

Sri Aurobindo and Hinduism

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Many people think of Sri Aurobindo as a Hindu, but he looked upon himself as a member of the Hindu religion for only around twelve of his seventy-eight years. His attitude towards religion in general and Hinduism in particular changed dramatically over the course of his life. At first an agnostic, he became interested in what we would now call Hindu culture (notably the Upanishads, the epics, and the *Bhagavad Gita*) towards the close of the nineteenth century. For a while this interest was so strong that he spoke of himself as a Hindu, but he never took part in conventional Hindu worship or observed Hindu social practices. During his political career, he made use of Hindu terminology and symbols, but rejected Hindu nationalism. After taking up yoga, he continued to draw inspiration from Hindu scriptural sources, but ceased to identify himself as a Hindu. He insisted that his path of yoga was not a religion, and wrote critically about conventional Hinduism. Yet he remained open to the spiritual possibilities offered by sincere religious practices, and did not prevent his followers from incorporating such practices in their lives.

When Dr. Nadkarni did me the honour of inviting me to deliver this year's Guru Perashad Memorial Lecture,¹ I chose a subject I had been thinking about for a fairly long time: Sri Aurobindo's relationship with and ideas about the Hindu religion. I was unaware when I selected this topic that the theme of our conference was "Spirituality and Life." As you know, and as the participants in the seminar have brought out, Sri Aurobindo made a distinction between spirituality and religion. Religion, as he wrote in *The Human Cycle*, could never be an effective "guide and control of human society" because it tends to become confused with "a particular creed, sect, cult, religious society or Church." The result is intolerance, hatred and persecution. Many of us think of these things as monopolies of the Semitic religions of the West, but Sri Aurobindo reminds us that sectarianism, hatred and occasional persecution have also tarnished the record of "fundamentally tolerant Hinduism."²

If religion plays such a negative role in human life, should it not be rejected altogether? Sri Aurobindo did not think so. The evil, he wrote, "is not in true religion itself, but in its infrarational parts." True religion or "spirituality" becomes religiosity or, simply,

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² Sri Aurobindo, *The Human Cycle, The Ideal of Human Unity, War and Self-Determination* (hereafter HC). Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1997, p. 176.

“religion,” under the infrarational pressure of the lower mind and life. If life is to follow the path of evolutionary progression, it has to open itself to the spirit. “It is in spirituality that we must seek for the directing light and the harmonizing law,” he concluded, “and in religion only in proportion as it identifies itself with this spirituality.”³ The question remains whether religion is really capable of identifying itself with spirituality. In 1918, when he wrote the passages I have quoted, Sri Aurobindo seemed to think that it was possible; but later in his life he became less confident that traditional religion had a significant role to play in the development of integral spirituality. This conclusion came at the end of a long engagement with religion that began in England, took a new turn in Baroda and again in Calcutta, and reached an ambiguous conclusion in Pondicherry. I intend to trace the course of this engagement, but, before I begin, I would like to spell out for you the point of view from which I speak.

I am not, and never have been a religious person. My parents were Protestant Christians, though neither was religious. I was sent to Sunday school in order to satisfy my grandmother, but took no interest at all in what was taught there, and never entered a church or any other place of worship as a worshipper. If I ever stepped into a church (or synagogue or mosque or temple) it was to admire the architecture and artworks, and perhaps also to enjoy the atmosphere of peace that sometimes fills such places. But I found the beliefs and practices of every religion I encountered to be pointless and uninteresting. The search for truth was important to me; but it never crossed my mind that religion could be any help in this. Rather I turned to poetry, philosophy and psychological experimentation in my search for enlightenment. These interests led me to yoga and, because yoga usually is taught by people who come from the Hindu tradition, I was exposed to the literature and some of the practices of the Hindu religion. I found, and still find, the literature profound and significant. As for the practices, I found them colourful and charming, though certainly not the sort of thing I could incorporate into my life.

Now you may well ask, why should I, a non-Hindu, choose to speak about Sri Aurobindo and Hinduism? It may be true, as Dr. Mohanty has noted in his introduction, that I am a writer, a historian, and a member of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram; but if I am not a practicing Hindu, is it really possible for me to understand the complex amalgam of thought, feeling and practice that makes up the religious system that we call Hinduism? And if not, is it really possible for me to reach an accurate assessment of Sri Aurobindo’s relationship to this religion? I will be the first to admit that there is much about Hinduism that I do not understand. But my aim here is not to describe, defend or detract from the Hindu religion. I speak as a historian: one who uses documentary and other evidence to reconstruct the past in order to understand the present better. A historian generally begins with a problem: an event or line of development that has not been sufficiently studied or is commonly misunderstood. Sri Aurobindo’s relationship to Hinduism is such a problem. Quite a lot has been said and written about the subject; much of this, in my opinion, is inadequate and one-sided. It is generally taken for granted that Sri Aurobindo was a outstanding representative of the Hindu tradition, and a leader of the Hindu revival movement. Many people depict him as a devout, even

³ HC 176, 181.

an orthodox Hindu. Some go further and make him the object of Hindu forms of worship, a modern Hindu deity. Others, more interested in politics than religion, present him as a characteristically Hindu politician, to be praised or condemned (depending on one's political leanings) for building up, or breaking down, the integrity of the Indian nation. As a historian and as a practitioner of Sri Aurobindo's yoga, I find all this unwarranted. But as a scholar I can't just reject these representations. I must return to the textual and biographical evidence, see what light this material casts on the subject, and arrive at my own documented conclusions.

Since I speak to you as a historian, I will present my findings chronologically. What was Sri Aurobindo's relationship to Hinduism during different periods of his life? As most of you know, he was not brought up as a Hindu. His father, who was an Anglophile and (as Sri Aurobindo once said) "a tremendous atheist,"⁴ took care to shield his sons from all aspects of traditional Indian life. He sent them to a convent school when Aurobindo was just five; two years later he took them to England, where Aurobindo and his brothers remained for the next fifteen years. Dr. Ghose asked his sons' guardian to see that they did not "undergo any Indian influence." As a result, they "grew up in entire ignorance of India, her people, her religion and her culture."⁵ Living in the house of a man who happened to be a Congregationalist minister, they absorbed a good deal of Protestant Christianity. This was, Sri Aurobindo later wrote, "the only religion and the Bible the only scripture with which he was acquainted in his childhood." But he never became a Christian. His father asked the boys' guardian not to give them any religious training but to let them make up their own minds about religion when they came of age. By the time he reached adulthood, Sri Aurobindo had become disgusted by "the hideous story of persecution staining mediaeval Christianity" and repelled by "the narrowness and intolerance even of its later developments." For a while he considered himself an atheist; later he "accepted the Agnostic attitude."⁶

Thus we see that during the first twenty-one years of his life, Sri Aurobindo had no religion at all. Nor can he be said to have been a religious person during the first seven or eight years of his stay in Baroda. To be sure, he read and translated a number of passages from texts that are considered parts of the Hindu canon: the Mahabharata, the Ramayana, some Bengali devotional poetry; but he did this as part of his discovery of India's cultural inheritance. As a linguistic prodigy at St. Paul's School and Cambridge, he had developed "an early cult for the work of the great builders" of Greek, Latin, English, French and Italian poetry.⁷ Now he included the great writers of Sanskrit and Bengali in his literary pantheon. In writing about Vyasa, Valmiki, Kalidasa and Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, he occasionally alluded to Hindu philosophy and ethics, but he never spoke from a Hindu point of view or referred to himself as a Hindu. He was

⁴ A. B. Purani, ed., *Evening Talks with Sri Aurobindo*. Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1982, p. 109.

⁵ Sri Aurobindo, *Autobiographical Notes and Other Writings of Historical Interest* (hereafter AN). Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 2006, p. 15.

⁶ AN 106.

⁷ Sri Aurobindo, *The Future Poetry with On Quantitative Metre*. Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1997, p. 8.

probably thinking of his own case when he wrote in a literary essay that the coming generation in Bengal was “a generation national to a fault, loving Bengal and her new glories, and if not Hindus themselves, yet zealous for the honour of the ancient religion and hating all that makes war on it.”⁸

Among the manifestations of the old spirit that he condemned in this essay was the Sadharan Brahmo Samaj, a reform group that one of his uncles belonged to. His maternal grandfather, Rajnarain Bose, was the leader of another Brahmo faction. Despite these connections, Sri Aurobindo found nothing of interest in the Brahmo *dharma*. It was, he thought, a pallid imitation of the European religion he had come to dislike. When he decided to marry in 1901, he surprised and offended his family by wedding as a Hindu.

Sri Aurobindo’s marriage was the first, and the last, Hindu ritual he ever took part in. The fact that he paid off the officiating priest, who wanted him to shave his hair as an atonement for “crossing the black waters,” shows how lightly he took the demands of Hindu orthodoxy. Still, it is a fact that from around this time he began to think of himself as a Hindu. He had come to feel that Hinduism, broadly conceived, represented the authentic cultural tradition of his homeland, and he wanted to identify himself with it. But this was a matter of cultural sympathy rather than religious conviction. His brother Barin wrote that Sri Aurobindo “took pride in calling himself a Hindu” rather than a Brahmo; but Barin rarely “saw him indulge in conventional religious ceremonies. He has always passed or entered a temple without ever bending his head to the idol installed there.”⁹

Around 1902, Sri Aurobindo put aside an unfinished work on Kalidasa and plunged into the study of the Upanishads and Bhagavad Gita. He had been familiar with these scriptures for a number of years. Now he began to study them in the original Sanskrit, and to write translations of and commentaries on them. He found in these texts a philosophy that offered an alternative to the “scientific atheism” of the West, which had led to a general “breakdown of moral ideals.” If Hinduism was to survive, he wrote at this time, it could only be “as the religion for which Vedanta, Sankhya & Yoga combined to lay the foundations, which Srikrishna announced & which Vyasa formulated” in the Gita.¹⁰ He was careful to distinguish this philosophically grounded religion from the “ignorant & customary Hinduism of today.” It was not this “vulgarised and Buddhicised edition of the old faith,” but rather the “purer form” of Vedanta that interested him.¹¹

Sri Aurobindo continued to study and comment on the Upanishads and the Gita for the next eighteen years. But between 1905 and 1910, the focus of his action and writing was the Indian national movement. It has often been noted that he mentioned Hindu texts, and used Hindu terminology, in some of his political writings and speeches. This has

⁸ Sri Aurobindo, *Early Cultural Writings* (hereafter *ECW*). Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 2003, p. 117.

⁹ Barindra Kumar Ghose, “Sri Aurobindo as I Understand Him” (unpublished manuscript, hereafter *SAAIUH*), pp. 11, 42.

¹⁰ *ECW* 332.

¹¹ Sri Aurobindo, *Kena and Other Upanishads*. Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 2001, p. 339.

led many to speak of him as a “religious nationalist.” I have discussed this question at length in several essays and conference presentations. In brief, what I have found is that Sri Aurobindo’s nationalism was not based on religious conviction, but (as he himself put it) on “the inalienable right of the nation to independence.”¹² His references to the Gita, to Hindu mythology, to Vedantic and Tantric philosophy were natural in one who drew inspiration from these sources, and who knew that they were meaningful to his audience. It is possible, as some have claimed, that his use of Hindu language tended to alienate some Muslims; but he certainly never tried to provoke them. Rather he attempted to draw the members of all religions into a single Indian nationality. Though he has recently been appropriated by members of the Hindu Right, he never supported Hindu nationalism. Indeed he said quite clearly that he could not “understand Hindu nationalism as a possibility under modern conditions.” Under modern conditions, he went on, “India can only exist as a whole.”¹³

Sri Aurobindo began his practice of yoga around the time he became involved in the nationalist movement. Before this he had had a number of spiritual experiences, but he did not, he later wrote, “associate them at that time with Yoga about which he knew nothing.”¹⁴ He did not say what he did associate them with. Quite possibly with Vedanta philosophy, for he later described some of these experiences in Vedantic terms: as visions of the Self. Two other early experiences involved feeling the presence of the Mother behind a sculptured image. You are probably familiar with the sonnets in which he described these visions:

In a town of gods, housed in a little shrine,
From sculptured limbs the Godhead looked at me,—
A living Presence deathless and divine,
A Form that harboured all infinity.

and

After unnumbered steps of a hill-stair
I saw upon earth’s head brilliant with sun
The immobile Goddess in her house of stone
In a loneliness of meditating air.¹⁵

Such experiences revealed to him the truth behind Hindu image-worship, which he explained years later in *The Defence of Indian Culture* as follows: “The image to the Hindu is a physical symbol and support of the supraphysical; it is a basis for the meeting between the embodied mind and sense of man and the supraphysical power, force or presence which he worships and with which he wishes to communicate.”¹⁶

¹² AN 81.

¹³ Sri Aurobindo, *Karmayogin: Political Writings and Speeches 1909-1910* (hereafter KY). Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1997, p. 304.

¹⁴ AN 39.

¹⁵ Sri Aurobindo, *Collected Poems: The Complete Poetical Works*. Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1972, pp. 139, 154.

¹⁶ Sri Aurobindo, *The Renaissance in India with A Defense of Indian Culture*. Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1997, p. 147.

Sri Aurobindo took up yoga seriously in August 1905. Writing to his wife at the end of the month, he said that he had made up his mind to “have the direct vision of God.” To most people, he said, religion was “repeating the name of God at any odd hour, praying in public, showing off how pious one is.” With this he would have nothing to do. Rather he heeded “the sages of the Hindu religion,” who insisted that the path to truth lay “in one’s own body, in one’s own mind,” through the psychophysical practices known as yoga. He had taken up some of these practices, and “within a month” he had “realized what the Hindu religion says is not false.”¹⁷ This shows that, at this time at least, he conceived the methods of yoga as lying within the Hindu tradition. But he was also aware that these practices had only a distant relationship to the conventional practices of popular Hinduism.

Sri Aurobindo practiced yoga on his own for more than two years before he met a guru. With the help of this man he had the first of the “four fundamental realisations” on which his yoga is based: “the realisation of the silent spaceless and timeless Brahman.” A few months later, in Alipore jail, he had the second realisation: “the experience of the cosmic consciousness and of the Divine as all beings and all that is.”¹⁸ You are all familiar with the Uttarpara speech and its description of his vision of Krishna in the Alipore courtroom and jail. You also remember the passage with which he closes the speech: “This Hindu nation was born with the Sanatana Dharma, with it it moves and with it it grows. When the Sanatana Dharma declines, then the nation declines, and if the Sanatana Dharma were capable of perishing, with the Sanatana Dharma it would perish. The Sanatana Dharma, that is nationalism.”¹⁹ This passage is often held up as proof that Sri Aurobindo was a follower of traditional Hinduism, and a proponent of Hindu nationalism. I have never been able to read it that way. He made it clear in the speech itself that the Hindu religion, which he here equated with the *sanatana dharma*, was “the Hindu religion only because the Hindu nation has kept it” in “the seclusion of this peninsula,” but that it was “not circumscribed by the confines of a single country.” The *sanatana dharma* was not a sectarian religion, a religion made up of a certain number of practices and beliefs, because “a sectarian religion, an exclusive religion can live only for a limited time and a limited purpose,” and thus could hardly be called the eternal religion.²⁰ He went further in an essay published in the same issue of the *Karmayogin* as the speech. Here he explained that the “Hinduism” of which he spoke was “not a dogma or combination of dogmas but a law of life,” not “a social framework but the spirit of a past and future social evolution.” This *sanatana dharma* had, he said, “many scriptures, Veda, Vedanta, Gita, Upanishad, Darshana, Purana, Tantra, nor could it reject the Bible or the Koran; but its real, most authoritative scripture is in the heart in which the Eternal has His dwelling.” Its basis, in other words, was not any particular belief or practice but inner experience that was available to all humans. It was this experience-based “Hinduism” that might become, he thought, “the basis of the future world-religion.”²¹

¹⁷ Letter to Mrinalini Ghose, 30 August 1905, translation in A. B. Purani, *The Life of Sri Aurobindo*. Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1978, pp. 81-82.

¹⁸ AN 94.

¹⁹ KY 12.

²⁰ KY 11.

²¹ KY 26.

Over the next few years, Sri Aurobindo often came back to the distinction between higher and lower Hinduism. “There are two Hinduisms,” he wrote in an essay of 1910,

one which takes its stand on the kitchen and seeks its Paradise by cleaning the body; another which seeks God, not through the cooking pot and the social convention, but in the soul. The latter is also Hinduism and it is a good deal older and more enduring than the other; it is the Hinduism of Bhishma and Srikrishna, of Shankara and Chaitanya, the Hinduism which exceeds Hindusthan, was from of old and will be for ever, because it grows eternally through the aeons.²²

Higher Hinduism itself came in two forms: one sectarian and disruptive, the other unsectarian and synthetic. The first of these cries out: “ ‘My guru is the only guru and all others are either charlatans or inferior,’ or, ‘My temperament is the right temperament and those who do not follow my path are fools or pedants or insincere’; or ‘My Avatar is the real God Himself and all the others are only lesser revelations.’ ” The second, synthetic, form says instead: “There are many paths. . . and they all lead equally to God.”²³

Sri Aurobindo could be scathing in his dismissal of lower Hinduism. In another essay written at this time, he said:

To venerate the Scriptures without knowing them and to obey custom in their place; . . . to do one’s devotions twice a day without understanding them; to observe a host of meaningless minutiae in one’s daily conduct; to keep the Hindu holidays, when an image is set up, worshipped and thrown away,—this in India is the minimum of religion. This is glorified as Hinduism and the Sanatana Dharma.²⁴

But there was also a maximum of religion: “to rise beyond this life into a higher existence, not necessarily for oneself alone. . . [but also] to bring down the bliss, illumination and greatness of that higher existence into the material world of creatures.”²⁵

During his early years in Pondicherry, that is, between 1910 and 1913, Sri Aurobindo continued to write about Hinduism as a Hindu. He noted around 1912, in regard to the Puranic explanation of the world: “I see no reason why we Hindus, heirs of that ancient and wise tradition, should so long as there is no definite disproof rule it out of court in obedience to Western opinion.”²⁶ At the same time, he felt that most Hindus had made a rather bad use of their patrimony. “Our Hinduism, our old culture are precisely the possessions we have cherished with the least intelligence,” he wrote in an essay on the subject of originality in thought. “Throughout the whole range of our life we do things without knowing why we do them, we believe things without knowing why we believe them, we assert things without knowing what right we have to assert them, — or, at most, it is because some book or some Brahmin enjoins it, because Shankara thinks it, or because someone has so interpreted something that he asserts to be a fundamental Scripture of our religion.”²⁷ As a result of this unreflective approach to Hindu scrip-

²² ECW 551.

²³ ECW 552.

²⁴ ECW 492.

²⁵ ECW 493.

²⁶ Sri Aurobindo, *Isha Upanishad*. Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 2003, p. 313.

²⁷ ECW 39.

tures and practices, the religion had become conventional and sometimes even corrupt. It needed to be reformed, its “present mould” “broken and replaced,” but, he stressed, this had to be done “by knowledge and yoga, not by the European spirit, and it is an Indian and not an English mould that must replace it.”²⁸ In an essay entitled “Social Reform” he wrote: We are Hindus seeking to re-Hinduise society, not to Europeanise it. But,” he went on, “what is Hinduism? Or what is its social principle? One thing at least is certain about Hinduism religious or social, that its whole outlook is Godward, its whole search and business is the discovery of God and our fulfilment in God. But God is everywhere and universal.” Human beings could achieve union with God by means of the “eternal religion.” This was the basis “of the shifting, mutable and multiform thing we call Hinduism.” Note the relationship between the two. Conventional Hinduism was not the same as the “eternal religion”; it was a derivative, sometimes a corruption. The truest truth of the eternal religion was “to realise God in our inner life and our outer existence, in society not less than in the individual.”²⁹

We see then that as late as 1912, Sri Aurobindo included himself among those who were part of the cultural entity called Hinduism, though he looked beyond conventional Hinduism towards the integral spirituality he was developing through his practice of yoga. But when we read his writings of 1913 and after, we find few references to Hinduism, and none in which he spoke of himself as a Hindu or wrote from a Hindu standpoint. A negative approach to religion in general came to the fore in his writings of this period. “How much hatred & stupidity men succeed in packing up decorously and labelling ‘Religion!’” he wrote in an aphorism of c. 1913. He even found something good to say about atheists and unbelievers. “There are two for whom there is hope,” he wrote in another aphorism, “the man who has felt God’s touch & been drawn to it and the sceptical seeker & self-convinced atheist; but for the formularists of all the religions & the parrots of free thought, they are dead souls who follow a death that they call living.”³⁰ He did not deny that the major religions had often played a positive role in human development. “All the religions have saved a number of souls,” he wrote in *Thoughts and Glimpses*, “but none yet has been able to spiritualise mankind. For that there is needed not cult and creed, but a sustained and all-comprehending effort at spiritual self-evolution.” Among these imperfect attempts he assigned a certain priority to Hinduism; it had, he wrote, opened to mankind “the largest and profoundest spiritual possibilities.” Nevertheless, he affirmed that all religions, Hinduism included, were held back by “dogma and cult egoism.”³¹

This is one of very few references to Hinduism in the works that Sri Aurobindo published in the *Arya* between 1914 and 1920. He did, of course, write about Indian religion in general and Hinduism in particular in his essays on Indian culture; but he did this not as a proponent of Hinduism but as a defender of Indian culture against attacks by European rationalists. What emerges from these essays is a general admiration for Hin-

²⁸ ECW 499.

²⁹ ECW 53.

³⁰ Sri Aurobindo, *Essays Divine and Human*, Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1997, 456, 441.

³¹ Sri Aurobindo, *Essays in Philosophy and Yoga*. Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1998, p. 211.

duism's broadness and spiritual orientation. In the first of five essays dealing with Indian spirituality and life, he set forth what he called the three "credos" of Hinduism. First was the awareness of the One, the Infinite that takes many forms. Next was an acceptance of a multitude of ways of approach to this One. Finally, and most important, there was an understanding that

while the Supreme or the Divine can be approached through a universal consciousness and by piercing through all inner and outer Nature, That or He can be met by each individual soul in itself, in its own spiritual part, because there is something in it that is intimately one or at least intimately related with the one divine Existence. The essence of Indian religion is to aim at so growing and so living that we can grow out of the Ignorance which veils this self-knowledge from our mind and life and become aware of the Divinity within us.

These three things were, he concluded, "the whole of Hindu religion, its essential sense and, if any credo is needed, its credo."³²

From this point onward, Sri Aurobindo hardly referred to Hinduism or to Indian religion in general in his writings or recorded talks. In a letter to his brother written in April 1920, he wrote that the current revival of Vaishnavism, like the earlier revival of Vedanta, was all "very old and unsuitable for the new age." Indian civilisation, he observed, had become "a stagnant backwater, Indian religion a bigotry of externals." Even Indian spirituality was largely played out; the best it seemed able to provide was "a faint glimmer of light or a momentary wave of intoxication." India's problem was not "a lack of spirituality or religion but a diminution of the power of thought." Perhaps for this reason, he no longer viewed himself or his work in religious terms. "I am not a saint, not a holy man — not even a religious man," he wrote. "I have no religion, no code of conduct, no morality." What he wanted to establish was "not a fixed and rigid form like that of the old Aryan society, not a stagnant backwater, but a free form that can spread itself out like the sea in its multitudinous waves."³³

Around this time a community was forming around him, which eventually would become the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. From the beginning, Sri Aurobindo made it clear that he wanted this community to be the sort of "free form" he spoke of in his letter to his brother. Asked by a correspondent in 1930 whether the teaching at the Ashram was "based perfectly upon Hinduism," he replied: "No sectarian religion is the basis; orthodox Hinduism and its caste rules are not followed; but the spiritual Truth recognised here is in consonance with the Vedas, Upanishads and Gita while not limited by any Scripture."³⁴ In his first published statement on the nature and purpose of the Ashram, he made it clear that it was not "a religious association." The members, he wrote, "come from all religions and some are of no religion." (I have always taken heart from this last phrase. Despite all appearances, there is room in the Ashram even for those who are completely non-religious.) Sri Aurobindo went on to say: "There is no creed or

³² RI 193-95.

³³ Letter to Barindra Kumar Ghose, April 1920, translation in *Sri Aurobindo: Archives and Research* 4 (April 1980): 13-17.

³⁴ Letter of 5 September 1930, to be published in the forthcoming *Letters on Himself and the Ashram*.

set of dogmas, no governing religious body” at the Ashram; “there are only the teachings of Sri Aurobindo and certain psychological practices of concentration and meditation, etc., for the enlarging of the consciousness, receptivity to the Truth, mastery over the desires, the discovery of the divine self and consciousness concealed within each human being, a higher evolution of the nature.”³⁵

Despite this explicitly evolutionary aim, many people still had a tendency to view his work in religious terms. He wrote a number of letters to correct this misconception. To an English disciple who wondered whether his un-Hindu nature somehow disqualified him for the yoga, Sri Aurobindo wrote: “It is not the Hindu outlook or the Western that fundamentally matters in yoga, but the psychic turn and the spiritual urge, and these are the same everywhere.”³⁶ A number of important letters on this subject were addressed to a Muslim disciple — a man, as it happens, from a prominent family of Hyderabad. When this disciple asked about the role of Islam in the Ashram, Sri Aurobindo insisted that there was “no place for rigid orthodoxy, whether Hindu, Mahomedan or Christian in the future. Those who cling to it, loose hold of life and go under — as has been shown by the fate of the Hindus in India and of the orthodox Mahomedan countries all over the world.” When the disciple observed that the Ashram, most of whose members were from Hindu backgrounds, in fact favoured Hinduism, Sri Aurobindo’s answer was unequivocal: “If this Asram were here only to serve Hinduism I would not be in it and the Mother who was never a Hindu would not be in it.”³⁷ When the disciple persisted, Sri Aurobindo set forth his position at some length in forceful terms:

Every Hindu here — even those who were once orthodox Brahmins and have grown old in it, — give up all observance of caste, take food from Pariahs and are served by them, associate and eat with Mahomedans, Christians, Europeans, cease to practise temple worship or Sandhya (daily prayer and mantras), accept a non-Hindu from Europe as their spiritual director. These are things people who have Hinduism as their aim and object would not do — they do it because they are obliged here to look to a higher ideal in which these things have no value. What is kept of Hinduism is Vedanta and Yoga, in which Hinduism is one with Sufism of Islam and with the Christian mystics. But even here it is not Vedanta and Yoga in their traditional limits (their past), but widened and rid of many ideas that are peculiar to the Hindus. If I have used Sanskrit terms and figures, it is because I know them and do not know Persian and Arabic. I have not the slightest objection to anyone here drawing inspiration from Islamic sources if they agree with the Truth as Sufism agrees with it. On the other hand I have not the slightest objection to Hinduism being broken to pieces and disappearing from the face of the earth, if that is the Divine Will. I have no attachment to past forms; what is Truth will always remain; the Truth alone matters.³⁸

In another letter to the same disciple, he made his position abundantly clear: “The As-

³⁵ AN 531.

³⁶ Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga* (hereafter LY). Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1970, p. 556.

³⁷ Letters of 23 February and 17 November 1932, published in *Bulletin of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education* 52 (February 2000): 80; *ibid.* 52 (August 2000): 70.

³⁸ Letter of 17 November 1932, published in *Bulletin of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education* 52 (August 2000): 74.

ram has nothing to do with Hindu religion or culture or any religion or nationality. The Truth of the Divine which is the spiritual reality behind all religions and the descent of the supramental which is not known to any religion are the sole things which will be the foundation of the work of the future.”³⁹

Yet, for all Sri Aurobindo’s insistence that there was no necessary connection between Hinduism and his yoga, life in his Ashram retained a recognisably Hindu tone. People who came from Hindu backgrounds found no difficulty in carrying over various Hindu habits into their yogic practice. And Sri Aurobindo did not oppose this. Indeed, he seemed sometimes to encourage it. He spoke openly of the important role that Krishna played in his yogic development. He wrote of the Divine Mother using the language of Hindu scriptures, and did not conceal the fact that he considered the Mother of the Ashram to be an incarnation of the Divine Mother. Some of the ceremonial practices that developed in the Ashram, in particular *pranam* with the Mother, would not have seemed out of place in an ordinary Hindu setting. But Sri Aurobindo did not see such practices in Hindu terms. He distinguished between acts like *pranam*, which, he wrote, “have a living value,” and conventional forms which “persist although they have no longer any value — e.g. Sraddha for the dead.” He disapproved of people holding to “forms which have no relation to this Yoga — for instance Christians who cling to the Christian forms or Mahomedans to the Namaz or Hindus to the Sandhyavandana in the old way.” Such people, he thought, might soon find such forms “either falling off or else an obstacle to the free development of their sadhana.” He also discouraged any form of public worship, such as prostrating before his photograph in the Ashram’s reception room. Such ostentatious worship he specifically prohibited; but he noted at the same time that there was “no restriction in this Yoga to inward worship and meditation only.” He hoped that “old forms of the different religions” would eventually fall away; but he insisted that “absence of all forms is not a rule of the sadhana.”⁴⁰

He was aware that the disappearance of old forms would not come easily. “For always the form prevails and the spirit recedes and diminishes,” he had written years earlier in *The Human Cycle*. The outer form always ended up replacing the inner spirit. If the spirit attempted to come back, “to revive the form, to modify it,” in the end the tendency of the form to overcome the spirit always proved “too strong.” Looking, for example, at the history of religion, he saw that

the efforts of the saints and religious reformers become progressively more scattered, brief and superficial in their actual effects, however strong and vital the impulse. We see this recession in the growing darkness and weakness of India in her last millennium; the constant effort of the most powerful spiritual personalities kept the soul of the people alive but failed to resuscitate the ancient free force and truth and vigour or permanently revivify a conventionalised and stagnating society; in a generation or two the iron grip of that conventionalism has always fallen on the new movement and annexed the names

³⁹ Undated letter, published in *Bulletin of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education* 53 (February 2001): 72.

⁴⁰ Series of four letters, 23 December 1933 to 3 January 1934. The quoted passages are from two of these letters, as published in LY 850 and 777. All four letters will be published in full in *Letters on Himself and the Ashram*.

of its founders.”⁴¹

What would the founders of the Ashram — no “movement” surely, though many now seem to regard it as such — have to say, a generation or two after their passing, about its current life? Would they be surprised that not just the reception room but also parts of the courtyard and meditation room of the Ashram are used for public worship at all hours of the day? Would they be surprised to see conventional Hindu symbols displayed, on occasion, in Ashram buildings or on the covers of their books? Would they be taken aback that Ashram departments observe Hindu holidays with conventional decorations, or that newcomers are told by self-righteous onlookers to follow Hindu customs while sitting and moving in Ashram spaces? To be frank, I don’t think that they would be greatly surprised, because all these things were present during their lifetimes. And if they disapproved (as they did disapprove during their lifetimes), they probably would take a tolerant or at any rate a resigned attitude towards these survivals of conventional religion.

Barindra Kumar Ghose, who wrote that Sri Aurobindo “always passed or entered a temple without ever bending his head to the idol,” also observed that Sri Aurobindo, in his “supreme catholicity,” was not against the use of religious symbols. As one example of this catholicity, Barin noted that Sri Aurobindo allowed a Brahmin priest, who had been sent to him by a *sannyasi* he knew, to perform the worship of Bagala Devi in a hut in front of his house in Baroda.⁴² Years later, Sri Aurobindo informed a disciple who persisted in directing his devotion towards Krishna even in the Ashram: “I thought I had already told you that your turn towards Krishna was not an obstacle. . . . Sectarianism is a matter of dogma, ritual etc., not of spiritual experience. . . . If you reach Krishna you reach the Divine.”⁴³ There is no question of conventionality when one is speaking of living spiritual experience.

Nevertheless, it is certain that Sri Aurobindo considered Hinduism and other religions to belong to the world’s past, and he had no desire to perpetuate them. When people wrote to him during the 1930s and 1940s asking about Hindu culture, he expressed a lack of interest in the subject: “I feel as if I have said all I could say on these things,” he once wrote. He continued to believe that the truth *behind* the Hindu religion was something that was “contained in the very nature (not superficially seen of course) of human existence.”⁴⁴ But during the last twenty years of his life he declined to frame discussions of this truth in terms of Hinduism or any other religion. “It is far from my purpose,” he wrote in 1935, “to propagate any religion new or old for humanity in the future. A way to be opened that is still blocked, not a religion to be founded, is my conception of the matter.”⁴⁵

Summing up, we may distinguish five periods of Sri Aurobindo’s engagement with

⁴¹ HC 13-14.

⁴² SAAIUH, p. 42.

⁴³ Sri Aurobindo, *On Himself*. Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1972, p. 137.

⁴⁴ Letters of 19 September and 14 May 1938, both to be published in the forthcoming *Letters on Himself and the Ashram*.

⁴⁵ LY 139.

religion. During the first, which lasted from his childhood till his return from England at the age of twenty-one, he belonged to no religion at all. For the next eight years, from 1893 to 1901, he was absorbed in the study of Indian culture in general and Indian literature in particular, but did not think of himself as a Hindu. Then came a period of around twelve years, from 1901 till around 1912, when he spoke of himself as a Hindu, and on occasion wrote from a Hindu standpoint. His brief career in politics fell within this period, so it is not surprising that we find him using Hindu terminology and symbols in some of his political writings. But from around 1913, when he began to write the yogic and philosophical works for which he is chiefly remembered, he stopped alluding to Hindu themes, and ceased to write from a Hindu standpoint. He included a discussion of Hinduism in his *Defence of Indian Culture*, but it was as a cultural phenomenon and not a body of religious truth that he studied it. From 1920 to 1950, he took no interest in Hinduism at all. As his yoga developed, he made it clear that it was not based on Hinduism or any other religion. The best that could be said was that it was “in consonance with” certain Hindu scriptures though “not limited by any Scripture.” Later, as his Ashram took shape, he wrote repeatedly that it was not a religious organisation, much less a conventionally Hindu one. He did not, however, prohibit Hindu modes of worship among those who were attracted to them.

Throughout this development, he retained a deep respect for Indian culture and, within it, the Hindu religious tradition. In the last year of his life, he was asked by the politician K. M. Munshi about the need of a “reintegration of Hindu culture” under the aegis of the *sanatana dharma*. In answering, Sri Aurobindo avoided any allusion to *the sanatana dharma* or to Hinduism, but he did agree that there had indeed to be a “reintegration of Indian Culture under modern conditions.”⁴⁶

I think that many of us, like K. M. Munshi, find it easier to remember Sri Aurobindo’s early endorsement of Indian religion than his later insistence that the yoga he taught went beyond all conventional religion. By so holding on to an expression that he himself abandoned, we may be doing a disservice both to him and to Hinduism. What he offered in his major works was a means to achieve an experiential truth that surpasses the doctrines and practices any religion of the past or present. He did not prohibit religious expression, but he expected those who needed it to rise above sectarianism and conventionality. For such things can only act against the full expression of his work. At the same time he offered those who were proud of their Hindu heritage an unusual opportunity. They could serve as links between an ancient religion and the new possibilities offered by his path of yoga. A Hinduism open to the transformative power of this yoga could become a force for transformation in the world.

⁴⁶ AN 513.