

Swami Vivekananda and Vladimir Solovyov: Similar Response to Global Crisis of Civilization

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Abstract

One of the most important themes of Russo-Indian cross-cultural research is the ideological commonality and solidarity of values with which the two great cultures have responded to the beginning of the global crisis which continues to this day. From this point of view we find deep intellectual and spiritual parallels in the works of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda (Indian Vedanta) and V.S. Solovyov (Russian religious-philosophical doctrine of Total Unity). These ideas are still hold a deep meaning in contemporary world as an alternative to the imperialistic globalization founded on Euro-centrism, economic competition and pursuit of profit, individualism and primacy of secular parts of culture over its sacral components.

Key words: Indian Vedanta, Euro-Centrism, Globalization

Introduction

One of the most important themes in Russo-Indian cross-cultural research is the ideological commonality and solidarity of values with which the two great cultures have responded to the beginning of the global crisis which continues to this day. I would like to point out that it was precisely in the last quarter of the 19th Century that the imperialistic colonial division of the world and the formation of transnational corporations laid the groundwork for the future world wars. This was also the period in which the world religions were struck with deep crisis: a rise in untraditional cults and mass atheistic sentiments. A parallel phenomenon occurred in science—the symbol of progress and the object of religious belief in the 18th and first half of the 19th Centuries. The scientists turn from teachers and sages of life into mercenaries and narrow specialists, and science discovered its potential not only for good, but for destruction and inhumanity, becoming a servant of militarism. The end of the century marked the beginning of the global environmental crisis, the rise of modernism and dissolution in art and division of mass and elite culture. The phenomenon of international terrorism is also the offspring of this epoch, if we remember the actions of the Russian extremists in the second half of the 19th Century. All in all, this was the beginning of new deep rift of humanity along the lines of “rich North, poverty-ridden South,” and “progressive West, backward and retrogressive East.”

It is my opinion that Russian and Indian culture have almost simultaneously begun a religious and philosophical project as an alternative to the imperialistic globalization founded on Euro-centrism, economic competition and pursuit of profit, individualism, and primacy of the secular parts of culture over its sacral components. Pragmatism and positivism on one side, and the irrationalism of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche on the other, are opposites on the surface, but are united by the deeper philosophical meanings of globalization played out according to the Western script. To what can we attribute this similarity in Russian and Indian philosophical responses to the approach of humanity in this protracted period of crisis? Which of these ideological responses have lapsed into historical void and which have not lost their depth and urgency to this day? I am far from approaching an exhaustive answer to these questions, and will limit myself only to the short analysis of the similarity of basic conceptual framework of reform *Vedanta* in the second half of the 19th Century and Russian metaphysical Total Unity, coined by V. S. Solovyov.

It is surprising that the religious-philosophical doctrine of Total Unity within Indian *Vedanta* and the analogous views within Russian religious philosophy were conceived almost simultaneously. Even the Russian term, “metaphysical Total Unity,” itself, which defined the philosophy of V. S. Solovyov, perfectly conveyed the essence of *Vedanta*’s renewal in the studies of Swami Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda. Both now and then, we have the task of unifying humankind on Earth, split by religious and national identifications. When different people believe in different Gods, proclaims Ramakrishna and V. S. Solovyov, it is hardly grounds for enmity and alienation. Above the visible differences which we identify in each other, and which we should respect, there exists a deeper, divine unity of all people, superseding their outer earthly differences. *Vedanta* speaks of the divine Self—the seed of spirit—sleeping deep within any living creature; this individual Self – *atman* – is in fact identical to Divine *Brahman*. V. S. Solovyov also postulated the involvement of each individual soul in Divine Total Unity. This deep anthropological unity, which does not abolish differences, demands rejection of egoism, and militant religious and ethnic selfism. V. S. Solovyov, like his followers, believed in the unification of humanity and in the future reconciliation of Christian Church on the foundation of the unifying spiritual power of Russian Orthodoxy. Shri Ramakrishna criticized egoism and fanaticism in exactly this same way. “Do not be like a frog in a well,” the great prophet warned. “A frog in a well does not know anything better or more magnificent than its well. The same is true of a fanatic. They do not know anything better than their faith” (*Притчи Рамакришны, 1993*). In the thinking of Ramakrishna and his student, Vivekananda, the great integrating power of *Vedanta* in the contemporary world resides in the very fact that it has the ability to reconcile and encompass within itself the different religious doctrines, seeing the essence of religion not in the outward mechanical execution of rites, the reading and interpretation of sacred texts, but in steadfast manifestation of one’s inner divine nature. Genuine religion, Swami Vivekananda later said, “is not talk and not theory, however wonderful they are. It is existence and self-actualization...when the heart begins to completely transform according to what you believe” (*Vivekananda, 1946*). By the way, the role of the heart in religious transformation of a person, and finding oneness with God, the world, and others, is another common motif in Russian and Indian philosophy of that period.

The similarity between Indian and Russian religious-philosophical thinking at the end of the 19th Century concerns yet another basic area: the deepest ontological and vital unity of male and female beginnings in the Universe. Study of the Great Mother in the teachings of Ramakrishna and study of Sophia-Wisdom of God in Russian religious philosophy (V. S. Solovyov, the brothers S. N. and E. N. Trubetzky, S. N. Bulgakov, and P. A. Florensky) are a fundamental point of convergence in Indian and Russian cultural thought of that period. At the age of domestic and social abasement of women throughout the world, here is proclaimed the fundamentality of her mission on Earth and in the Universe: to birth and guard the beginning of existence, introducing into the world true goodness, beauty and wisdom, without which, no order could be sustained and no undertaking permanent. Herein lies the negation of sterile feminism, in which the pseudo-liberated woman vainly wants to become “like a man,” forgetting about the main task of her existence in the world—to be a loving wife and the closest friend for her spouse, and a caring mother to her children. Swami Vivekananda and V. S. Solovyov spoke practically in unison of the sacred character of earthly marriage, soldering mutual loyalty and spiritual kinship between a man and a woman. Such unity is in keeping with the deepest laws of the Universe. It strengthens not only society, but the whole world, becoming in the eyes of Vivekananda, almost in complete likeness with monastic service to God. “If you understand the true nature of marriage,” he wrote during a later period of his work, “the foundation of which can only be love, adoring love, love which

borders only with death, you will directly approach the idea of monasticism” (*Никхилананда*, 1991, 54).

There are three more key ideas, on which the representatives of *Vedanta* and Russian metaphysical Total Unity come together; and which have not lost their currency. The first idea affirms the organic unity of tradition and novelty of ancient and contemporary knowledge. Without such unity, the living ties between generations of one or another cultural persuasion would be broken, and the basic super-temporal idea of a nation, assuring uninterrupted existence throughout the course of history, risks being lost. Vivekananda reminded that “every nation has its mission in the world. As long as each follows its own calling, it will live on, despite all hardships. But once the ‘predominating idea’ is destroyed, the nation will perish in agony” (*Вивекананда*, 1992). Practically, identically and simultaneously with Vivekananda, V. S. Solovyov wrote in his work, *Russian Idea*: “...No nation can live in itself, through itself, and for itself; instead, the life of each people offers only specific participation in the common life of humanity. The organic function placed on one or another nation in this universal life is its true national idea, eternally formed in God’s plan” (*Соловьев*, 1989). This single idea-goal, in the thought of both thinkers, invisibly pierces through all of time during the existence of a given people in history, but must be interpreted and fulfilled in a way specific to each age. In its own turn, this driving goal helps people pass through all shocks and thorns presented throughout its history. Accordingly, the innermost wisdom of people cannot contradict contemporary knowledge, and contemporary knowledge, if true, cannot refute the super-temporal wisdom of tradition, which withstands the test of time.

It is surprising here how closely V. S. Solovyov and Swami Vivekananda interpret Russia’s and India’s purposes of existence. Incidentally, it is from this that the second common idea of Russian and Indian traditions of Total Unity emerges. The main task in approaching the new age is to secure the organic joining of Eastern spirituality and the scientific, technical and social advances of the West. For Indian culture in the new age, saw the superior goal, about which his teacher Ramakrishna spoke, to be precisely this: to deliver the all-unifying and saving light of true religion to the world. This task of familiarizing the West with the depths of Indian spirituality Vivekananda wholeheartedly put into practice in the course of his short and bright life. Through his lectures in America and England, France and Japan, the wide global public came to know for the first time the riches of the Indian religious and philosophical legacy, discovering for themselves with astonishment, the Eastern truths that ring as true as ever. Russian religious thinkers saw the same task of unifying the spiritual East and rationalist West-but based on the values of Russian Orthodox Christianity-as the mission of Russia, geographically situated, as it is, on the crossroads between these two great cultural worlds. These thinkers, later to become exiles from atheistic Soviet Russia, directly demonstrated to Western and Eastern intellectuals the true achievement of Russian culture, art, and philosophy. Some of great bearers of the national spirit equally open to the Eastern and Western spirit would be the Roerich family.

It is telling that while fulfilling his great mission of acquainting the West with the religious-philosophical ideas of India, Swami Vivekananda became deeply convinced that the true synthesis of East and West which would open a new historical age in the development of civilization on Earth, would come into being in the great northern country of Russia, which had always fascinated him. “Europe,” he wrote, “is on a volcanic crater”. If the spiritual flame does not counterbalance the black flame, it will mean catastrophe. The next shift...will come from Russia” (*Никхилананда*, 1991, 50). Vivekananda’s intent and loving attention to Russia may have been influenced by the words of his teacher, Ramakrishna, not long before his death in 1886. The great Indian prophet

promised to be born again into an earthly body after one hundred years...in Russia. It is understandable that the faithful and sensitive student could not help but develop affection for the country which his teacher consciously chose for his next earthly mission.

Finally, there is one more basic idea relating Indian Reform *Vedanta* and Russian philosophy. This is the necessity to consolidate spiritual theory and life practice in the form of active service to the world and others. The only true spirituality is active spirituality. "Monasticism," wrote V. S. Solovyov, "once held a lofty status, but now has come a time not to run from the world, but to go into the world in order to transform it" (Соловьев, 1990). In its Eastern tongue, this active way of serving the world could be called the way of *karma-yoga*—the *yoga* of unselfish labor for the good of the world. Vivekananda especially emphasized the meaning of this *yoga* in the coming age. His teachings were kept by monks-members of the organization he founded, "The Mission of Ramakrishna," whose purposes were (and are, to this day): to propagate the ideas of Ramakrishna; to engage in active charity and social service; to participate in the spread of scientific knowledge which can improve the material and spiritual conditions of the masses; and to support new technologies and ancient trades (Костюченко, 1993). Here is one such lesson of Vivekananda, worthy enough to be reprinted almost in full: "Never forget service to others and the realization of God—these are the ideals of monastic life...Give yourself to the service of others—this is the shortest path of attaining liberation! Kill within yourself the desire for personal salvation! This is the greatest spiritual discipline! Work, my boys, work with all your heart, with all your soul...Shri Ramakrishna came to this world in order to give of himself without remainder. I have tried to imitate Him. You have to work. All of our work is just the very, very beginning. Believe me, it is with the blood of our hearts that we will sprinkle this earth, which will bring forth spiritual giants, heroic collaborators in the army of the Lord, which will implement in the world a revolution of the Spirit... Believe above all in yourself, and then you shall believe in God. A hundred believers can transform the world. We need charitable hearts, bright minds, and a strong army of workers. A charitable heart is the best armament in this fight" (Никхилананда, 1991, 43).

The actions of Ramakrishna, Vivekananda and their students, as we know, influenced India a great deal. The country was, in fact, transformed by "a hundred believers," who made India remember its national virtue and freedom. Their powerful impact was absorbed by key prominent political and cultural figures of India, who as a result invested hugely in its liberation from colonial slavery—such figures as Tilak and Rabindranath Tagore, Mahatma Gandhi, and Shri Aurobindo Ghosh.

Swami Vivekananda felt the direct repercussions in the souls of his people whom he and his companions had reminded of their great spiritual roots and teachers, at the time of his triumphant return to India from Europe in 1887. It seemed that all of India had come out onto the streets to greet its great son returning from afar, through whose lips it would seem the whole nation had spoken in Europe and America. At the time, Swami Vivekananda said prophetic words, which were fulfilled completely in the subsequent history of India: "Look, India, on whom you place the honorable crown today! Not upon a general, nor a prince, nor a rich man. Is it not a poor, homeless monk that stands today in your glorious rays, India? Really, you are kneeling today before your only truth, India, before the True Spirit, and...this poor monk is only your beloved son, India, whose voice awoke your dormant Spirit. And all that is happening is just the great festivities of the awakening Spirit. You have awakened, Sacred Mother. You have awakened, my Love. You have awakened to bring the world the triumphant Truth" (Никхилананда, 1991, 26).

Through the foreign mission of Vivekananda, it was as if the great culture of India came to know itself all over again—its most important values and most secret ideas. A similar spiritual revelation had taken place six years before in Russia, hearing the prophetic words of F. M. Dostoevsky, spoken in the famous speech of 1881 on the anniversary of Pushkin: “I say that the Russian heart is perhaps more destined than that of any other people for worldwide, human and brotherly unity. I see its tracks in our history, in our talented countrymen, in the artistic genius of Pushkin...In fact, he could contain within his spirit the genius of another, like his own. In the arts, at least in artistic creation, he indisputably manifested this universality of the Russian spirit’s aspirations—of this there is great evidence. If our idea is a fantasy, then thanks to Pushkin, there is at least something on which to base this fantasy” (Достоевский, 1992) And then, moved by his inspired and providential words, a crowd of young Russians carried Dostoevsky from Tverskaya Square on their shoulders.

The common good message about the brotherhood and unity of all humanity, emerging almost simultaneously from the great sons of Russia and India bring about a deep interest and sympathy amongst the geniuses of both cultures. Lev Tolstoy was familiar with the memoirs of Vivekananda and valued them very highly. Tolstoy, in turn, was Mahatma Gandhi’s favorite thinker. V. I. Vernadsky knew the ideas of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda well, and discussed them at length with his friend and prominent orientalist, Prof. S. F. Oldenburg. They were also well-known to Pavel Florensky, who always showed great interest in Indian culture. E. I. and N. K. Roerich always urged Vivekananda’s memoirs for spiritual reading, especially to young people. In turn, the philosophical and artistic legacy of the Roerich’s is an indelible part of the cultural repertoire of India, as well as that of Russia. The renaissance of the Roerich Institute, “*Urusvati*,” is a very important step in strengthening the brotherly spiritual dialogue between the Russian and Indian peoples.

However, the further investigation of the spiritual links between prominent philosophical minds of India and Russia is far from being simply an interesting and important scientific task; it is also vitally necessary if we are to find an escape from the current globalist cul-de-sac, and stand once more on the path—not of techno-consumerism, but of the true spiritual and ecological unification of humanity.

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