EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF LIFE SAFETY AND STABILITY (EJLSS)
ISSN2660-9630
https://ejlss.es/ Volume 59, 2026 ||



Vivekananda and His Religion: Our Religion; National Religion

Sri Kaleswar Barman
Assistant Professor, Department of Philosophy, Dewan Abdul Gani College, Harirampur, Dakshin Dinajpur, West Bengal, India

Abstract: *This paper examines Swami Vivekananda's conception of religion as a living, universal, and inherently national force — a spiritual framework that he believed must serve as the moral and cultural bedrock of India's civilizational identity. Drawing upon his speeches, letters, and philosophical writings, the study argues that Vivekananda did not treat Hinduism as a sectarian creed but rather as a universal science of the spirit applicable to every human being, regardless of birth or status. The paper further explores how his notion of 'our religion' transformed into a rallying point for national consciousness during the colonial era, how he synthesized Advaita Vedanta with practical social reform, and how he envisioned the union of spirituality and nationalism as the path toward India's regeneration. The study concludes that Vivekananda's religious philosophy remains an enduring blueprint for understanding the relationship between individual faith, collective identity, and national purpose.*

Keywords: *Swami Vivekananda, Hinduism, National Religion, Vedanta, Indian Nationalism, Spiritual Universalism, Colonial India.*

Date of Submission: 01-06-2026 ***Date of Acceptance: 25-07-2026***

---

1. Introduction

Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902) stands as one of the most consequential religious thinkers of modern India. At a time when colonial rule had systematically delegitimized indigenous knowledge systems and when Christian missionaries actively questioned the moral validity of Hindu traditions, Vivekananda mounted an unprecedented intellectual and spiritual counter-offensive. He carried the message of Vedanta to the West, addressed the Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago in 1893 with remarkable confidence, and returned to India armed with a new vision: that the spiritual legacy of the subcontinent was not merely a relic of an ancient past but a living, evolving, universally relevant philosophy capable of healing a fragmented world.

What makes Vivekananda particularly significant in the context of religion and nationhood is his insistence that religion — specifically the Vedantic tradition — was the lifeblood of Indian civilization. He declared, in one of his most celebrated formulations, that if there is any land on this earth that can lay claim to be the blessed punya bhumi, the land of duty and righteousness, it is India (Vivekananda, Complete Works, Vol. III). For him, religion was not a private affair consigned to temples and rituals; it was the organizing principle of a people's collective life, the force that bound them to one another and to the cosmos.

This paper undertakes a systematic analysis of how Vivekananda conceptualized religion, how he transformed Hinduism from a perceived backward superstition (in colonial discourse) into a dignified universal philosophy, and how that philosophy was interwoven with his vision of Indian national regeneration. Through close reading of his primary texts and engagement with secondary scholarly literature, the paper argues that Vivekananda's notion of 'our religion' was simultaneously personal, social, and national — a triadic structure that remains philosophically compelling and historically instructive.

2. Historical and Intellectual Context: India Under Colonial Modernity

To appreciate the magnitude of Vivekananda's contribution, one must situate it within the turbulent intellectual landscape of nineteenth-century India. The encounter between Indian civilization and European colonialism was not merely a political or economic confrontation; it was profoundly epistemic. British administrators and Christian missionaries often portrayed Hindu society as intellectually stagnant, morally corrupt, and spiritually hollow. Orientalist scholars, while sometimes admiringly curious, nonetheless framed Indian philosophy as antiquated and passive, incapable of generating the dynamism associated with modernity (Said 1).

The Bengali Renaissance, in which Vivekananda was deeply embedded, was a response to this civilizational challenge. Figures like Ram Mohan Roy, Debendranath Tagore, and Keshab Chandra Sen had already begun the work of religious reform and reinterpretation. However, it was Vivekananda's teacher, Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa (1836–1886), who provided the experiential and mystical foundation from which Vivekananda would build a universal theology. Ramakrishna's direct encounters with the divine across multiple religious traditions — Hinduism, Islam, Christianity — convinced Vivekananda that all genuine paths of worship lead to the same ultimate reality (Rolland 43).

Vivekananda, trained in Western philosophy and science at the Scottish Church College in Calcutta, synthesized this mystical inheritance with rational inquiry. He was acutely aware that a religion that could not withstand intellectual scrutiny would eventually collapse under the weight of modernity. His project, therefore, was dual: to demonstrate the rational coherence of Vedanta and to show that it contained within it the seeds of both individual liberation and social transformation.

3. The Universal Religion: Vedanta as the Science of the Spirit

Vivekananda's most foundational claim was that Hinduism — or more precisely, the Vedantic philosophy that underlies it — was not a religion in the exclusionary Western sense of the word. Unlike doctrinal systems that require assent to particular historical events or specific theological propositions, Vedanta, he argued, is a science: an empirical investigation into the nature of consciousness, the self, and ultimate reality. In his address at the Parliament of the World's Religions in 1893, he declared that he was proud to belong to a religion which has taught the world both tolerance and universal acceptance, and which believes not only in universal toleration but accepts all religions as true (Vivekananda, Complete Works, Vol. I).

This universalism was not a strategic rhetorical gesture aimed at Western audiences; it was philosophically grounded in the Advaita Vedanta tradition, particularly as articulated by Adi Shankaracharya in the eighth century. According to Advaita, the apparent multiplicity of the universe is superimposed upon a single, undivided consciousness — Brahman. The individual self (Atman) is identical to this Brahman. All phenomena, including the diversity of religious forms, are manifestations of this one underlying reality. Vivekananda translated this metaphysical insight into a democratic and pluralist ethics: since the divine pervades all beings equally, every soul is potentially divine, and every sincere religious practice is a valid approach to that divinity (Balasubramanian 112).

This had revolutionary implications. It meant that untouchability, caste-based discrimination, and the denial of spiritual agency to women were not only social injustices but metaphysical errors — a denial of the Atman's universality. Vivekananda's religion was not merely tolerant of diversity; it positively required the recognition of divinity in every human person. His famous declaration, 'Daridra Narayana' — that the poor are God — was an extension of this Vedantic logic into the domain of social ethics (Sharma 67).

4. Our Religion: The Personal, Social, and National Dimensions

When Vivekananda spoke of 'our religion,' the possessive pronoun carried several overlapping meanings. At the personal level, 'our religion' referred to the individual's direct encounter with the divine — what he called the realization of God, not merely belief in God. He was deeply critical of what he termed 'kitchen religion,' the reduction of spiritual life to ritual observance, dietary restrictions, and caste propriety. True religion, for him, was transformative experience: the expansion of the self beyond ego-boundaries to encompass the totality of existence (Vivekananda, Complete Works, Vol. II).

At the social level, 'our religion' meant the practical application of Vedantic ethics to the problems of poverty, ignorance, and oppression. He founded the Ramakrishna Mission in 1897 with the explicit mandate to combine spiritual practice with humanitarian service. The Mission's hospitals, schools, and relief centers were conceived as temples — spaces where the worship of God and the service of human beings were one and the same activity. This fusion of jnana (knowledge), bhakti (devotion), karma (action), and raja yoga (psychological discipline) into a comprehensive spiritual praxis was Vivekananda's distinctive contribution to the Hindu tradition (Beckerlegge 204).

At the national level, 'our religion' became a force for the reconstruction of Indian identity under colonial conditions. Vivekananda argued that the primary cause of India's subjugation was not merely political or military weakness but a loss of self-confidence — a failure to recognize and affirm the greatness of the indigenous spiritual tradition. His call to his countrymen was therefore not primarily political but cultural and psychological: Arise, awake, and stop not till the goal is reached (Vivekananda, Complete Works, Vol. III). The goal he envisioned was a spiritually awakened India that could offer the world not conquest or commerce but wisdom.

5. National Religion: Spirituality as the Soul of Indian Nationalism

Vivekananda's contribution to Indian nationalism has been a subject of considerable scholarly debate. Some scholars, such as Tapan Raychaudhuri, have questioned whether his vision was sufficiently attentive to structural political reform, while others like Partha Chatterjee have argued that his cultural nationalism inadvertently reinforced a Hindu-centric conception of Indian identity (Chatterjee 97). These critiques have merit and must be engaged with seriously. However, they do not fully account for the complexity and internal tensions of Vivekananda's thought.

Vivekananda was not a political nationalist in the manner of Bal Gangadhar Tilak or later Mahatma Gandhi. He did not campaign for political independence, organize mass movements, or articulate a systematic theory of sovereignty. His nationalism was cultural and civilizational. He believed that India's unique contribution to humanity lay in its spiritual philosophy, and that this philosophy — not race, territory, or language — was the authentic basis of Indian identity. In this sense, he was arguing for a form of civic nationalism grounded in shared philosophical inheritance rather than ethnic exclusivity (Joshi 88).

Importantly, Vivekananda's national religion was not exclusivist. He repeatedly insisted that Hinduism's capacity for assimilation was its greatest strength. India had absorbed Buddhism, Jainism, Islam, and Christianity into its civilizational fabric without losing its essential character. The national religion he envisioned was, therefore, not a religion of exclusion but one of expansion

— a spirituality capacious enough to contain multitudes. This vision resonated deeply with the constitutional nationalism that would later animate India's founding documents, particularly the commitment to equality of all religions (Heehs 156).

Vivekananda also linked the regeneration of religion with the uplift of the masses. He was acutely aware that the Hindu tradition had, through the distortions of caste hierarchy, excluded enormous segments of the population from spiritual and intellectual life. His national religion demanded the democratization of spiritual access — the conviction that the Vedas belonged to every Indian, not merely the Brahmin elite (Vivekananda, Complete Works, Vol. V). This was a radical proposition in the social context of late nineteenth-century India, and it anticipated the social justice dimensions of the later nationalist movement.

6. Vivekananda's Critique of Religious Dogmatism and Ecclesiastical Power

A critical dimension of Vivekananda's religious philosophy that is often underemphasized is his sharp critique of organized religion, dogmatism, and priestly authority. He had little patience for religious institutions that prioritized ritual conformity over spiritual growth, or that used the authority of scripture to justify social oppression. His attitude toward the Brahminical establishment was frequently critical; he argued that the degeneration of India's religious life was in large part the result of the monopolization of spiritual knowledge by a hereditary priesthood (Vivekananda, Complete Works, Vol. IV).

This critique placed him in an interesting tension with orthodox Hindu conservatives, even as he championed Hinduism against colonial denigration. He was simultaneously a defender and a reformer — defending the essential philosophical core of the tradition while attacking its institutional corruptions. This dual posture gave his religious vision a dynamism that pure conservatism lacked: it could speak to reformers within the tradition as well as to those who had been alienated from it (King 178).

Vivekananda was also suspicious of religious nationalism when it degenerated into fanaticism. He warned against the tendency to confuse religious identity with political aggression, insisting that true religion produced gentleness, compassion, and universal fellow-feeling, not hatred or exclusion. His ideal of the national religion was therefore emphatically not a theocratic vision; it was a moral and philosophical vision in which spirituality served as the ground of ethical life rather than as a justification for communal conflict (Bharati 233).

7. Legacy and Contemporary Relevance

Vivekananda's death in 1902 at the age of thirty-nine cut short a project of extraordinary intellectual ambition. Yet his influence has been remarkably persistent. The Ramakrishna Mission he founded continues to operate hospitals, schools, and cultural institutions across India and internationally. His writings and speeches have been translated into dozens of languages and continue to be read by millions. Political leaders from Jawaharlal Nehru to Subhas Chandra Bose acknowledged his formative influence on their worldviews, and the Government of India celebrates his birth anniversary, January 12, as National Youth Day.

In the contemporary context, Vivekananda's vision of religion as a unifying national force raises complex questions. India in the twenty-first century is a plural democracy in which religious identity is deeply intertwined with politics, and in which communal tensions remain a persistent challenge. Some interpreters of Vivekananda have sought to recruit his authority for majoritarian Hindu nationalism — a reading that sits uncomfortably with his emphatic universalism and his critique of religious exclusivism (Sarkar 34). A more faithful reading of his thought would emphasize his insistence that the true religion of India was one that recognized divinity in all human beings, regardless of caste, creed, or community.

His synthesis of spiritual depth, intellectual rigor, social compassion, and national pride offers a model of engaged religiosity that remains relevant to contemporary debates about the relationship between faith and public life. In an era marked by both religious fundamentalism and aggressive secularism, Vivekananda's vision of a religion that is simultaneously personal and universal, traditional and reformist, spiritual and socially engaged, speaks to needs that neither extreme can address.

8. Conclusion

Swami Vivekananda's conception of religion as 'our religion' and as national religion represents one of the most sophisticated and enduring attempts to articulate the relationship between spiritual philosophy, individual identity, and collective national purpose in the modern world. By grounding his religious vision in the Advaita Vedanta tradition — with its radical affirmation of the divinity of every human being — he simultaneously challenged colonial denigration of Hindu civilization, critiqued internal social injustices, and offered a philosophical basis for a pluralist and inclusive Indian nationalism.

His religion was not a dogma to be imposed but a realization to be achieved — the direct experience of the unity underlying all apparent diversity. When he spoke of 'our religion,' he meant a living inheritance that demanded both intellectual honesty and ethical engagement, both personal transformation and social service. When he spoke of national religion, he meant not the imposition of Hindu theology upon a diverse population but the recognition that the spiritual wisdom accumulated over millennia in the Indian tradition constituted a resource of incalculable value for the project of human self-understanding.

In this sense, Vivekananda's life and thought constitute an ongoing challenge: to practice a religion that is genuinely universal without being vacuously relativistic, genuinely Indian without being narrowly exclusivist, and genuinely spiritual without being socially irresponsible. Nearly a century and a quarter after his death, this challenge remains as urgent as ever.

References

1. Balasubramanian, R. Advaita Vedanta. Centre for Advanced Study in Philosophy, University of Madras, 1976.
2. Beckerlegge, Gwilym. The Ramakrishna Mission: The Making of a Modern Hindu Movement. Oxford University Press, 2000.
3. Bharati, Agehananda. The Ochre Robe: An Autobiography. Doubleday, 1970.
4. Chatterjee, Partha. The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories. Princeton University Press, 1993.
5. Heehs, Peter. The Essential Writings of Sri Aurobindo. Oxford University Press, 1998.
6. Joshi, Kireet. Swami Vivekananda: A Study. The Mother's Institute of Research, 1998.
7. King, Richard. Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and 'The Mystic East.' Routledge, 1999.
8. Raychaudhuri, Tapan. Europe Reconsidered: Perceptions of the West in Nineteenth-Century Bengal. Oxford University Press, 1988.
9. Rolland, Romain. The Life of Vivekananda and the Universal Gospel. Translated by E. F. Malcolm-Smith, Advaita Ashrama, 1931.
10. Said, Edward W. Orientalism. Vintage Books, 1979.

11. Sarkar, Sumit. Writing Social History. Oxford University Press, 1997.
12. Sharma, Arvind. The Philosophy of Religion and Advaita Vedanta: A Comparative Study in Religion and Reason. Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995.
13. Vivekananda, Swami. The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda. 9 vols., Advaita Ashrama, 1907–1997.