

How Did the Americans Re-internalize American Sensibilities in Swami Vivekananda's Speech at World Parliament of Religion, Chicago?

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Swami Vivekananda preached the philosophy of Hindu religion in Chicago but the logic and scientific insight of his speech was universal and not just a representation of a particular religion. In this paper I examine how his speech correlates with American sensibilities of 'democracy' and 'American dream'. Although, he did not speak with any intention to reemphasize the national ethos of America, the philosophical bases of his speech unconditionally merged with American senses and sensibilities and therefore in 1893 he became an overnight success in the foreign land. Since, there is no clear-cut definition of religion; controversy persists over the constituents of a religion. For Vivekananda practising religion is not merely a way to communicate with divinity, religion sets the philosophy of life; it is a source of knowledge and guideline for improving self with the society. He could place himself high upon a pedestal by acknowledging the contribution of all religions and not merely of his own. He says that "The Hindu may have failed to carry out all his plans, but if there is ever to be a universal religion, it must be one which will have no location in place or time; which will be infinite like the God it will preach, and whose sun will shine upon the followers of Krishna and of Christ, on saints and sinners alike; which will not be Brahminic or Buddhistic, Christian or Mohammedan, but the sum total of all these, and still have infinite space for development;". Peter Mandaville and Paul James bypass the dichotomous understanding of immanence/transcendence, spirituality/materialism, and sacredness/secularity and they define religion as "a relatively-bounded system of beliefs, symbols and practices that addresses the

nature of existence, and in which communion with others and Otherness is *lived* as if it both takes in and spiritually transcends socially-grounded ontologies of time, space, embodiment and knowing.” The speech of Vivekananda also had an emphasis for communion with others but his religion was not “bounded” with certain beliefs or practices; he had tremendous capability to acknowledge variance and diversification. Since, the essence of religion can convey any idealistic notion of senses and sensitivities; I should be spared from criticism for examining the speech of Vivekananda from an alternative perspective.

In response to his welcome Vivekananda expresses his earnest gratitude to the organizers and all the delegates of world’s parliament of religions and then he states that “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...I am proud to belong to the religion which has sheltered and is still fostering remnant Zoroastrian nation.” This democratic vision of religion lies in acceptance of “others” and it indirectly reinvigorates American sensibility of democracy which has always been under experiment for the development of the nation. The religious democracy can also be found in New England’s minister Roger Williams who countered Puritans’ intolerance to other religions. He was banished from Massachusetts for his own view on religion and then survived only by living with the Indians. He later established a colony in Rhode Island which was literally open for people of different religions, cultures and creeds. However, the political administrators and reformers of America struggled to plant the seeds of democracy even before the beginning of American Revolution. America’s first president George Washington would always be remembered for describing the country as “unified nation”. Harry Rubenstein, the chair and curator of the division of political history at American History Museum says about Washington that “His intention is to urge people to put aside their differences, and not get caught up in the squabbles of the international community,” American democracy persuades the citizens to

share equal responsibility by working together and to secure prosperous future for themselves and the nation. In fact, American dream is a dream for the functioning of democracy. The idealistic notion of universal tolerance evokes American sensibility of accepting millions of immigrants every year irrespective of class, culture, religion and race. Swami Vivekananda criticizes religious ‘sectarianism’, ‘fanaticism’, ‘bigotry’ that cause violence, hostility and friction among people. He quotes a few lines from a hymn that focus on democratic goal and belief: "As the different streams having their sources in different places all mingle their water in the sea, so, O Lord, the different paths which men take through different tendencies, various though they appear, crooked or straight, all lead to Thee."

Vivekananda explains the reason for why people disagree while there is variance. He tells a story of two frogs, one living in a well and the other which is originally from sea but accidentally falls into the well. The frog of the well asks the other frog where he lives. The other frog replies that he is from the sea. Since the frog has never seen the world outside his well he asks the other with curiosity if the sea is as big as his well. The other frog tries him believe that there cannot be any comparison between this little well and the vast sea. The frog which has always been proud of his well shouts at the other that nothing can be bigger than his space. Indeed, he calls the other a liar and ousts him from the place. Vivekananda allegorically relates the ignorant frog with people who are obsessed with their own ideas and who assume the ideas to be universal. So, he advises them to acknowledge plurality and come out from their little cells. Vivekananda solemnly expresses “I have to thank you of America for the great attempt you are making to break down the barriers of this little world of ours, and hope that, in the future, the Lord will help you to accomplish your purpose.” The democratic spirit of America which Vivekananda appreciates is a consequential result of American Dream. In this context, we can refer Thomas Paine’s pamphlet *Common Sense* which proudly celebrates the idea of American “exceptionalism” that is in some radical common sense America is a

democratic experiment and a country literally open to all immigrants. The fate of America foreshadows the fate of humanity at large. Vivekananda asks the Americans why they do not come to be of service to the impoverished people of India who largely suffer from hunger. Christians send missionaries to save the souls of the ‘heathens’ but why do they not save the bodies of thousand of starving Indians. The Christians has built up churches all through India but Indians have religion enough and its insult for starving people to teach “metaphysics”. So, Vivekananda urges to fulfil the democratic vision of fundamental human needs earlier than religion.

His paper on Hinduism which he read on 19th September was tightly argued with the philosophy of Hindu religion. He said that with the emergence of different religious faiths, much religious contradictions arose in India and from the philosophy of Vedanta to the low ideas of the worship of idols, agnosticism of the Buddhists, and atheism of Jain – all became part of Hindu religion. Therefore, Vivekananda asks what is the common ground to which all these diverging aspects converge? What are the ideas that solve these apparently “hopeless contradictions”? The Hindu religion has been received through “revelations”, the Vedas. No books are meant by Vedas. Vedas are the moral, spiritual, ethical laws discovered by different people of different times but these laws surely have been existed even before their revelations. So, the notion of accepting rational revelations of laws in Hindu religion reflects the democratic vision without charging any written manifesto or beliefs of certain people or groups. However, the discoverers of the laws are called Rishis who are considered as “perfected beings”. Vivekananda gladly informs that some of the greatest of them were women. Despite the wave of democracy in United States, women and black people were not considered to be equal to white men at that time; women did not have voting rights until 1920, the 19th amendment to U.S constitution. By giving equal credit to women, Vivekananda refurbishes the democratic practices of America. He dissociates soul from body and says that the Hindus believe in soul

which is ‘unbounded’, ‘holy’, ‘pure’ and ‘perfect’. It cannot be materialized as “gendered”, “sexed” or any other conditions of matter and discriminations. But people ignorantly materialize body in terms of gender, sex, race, class, caste, religion without much thinking that body is impermanent. For Vivekananda all souls are equal and fair and therefore all human beings should be treated equally and without discriminations. In the second paragraph of the United States Declaration of Independence starts as follows: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness.” The democracy of American dream is the democracy of care, shared responsibility and trust. Vivekananda expresses “Hail, Columbia, motherland of liberty! It has been given to thee, who never dipped her hand in her neighbour's blood, who never found out that the shortest way of becoming rich was by robbing one's neighbours, it has been given to thee to march at the vanguard of civilisation with the flag of harmony.” A strong work ethic of American dream is indirectly pointed out by Vivekananda. He considers it to be the key factor of the nation’s rapid progress.

Vivekananda depicts religion as something necessary for right senses and sensibilities. He has not insisted the people of other religions to become devotees of Hinduism. He says: “Do I wish that the Christian would become Hindu? God forbid. Do I wish that the Hindu or Buddhist would become Christian? God forbid.” Each of the religion must assimilate with the spirit of others.” Since, Vivekananda studied the works of David Hume, Immanuel Kant, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Baruch Spinoza, Georg W.F. Hegel, Arthur Schopenhauer, Auguste Comte, John Stuart Mill, Charles Darwin; much of his religious view was followed by western philosophers. However, at the final session of the parliament of religions he addresses the organizers: “My thanks to those noble souls whose large hearts and love of truth first dreamed this wonderful dream and then realised it. My thanks to the shower of liberal sentiments that

has overflowed this platform.” At the end of his lecture he wishes that on the banners of all religions will be written: "Help and not Fight," "Assimilation and not Destruction," "Harmony and Peace and not Dissension."

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