nor has he done to the Vedanta of Sankara, Ramanuja, Madhva, Nimbarka, or of anyone else, what either one of them did to the thoughts contained in the Upanisads, Brahma-Sutras, or Bhagavadgita. He did not aim at making the classical Vedanta more sound or elegant by plugging in some of what he took to be its logical holes. No such thing was his objective. It is not that he has failed to present a philosophical theory, or given a poor one. He has not attempted to give any.

Some philosophers have put on him the mantle of a great philosopher. They have tried to justify doing that by themselves writing, or by getting written by their doctoral students, some comparative or non-comparative account of what the Swami has said on some topics some traditionally reputed philosophers have written on. But none of these attempts has succeeded in deriving any philosophical lead from his works, any lead following which one can make some departure, or go in some new direction even in any of the traditional fields of philosophy, like metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, philosophy of religion, etc., not to speak of any one of the newer ones. Some of these writings do fulfil certain promotional requirements of their authors or supervisors but that means nothing about the status of the Swami as a philosopher. Such works are bound to be, as philosophical pieces, insipid and no string of them, howsoever pompously made, would be a respectable garland for the Swami's elevated neck.

To say all this is not to deny that the Swami is a great thinker. One need not be a great philosopher in order to be a great thinker because to be one he need not be a philosopher. Rather, to call Swamiji a great philosopher and not to be able to validate the claim by exhibiting his innovativeness in philosophical theorizing is to put him in a bad light. It may give the impression that he failed to give anything new in philosophy. But the question of his failure or success does not arise. His objective was not

philosophical theorizing, but showing to the world a path of moral rejuvenation. This he did with the passion and persuasive power of a prophet. Whether or not the world, or his own motherland, has followed the path is another matter. It is a typically Indian propensity to call one, who has achieved, or is considered to have achieved, some greatness in any field of life, a great philosopher. In place of doing him honour, it very often does a lot of dishonour because it is not very difficult for experts to assess the claim to his greatness as philosopher. It is childish to deny this obvious truth of the academic profession of philosophizing on the so-called ground of there being no agreement about the criterion or criteria for calling one a great philosopher, or even a philosopher. But some 'philosophers' have not been less childish than some non-philosophers in this regard.

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