A Christian looks at Sri Aurobindo

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On the profound levels of dialogue between religions, it is necessary for Christians to formulate some lines of approach in understanding one of the important movements within contemporary Hinduism. Even if opinions might differ as to the philosophical significance of the important religious movement that we have in mind, namely that associated with the name of Sri Aurobindo, its immense cultural significance in this country, particularly among certain sections of the educated classes, cannot be doubted.

It is true that Sri Aurobindo's rôle that is claimed for him by some of his devotees—sometimes in rather extravagant terms, such as 'liberator', 'redeemer', 'prophet of the Life Divine', etc. —is not acknowledged by large segments of Hindu intelligentsia, but his total position in the cultural renaissance of India is not held very much in dispute. This latter is what is signified by saying that he was a great patriot. But of course philosophers might wonder whether it is warrantable to confuse his patriotism with what has been claimed as his spiritual mission. Patriotism is a good thing and we all do and ought to share it, but it is only evidence of the limitedness of all of us petty humans and no evidence of anything that transcends the limitedly human.

Sri Aurobindo and Traditional Hindu Philosophy

To begin with, it should be noted that in approaching Aurobindo's doctrines we have to proceed differently from approaching traditional Hinduism, especially as it appears in the systems of Vedanta, because Aurobindo has made some significant departures. Aurobindo's theoretical position is describable as the philosophy of the Life Divine, and its most elaborate and, to a certain extent, systematic exposition is given in the work bearing the same title; and his practical doctrines can be capsuled by the phrase 'integral yoga'; all of his numerous works bear on these two, namely the theoretical and practical aspects of his teachings. The one deals with what to bring about and the other with how to bring it about.

Aurobindo is violently opposed to several parts of the vedantic teaching, particularly in its advaitic form. Chief among

his targets is the illusionism of Sankara. He claims—and it is even more vociferously claimed for him by his followers—that he has recaptured the true import of the maya doctrine—as also of other doctrines—taught by the ancient rishis but perverted by Sankara into a theory implying the denial of the reality of the world. However, orthodox Hindu opinion, whenever it has taken notice of Aurobindo's claim, has not been inclined to concede it but has treated it as a cavalier pronouncement based on poor scholarship in ancient writings. The weight of evidence certainly seems to be on the side of the pundits. But we are not interested in adjudicating between the disputants in this regard.

Aurobindo has sought to convert the maya doctrine into a theory of creation. The original thing about the Pondicherry seer is perhaps that he has transformed a world and life negating doctrine into a world and life affirming one. He has gone to the other extreme in as much as he maintains that the earth itself will be gradually turned into Heaven. This is what is designated as the divinization of the cosmos. Further, this process is supposed to be a 'democratic' one, which invites the co-operation of all human beings. The divinization of the cosmos is effected by the descent of what is called Supermind, which is in effect the same as the mass elevation of the whole of human race to the supramental level; man now is merely at the level of the mind, but it is the inherent and imminent destiny of the mind to pass over into the stage of the Supermind. It seems that Aurobindo has instituted a certain democratic ideal of Godhead even, which is probably calculated to strike a sympathetic chord in modern men schooled in the egalitarian notions that prevail in the contemporary world. (But the implicit presupposition of his own and even more the 'Mother's' position of incomparable uniqueness in the cosmic scheme of things would be treated as unacceptable by Hindus as well as non-Hindus.) In Aurobindian literature a number of fine, nice and laudable sentiments are stuffed into the theory of reality and the theory of salvation they present. The patent thing about it all is that the standard values of the contemporary civilization and acceptable norms prevailing at the present epoch in history have been freely used. This is mainly where Aurobindian philosophy differs from classical Hindu philosophical systems, which are noted for their rigour of methodological procedure.

A hostile critic might object, as many vedantists and others do, that Aurobindo's picture of reality is a large package containing many things to satisfy the cravings of man, but that one fails to meet with in it the rigorous pursuit of an ideal or a line of reasoning characteristic of great philosophies or much valuable intuition into human nature or history. What Sri Aurobindo has done is to rework a select set of materials from traditional Hindu philosophy assisted by elements taken from many sources, chiefly Hegel and Bergson, with the result that a world and life negating faith—to use Schweitzer's words again—is transformed into a

world and life affirming one. And this change accords well with the mood of the contemporary world. However, it is evident that Aurobindo's Philosophy is unacceptable to the upholders of the orthodox systems.

With regard to the problem of Christian approach to the orthodox systems of Hinduism there is abundant clarity of positions, but when it comes to approaching Aurobindoism there arise certain new difficulties in view of the fact that on many points it bears certain semblances to Christianity which, however, on closer examination will prove to be no real affinities. We shall presently come to a fuller examination of Sri Aurobindo's doctrines in the light of Christian Faith, though we shall not pursue the task of examining them in the light of Philosophy as such. No attempt will be made to state explicitly the main tenets of Aurobindo's teachings, as they will implicitly appear in the criticisms that we are going to urge against them. But it is to be made clear that the points to be discussed below are made as the result of a random selection, and that they are merely comparative study. There will be many many more things that could be said, which space will not permit us to say.

The Christian Reaction to Some Points in Aurobindo's Teachings

Firstly, Christianity has no point of contact with Aurobindo's gnostic hierarchy which is set up from the Absolute down to matter, comprehending such entities as Supermind, Overmind, Real-Idea, etc. His method is to establish continuity between the Absolute Spirit through many intermediate stages with matter, so that the latter is shown up as the terminus in the creative self-evolution of the former. (The entities postulated are philosophically of doubtful value because they violate all canons of postulation accepted in philosophy.) In fact what Aurobindo does is to hypostatize and expand a certain psycho-metaphysical hierarchy of entities that prevails in the vedantic and other systems of traditional Hinduism. But it can be said that while Vedanta really flounders when it comes to indicating any possible relation, however negatively conceived, between the Absolute and any entity that is the least bit less than the Absolute, Aurobindo triumphs in so far as he has thrown out of board the doctrine of illusionism altogether. For Aurobindo all entities are real. But in actual fact there still exists in both the same complication. Aurobindo peoples the space between the Absolute and the material world (for him real) with numerous entities (that are also real) whereas Vedanta fills the distance between the Absolute and an unreal world with numerous unreal entities. Logically speaking, it is a mistaken idea to think that by multiplying entities and the possibilities of subtle distinctions the truth of a philosophy increases ; it no more does so than that the truth of a religion increases by multiplying gods.

As against the foregoing view of Aurobindian gnosticism it must be said that Christian thought does not needlessly multiply entities, either realistically or hypothetically. Its ultimate theological basis is the person-to-person relation between God and man, between God the creator-person and man the concrete, *existing* person. Neither God nor matter are considered as the termini in a graded scheme of things, moving from one to the other in terms of continuity ; they are also not regarded in terms of some principle of idealized reality versus idealized unreality. It is also not the case with Christianity that man is regarded as the conjunction between the two. Further, to state the real truth of the case, it must be observed that the whole basis of Spirit-matter distinction is foreign to Christian thinking, no matter whether the two are held as irreconcilable or sought to be reconciled after the magnificent manner of Hegelian synthesis, or whether the one of them is treated as a product of the other through some graduated process of 'involution' or in some other way. (In the West the idea had originated in Greece and it has plagued Western philosophy ever since, causing much misunderstanding even regarding the fundamentals of Christianity.) The distinction that is germane to Christian Faith is that between God the creator and the created world of which man is the centre. The enunciation of any genuine Christian philosophy is possible only on the basis of the Creator-creature relationship and only on condition that the whole premiss of Spirit-matter distinction of secular metaphysics and of mysticism be tossed aside. Spirit evolving or involving itself into matter—an evolutionary version of identity-in-difference, championed by Aurobindo, which seeks to synthesize in the grand style, indeed has not much in common with the Christian conception of creation.

Secondly, in Christianity the ultimate notion of the Spirit is based on the *transaction between man and God.* What opposes the Divine Spirit is not Matter but Satan or the Devil. The problem is neither the theosophical one of Ignorance nor the metaphysical one of Evil but the spiritual one of Satan, whose function is to interrupt the Divine-human transaction. There is not the slightest warrant in Christianity to think that the world of matter is either unreal or evil in any sense and as such the world of matter in no way cries for reconciliation with Spirit. If Aurobindo postulates the ideal continuity between Spirit and matter, thus getting rid of the possibility of its unreality, he also seeks to 'divinize' matter by helping the 'Supermind' to descend, which will result in the elimination of Evil and pain and their allies. The great idea of Aurobindo is that the Spirit is 'Delight' and the world is 'the ecstatic dance of Siva'. Thus while matter is real Evil is not real ; Evil can be got rid of in history itself. Christianity does not favour the belief that Satan can be eliminated from history, within history. While the so-called origin of Evil is a metaphysical problem, in which Christianity is not interested, being based on certain hypothetical

notions of the Good, the reality of Satan is a Christian problem and it cannot be comprehended outside the context of Christian Faith. The problem of Satan is all-important because it represents the reverse side of the Divine-human relation distinctive of Christianity. The possibility of Satan depends on the fact that there is such Divine-human relation. While Satan represents no self-existent principle, it is at the same time incapable of being eliminated by helping man to ascend to a supposedly higher level of being. It is a perennial factor in human history and will be operative there until its consummation. But Satan is not alone operative in history, for the Divine power that perpetually annihilates the power of Satan and restores the Divine-human transaction has intervened in history in the person of Jesus Christ, who is the ultimate reversal of all reversal. Participation in Christ thus becomes the ultimate condition for the fulfilment of human destiny. The drama of human history is already consummated symbolically in the new reality that Christ has brought into being, embracing all dimensions of human existence and all aspects of civilization. On the contrary, the presumed descent of the Supermind does not show any empirical evidence traceable in actual history. The new reality of the Supermind to which modern man is invited to retreat can in fact only constitute a retreat from history itself and from the inescapable contradictions in which God has willed to place man. And surely, it is the possibility of this retreat or rather escape that accounts for the fascination that many puzzled minds in contemporary times have for this new gnosticism.

Thirdly, the world whose reality Christianity asserts is not the material world (which constitutes no problem for it), because Christianity is not an exercise in speculative philosophizing. The world whose reality it asserts is the world of man, the world *as* the world of man, conceived in specifically human terms. It is man's *existence* or rather *existential situation* that is Christianity's primary concern; and this is no subject of speculative doubt. Human existence is something that needs no proof other than itself. The world and life talked about here are not understood outside of the context of Christianity at all, so that what Aurobindo affirms and Vedanta denies is something in which Christian Faith has no part and in whose outcome it has no stake, for it considers it a vain pursuit. And what is man's existence? It is, as Kierkegaard says, that which is constituted of the self's (no academic self but the human self) relation to itself, which is a reflection of the self's relation to God; and the dialectical nature of such relation is the basis of *anxiety* (a poor word for a great truth). It is also derivatively constituted of the empirical realities of human life, such as pain and sorrow, pleasure and joy, the experience of perplexity and surprise, sense of mystery and wonder, the longing for physical and mental relief, etc., as well as everything else that social relations imply.

Fourthly, the literalism in Aurobindian spirituality has no kinship with the Christian notion of spiritual life. Aurobindo believes that matter can be actually divinized. When Aurobindo died the 'Mother' sent out a pamphlet with an illustration depicting the theme 'we worship not a crucified but a glorified body'. The doctrine of the resurrection of the body in Christianity and the belief in the glorification or divinization of the body in Aurobindoism stand out in clear contrast to each other. Aurobindo's body itself was supposed to become the first fruits of them that shall be glorified, without undergoing the corruption that is the condition of all flesh. In all elementary stages of faith a literalistic notion of the incorruptibility of the flesh of the holy man is prevalent. Alyosha was on the point of being shocked out of his faith when scent started coming out of Father Zossima's body, but he later perceived the mystery of the Christian doctrine (*The Brothers Karamazov*). There is an irreconcilable difference between the Christian doctrine of death (or Crucifixion) and resurrection (or Resurrection) and Aurobindian belief in the direct glorification of the body, which is a corollary of the doctrine of the divinization of matter. Christianity affirms faith in the resurrection of the body, a reality in which the believer already participates *symbolically*, as he also participates actually in the reality of death through human mortality. Faith is the dynamics of this symbolic participation. Thus Christianity lends no support to literalism in spiritual life.

Fifthly, Christianity can have nothing in common with any kind of spiritual technology—one in which the mechanical notion of uniform motion and causation is operative—to which Sri Aurobindo's literalism leads him. Some talk as easily of the divinization of the world as a corporation chief would talk about the electrification of his city. For them the whole thing is a grand engineering scheme, where the making of blue prints and planning are all in order. For Christianity salvation of the world comes not as the result of any subtle technique but as the result of the work of God. It does not regard culture, spiritual or other, as directly assisting in redemption. On the contrary, it regards the progress of culture in history as a necessary process in the act of raising to a high pitch of poignancy man's creatureliness and sinfulness, in other words, his limitedness or finitude, which is qualitative rather than quantitative. Culture, including all its elaborate instruments and techniques, is the dramatization of man's inability to save himself, and therefore an implicit confession, a cry of despair, which has to continue through all history as the fulfilment of the negative condition for man's redemption by God. Crisis is seen as the spiritual destiny of culture when looked at from the Christian point of view. The true function of culture is to create spiritual crisis in man and society, or rather to prepare man and his society to respond to the continuing spiritual crisis that impinges on them from elsewhere; and no 'harmony' or 'peace' of the aesthetic-idealist variety such as are the

aim of occult practices is entertained by Christianity as the proper end of culture.

Sixthly, for Christianity man is the *sum of his conditions* and *not the sum of his powers*, as is evidenced to be the case in Aurobindo. And all of man's conditions are reducible to one supreme and ultimate condition designated by the term 'sin'. It is only man who can be a sinner. The word 'sinner' also veils his spiritual origin and spiritual destiny. It is equally an indication of his relation to God. The sum of conditions that man is cannot be increased or decreased: it can only be answered—by redemption—and only God can answer it. On the contrary, man's powers can be increased and decreased; and if man is regarded as the sum of his powers his status *vis-à-vis* himself and *vis-à-vis* the Ultimate is alterable. If man is regarded merely in terms of his powers, devoid of an ultimate condition, he will be robbed of his spiritual origin and destiny, however much one may try to attribute fictitious divinity to him as to all else. Christianity, however, does not deny that man's powers are subject to variation. But it does deny that the direct intensification or energizing of any of his powers of consciousness—as prescribed by Aurobindo for attaining Supermanhood—will ever move in the direction of surpassing his ultimate sum of conditions. 'Can you by taking thought add a cubit to your stature?' asks our Lord. Christianity teaches that self-transcendence though not self-exceeding is a possibility by virtue of grace. But under the conditions of existence such transcendence has got to be symbolic rather than literal. To treat it as literal would be to confuse it with self-exceeding, which again is a category relevant only to the notion of power. The true transcendence of man lies in another direction than that of self-exceeding. Here the Christian doctrine of grace appears as compelling in its verity.

Christianity does permit mysticism to be sure, though not any occult practice, for it permits and indeed encourages all natural self-expression of man, mystical, artistic and scientific. But in itself neither mysticism nor art nor science can do any more than function within the framework of the *sinful* culture of man, the conglomerate of human activities which ought to fulfil themselves negatively, through their destiny of crisis all the time striving to convert that which is *Non-Existent* into that which is *Absent*, which the Redeemer in his time will change into that which is *Present*. The inner teleology of all acts is to change the Non-Existent into the Absent—the special kind of fulfilment it is their destiny to work out—acts have no more potency than that—and it is the prerogative of the Divine grace which is in Christ to transform Absent fulfilment into Present fulfilment, that is, to bring about the real fulfilment of all acts. Aurobindoism as a spiritual technology believes that all acts can fulfil themselves directly. This is the reason why the mysticism in it slips into gnosticism and occultism; in fact it is easy for mysticism to be transformed into these, the sum and substance of which is spiritualized

mechanism. The followers of Sri Aurobindo freely talk of 'forcing' the Divine will, and they build up a series of forces in the spiritual realm exactly parallel to the system of forces that we are acquainted with in the world of matter and motion. Many Christians themselves practice such mysticism and entertain such notions, but we are speaking of Biblical Christianity.

These are some of the problems that Christian thinkers have in initiating a dialogue with the Aurobindian movement. However, the first step, the writer believes, is to enunciate the Christian reactions fully.

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A New Edition of the Greek New Testament

Students of the Greek New Testament will be glad to know that the second edition of the British and Foreign Bible Society's Greek New Testament, with revised critical apparatus, has now been published. This long awaited publication commemorates the 150th Anniversary of the Society's foundation.

The first edition was published in 1904. During the past 50 years there have been momentous discoveries of New Testament documents and papyri, of which note has been taken in preparing the new edition.

The task of preparing it was entrusted to Dr. Erwin Nestle of the Wurttemberg Bible Society and Professor G. D. Kilpatrick of Queen's College, Oxford. The former is the son of the scholar who gave his name to the famous series of editions of the Greek Testament which have appeared since 1898. Dr. G. D. Kilpatrick is Dean Ireland's Professor of Exegesis of Holy Scripture in the University of Oxford.

Students of the Greek New Testament will want to turn to the apparatus, which is entirely new. It contains a large selection of the important variant readings, including all readings of moment which may be original, those which are characteristic of the main types of text (such as the Western text) and other readings of special interest. In addition, thirty-seven papyri have been used and many other early fragments.

Quotations are made from the unpublished portion of the Bodmer Papyrus for John xv–xxi. New knowledge about the Latin versions has been employed and the quotations from the Fathers have been carefully studied. The book contains xxvii + 787 pages, as compared with viii + 668 pages in the first edition. The type is clear and will be a delight to read. Orders may be placed with one of the Auxiliaries or with the Bible Society of India and Ceylon, A/1 Mahatma Gandhi Road, Bangalore 1.