

**April 2014:**

## **Vivekananda and 'the Preferential Option for the Poor'**

By Anantanand Rambachan\*

Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902), whose 150th birth anniversary we celebrated in 2013, was a Hindu monk with an extraordinary vision and sense of purpose. Vivekananda inherited a tradition in which monasticism was widely understood to mean the renunciation of worldly interests in order to pursue a private religious quest for spiritual liberation. He challenged powerfully this understanding of the monk's life and, in a wider sense, the meaning of the religious life.

In Swami Vivekananda's vision, the religious life was a necessity, although he was deeply concerned about the fact that we too often get lost in what is trivial and non-essential. In its highest expression, religion liberates us from self-centeredness and greed; it makes possible the discovery of a profound inner fulfillment. For Vivekananda, however, these accomplishments of the religious life must find expression in a commitment to service. Liberation from ignorance and greed awakens compassion for the service of the poor and oppressed and dedication to the work of overcoming human suffering. The religious life frees us for a high and noble purpose.

This profound understanding of spirituality is beautifully articulated in the cryptic motto of the Ramakrishna Mission that Swami Vivekananda bequeathed to us all: *atmano mokshartham jagat hitaya cha*. In these five inspired and beautiful words, we find articulated the highest purpose of human existence. The first two words, *atmano mokshartham* (for one's freedom) emphasizes the necessity of the religious for individual freedom and well-being. The next two words, *jagat hitaya* (for the well-being of the world) is his passionate call for us to see the religious life as finding its true expression in a life of service. For Swami Vivekananda, both dimensions are essential and complimentary. The self-centered religious life is a contradiction.

The balance that Swami Vivekananda envisioned springs from his core conviction and experience that God, the goal of our human religious quest, exists equally in all beings. One will not find God by turning away from one's neighbors who are in need and by deafness to their cries. Our understanding of God is not true unless it finds expression in active lives of loving care for others. In some of his most famous words, spoken at the Rameswaram Temple in south India in 1897, Vivekananda challenges us all to think about the meaning of worship in the context of the nature of God and our human responsibilities:

He who has served and helped one poor man seeing Siva in him, without thinking of his caste, creed, or race, or anything, with him Siva is more pleased than with the man who sees Him only in temples.

The service of God in the suffering is a privilege and opportunity that we ought to embrace in humility.

More than fifty years before liberation theology developed into a major movement in the world, Swami Vivekananda was already expressing what would become one of its defining doctrines. This is the "preferential option for the poor," the famous phrase coined in 1967 by the Peruvian theologian, Gustavo Gutierrez. For Swami Vivekananda, the service of the poor and the overcoming of poverty are among our primary human obligations. Like Gutierrez, he also coined a famous phrase, "*daridra narayana* (God in the poor)" to call attention to the special claims of the poor on our resources and energies. "I do not believe," said Vivekananda, "in a God or religion which cannot wipe the widow's tears or bring a piece of bread to the orphan's mouth." He was willing to forgo his own liberation in exchange for the opportunity to serve those in need. In memorable words spoken in 1897, Vivekananda shared his heart's deepest yearning:

May I be born again and again, and suffer thousands of miseries so that I may worship the only God that exists, the only God I believe in, the sum total of all souls -- and above all, my God the wicked, my God the miserable, my God the poor of all races, of all species, is the special object of my worship.

Swami Vivekananda developed a unique theology of service rooted in the Hindu understanding of God's existence in all beings and in our special obligations to those who suffer. His vision and commitment, however, offer us also a common space where people of all religious traditions, and none, may come together in shared action to join hands in the privilege of service.

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