

Swami Vivekananda and Universal Humanism  
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**Origin and Development of Humanism**

‘Humanism’ has developed as a distinct philosophy in Europe in the Modern period. It deals with man and his actions and aspirations in the social and philosophical areas. Arnold Toynbee, the great historian of Modern times, says that this philosophy traces its origin to the aftermath of the protestant-catholic war in Germany fought for the papal supremacy. The war was fought in the name of religion—in the name of God. God is the supreme reality and his abode is in heaven. Till then the Christian concept centered around God and God only. The philosophy of Humanism strikes a transition from the heaven-centred theology to man-centred philosophy. Martin Luther, the 15th century Christian leader and the founder of Protestant movement, added a new dimension to the philosophy of Humanism. But he kept the position of God unchanged. The progress of science and technology contributed significantly to this movement. Since there is no place of God and heaven in science and technology, faith and church-centred religion faced a tremendous shock. Marks of Humanism could be found in the philosophy of the ancient Greeks also. The ancient Greeks significantly contributed to the development of politics and sociology which were secular in their approaches. In Greek Humanism women and slaves were not counted upon and it reduced the Greek Humanism to a limited sphere of development. New ideas of Humanism were added by Christian Humanism leading to the movements of women’s liberation and the abolishment of the system of slavery in the United States of America. Gradually we reached the age of Wars in the twentieth century. The First World War and the Second World War broke out in this century leading to unthinkable change and loss of human values. Arnold Toynbee writes that following the impact of the great Wars there was a remarkable change in the total situation. Man not only had lost faith in God above, but in man below also. The philosophy of Humanism in modern times thus met with a severe crisis. The Wars have always plunged human civilisation in severe crisis. In the Gita, in the first chapter itself, Arjuna expressed his anguish and fear in anticipation of great loss of human values and decay in human situation. The great Wars of modern times have proved that the anxiety of Arjuna was as true in olden times as in the present age.

**Swami Vivekananda and New Humanism**

In the backdrop of this, we may definitely look back to Swami Vivekananda and his message of spiritual Humanism against the Christian and Puranic theological concepts of God and heaven. Swami Vivekananda presented a new concept of Humanism—the Humanism based upon a profound philosophy of the potential divinity of man according to Vedanta. It was Swami Vivekananda, who presented for the first time before the Western world the message of the glory of man. He said that men were never children of sin, but verily the children of immortality. He referred to the Vedic utterance of “*Shrinvantu Vishve Amritasya Putrah*”—“Oh the children of immortality, wherever you are in the whole universe, hear ye all”. It was not a philosophy of Humanism limited to any religion or country or time. The Vedic seers called upon everyone everywhere in the universe or beyond that all are divine—all are divinities in human form. It was indeed universal Humanism—not Hindu, not Buddhist, not Christian, not Muslim and so on. Swami Vivekananda says, this was not just an intellectual or emotional expression. It had behind it a profound realisation as its foundation.

The philosophy which Swami Vivekananda presented before the Western audience or his own countrymen was indeed in our Vedas or Upanishads, but Swami Vivekananda had found this philosophy in flesh and blood in the life and message of his Master Sri Ramakrishna, who said : “*Yatra Jiva Tatra Shiva*”. Jiva is verily Shiva himself. Man is God, God himself. According to the History of Humanism, Humanism is a product of Modern Age beginning from 1500 AD and it is a Western concept. But Swami Vivekananda says that it is essentially an Indian concept found in our ancient texts of Vedas and Upanishads and even in the text belonging to the 8th or 9th century AD, viz, *Bhagabata Purana*. The tradition was continued even later and also in the beginning of 15th century in the poems of Chandidasa and in the life and teachings of Sri Chaitanya. Chandidasa says : “*Shunahe manush bhai, / Sobar upare manush satya, / Tahar upare nai*”—“Oh, mankind, my brethren, hear me—man is above all truths and there is no truth higher than that”. This is the message which was dealt with later also by Rabindranath Tagore, Sarat Chandra Chatterjee, Premchand, Subrhamanya Bharati and others.

### **Humanism is Universal**

Humanism must be universal and never parochial or limited. This is what India says and is expressed by Swami Vivekananda. Vedanta and Vivekananda say that there is no God anywhere in the world except you yourself. If there is any God, that is you and me. And if there is any heaven, that is nowhere else except in your or my mind. The more you try to unfold the divinity which is already within you, the more you will discover heaven and the Kingdom of God in fuller colours. This must be unfolded step by step and this can be accomplished by anybody, since Swamiji says, the divine possibilities are hidden in every human being. Swami Vivekananda calls it the ‘The science of Human Excellence’ and the celebrated scientist of modern times, Julian Huxley, calls it ‘The science of Human Possibilities’. Thus Swami Vivekananda adds a new dimension to the philosophy of modern Humanism. He says : Have faith in your essential divine nature and try to unfold it everyday and realise it. Thus you be a real achiever. Know it for certain that nothing is impossible for man. It is not God who is omnipotent, but man is actually omnipotent. Man can do anything and everything. This is the ‘Science of Positive Thinking’ which Swami Vivekananda left before us. He says in his famous lecture entitled ‘The Mission of Vedanta’ delivered in Kumbhakonam in early February 1897 : “Teach yourselves, teach every one his real nature, call upon the sleeping soul and see how it awakes. Power will come, glory will come, goodness will come, purity will come, and everything that is excellent will come when this sleeping soul is roused to self - conscious activity.” Romain Rolland, the famous french biographer of Swami Vivekananda, says : “I cannot touch these sayings of his, scattered as they are through the pages of books at thirty year’s distance, without receiving a thrill through my body like an electric shock. And what shocks, what transports must have been produced when in burning words they issued from the lips of the Hero!”

This is what may be called, as Swami Ranganathananda says, ‘Vivekananda shock’. He says : “Touch it, get the shock—you will be a different individual. That is what this country needs today.”

This, in fact, is the Humanism of Swami Vivekananda, which is universal and eternal. This indeed is the central note of Swami Vivekananda’s message. He used to say, as Sister Nivedita writes, “The more I grow in years, the more I realise that everything depends upon manliness. This is my new gospel.”