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A table of contents for *Indian Journal of Theology* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_ijt_01.php

William Carey and Swami Vivekananda : Transformation of Religion and Culture

*SOMEN DAS**

Introduction :-

It is significant that we are celebrating two historic events originating from the State of W. Bengal in this year. We recognise with joy and gratitude the arrival of William Carey in 1793— two hundred years ago. He was the pioneer and prophet of the modern Protestant missionary movement. Swami Vivekananda from Bengal delivered his famous speech on HARMONY OF RELIGIONS at the Parliament of Religions in Chicago, U.S.A. in 1893— one hundred years ago. It is important and necessary to acknowledge the impact of these two stalwarts of the nineteenth century— one towards the beginning and the other towards the end of the century. I propose to recapitulate their impact in terms of their understanding of culture and religion.

Religion as the Basis of Socio-Cultural Transformation :

William Carey in his *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens* wrote,

Missionaries must have patience, and mingle with the people, till they have learned so much of their language as to be able to communicate their ideas to them in it.¹

He himself learnt first the local language, not only through a pundit but through his practical experience at Madnabati in North Bengal. In the process he realised the plight of the poor people and their traditions and superstitions. He realised through this intimate association that Hindu culture needed a radical socio-cultural metamorphosis. Therefore he would have agreed with Raja Rammohun Roy when he wrote to his friend, John

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Digby in England in 1828,

the present system of religion adhered to by the Hindus is not well calculated to promote their political interest. The distinction of castes introducing innumerable divisions and subdivisions among them has entirely deprived them of patriotic feeling.

For the same reason, he wrote to the Governor-general in 1823, "The Sanskrit system of education would be best calculated to keep this country in the darkness." William Carey began his relentless struggle against social evils and economic deprivation of the time right in the beginning of the nineteenth century. Thus on the one hand he identified with the local people and understood their ambitions and aspirations, while on the other he was not hesitant to attack the Indian (Hindu) culture where it was evil and superstitious. No attempt was made by him to justify such cultural aberrations or distortions in his zeal to localise or contextualise. He maintained the normative character of his mission. Thus he was for the secular and religious education of the people, uplift of women, removal of *sati* and *Gangasagar* infanticide and such other practices of the time. It may be noted that during his life time several schools were started by Joshua and Hannah Marshman for the education of girls and women. Through these actions William Carey was redefining the nature and function of religion two hundred years ago in terms of socio-cultural transformation. In this effort he wanted religion to be the basis of culture and society. He was not a social activist cut off from religious moorings and roots. Therefore he became concerned with the Bible and its many translations.

Similarly, Swami Vivekananda about one hundred years later wanted to make the ancient Hindu religion a powerful instrument, a potent force for socio-cultural change. Soon in his life and work, Vivekananda understood the deplorable condition of India which he called a "sleeping Leviathan"², "the country is dead" and "India is in putrefication."³ Somebody was required "to cross the Rubicon of orthodoxy and to rejuvenate Hindu society and to give Hinduism a *social purpose*."⁴ Vivekananda had said more than hundred years ago,

A country where millions of people live on flowers of the *mahua* plant and a million or two sadhus and a hundred million or so Brahmins suck the blood out of these poor people... is that a country or hell? is that a religion or a devil's dance.⁵

On another occasion he had affirmed categorically,

...their extreme poverty is one of the causes why the Chinese

and Indians have remained in a state of mummified civilization... the people are neither Hindus nor Vedantins— they are merely don't touchists, their kitchen is their temple and cooking pots are their objects of worship...⁶

His family background, his education particularly at Scottish Church College and above all his *parivrajak* (travel) gave him a historical consciousness and he realised the "inevitability of history." His empirical, historical experience made him realise the oppressive dimensions of society and the legitimising role of religion. This is where he recognised the need to reformulate or reinterpret *advaita vedanta* (non-dualism) which for him is not monism but an acknowledgement of pluralism both human and divine. He affirmed unity not as a barren mathematical unit, but that which contains tremendous diversity. No attempt was made to reject or eliminate diversity or multiplicity. He took seriously the particularity or the otherness of the other, both human and divine. It was a total acceptance of the neighbour not only as the spark of divinity or the image or the likeness of God but a part and parcel of the *atman* (self). The latter in turn is an integral part of the *paramatman* (Ultimate self). This neo-*Vedanta* became the basis for socio-cultural transformation. No attempt was made by Swami Vivekananda to hide or be apologetic or defensive about the oppressive, unjust nature of religion and culture of the time and he became the pioneer crusader. He confessed honestly the mistakes and failures of both Indian culture and religion while declaring the greatness of her legacy and history. His patriotism or nationalism did not vitiate or blur the distinction between right and wrong, good and bad. He established the normative goals of religion, *Dharma*, is that which must hold and uphold, support and sustain in a meaningful and purposive way the whole fabric of culture and creation. *Dharma* does not divide or destroy but builds up or upbuilds.

Criteria for Religio-Cultural Transformation :

Both William Carey and Swami Vivekananda realised in their own way that both religion and culture need to interact dynamically and change as both are historical phenomena subjected to spatio-temporal limitations, historically conditioned or determined. Ernest Hocking defined religion as "a passion for righteousness considered as a cosmic demand." Christopher Dawson had affirmed.

Marriage of religion and culture is equally fatal to either partner, since religion is so tied to the social order that it

loses its spiritual character and the free development of culture is restricted by the bonds of religious tradition until the social organism becomes rigid and lifeless as a mummy.⁸

Therefore we must not indulge in idolatry of either religion or culture. Paul Tillich defined idolatry as,

the elevation of a preliminary concern to ultimacy. Something essentially conditioned is taken as unconditional, something essentially partial is boosted into universality, and something essentially finite is given infinite significance.⁹

This was the perspective of the two stalwarts of the nineteenth century. Thus Richard Niebuhr in his classic study on Christ and Culture realised the similar problem but viewed it primarily from the cultural perspective. We have now realised through the study of many scholars that Christology or Christologies have evolved historically and culturally. Nothing about them is static or pre-determined. Paul Tillich had taken cognizance of provincialism of culture and religion and stated,

The Church judges culture, including Church's own forms of life. For its forms are created by culture, as its religious substance makes culture possible. The Church and culture are within, not alongside, each other. And the Kingdom of God includes both while transcending both.¹⁰

Thus Tillich developed his own criterion to judge religion and culture- the Kingdom of God. But what constitutes the Kingdom particularly according to Carey and Vivekananda ? We can suggest at least two of them for our purpose.

Carey and Vivekananda indirectly but decisively accepted liberation as one of the criteria to judge both culture and religion. Of course we must concede that the concept of liberation was not understood in the way that Gutierrez, Segundo and other liberation theologians have understood. But their words and actions in defence of the poor and the oppressed, the women and the marginalised, uneducated and the illiterate indicate it. They were interested in the liberation of the mind, body and the spirit. They were spiritual people whose spirituality was conceived in terms of Indian reality. *Moksha* or *mukti* was not abstract or cut off from the physical, the mundane. For them liberation was perceived as *sarvodaya* (uplift of all and the whole) long before Mahatma Gandhi or Binova Bhave. In this process they tried to bridge the gulf between spirituality and praxis, between gnostic and agapaic thrust and between salvation and liberation.¹¹ Both Carey and Swami Vivekananda realised that religion had legitimised oppression and injustice but the latter also reinterpreted the classical Hindu philosophy to make it liberational

or liberative. There is a need to reread the scriptures to make them liberating. For Vivekananda *nirvikalpa samādhi* became subordinate to *savikalpa samadhi* and *jivanmukti* (liberation here and now) more important than *videhamukti* (liberation outside the body).

The second most important criterion for religion is humanisation according to Carey and Vivekananda. Carey was actively engaged in uplift of women, for education and translations so that there may be greater and fuller humanity. Education (enlightenment) brings self-respect and self-identity. The women of the time were treated in an inhuman way and thus Carey started the war against *sati*. These were modest attempts in the beginning of the nineteenth century to restore dignity and humanity to all kinds of people. Swami Vivekananda was more explicit and direct about the advocacy of this criterion. After seeing the plight of the people in India Vivekananda said, "It is man-making religion we want. It is man-making theories we want. It is man-making education all around that we want."¹² He could not bear to see human beings living as animals. His neo-Vedanta was an attempt to focus sharply on human beings and humanisation— how they can move from the individual *atman* to *paramatman*. Thus he said that the great national sin has been the neglect of human beings particularly the poor and the oppressed. He gave emphasis on *manava dharma* and asserted, "...if you want to find God, serve man! If you want to acquire power, serve your brother man."¹³ Once he told Sister Nivedita, "You do not understand India! We Indians are manworshippers after all! Our God is man!"¹⁴ Increasingly we have come to realise that in the ultimate sense Christology is transcendent anthropology. The incarnation is a reminder that the God whom we worship is *nara-Hari*. The divinity of Jesus becomes pronounced in the midst of his humanity. Therefore we do not need to argue with Vivekananda about this. The latter wrote to his Hindu devotees from the United States in 1894, "If you want any good to come, just throw your ceremonials in the waters of the Ganga and worship the visible God; He who wears all these various human forms. ..." ¹⁵ This is the way that Vivekananda made the ancient Hindu religion the solid foundation for socio-cultural transformation. In his own way he perceived the legitimising and deligitimising role of religion. Religion must uphold culture in a liberative, humanised ways and culture in turn must shape and form religion in that direction and with that meaning and purpose. Both Carey as well as Vivekananda redefined or refined religion through their respective words and actions. They were religious reformers who used religion or

reformed religion to give it a socio-economic-political purpose. Of course Vivekananda was a nationalist, a patriot who understood liberation and humanisation specifically in terms of India's political freedom. Bhupendranath Dutta makes that explicit in his writing. Both of them viewed religion, *dharma*, as that which promotes and enhances life with all its richness and variety. It has to be made dynamic and active. Thus in the ultimate sense both for Carey and Vivekananda religion is not rituals or ceremonials but "passion for righteousness" (justice).

At this juncture it is useful to remember that succeeding generations of Indian scholars have tried to make Hinduism purposive. As a result in our own time *dharma* does not only mean advaita-Vedanta but *dharma* has come to mean the dalits, the oppressed, the poor, the people. Debiprasad Chattopadhyaya has made a serious attempt to recover the ancient *lokayata* school of Hinduism. This has to do with the materialist, physical, people's view of life as compared to the idealist and the spiritual. It is on this basis Debiprasad distinguishes between the living and the dead in the Indian philosophical tradition.¹⁶ Thus it is increasingly being realised that it is not enough or adequate to emphasise only or exclusively the Brahminic-Sanskritic tradition of Hinduism. If we are to emphasis and promote rationalism, secularism, science-orientation and the real content of freedom, we have to take seriously the *lokayata* School and I believe that Vivekananda was a precursor and pioneer of this effort in the nineteenth century. He tried to work through the contradictions between the spiritual and the physical, between idealism and realism. In our theological affirmation we realise that in the incarnation of Jesus, the transcendence is known and acknowledged in and through the immanence of God. The human becomes the locus of the divine. Then religion will not permit privileging of the so-called 'general' over the particular; the larger over the 'smaller'; the 'mainstream' over the 'marginal'.¹⁷ In the final analysis, religions of the world must promote equality, dignity, and freedom of all people, of all human beings irrespective of caste, colour or creed. That is the universal, unconditional categorical imperative. Carey and Vivekananda were pioneers of this universal religion in their own way.

Conclusion :

Carey and Vivekananda realised that religion and culture must mutually correct and enrich. No attempt was made to understand religion in an aggressive, selfish, and fanatical sense. We have

to recover the spirit and energy of both the great stalwarts, one who was born in Bengal and the other who came to Bengal from a distant country and made it his home. They wanted to liberate and humanise religion and culture. They were not considered fixed, static or predetermined. Both needed to be forged on the anvil of human life and reality. It is tragic that the Global Vision 2000 organised by Vishva Hindu Parishad in Washington recently distorted this Vision. Both Mr. Ashok Singhal and Mr. Vishnu Hari Dalmia described the demolition of the Babri Masjid on 6th December, 1992 as a victory and the day of Hindu revivalism. Swami Vivekananda was a much bigger man with a greater vision. They have forgotten the history of India and the logic of history.

On 12th August of this year an exhibition of paintings and posters were mounted by the Safdar Hasmi Memorial Trust at Ayodhya in celebration of the pluralism of Indian culture. But it was attacked and destroyed by the Hindu fanatics in the name of religion. The Sahmat does not consider the Indian culture as monolithic but the RSS-VHP-Bajrang dal- Shiv Sena brand of Hindusim negates the long secular tradition of India. Intolerance is inimical to pluralist secularism but essential to communalism. In this critical juncture in the history of India, we need to recover the spirit and power of people like Carey and Vivekananda and emulate their words and actions. Religion has become a prisoner of culture and the pluralist cultural expressions have been stifled by religion. Therefore it is important and necessary to maintain a dialectic between religion and culture. We should not separate them completely or reduce them to each other forgetting their distinctions. Religion needs to be liberated from myopic minds that fail to apprehend the whole of life and all of life,— life in its totality. Culture and society need religious foundation and religion in turn needs to be liberative and humanising. Thus it is important to hold together the universal and the particular, the global and the contextual in our pursuit of religion in our socio-cultural milieu. This is what Carey and Vivekananda did in their own way in their own historical context. We salute them for their efforts.

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15. Marie Louis Burke, *Swami Vivekananda in America- New Discoveries* (Calcutta : Advaita Ashram, 1958), p. 595.
16. Debiprasad Chattopadhyaya, *Lokayata: A Study in Ancient Indian Materialism* (New Delhi : People's Publishing House, 1959) and his *What is Living and What is Dead in Indian Philosophy* (New Delhi : People's Publishing House, 1976).
17. See some of the *Dalit* theological and secular literature to appreciate this point. They have been considered outside the Brahminic-Sanskritic tradition.