

THE RAMAKRISHNA MISSION INSTITUTE OF CULTURE

A GREAT WORLD CITIZEN

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I am sure we do well to-night to meet together to do honour to a very great Englishwoman, Miss Margaret Noble, an Englishwoman great enough to become a great Indian. And I rejoice to think that if she were alive to-day, she would become a real representative of the great British Commonwealth in which all nations can meet in freedom.

I see Margaret Noble was ahead of her time in those ways and was a great world citizen. She saw that humanity was one. Now you may say, 'But these are commonplaces,' and I would agree. I think we are very lucky that in this mid-century these are commonplaces. But let us remember that in her time it was a very different world by which she was surrounded. It was a world of slow travel—it actually took you, I think, four to six weeks to reach India at all. There were no aeroplanes, there was no radio. It was an extraordinarily different world even on the physical plane, and I am very sorry to say, I think it was a different world on the spiritual plane, because I think that, generally speaking, the educated classes in Europe nearly fifty years ago were rather ignorant of Indian philosophy and Indian religion.

In theology it was an age of Western Catholicism, an age of Western dogma, an age when it was claimed that the unique and final revelation of God had been made to one particular church and to no other. That was the atmosphere in which she moved, and all the rest of the world was supposed to have been delivered over to an idolatrous polytheism. Now that applied, I think it is quite fair to say, not only to the spiritual plane of life, but also to the universities. On this in a certain way I can speak with some knowledge.

I happen to have had the great good fortune of spending something like nine years at various universities in Europe, and in not a single university did I ever hear a word about Indian thought, Indian religion, or Indian philosophy—it was so narrowed down. Well now, in addition to this it was an age entirely subject to the supremacy of Greek thought. The universities in Europe fifty years ago were really limited to the intellectual thought of Greece. That was the atmosphere not only of England but also of America, so far as I can follow from the literature, though I cannot speak here from direct knowledge. Because of the difficulties of communications in those days it was a very small world. But still people were curious, and the way they got over the fact that they could not travel was to have great exhibitions in the various capitals of Europe and America.

The Americans decided to be great, we bow to their greatness, they decided to have in the year 1893 the greatest exhibition that had ever been. They were going to have assembled in Chicago all the triumphs of modern civilisation in science, in commerce, in art. Then the religious leaders of Europe and America put their heads together and said, 'But we should not limit it to philosophy and science and arts. Why don't we have an exposition of the religions of the world?' And they decided to have a World Parliament of Religions.

Now, I am afraid that when they said 'the religions of the world,' what they meant was what they considered the real religions of the world, which of course could only be the religions of Europe.

They issued their invitations to a very distinguished person (I think I am right in saying he was one of the cardinals here), and to similar distinguished persons in the West. Certainly the most eminent representatives of all the religions of Europe did attend, but the idea of the Parliament also spread in India. The idea that Indians also were invited to come to this great Parliament was taken up;

whereupon the great Vivekananda—you have described him, Swami, as a very dynamic and magnetic personality—said ‘I might go there.’ To the great surprise of all the assembled ecclesiastics, this coloured gentleman from India arrived.

He was not a gentleman whom you could put conveniently into the corner, because when he got up to speak, he *absolutely took the Parliament by storm*. He became the outstanding figure of the great Parliament of Religions, and instead of speaking in a humble and apologetic tone he turned on the assembled ecclesiastics and *condemned* them for the state India was in. He said, ‘You are ruining the Empire. Have you been to India and seen the state of poverty and the squalor and the filth there?’ They were very alarmed.

Then he did something which I think was great—he preached the great doctrine of Universalism. He rose above all the other speakers who spoke of their particular Gods, of their particular religions, of their particular sects: the Swami Vivekananda rose above all that and spoke of the one God of all mankind. That arrested not only the attention of the whole of the Parliament of Religions, but of the whole of America. So popular and prominent a figure did he become that he was kept in America for three years, speaking on Vedanta and also establishing Vedanta Centres in U.S.A., so that this universal religion and philosophy he taught might be disseminated and practised even after his death.

Such preaching by the Swami had its influence in England too. Take, for example, Oxford. Now Oxford in my time was a place that had never heard of Indian philosophy and Indian religion. Today it actually has a chair of Eastern Religions and Ethics. I think the first occupant of that Chair was one of the great men of our time.

Another great service Swami Vivekananda rendered to England was that he introduced us to the teachings of Vedanta. Vedanta is the purest Gospel of Universalism, as I see it. I humbly suggest to you that in Vedanta you have one of the greatest syntheses of modern thought. It is a synthesis of modern science, philosophy and religion.

You know how the greatest and most eminent minds, such minds, such men, as Lord Samuel and others have been calling us for many years to come to such a synthesis of science, of philosophy and religion. Well, that synthesis you have in Vedanta. Because, as I see it, Vedanta is a religion *purely spiritual*. Now what do I mean, when I say a religion is purely spiritual? The best definition, as far as I know, of what is religion, is Whitehead’s very famous definition: it is what you and I do with our solitariness. What do you and I do when we are alone? Not what we do when we are at a meeting, talking or sitting and listening.

There is no religion in that; but what do we do when we are alone, when we have to face the deep meaning and mystery of life, when we realise the briefness of our lives? What is the meaning of it and what are we going to do? Then comes Vedanta and it says—not only Vedanta, but all the great religions of the world—‘God is One.’ The East and West cease to be East and West, the East and West are one; and, as I see it, Vedanta and all religions of the world teach that man’s chief end is to glorify God and to attain to God, to overcome self, sin, suffering, old age and death in the life of the One that shall be from everlasting to everlasting. That, as I understand it, was the Gospel of Vivekananda and what Sister Nivedita stood for. And I think we do well to meet together tonight to honour her. (Loud applause)

* Text of the speech Sir John Stewart-Wallace delivered at the meeting.