

*The Collective Role of Religion & Education in Promoting the Power in Man: The Legacy of Swami Vivekananda*

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## Introduction

Vivekananda realized that mankind, in India, was passing through a national crisis. The tremendous emphasis on the scientific and mechanical ways of life was fast reducing man to the status of a machine. Moral and religious values were being undermined. The fundamental principles of civilization were being ignored. Vivekananda asked the solutions of all these social and global evils through education. With this end in view, he felt the dire need of awakening man to his spiritual self wherein, he thought, lies the very purpose of education. In his view, education and religion are inextricably intertwined. Vivekananda's firm belief in Vedānta philosophy touched and shaped every aspect of his view on education. For him, education is nothing but religion and religion is the pure form of education.

This article explores the indissoluble linkage between education and religion as suggested by Swamiji and takes a look at the contribution of Vivekananda's Philosophy of education. It tells how his noble thoughts and mild rebukes can inject *Sanjivni*, or a new life into the dry bones of modern education system. To start with, at the very outset, we have to know what he understands by 'education' and 'religion'.

## Defining Education & Religion

Swami Vivekananda prepared the scheme of this man-making education in the light of his over-all philosophy of Vedānta. According to Vedānta, the essence of man lies in his soul, which he possesses in addition to his body and mind. In true with this philosophy, Vivekananda defined education as '***the manifestation of the perfection already in man***'<sup>1</sup> as he described religion as 'the manifestation of the divinity already in man'.<sup>2</sup> First of all, the word '**manifestation**' implies that something *already exists* and is waiting to be expressed. The main focus in learning is to make manifest the hidden ability of a learner. According to him, knowledge is *inherent* in man, *not acquired from external sources*. 'Manifestation' indicates spontaneous growth, provided that the impediments, if any, are removed. Vivekananda said "what a man learns is really what he 'discovers', by taking the cover off his own soul, which is a mine of infinite knowledge".<sup>3</sup> Next, we shall see the importance of the expression '**already in man**' in the Swami's definition of education. This refers to a human being's *potential*, which is the range of the abilities and talents, known or unknown that is born with. 'Potential' speaks of the possibility of awakening something that is *lying dormant*. The word '**perfection**' in the Swami's definition of education is also very significant. The English word 'perfect' implies completion, or something being made whole. Again, we can see that every act connected with learning, training etc. is part of a process directed towards an end. Drawing on these meanings, one may conclude that perfection in education parlance is the goal of actualizing the highest human potential.

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1. *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* (henceforth, *CW*), Vol.4, Writings: Prose, "What We Believe In", p. 358.

2. *Ibid.*,

3. *CW*, Vol.1, Karma Yoga, "Karma in its Effect on Character", p. 28.

Again in a similar way, Swamiji defined ‘religion’ as ‘*the manifestation of the divinity already in man*’. It is *awakening* spirituality already in man. To him, Religion is not just a talk and doctrines or theories, nor is it sectarianism. Religion earned a very bad reputation over past several centuries since the followers of different religions are deviated from this primary objective of spiritual enlightenment. So it is very important to mark a dividing line between genuine religiosity and institutional religions or bigoted fanaticism. *Religion consists in realization of the self*, it is a relationship between soul and God. Religion is inseparable with man and his life, it is a necessity of life. It cannot be imposed from outside, rather it is a realization within the core of the heart. It is touching God, feeling God and realizing that I am a spirit in relation with the universal spirit and all its great manifestations. Thus in his view religion has no value without inner growth. The very core of religion is *self-experience*.

The existence of God and his nature is a major question discussed in the Philosophy of Religion. In this respect Vivekananda said about identification of God with ‘self’. He told that, God is within our own self, which is propelling us to seek for him, to realize him. To him God exists, but he is not the man sitting upon a cloud. But if we approach to our real self we can see the God within us. We possess the pure spirit. That is our self. God is body, mind, soul and everything in this world. Thus, in nutshell, religion is the process of discovering the living God within us through self realization and education is the process of inculcating self realization in man. That is why he says that religion is the innermost core of education.

### **Aims of Education**

Vivekananda pointed out that the defect of the present-day education is that it has no definite goal to pursue. A sculptor has a clear idea about what he wants to shape out of the marble block; similarly, a painter knows what he is going to paint. But unfortunately a teacher, he says, nowadays has no clear idea about the goal of his teaching. Vivekananda was skeptical about the system of education where the learner’s mind gets jam-packed with information without having any space for independent thinking. He cleared up all confusing misconception in this regard with a witty remark: “*If education is identical with information, the libraries are the greatest sages of the world and encyclopaedias are the Rishis*”.<sup>4</sup> Education is neither mere book-learning, nor getting degrees, nor passing examinations, nor even delivering impressive lectures. According to him, education is not a certain “amount of information that is put into your brain and runs riot there, undigested all your life”.<sup>5</sup> Rather, it is an ability to think originally, to stand on your own feet mentally as well as practically, interacting with people successfully. But our schools and universities, he maintained with gross frustration, still continue to be merely *examining bodies*<sup>6</sup> turning out mechanically every year in huge numbers men and women destitute in faith and poor in culture – they are poor in the knowledge of our ancient literature and arts; they are equally unable to think originally, incapable of

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4. *CW*, Vol.3, Lectures From Colombo to Almora, “The Future of India”, p.302. Emphasis Added.

5. *CW*, Vol.3, Lectures From Colombo to Almora, “The Future of India”, p.302.

6. *CW*, Vol.5, Interviews, The Missionary Work Of The First Hindu Sannyasin To The West And His Plan Of Regeneration Of India” p.224

standing on their own feet, and virtually untouched by religion which Vivekananda regarded “the innermost core of education”.<sup>7</sup>

On the contrary, taking a pragmatic turn, he viewed education as “*life-building, man-making, character-making and assimilation of ideas*”<sup>8</sup> Vivekananda opined that the real education is that which prepares the individual for struggle for existence. Education for him means that process by which character is formed, strength of mind is increased, and intellect is sharpened, as a result of which one can stand on one’s own feet. Thus, according to Vivekananda, education is the discovery of the inner self i.e. self revelation. It is not an imposition of certain borrowed ideas from the external sources on the individual, but a natural process of enfoldment of all the inherent powers which lie in dormant condition in an individual. Education is the development from within. Education prepares a man for social service, to develop his character and finally imbues him with the spirit and courage of a lion by promoting self-confidence and self-reliance in the individuals. The ultimate goal of all educational effort is to strive towards character development characterized by the development of will-power, leading to courage, stamina and fearlessness. Through education the individual should develop adaptability and able to meet the challenge of a changing society and this can be able through education and training that he or she receives from his parents and teachers. Education should lead to a feeling of brotherhood and the unity of mankind. According to Vivekananda, work is worship, so to serve the masses is to serve God, so education should lead us to recognize this and to fulfill this end. Education should lead us to acquire the spirit of renunciation.

Education, thus, is a tool for awakening the selves from the darkness and ignorance. After getting of education, the knowledge will shines out dazzlingly. He condemned and refused the bookish learning and memory-based education. Condemning the theoretical and academic education, he spoke emphatically for practical and experimental education. He warned his countrymen saying “you will have to be practical in all spheres of work. The whole country has been ruined *by mass theories*.”<sup>9</sup>

### **Method of Teaching, Role of the Teacher and Role of the Student**

Having analyzed the goal or objective of education, the next question that naturally arises is about the method of imparting education. According to him Vivekananda, knowledge is *inherent* in every man’s soul. What we mean when we say that a man ‘knows’ is only what he ‘discovers’ by taking the cover off his own soul. Vivekananda had emphasized that all the knowledge which we get from worldly or spiritual lies embedded in the human mind. It was covered with a veil of darkness and ignorance. Consequently, he drew our attention to the fact that the task of the teacher is only to help the child to manifest its knowledge by removing the obstacles in its way. To analyze his point, he referred to the growth of a plant. Just as in the case of a plant, one cannot do anything more than supplying it with water, air and manure while it grows from within according to its own nature, so is the case with a human child. The teaching and learning are the one way of process.

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7. *CW*, Vol. 5, Interviews, “On Indian Women — Their Past, Present And Future”, p. 231.

8. *CW*, Vol.3, Lectures From Colombo to Almora, “The Future of India”, p.302. Emphasis Added.

9. *CW*, Vol.7, Conversations and Dialogues, “From the Dairy of A Disciple”-V, p. 135. Emphasis Added.

Since, self learning and self getting knowledge is the real education, the ideal teacher, in the educational system of Vivekananda, only guides, suggests, points out and helps the student. He/she only motivates and encourages the students to find out the hidden treasure of knowledge that lies dormant within him. So there should be *least* intervention and the ideal teacher should *consciously* under-teach so that the learners get ample scope for learning themselves: “No one can teach anybody. The teacher *spoils* everything by thinking that *he is teacher*”.<sup>10</sup>

That does not mean that the teacher is not performing any significant role. Rather, in Vivekananda’s view, teacher’s personal and constant contact with the student constitutes and necessitates the mode of ideal teaching. The teacher should share with the student the conviction that they are both truly *one in Spirit* – at the same time cultivating in the student a feeling of dignity and self-respect”. As Vivekananda said “The only true teacher is he who can immediately come down to the level of the student, and transfer his soul to the student’s soul and see through the student’s eyes and hear through his ears and understand through his mind. Such a teacher can really teach and none else”.<sup>11</sup>

The studentship is also redefined by him. The ideal student, according to Vivekananda, must be pure in thought and speech. A real student should have an inclination and eagerness to learn. He must have a perseverance and real thirst for knowledge. He must practice Yoga or Brahmacharya regularly to acquire a sound body, a sound mind with the power of concentration and self-control. He should have a continuous struggle; a constant fight within himself for applying with his true and pure nature. This only suffices him to conquer the illusion of *Māyā* and acquire the ultimate knowledge of Unity. However, all such abilities and qualities cannot be achieved unless he possesses absolute submissiveness and reverence towards the Guru.

But these feelings among the students won’t come if the teachers do not reciprocate the same towards their beloved students. Rather, according to Vivekananda, the teacher should take the initiative in building such relation of love and sympathy. Love is the best mean and inspiration for education as well as in character building. Love in the minds of the educators is the real source of their influence upon the educated. The teacher must have love for his students. Without love he cannot contribute anything to them. The child should be taught through by love as it promotes fellow feelings and love for humanity. Love is the best medium to transmit the spiritual force also. As we know Vivekananda’s love for mankind does not permit any geographical boundaries, he always pleaded for the harmony and good relationship with all nations. According to him, through education only we can gradually reach the idea of universal brotherhood by flinging down the walls of separation and inequality. Education must call forth the power of unity in every person and broaden it to such extent that it may cover the whole world.

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10. *CW*, Vol.5, Conversations and Dialogues, “Shri Priya Nath Sinha-IX”, P. 366.

11. *CW*, Vol.4, Lectures and Discourses, “My Master”, p.183.

## Curriculum and the Medium of Education

### Moral and Religious Education

Vivekananda considered that religion was the source of all powers and the source of all goods. He also considered that ethics and religion are one and the same. The supreme mission of the Vivekananda's view on education was to spread the gospel of the *Vedas & Upanisadas*. This was the corner stone of the education according to him. For this he stressed on religious education. He said "Religion is the inner most core of education..... Religion is as the rice and everything else, like the curries. Taking only curries causes indigestion and so is the case with taking rice alone".<sup>12</sup> According to him, to counter the effects materialism and its evil influence, religious education is necessary. It is only by a synthesis of religion and science that man may reap the advantages of both. For the modern society both science and religion are necessary. Religious Education should be only a part of the curriculum. It should be taught along with other disciplines. Here Religious Education does not mean teaching about a particular religion or dogma or about a particular denomination. In this context he recommended that the best way of imparting religious education is to present the high ideals of saints and religious men before the student. Among the great souls, Vivekananda pointed out some. They are Sri Krishna, Mahavir and Ramakrishna. Vivekananda prescribed service, devotion and courage in religious education. He considered Hanuman as an example of service, devotion and courage. According to Vivekananda India, today needs a religion which should be harmonious with science and teach patriotism, service and sacrifice and then only religious education becomes useful to the nation. According to Swami Vivekananda, moral and religious education will develop self confidence among men and women. Self confidence is the real religion for him. It leads to world brotherhood and love of humanity. A person having self confidence sees self everywhere. Self confidence means confidence in humanity. Thus Vivekananda's religion is humanistic in spirit. "One must enter into the heart of the religion, that is, one must realize it in one's own life".<sup>13</sup> According to Vivekananda, religion must be a living experience with oneself. Vivekananda was very kin in the spiritual development of the masses as well as their economic & material prosperity.

### Practical and Physical Education

Vivekananda recognized the importance of power. This power is not physical or biological only. It is spiritual power. India in his time was under the British rule. It was groaning under slavery. So he recognized the need of strength and power. Therefore he asked the Indians to shed all types of weakness and march-forward with courage, strength and power. So he wanted to synthesize the study of *Vedānta*, Religion, Philosophy & Theology & Western education because that was (and is) the requirement of the day. To Vivekananda, the practical aspects of life must not be ignored in any scheme of education. Only then, it will be possible to make an individual self-dependent and the country prosperous. He said: "It will not do merely to listen to great principles. You must

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12. *CW*, Vol. 4, Fundamentals of Religion, p. 358.

13. *CW*, Vol.3, Lectures From Colombo to Almora, "The Sages of India", p. 259.

apply them in the practical field, turn into constant practice”.<sup>14</sup> So he emphasized the importance of education in agriculture and other practical aspects.

However, physical and health education is one aspect of education received a special treatment in the hands of Swami Vivekananda. He often quoted the *Upanisadic* dictum ‘*nāyamātma balahīnena labhyah,*’ i.e. the self cannot be realized by the physically weak. Accordingly, he recommended that physical exercise of some kind or the other must form a part of an educational training. The mind acts on the body and the body acts on the mind. “*Be Strong, My young friends*” he argued, “*That is my advice to you. You will be near to heaven through football than to Gītā*”.<sup>15</sup> Vivekananda said, “*Make your nerves strong. What we want is muscles of iron and nerves of steel.*”<sup>16</sup>

However, along with physical culture, he harped on the need of paying special attention to the culture of the mind. According to him, the mind of the students has to be controlled and trained through meditation, concentration and practice of ethical purity. So in his scheme of education, Yogāvyās or Brahmacharya plays a vital role. All success in any line of work, he emphasizes, is the result of the power of concentration. *Concentration, which necessarily implies detachment from other things, constitutes a part of Brahmacharya, which is one of the guiding mottos of his scheme of education.* Brahmacharya, in a nutshell, stands for the practice of self-control for securing harmony of the impulses of the senses. By his philosophy of education, Vivekananda thus brought it home that education is not a mere accumulation of information but a comprehensive training for life.

Like Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore, Vivekananda also emphasized education *through the mother tongue*. Besides mother tongue, there should be a common language which is necessary to keep the country united. Vivekananda appreciated the greatness of Sanskrit, as mastering this leads one into the depths of our vast store of classics. Again, English is necessary for mastering Western science and technology. The implication is that language should not be the barrier in a nation’s progress.

### **Education for All**

Vivekananda’s views on education have a *democratic face*. He expressed deep concern for the mass. Actually, his aim of education bears a strong nationalist commitment. For him, the individual development is not a full development of our nation, so he advocated mass education. He took this mass education as an instrument to improve the individual as well as society. By this way, he exhorted to his countrymen to know- “I consider that the great national sin is the neglect of the masses, and that is one of the causes of our downfall. No amount of politics would be of any avail until the masses of India are once more well-educated, well-fed and well-cared for.”<sup>17</sup> So he pleaded for the universal education so that the backward people may fall in with others. Thus education should

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14. *CW*, Vol.7, Conversations and Dialogues, “From the Dairy of A Disciple-II”, p. 117.

15. *CW*, Vol.3, Lectures From Colombo to Almora, “Vedanta in its application to Indian Life”, p. 242.

16. *CW*, Vol.3, Lectures From Colombo to Almora, “My Plan of Campaign”, p.211

17. *CW*, Vol. 5, Interviews, “The Missionary Work Of The First Hindu Sannyasin To The West And His Plan Of Regeneration Of India”, p. 222.

spread to every household in the country, to factories, playing grounds and agricultural fields. If the children do not come to the school, Vivekananda maintained, the teacher should reach them to impart education. Thus, Vivekananda favoured education for different sections of society, rich and poor, young and old, male and female.

As an endeavour towards mass education, Vivekananda, like Vidyasagar, also stressed the importance of women education. Swami Vivekananda did not preach two different kind of scheme for educating men and women. His teaching is exactly the same without any discrimination.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, his views on women call for a separate treatment, just as his plea not to monopolize all education for the benefit of a handful of people. With a brilliant flight metaphor Vivekananda explained the point about how female illiteracy retards the progress of a nation: “It is not possible for a bird to fly on only one wing”.<sup>19</sup> He realized that if the women of our country get the right type of education, then they will be able to solve their own problems in their *own way*. *The main objectives of his scheme of female education are to make them strong, fear-less and conscious of their chastity and dignity*. He observed that although men and women are equally competent in academic matters, yet women have a special aptitude and competence for studies relating to home and family. Hence he recommended the introduction of subjects like sewing, nursing, domestic science, etc which were not parts of education at his time.

### **Collective Role of Education and Religion: Promoting Power in Man**

Vivekananda laid stress on education as a powerful weapon to bring the change in nation. To implement that, he rested the foundation of education on the firm ground of our own philosophy and culture with a harmonization of new values brought through the progress of science and technology. He firmly believed that human intelligence develops the power to identify and solve human problems through the training of that intelligence in purposive thinking and social feeling and social action. The product of such training is personality-energy and character-efficiency. It is this energy that is capable of mobilizing all types of physical and social energy resources and investing them in the social field and to make society grow in health and vigour. This is the energy that we have to develop in our people today. Then only we cease to be just passive spectators of human sufferings. Swamiji optimistically said, we, by our trained mind and hand, shall become adequately enough strong to handle our mounting problems. As an educationalist he believed in absolute values which have to be realized by a good system of education. Education should develop a feeling of nationalism and international understanding with special attention to the development of character and make individual self-dependent. Through his scheme of education, he tried to materialize the moral and spiritual welfare and upliftment of humanity, irrespective of caste, creed, nationality or time.

The exposition and analysis of Vivekananda’s scheme of education brings to light its constructive, practical and comprehensive character. Vivekananda realized that it is only through education that the uplift of masses is possible. He had gone deep into the social and political decline of his motherland and attempted to prescribe a workable formula to eradicate all social and political inequalities. To refer to his own words: “Traveling

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18. *CW*, Vol. 5, Interviews, “On Indian Women — Their Past, Present And Future”, p. 232

19. *CW*, Vol.5, Conversations and Dialogues, “Thoughts on Women”, p. 69.



through many cities of Europe and observing in them the comforts and education of even the poor people, there was brought to my mind the state of our own poor people, and I used to shed tears. What made the difference? "*Education*" was the answer I got."<sup>20</sup> Education, for him, is the basic infrastructure for an all-round development of a country. He stated it emphatically that if society is to be reformed, education has to reach everyone - high and low, because individuals are the very constituents of society. He always used to tell one thing that the future of the nation is built only in the classrooms. If we water the routes of the plant the total plant will be watered. So he always placed stress on a man-making education and a man-making religion. Proper education, according to him, aims to rebuild a person. It should have the power to make a person to handle difficult situations in life which are really needed to be seen or focused on. *Education, thus, for Vivekananda, should be the preparation for life.* The aim of education is to manifest in our lives the perfection, which is the very nature of our inner self. This perfection is the *realization of the infinite power* which resides in everything and everywhere-existence, consciousness and bliss. After understanding the essential nature of this perfection, we should identify it with our inner self. For achieving this, one will have to eliminate one's ego, ignorance and all other false identification, which stand in the way. Meditation, fortified by moral purity and passion for truth, helps man to leave behind the body, the senses, the ego and all other non-self elements, which are perishable. He thus realizes his immortal divine self, which is of the nature of infinite existence, infinite knowledge and infinite bliss.

However, Vivekananda's scheme of education, through which he wanted to build up a strong nation that will lead the world towards peace and harmony, is still a far cry. Today there is a constant deterioration of cultural ethics and standards. The supreme need of today is to counteract and combat this emotional, moral and cultural collapse. Only a sound system of education can bring back the faith. So, it is high time that we give serious thought to Vivekananda's philosophy of education and remember his call to every-body- "*Arise, awake, and stop not till the goal is reached*"<sup>21</sup>

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20. *CW*, Vol.4, Translation: Prose, "The Education India Needs" p. 483. Emphasis Added.

21. *Ibid.*, Emphasis Added. Also see *Katha Upaniṣad*, I.ii.4.

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