

Straight Talk on Religion - Swami Vivekananda

You may believe in all the churches in the world, carry in your head all the sacred books ever written, you may baptize yourself in all the rivers of the earth, still, if you have no perception of God, I would class you with the rankest atheist.

And you may have never entered a church or a mosque or a temple, nor performed any ceremony, but if you feel God within yourself and are thereby lifted above the vanities of the world, you are holy, a saint, call yourself what you will.

As soon as a person stands up and says they are right or their church is right, and all others are wrong, they are themselves all wrong. Upon the proof of all the others depends the proof of our own. Love and charity for the whole human race, that is the test of true religiousness. I do not mean the sentimental statement that all men are brothers, but that one must feel the oneness of human life.

So far as they are not exclusive, I see that the sects and creeds are all mine; they are all grand. They are all helping men and women towards the real religion. I will add, it is good to be born in a church, but it is bad to die there. It is good to be born a child, but bad to remain a child. Churches, ceremonies, and symbols are good for children, but when the child is grown, he must burst the church or himself.

We must not remain children for ever. It is like trying to fit one coat to all sizes and growths. I do not deprecate the existence of sects in the world. Would to God there were twenty millions more, for the more there are, there will be a greater field for selection. What I do object to is trying to fit one religion to every case.

Though all religions are essentially the same, they must have the varieties of form produced by dissimilar circumstances among different nations. We must each have our own individual religion, individual so far as the externals of it go.

Until your religion makes you realize God, it is useless. He who only studies books for religion reminds one of the fable of the ass which carried a heavy load of sugar on its back, but did not know the sweetness of it."

The man at whose feet I sat all my life--and it is only a few ideas of his that I try to teach--could [hardly] write his name at all. All my life I have not seen another man like that, and I have traveled all over the world. When I think of that man, I feel like a fool, because I want to read books and he never did. He never wanted to lick the plates after other people had eaten. That is why he was his own book.

All my life I am repeating what Jack said and John said, and never say anything myself. What glory is it that you know what John said twenty-five years ago and what Jack said five years ago? Tell me what you have to say.

Mind you, there is no value in learning. You are all mistaken in learning. The only value of knowledge is in the strengthening, the disciplining, of the mind. By all this eternal swallowing it is a wonder that we are not all dyspeptics. Let us stop, and burn all the books, and get hold of ourselves, and think.

You all talk [about] and get distracted over losing your "individuality". You are losing it every moment of your lives by this eternal swallowing. If any one of you believes what I teach, I will be sorry. I will only be too glad if I can excite in you the power of thinking for yourselves.... My ambition is to talk to men and women, not to sheep.

By men and women, I mean individuals. You are not little babies to drag all the filthy rags from the street and bind them up into a doll!

This is a place for learning! That man is placed in the university! He knows all about what Mr. Blank said!" But Mr. Bland said nothing! If I had the choice, I would ... say to the professor, "Get out! You are nobody!" Remember this individualism at any cost! Think wrong if you will, no matter whether you get truth or not. The whole point is to discipline the mind. That truth which you swallow from others will not be yours. You cannot teach truth from my mouth; neither can you learn truth from my mouth. None can teach another.

You have to realize truth and work it out for yourself according to your own nature. ... All must struggle to be individuals--strong, standing on your own feet, thinking your own thoughts, realizing your own Self. No use swallowing doctrines others pass on--standing up together like soldiers in jail, sitting down together, all eating the same food, all nodding their heads at the same time. Variation is the sign of life. Sameness is the sign of death. Once I was in an Indian city, and an old man came to me. He said, "Swami, teach me the way." I saw that that man was as dead as this table before me. Mentally and spiritually he was really dead. I said, "Will you do what I ask you to do? Can you steal? Can you drink wine? Can you eat meat?"

The man [exclaimed], "What are you teaching!"

I said to him, "Did this wall ever steal? Did the wall ever drink wine?"

"No, sir."

Man steals, and he drinks wine, and becomes God. "I know you are not the wall, my friend. Do something! Do something!" I saw that if that man stole, his soul would be on the way to salvation. How do I know that you are individuals--all saying the same thing, all standing up and sitting down together? That is the road to death! Do something for your souls! Do wrong if you please, but do something! You will understand me by and by, if you do not just now. Old age has come upon the soul, as it were. It has become rusty. The rust must be [rubbed off], and then we go on. Now you understand why there is evil in the world. Go home and think of that, just to take off that rustiness!

Collected from various lectures and talks from the [Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda](#)