



On Hinduism Swami Vivekananda (1893)

Swami Vivekananda was a Hindu monk from an upper-middle-class family in British-ruled Bengal. ("Swami Vivekananda" is his monastic name, not his birth name: "Swami" is a monk's title, while "Vivekananda" is a compound of two Sanskrit words that mean "discernment" and "bliss.") In 1893, he traveled from India to the United States, where he lectured on Hinduism at the World's Parliament of Religions, a pioneering multifaith gathering held in Chicago. Having proved a popular speaker, Vivekananda continued to tour the United States, teaching a modernized form of Vedanta philosophy and contemplative yoga to white audiences. The Vedanta Societies he founded in New York and California are credited with being the first Hindu organizations in the United States.

Presented below are excerpts from one of Vivekananda's addresses at the World's Parliament of Religions; his audience there was mostly white Americans from Christian backgrounds. The address was published in several different editions, which tried in varying ways to refine Vivekananda's English usage or to clarify obscure wording. The text you have here comes from an edition produced in India by the monastic order to which Vivekananda belonged.

I remember, as a boy, hearing a Christian missionary preaching to a crowd in India. Among other sweet things he was saying to them was: If he gave a blow to their idol with his stick, what could it do? One of his hearers sharply answered, "If I abuse your God, what can He do?" "You would be punished," said the preacher, "when you die." "So my idol will punish you when you die!" retorted the Hindu.

The tree is known by its fruits. When I have seen, amongst them that are called idolaters, men the like of whom, for morality and spirituality and love, I have never seen anywhere, I stop and ask myself, "Can sin beget holiness?"

Superstition is a great enemy of man, but bigotry is worse. [...]

To the Hindu, [...] all religions, from the lowest fetishism to the highest absolutism, mean so many attempts of the human soul to grasp and realize the Infinite, each determined by the conditions of its birth and association. Each of these marks a stage of progress; and every soul is a young eagle soaring higher and higher, gathering more and more strength, till it reaches the Glorious Sun.

Unity in variety is the plan of nature, and the Hindu has recognized it. Every other religion lays down certain fixed dogmas and tries to force the whole of society to adopt them. They place before society one coat, which must fit Jack and John and Henry all alike. If it should happen not to fit John or Henry, he must go without a coat to cover his body. The Hindus have discovered that the absolute can only be realized, or thought of, or stated, through the relative; and that images, crosses, and crescents are simply so many symbols, so many pegs to hang the spiritual idea on. It is not that this help is necessary for everyone, but it is so for many; and those who do not need it themselves have no right to say that it is wrong. [...]

To the Hindu, then, the whole world of religion is only a traveling, a coming up, of different men

and women, through various conditions and circumstances, to the same goal. Every religion is only an evolving of God out of the material man, and the same God is the inspirer of all of them. Why, then, are there so many contradictions? They are only apparent, says the Hindu. The contradictions come from the same truth adapting itself to the varying circumstances of different natures. It is the same light coming through glasses of different color. [...] But in the heart of everything, the same truth reigns. The Lord has declared to the Hindu, in His incarnation as Krishna, "I am in every religion, as the thread through a string of pearls. Wherever thou seest extraordinary holiness and extraordinary power, raising and purifying humanity, know thou that I am there."

And what has been the result? I challenge the world to find, throughout the whole system of Sanskrit philosophy, any such statement as that the Hindu alone will be saved and not others. Says Vyasa, "We find perfect men even beyond the pale of our own caste and creed." [...]

This, brethren, is a short sketch of the religious ideas of the Hindus. 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 holds no location in place or time; which is infinite, like the God it preaches; whose sun shines upon the followers of Krishna and of Christ, on saints and sinners alike; not Brahmanic or Buddhistic, Christian or Mahomedan, but the sum total of all these, yet still keeping infinite space for development; which, in its catholicity, will embrace in its infinite arms and find a place for every human being, from the lowest groveling savage, not far removed from the brute, to the highest man, towering by the virtues of his head and heart almost above humanity and making society stand in awe of him and doubt his human nature. It will be a religion which will have no place for persecution or intolerance in its polity; which will recognize divinity in every man and woman; whose whole scope, whose whole force, will be centered in aiding humanity to realize its own true and divine nature.

Offer such a religion, and all the nations will follow you. Asoka's council was a council of the Buddhist faith. Akbar's, though more to the purpose, was only a parlor meeting. It was reserved for America to proclaim to all the quarters of the globe that the Lord is in every faith.

May He who is the Brahman of the Hindus, the Ahura Mazda of the Zoroastrians, the Buddha of the Buddhists, the Jehovah of the Jews, and the Father in Heaven of the Christians give strength to you to carry out your noble idea. The star arose in the East; it traveled steadily towards the West, sometimes dimmed and sometimes effulgent, till it made a circuit of the world; and now it is again rising on the very horizon of the East [...], a thousandfold more effulgent than ever it was before. Hail, Columbia, motherland of liberty! It has been given to thee, who hast never dipped thine hand in thy neighbor's blood, who hast never found out that the shortest way to become rich was to rob one's neighbors—it has been given to thee to march onwards in the vanguard of civilization, carrying the flag of harmony.

Source: Swami Vivekananda, *The Chicago Addresses*, 5th ed. (Calcutta: Brahmachari Kapila, 1915), 1-21, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/wu.89003556776>. Public domain in the United States, Google-digitized.

Excerpts edited by John-Charles Duffy. Paragraph breaks adjusted for readability or to reflect more clearly shifts in topic. A long sentence broken up. Spelling modernized or Americanized. Punctuation and capitalization at the beginning of an indirect quotation emended. Other punctuation emended in line with modern conventions. Italicized quotations converted to roman text. The word *philosophy*, capitalized in the source publication, converted here to lowercase; other capitalizations replicate the source.

These edited excerpts from Vivekananda’s address are intended for *teaching* purposes only. For *research* purposes, you should consult, quote, and cite the source listed above or one of the alternatives sources cited below.

See also:

For the version of the address that appeared in the official proceedings of the World’s Parliament of Religions, see Swami Vivekananda, “Hinduism,” in *The World’s Parliament of Religions*, ed. John Henry Barrows (Chicago: Parliament Publishing Co., 1893), 2:968-978, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.b3316178>. The address appears with minor variants in a rival collection sourced chiefly from stenographers’ transcripts: Swami Vivekananda, “Hinduism as a Religion,” in *Neely’s History of the Parliament of Religions* [...], ed. Walter R. Houghton (Chicago: Frank Tennyson Neely, 1893), 438-445, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/cool.ark:/13960/t6m04pp2r>.

For simplicity’s sake, this excerpted version of Vivekananda’s address elides a mysterious reference in the final paragraph to “the borders of the Tasifu.” In a posthumous edition of Vivekananda’s complete works published by his monastic order, *Tasifu* was emended to *Sanpo*, referring to the Yarlung Tsanpo, a river that runs from Tibet into the Ganges Delta. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1907), 1:20, <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.94806>. Alternatively, a biographer has argued that *Tasifu* is a misreading of the word *Pacific* as it would have appeared in Vivekananda’s handwriting. Marie Louise Burke, *Swami Vivekananda in the West: New Discoveries*, 3rd ed. (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1983), 1:143-144.



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