

**SWAMI VIVEKANANDA'S NEO-VEDANTA AND THE IDEA OF UNIVERSAL  
RELIGION: RELEVANCE IN A PLURALISTIC WORLD**

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**Introduction**

Swami Vivekananda's Neo-Vedanta exemplifies a highly innovative philosophical response to the intersection of Indian spiritual traditions and the difficulties posed by modernity. Through the reinterpretation of Advaita Vedanta for a worldwide audience, Vivekananda expressed a vision of a "Universal Religion" capable of transcending sectarian boundaries while honouring the plurality of religion traditions. For him, religion was not a fixed collection of rituals but "the manifestation of the divinity already in man" (Vivekananda, 2013, p. 24). This experiential and humanistic interpretation of religion rendered his Neo-Vedanta not solely a metaphysical framework but also a pragmatic philosophy intended to promote harmony among diverse cultures and beliefs. Scholars have noted that Vivekananda's endeavour was both grounded in the Upanishadic concept of unity and attuned to the variegated nature of contemporary existence. Halbfass (1990) observes that Neo-Vedanta "opened Vedantic thought to the modern world, establishing a dialogical space between East and West" (p. 212). Vivekananda's concept of Universal Religion advocated for synthesis rather than uniformity, recognizing each tradition as a legitimate pathway to the Divine. He notably proclaimed that "we accept all religions as true" (Vivekananda, 2013, p. 10), a provocative assertion of inclusion that contested exclusivist theological assertions. Rambachan (1994) has asserted that his version of Advaita transitioned from a strictly world-renouncing philosophy to a "dynamic and engaged spirituality" (p. 67) that may foster societal cohesiveness. In the contemporary pluralistic landscape, characterized by enduring interreligious conflicts and cultural difficulties, Vivekananda's Neo-Vedanta provides a constructive philosophical framework. Larson (2002) contends that his universalist approach can function as a "spiritual resource for navigating diversity without obliterating difference" (p. 145). Consequently, the examination of Swami Vivekananda's Neo-Vedanta transcends mere historical or theological significance and possesses urgent contemporary relevance. Vivekananda integrated the philosophical principles of Advaita with the ethical imperatives of tolerance and service, perceiving religion as a cohesive force capable of resolving the moral and cultural dilemmas of contemporary global society. His appeal for religious unity, intercultural dialogue, and spiritual humanism persists in motivating endeavours aimed at establishing a more peaceful and inclusive global order.

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**Swami Vivekananda's Neo-Vedanta: Philosophical Foundations**

Swami Vivekananda's Neo-Vedanta is comprehended as a revival and innovative reinterpretation of Advaita Vedanta, tailored to address the intellectual and spiritual requirements of an increasingly globalized world. Grounded in Śaṅkara's non-dualism, Vivekananda's interpretation aimed to universalize Vedantic truths by articulating them in a manner accessible to both Eastern and Western audiences. His Neo-Vedanta prioritized experiential realization of the divine over mere intellectual speculation, transforming Vedanta from an obscure philosophy into a practical life guide. Vivekananda (2013) noted, "religion is being and becoming, not merely hearing or acknowledging; it is the entire soul transforming into what it believes" (p. 39). This existential reorientation established the basis for what he termed "practical Vedanta," connecting metaphysics with ethics and spirituality with social service. The conceptual basis of Vivekananda's Neo-Vedanta is rooted in the Upanishadic conception of Brahman as the supreme, omnipresent reality. Vivekananda's interpretation diverges from the traditional renunciatory perspective of Advaita by asserting the world's actuality as a manifestation of Brahman rather than as simple illusion (*māyā*). Rambachan (1994) observes that Vivekananda "broadened the interpretative scope of Advaita to encompass a favourable assessment of the empirical world, endorsing action and service as avenues for spiritual realization" (p. 71). This reinterpretation rendered Vedanta more socially engaged and pertinent, linking spirituality with the ethical obligation of assisting humanity.

Vivekananda's universalism is based on metaphysical monism: if all beings are manifestations of the same Brahman, then religious and cultural variety should be regarded as many pathways to the same truth. Halbfass (1990) notes that Vivekananda's Neo-Vedanta "was not an eclectic compromise but a reformulation that situated pluralism within the fundamental structure of reality" (p. 214). This understanding enabled him to assert that all religions are legitimate, not only as an act of tolerance but as a metaphysical imperative. His exhortation to "accept all religions as true" (Vivekananda, 2013, p. 10) is hence a direct outcome of his *Advaitic* perspective. Moreover, Vivekananda imbued Vedanta with a decidedly contemporary ethos by including aspects of logical investigation, humanism, and scientific receptivity. Radhakrishnan (1927) contended that Vivekananda's contributions signify "the modern phase of Vedanta, elucidating its principles through the lens of current experience and necessity" (p. 58). This intellectual receptivity positioned Neo-Vedanta as a conduit between tradition and modernity, enabling Indian philosophy to participate in global discourse while preserving its spiritual essence. Larson (2002) posits that the adaptive potential of Neo-Vedanta renders it "a viable resource for negotiating religious diversity and moral responsibility in the contemporary world" (p.

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146). The philosophical basis of Vivekananda's Neo-Vedanta is founded on three principal tenets: The non-dualistic assertion of Brahman as the foundation of all existence, the affirmative reassessment of the universe as a locus of spiritual practice, and the universalist perspective that perceives all religions as converging routes to truth. These ideas are the philosophical and ethical foundation of Vivekananda's concept of a Universal Religion, which continues to be significantly pertinent to the issues of pluralism, interfaith interaction, and global ethics in the twenty-first century.

### **The Idea of Universal Religion:**

Swami Vivekananda's notion of Universal Religion constitutes one of his paramount contributions to contemporary religious thought and ecumenical philosophy. Originating from his Neo-Vedantic framework, the concept was neither an appeal for a singular syncretic religion nor an endeavour to obliterate religious differences; instead, it was a vision of harmony whereby all faiths are acknowledged as legitimate pathways to the same ultimate reality. Vivekananda (2013) asserted, "We believe not only in universal toleration, but we accept all religions as true" (p. 10), a proclamation that embodies his extreme inclusivity and metaphysical dedication to the unity of existence. His Universal Religion was based on the Advaitic understanding that Brahman is the foundation of all existence and that the multiplicity of religious experiences is merely the diverse manifestation of a singular transcendent reality. Scholars contend that Vivekananda's concept of Universal Religion seeks to address the religious exclusivism and cultural hegemony of colonial modernity. Wilhelm Halbfass (1990) observes that Vivekananda's initiative "articulated a new, self-aware universality that aimed to engage the West on its own terms while affirming India's spiritual autonomy" (p. 218). This dialogical universality enabled him to address the 1893 Parliament of Religions not only as a representative of Hinduism but also as an advocate for a global spiritual fraternity. Anantanand Rambachan (1994) emphasizes that this vision was not intended to establish "a new religion" but to acknowledge "the underlying unity of purpose and experience that connects all religious pursuits" (p. 73).

Vivekananda's Universal Religion possesses significant ethical and social implications. If all religions converge on the same ultimate objective, then mutual respect and service to humanity become essential religious duties. Radhakrishnan (1927) noted that Vivekananda "transformed Vedantic unity into a moral imperative for universal fellowship" (p. 64). In this regard, Universal Religion transcends a mere philosophical theory; it is an imperative for religion to serve as a catalyst for peace, collaboration, and human prosperity. Modern academics, including Larson (2002), contend that Vivekananda's vision serves as "a normative framework for interfaith dialogue that does not necessitate the relinquishment of specific identities but promotes the development of common ethical

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commitments” (p. 147). In a diverse world characterized by religious strife and identity politics, Vivekananda’s concept of Universal Religion continues to be exceptionally pertinent. It provides a conceptual and pragmatic framework for engaging with difference without yielding to relativism or dogmatism. Vivekananda asserts that truth is multifaceted yet fundamentally singular, establishing a spiritual foundation for what modern thinkers refer to as “deep pluralism”—an acknowledgment of inescapable diversity alongside a dedication to harmonious cohabitation. This inclusive vision continues to motivate theologians, philosophers, and peace-builders, rendering his Neo-Vedantic interpretation of Universal Religion a vital resource for the 21st century.

### **Relevance in a Pluralistic World:**

Swami Vivekananda’s Neo-Vedanta and his concept of Universal Religion are remarkably pertinent in a multicultural world that is both interconnected and profoundly divided. Contemporary religious plurality offers both an opportunity and a challenge; globalization has facilitated deeper interactions among cultures and faiths, while it has simultaneously exacerbated sectarian tensions and identity-driven conflicts. Vivekananda’s vision provides a philosophical and ethical framework that resolves this conflict by affirming the unity of life while honouring its diverse expressions. His exhortation to “accept all religions as true” (Vivekananda, 2013, p. 10) establishes a basis for an inclusive pluralism that transcends mere tolerance and fosters authentic respect and reciprocal learning. Academics have highlighted that Vivekananda’s methodology possesses transformative potential for interfaith discourse. Larson (2002) contends that his universalism “provides a spiritual and intellectual framework for navigating diversity without erasing distinctions” (p. 147). In an era marked by religious extremism and exclusivism that frequently incites murder, Vivekananda’s assertion that all faiths represent a pathway to the same ultimate reality confronts the ideological foundations of prejudice. Anantanand Rambachan (2014) asserts that Vivekananda’s Neo-Vedanta establishes the foundation for pluralism in the intrinsic character of reality, rendering it a theological necessity rather than a pragmatic concession (p. 89). This metaphysical foundation facilitates profound pluralism, wherein diversity is not only accepted but also esteemed as an essential manifestation of divine abundance.

Vivekananda’s vision is pertinent to global ethics and social unity. By associating spirituality with service, he presented a paradigm of religion as a catalyst for social transformation. Radhakrishnan (1927) noted, “the sense of unity of life became in Vivekananda the foundation of a social gospel” (p. 66). This holds particular importance for modern cultures grappling with inequality, marginalization, and polarization. According to Mohanty (2010), Vivekananda’s practical Vedanta facilitates a dialogical ethics in which compassion and justice emerge as collective moral imperatives across all

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traditions (p. 132). An ethics of this nature is critically essential in multicultural democracies, where harmonious cohabitation relies on fostering a collective sense of moral obligation. Moreover, Vivekananda's focus on universality aligns with modern initiatives aimed at interfaith cooperation about climate change, poverty reduction, and human rights. Cornille (2013) posits that interreligious communication should progress "from mere understanding to collaborative action for the common good" (p. 15), a goal that Vivekananda foresaw with his advocacy for spiritual humanism. His Neo-Vedanta serves as a vital resource for developing a worldwide ethos that harmonizes difference rather than homogenizing it, and where religion fosters human flourishing instead of division.

**Critical Appraisal:**

Swami Vivekananda's Neo-Vedanta and his promotion of a "Universal Religion" represent a foundational attempt to reinterpret Indian spiritual resources for a worldwide context; nonetheless, they elicit both commendation and critical examination. Vivekananda's intellectual prowess is evident in his ability to harmonize *Advaitic* metaphysics with a comprehensive ethical framework: by establishing religious plurality on the *Advaitic* understanding that Brahman underpins all existence, he transformed metaphysical monism into a catalyst for interreligious respect, social service, and a pragmatic spirituality that confronts contemporary moral challenges. This strength—an amalgamation of spiritual insight, moral imperative, and dialogical receptivity—has been extensively recognized by scholars who perceive in Vivekananda a man who rendered Vedanta comprehensible and appealing to both Indian and Western audiences. Halbfass illustrates how Neo-Vedanta facilitated international encounters inside Vedantic philosophy and redefined it as a dialogical resource for grappling with modernity.

However, the modernity of Neo-Vedanta is simultaneously the primary source of ongoing critique. Early and prominent critics like Paul Hacker characterized Vivekananda and other contemporary Hindu reformers as architects of a "neo-Hinduism"—a modern, self-aware universal religion significantly influenced by colonial discourse and Western frameworks—thereby challenging the authenticity and historical continuity of their assertions. The hacker's critique has inspired extensive academic discourse that questions whether Vivekananda's universalism merely translates Western liberal and Romantic ideas into Hindu terminology, or if it constitutes a really local reinterpretation. Subsequent scholars have compounded Hacker's contentious assertion, observing that the "neo-Vedantic" designation can serve as a crude tool that both clarifies and misrepresents; Halbfass and others advocate for a nuanced interpretation that acknowledges innovation while refraining from presuming inauthenticity. A persistent criticism pertains to the politics of universalism. Critics

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question whether a metaphysics that prioritizes ultimate unity may, despite its ethical discourse, disguise social disparities and power imbalances. This subject holds particular gravity regarding caste in the Indian setting. Although Vivekananda vocally denounced caste discrimination and advocated for social transformation, contemporary study has questioned the efficacy with which his experiential mysticism was converted into a consistent structural critique. Contemporary research suggest that mystical universalism could potentially subvert caste systems by endorsing human unity; nevertheless, some warn that spiritual appeals to unity may inadequately address entrenched social injustices unless accompanied by clear political methods. Recent scholarship on Vivekananda and caste highlights both the liberating potential and the practical ambiguity of his position. Neo-Vedanta has been methodologically attacked for its interpretive strategies, notably Vivekananda's selective use of scriptural authority and his emphasis on anubhava (direct experience) over śruti-based exegesis. Rambachan illustrates how Vivekananda reinterprets Vedic and Upanishadic texts to advocate for a liberal, experiential theology, so broadening Vedanta's moral scope while also altering its conventional hermeneutical equilibrium. Proponents of classical philology regard this as a valid hermeneutical evolution, while skeptics of modernist interpretations perceive it as a shift that occasionally endangers the imposition of contemporary issues onto ancient writings.

An essential historiographical controversy exists regarding categories. Contemporary academics, such as Ayon Maharaj, have advocated for a departure from the broad term "Neo-Vedanta" and emphasized the need of examining the intellectual and spiritual connections between personalities such as Ramakrishna and Vivekananda and preceding Indian traditions. This correction underscores that what seems "modernizing" may also signify enduring, internally driven evolutions in Indian thought; it encourages us to interpret Vivekananda not solely as derivative or entirely innovative, but as involved in a nuanced, contextually grounded reinterpretation of his tradition. The practical constraints of universalist ethics warrant consideration. Vivekananda's vision—religion as service and unity as a lived practice—offers a compelling normative ideal for interfaith collaboration and moral cosmopolitanism. Contemporary plural societies encounter institutional, economic, and political conflicts that ethical universalism alone cannot address. Scholars utilizing Vivekananda's philosophy for modern peace-building frequently augment his metaphysical assertions with concepts from political theory, postcolonial analysis, and social policy to ensure that spiritual unity does not serve as a mere abstract remedy for systemic injustices. In summary, Vivekananda's Neo-Vedanta provides inspiration and intellectual tools for pluralism; nevertheless, scholars and practitioners must convert these resources into tangible institutional and political measures to effectively confront injustice and persistent conflict.

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A critical appraisal acknowledges Vivekananda's Neo-Vedanta as both conceptually productive and contentious. Its paramount intellectual accomplishment resides in reconceptualizing metaphysical non-duality as an ethic of solidarity and dialogical openness; its most persuasive critiques highlight issues of historical context, the dangers of depoliticized universalism, and the necessity of aligning spiritual ideals with tangible social reforms. Current scholarship aiming to utilize Vivekananda's concepts for pluralism is optimally supported by a meticulous, contextually aware hermeneutic—one that maintains the normative strength of his universalism while being responsive to historical critique and the need of social justice.

**Conclusion:**

Swami Vivekananda's Neo-Vedanta and his concept of Universal Religion represent a significant intellectual solution to the challenge of religious diversity in contemporary society. Through the reinterpretation of Advaita *Vedānta* into a vibrant, life-affirming philosophy, Vivekananda illustrated that spiritual enlightenment can coexist with social involvement, and that religion may serve as a unifying factor rather than a divisive one. His universalist perspective did not intend to eliminate differences across religious traditions but aimed to uncover their fundamental unity in the experience of the Infinite. He famously stated, "We accept all religions as true" (Vivekananda, 2013, p. 10), highlighting a spiritual inclusivism that is essential in an era marked by identity-based disputes and theological polarization. Contemporary academics have acknowledged the lasting importance of Vivekananda's methodology. Larson (2002) contends that his perspective provides a "philosophical framework for navigating religious pluralism without reducing diversity to uniformity" (p. 146). Rambachan (1994) asserts that Vivekananda's Neo-Vedanta is not a fixed metaphysical framework but rather a "practical spirituality" (p. 68) that necessitates social responsibility, tolerance, and humanitarian service. In a globalized and interconnected world, where cultural conflicts and religious exclusivity continue to jeopardize social cohesion, Vivekananda's teaching provides a bridge to a dialogical and cooperative civilizational ethos. The significance of Vivekananda's Neo-Vedanta and his concept of Universal Religion reside in both its intellectual profundity and its practical capacity to promote peace, mutual respect, and intercultural comprehension. It offers a framework for a universal ethic that honours difference as a manifestation of the same fundamental truth. Halbfass (1990) astutely notes that Neo-Vedanta is a "living and dialogical tradition" (p. 213), adept at addressing the spiritual and moral dilemmas of modernity. In this context, Vivekananda's philosophy persists in motivating intellectuals, spiritual aspirants, and policymakers to conceive of a society where

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religion serves as a conduit for discussion rather than a barrier of division — a goal that is as pressing today as it was at the end of the nineteenth century.

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