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A table of contents for *Indian Journal of Theology* can be found here:

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God and the Absolute in Vivekananda and Aurobindo — Contrasting Reactions to Contact with the West

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The reactions of Indian philosophers and religious leaders to western and Christian influences during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have attracted considerable attention.¹ The "renaissance" of Hindu thought and its associations with the growth of Indian nationalism have been the subject of substantial historical studies,² whilst the interaction of Christian and Hindu ideas in this period has been discussed at length.³

A pattern of Hindu response to western influences which has become characteristic of twentieth century apologists for Hinduism is that found in Swami Vivekananda. His lectures on Raja Yoga⁴

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¹ Cf. F. Matchett, "The Teaching of Ramakrishna in Relation to the Hindu Tradition - as Interpreted by Vivekananda," *Religion*, 11, 1981; Ursula King, "Indian Spirituality, Western Materialism: an Image and its Function in the Reinterpretation of Modern Hinduism," *Social Action*, New Delhi, 28, 1, 1978; W. R. Pape, "Keshub Chunder Sen's Doctrine of Christ and the Trinity: a Rehabilitation." *The Indian Journal of Theology*, 25, 2, 1976.

² David Kopf, *British Orientalism and the Bengal Renaissance*, University of California Press, 1969; *The Brahmo Samaj and the Shaping of the Modern Indian Mind*, Princeton University Press, 1979.

³ M. M. Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ of the Hindu Renaissance*, SCM Press, 1969; R. Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology*, CLS, Madras 1969; E. J. Sharpe, *Faith Meet Faiths*, SCM Press, 1977; D. B. Forrester, *Caste and Christianity*, Curzon Press, 1980.

⁴ The lectures may be found in *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol. 1, Advaita Ashrama, Calcutta, 1962.

presented Hinduism as a religion of exceptional tolerance. In emphasizing tolerance as a feature of Hinduism Vivekananda restricted himself to the discussion of matters of belief, and did not consider ways in which beliefs have been expressed in Hindu social customs. The claim for tolerance of Hinduism won wide acceptance, became an important part of the teaching of the Rāmākṛishna Mission which Vivekananda founded, and has figured prominently in the writing of later Hindu apologists, such as Sarvepalli Rādhakrishnan. It is, I believe, a tendentious claim, and it masks an exclusivist position. Vivekananda was quite confident that, although all religions are equal, some are more equal than others. For him the highest expression of religion was to be found in advaita vedānta. Other forms of religion he regarded as legitimate in their own ways, but inferior to advaita. The teaching and claims of other religions had their validity (and so “all religions are one”) yet advaita remained supreme. So successful was this form of apologetic, first proclaimed in the West by Vivekananda and the Rāmākṛishna Mission, that many western writers on Hinduism accepted the view that advaita is the essential Hinduism, and that misunderstanding can still be found in western textbook treatments of Hinduism.

Vivekananda’s view, however, is not likely to provide a fruitful basis for understanding and dialogue between Christianity and Hinduism. A more positive Hindu response to western influences is to be found in the writings of Sri Aurobindo, a fellow-Bengali only nine years younger than Vivekananda. Aurobindo has been much less influential than Vivekananda in conveying his ideas to a western audience, but his teaching, in my opinion, provides a much more suitable starting point for East-West or Hindu-Christian dialogue.

Vivekananda and Aurobindo were both influenced by western thought and Christian ideas, but they reacted in quite different ways to these influences.

Vivekananda’s higher education inevitably led him into contact, not only with the general patterns of thought of western science and philosophy, but also with western teachers. When Vivekananda entered the college of the Scottish Church Mission Board in 1880 to study for his B.A. he found himself in an atmosphere strongly influenced by Christian assumptions and in classes taught by missionaries. It was a Westerner, Professor William Hastie, who first mentioned the name of Rāmākṛishna to Vivekananda. Vivekananda’s later thought bore the marks of ideas either western or Christian, or

both, and in this respect his experience was a continuation of the process of renaissance which had influenced Hinduism during the nineteenth century.

Later, when Vivekananda visited America to speak as a representative of Hindu Faith at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago he found himself in a different relationship with western ideas and values. He appeared in Chicago as a great champion of traditional Hindu values, and it was the reporting of his speeches there that won him an immediate and enthusiastic following in his own country.⁵ After a long period during which India had to endure the situation of being a mission ground, with their own country and traditions often greatly criticized or at best regarded with an air of patronising superiority, Indians were able to look upon Vivekananda as a missionary of Hinduism. Vivekananda himself gave firm expression to the aim of his journeys to the West when he called upon his compatriots to anticipate "the conquest of the whole world by India."⁶ Yet it is clear that the meeting of Vivekananda and the people of America was not entirely a one-sided affair. As has often been the case, the missionary came to appreciate some of the values of those to whom he preached an alien message. He expressed approval of the evidences he had seen in the West of practical help and social service carried out in the name of religious faith. This observation no doubt gave impetus to his desire to do something for the practical welfare of the poor in India, and later influenced him in his insistence upon incorporating into the aims of the Rāmakrishna Mission the need to foster the material as well as the spiritual welfare of the people. Vivekananda was sufficiently rooted in his own faith and his own conviction that India had a unique contribution to make to the world not to be easily moved by his initial impression of the West. But he was able to make a discriminating assessment of what he saw, and was large-minded enough to admit the value of some aspects of life in the West.

In addition to his observations of a desire for service among some of the religious people of America, Vivekananda also noted the value of good organization. At the time of the formation of the Rāmakrishna Mission, he said: "From my travels I have come to see that

⁵ The speeches made by Vivekananda at the Parliament of Religions are in *The Complete Works*, Vol. 1.

⁶ *The Complete Works*, Vol. 3, p. 276.

without organization nothing great or permanent can be done.”⁷ The way in which the Rāmakrishna Mission was organized probably owed something to Vivekananda’s contact with the West, and there is little doubt that the organization of the Rāmakrishna Mission has played an important part in its success.

Whilst there are indications that Vivekananda was influenced by the West in these practical matters, there is no sign of his having been attracted to western theological or philosophical notions. The basis of his teaching was the uncompromising conviction that advaita vedānta is the supreme philosophy of religion, and that all else must be a preparation for that. The fact that Vivekananda was cast as an apologist for Hinduism, to reassert his own people’s pride and confidence in their cultural and religious traditions, made it inevitable that he would not readily acknowledge insights which came to him from sources outside India. That there was western influence on Vivekananda is indubitable; that it broadened his religious sympathies or understanding is doubtful.

The influence of western education and thought upon Aurobindo was more marked, and produced a more radical effect. His contact with the West was much closer than that given to Vivekananda by a hybrid education and fleeting visits to America and Europe. Aurobindo’s experience of the West extended over a much longer period. It will be recalled that Aurobindo was sent to England at the age of seven with the deliberate intention of giving him an English rather than an Indian education, and that he did not see his native India again for thirteen years. His education, first at the hands of a Congregational Minister and his wife in Manchester, then at St Paul’s School, and later at Cambridge, was a traditional classical education. Aurobindo studied Greek and Latin, English and European History, and French, and with these subjects submitted his formative years to the influence of those forces which had shaped western thought and culture for centuries. Unlike Vivekananda, Aurobindo was not simply placed in contact with western ideas for one brief period of his life; he was made to think and live like a Westerner by the whole process of his education.

⁷ Eastern & Western Disciples, *The Life of Swami Vivekananda*, Advaita Ashrama, Calcutta, 6th edn., 1960, pp. 500, 501.

It was not until he went to Cambridge that Aurobindo had his first contact, apart from his infant experiences, with Indian thought and affairs. It was at Cambridge that his somewhat distant and idealistic view of India was given expression by the act of joining a society which professed to work for revolution in India.⁸ On his return to India, with his formal education completed, Aurobindo's interest at first was chiefly in political activity. Only gradually did the cultural and spiritual appeal of India make itself felt. It was when he reached a point of frustration with political activity that Aurobindo turned aside from revolutionary nationalism to look more deeply at India's religious traditions. Unlike Vivekananda, Aurobindo was never hailed as a champion of Hinduism in any of its traditional forms, and it was partly this that enabled him to develop an eclectic attitude. He was critical of the abstraction of some Indian philosophy and by implication of the advaita which underlay Vivekananda's teaching. Aurobindo, no doubt influenced by his upbringing and formal education, saw the need to complement traditional teaching from one culture with insights gleaned from another. So Aurobindo wrote of salvation as corporate as well as individual, and his idea of evolution suggests the influence of such western thinkers as Hegel, Spencer and Bergson, as well as the commonly accepted notion of progress that was prevalent in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Europe.

Vivekananda and Aurobindo, then, reacted to the West in very different ways. For Vivekananda the West might provide some models of organization, but in terms of religious truth Hinduism was far superior. Indeed, Vivekananda marks the apogee of the renewed self-confidence of Hinduism at the end of the nineteenth century. Aurobindo, turning to the religious life in 1910, just eight years after the death of Vivekananda, felt no necessity to reject western thought out of hand. He could happily incorporate diverse strands of Indian and western thought into his original Integral Yoga.

Vivekananda — the superiority of advaita

Although Vivekananda's presentation of Hinduism has often been hailed as an example of broad-minded religious tolerance, and

⁸ A. B. Purani, *The Life of Sri Aurobindo*, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, 1964.

not least at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago and by his western followers, his teaching is not as tolerant as many would suggest. He assumes that advaita is the highest and truest expression of religion, and so deduces that other religious attitudes, from polytheism to deism, are preliminary stages which a devotee must out-grow before coming to a full understanding of religious truth.

This assumption on the part of Vivekananda leads to his construction of the "ladder theory" which he applies within Indian religion as well as in contrasts between advaita and Christian theism. So in Vivekananda's view the systems of dvaita and visishtadvaita were lower stages of religion which would find their crown in advaita. In passing it may be noted that this is built on weak historical foundations, for the classic expressions of advaita in the teaching of Sankarācharya preceded rather than followed the visishtadvaita of Rāmānuja and the dvaita of Madhva. However, Vivekananda claimed that the Upanishads show a development from dvaita to visishtadvaita, and that all else, even in those ancient scriptures, is a preparation for the supreme truth of advaita. In making this assertion Vivekananda appears to have fallen into the trap of basing the stages of his argument upon his final conclusion. The existence of different systems of philosophy within Hinduism, and their co-existence down the centuries, is a fact of history which does not appear to the uncommitted observer to be part of a process which leads inevitably and finally to the acceptance of advaita as the supreme philosophy; rather, it seems to suggest that within the subtlety and comprehensiveness of Hindu thought a variety of philosophies are able to co-exist, with no ultimate victory likely for any of them. Vivekananda criticized the concept of God in both of the alternative systems, but does not appear to have fully understood the positions held by the dvaitin and the visishtadvaitin.⁹ So he claimed that dvaita accepts three separate infinities—God, soul, and nature—in spite of the assertion in the writings of dvaita philosophers that their system is a unity in which soul and nature are entirely dependent upon God, who is alone infinite. Similarly, Vivekananda's criticism of visishtadvaita does less than justice to the understanding of God in that system as the ground of existence, infinite and eternal.

⁹ Cf. Nalini Devadas, *Swami Vivekananda*, CISRS, Bangalore, 1968, pp. 14, 15.

In a lecture on vedānta, delivered at Lahore on the 12th November 1897, Vivekananda asserted the superiority of advaita in the following way:

The same God whom the ignorant man saw outside nature, the same whom the little-knowing man saw as interpenetrating the universe, and the same whom the sage realizes as his own Self, as the whole universe itself—all are One and the same Being, the same entity seen from different standpoints, seen through different glasses of Maya, perceived by different minds, and all the difference was caused by that. Not only so, but one view must lead to the other. . . Thus you can see that this [Advaita] and this alone, and none else, can be the only scientific religion. . . let us take the ignorant by the hand, lead them always step by step just as they can go, and know that every step in religious growth in India has been progressive.¹⁰

It is clear from this long quotation that Vivekananda did not regard all religions and all systems of Hinduism as equally true and equally valuable—an impression that is sometimes given of the attitude of the Rāmakrishna Mission. Rāmakrishna's attitude to other systems within Hinduism, such as dvaita and visishtadvaita, seems to have been that they were valid alternatives to advaita, and that all could lead to the same goal. But this evidently was not the case with Vivekananda. For him, advaita was supreme, and at best the other systems could only be regarded as preparation for advaita. As Nalini Devadas points out,¹¹ Vivekananda's teaching on Comprehensive Vedānta appears at first to suggest that every higher stage of vedānta meaningfully includes the lower stages. But on closer examination of the analogies he used, it becomes evident that there is a break between each system. One does not lead naturally to another; the sādḥaka has to perceive the annulment of one system before going on to another.

¹⁰ *The Complete Works*, Vol. 3, pp. 423, 424.

¹¹ Devadas, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

Nevertheless, Vivekananda's insistence on the supremacy of advaita was an important part of his successful missionary strategy. He spread to western observers the impression that advaita was essential Hinduism. Other aspects of the Hindu tradition were to be regarded as simply preparatory stages leading to advaita, and Christianity, with its notions of a personal God, was necessarily inferior.

In his lecture, "Reason and Religion," Vivekananda claimed that the idea of a god "outside the universe," as Creator and Ruler, is untenable, and he based his objection largely on current ideas of evolution.¹² Evolution, he said, had shown that causes are not external to effects, but are contained within them. He argued that our concept of divinity must be such as to allow that divinity emerges from man, rather than being something external to and independent of the life we know. From this point he proceeded to the suggestion that in order to ensure that our concept of divinity is sufficiently comprehensive, we must frame it in terms of "an ultimate generalisation." The Brahman of the vedānta, he suggested, fits the category of an ultimate generalisation because Brahman is the last generalisation to which we can come. It has no attributes, but "is Existence, Knowledge, and Bliss—Absolute."

Vivekananda also supported his claim for the superiority of the doctrine of Brahman over notions of a personal God by reference to Hindu scriptures.¹³ He asserted that the most ancient and authoritative scriptures, the Sruti, deal with principles, whilst the less binding scriptures, the Smriti, contain the stories of avatārs and rishis. Vivekananda regarded this as an illustration of the pre-eminence of the impersonal, an indication that the impersonal is a higher expression of truth than the personal. Again, one must enter a caveat. The Upanishads may deal with the impersonal Brahman, but what of the earlier Sruti in the Rig Veda? Is Indra to be regarded simply as impersonal power? It seems unlikely.

Vivekananda's doctrine of God, then, rests upon an advaitist interpretation of Brahman, and maintains the superiority of the impersonal over the personal, and of the ultimate generalisation over the specific attributes of personality.

¹² *The Complete Works*, Vol. 1, pp. 366-382.

¹³ *The Complete Works*, Vol. 3, pp. 249-251.

Nevertheless, Vivekananda's thought does leave some room for the idea of a personal God. Much of his thinking on this subject can be gleaned from his lectures on Bhakti Yoga, reproduced in volume 3 of *The Collected Works*. In these lectures he spoke of Ishvara as "the highest possible reading of the Absolute by the human mind." All is Brahman. But because the impersonal Brahman cannot be loved and worshipped, the bhakti chooses "the relative aspect of Brahman, that is, Ishvara, the Supreme Ruler."¹⁴ Yet it is māyā which creates the apparent differences between Brahman and Ishvara. It is the ignorant man who stands in need of the personal God; a little-knowing man who suspects the immanence of God in the universe; and the sage who can say of himself in relation to Brahman: "Thou art that." As people progress from ignorance to mature spiritual awareness of reality, so they should progress from belief in a personal God to an advaitist view of life.

The success of Vivekananda's Lectures on Rāja Yoga led to the assumption among many Westerners that Hinduism was to be identified with advaita, to the detriment of a western appreciation of the importance of visishtadvaita and bhakti. But the Lectures on Rāja Yoga, in which Vivekananda's teaching on advaita was presented in its most systematic form, also fitted in very well with Vivekananda's missionary presentation of Hinduism. Advaita was not put forward as one possible interpretation, but as the climax of true religious thought and practice. By making this assertion, Vivekananda made a considerable contribution to the reform of Hinduism by reasserting the positive claims of Hinduism and claiming the superiority of advaita to all other forms of religious faith and practice. In this way and in this man, the change in the nineteenth century reform of Hinduism from a defensive reaction to Christianity to a confident offensive against western materialism reached its climax. Vivekananda gave great encouragement to Hindu self-confidence at the turn of the century, and that had important implications for Indian politics as well as for its religion. He also achieved considerable success as a missionary advocate of Hinduism, making disciples in America and Europe, and persuading a number of western intellectuals that advaita vedānta was indeed an enlightened and rational faith, suitable for a scientific age. But in the long run his

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

rather aggressive claims for Hinduism will probably be seen as a detriment rather than an asset in dialogue between religions.

Aurobindo — Integral Yoga

A more positive attitude to the possible meeting of eastern and western ideas is found in Sri Aurobindo. Aurobindo was critical of the “ultimate generalisation” favoured by Vivekananda, and by implication of the emphasis on the superiority of advaita which is found in Vivekananda’s teaching. In one comment on the Sat-Chit-Ananda of the Upanishads, Aurobindo wrote:

They reduced everything to three abstractions, existence, consciousness, and bliss of being, and they tended to get rid of the two of these three which seemed dependent on the first and most abstract, and to throw all back into a pure featureless existence from which everything else had been discharged, all representations, all values, except the one infinite and timeless fact of being. But the intellect had still one further possible step to take, and it took it in Buddhist philosophy. It found that even this final fact of existence was only a representation; it abstracted that also and got to an infinite zero which might be either a void or an eternal inexpressible.

The heart and life, as we know, have an exact opposite law. They cannot live with abstractions; they can find their satisfaction only in things that are concrete or can be made seizable . . . when the heart and life turn towards the Highest and the Infinite, they arrive not at an abstract existence or non-existence, a Sat or else a Nirvana, but at an existant, a Sat Purusha, not merely at a consciousness but at a conscious Being. . . .¹⁵

This quotation shows Aurobindo’s dissatisfaction with the kind of teaching that was being presented to the world outside India as essential Hinduism. The success of the Rāmakrishna Mission and Vivekananda in persuading the West that their interpretation was authentic Hinduism was later reinforced by the polemical writings of Radhakrishnan and his expositions of neo-advaita. It is significant

¹⁵ Sri Aurobindo, *The Synthesis of Yoga*, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, 1957, pp. 660,661.

that Aurobindo, deeply influenced by his western education, should have taken exception to the basic tenets of neo-advaita and produced a philosophy which was at the same time a more genuine expression of Indian spirituality and a real attempt to incorporate insights from western thought.

One of the principal motives behind the construction of Integral Yoga was the desire to enunciate a system of spirituality which did not confine itself to an otherworldly type of religion. Aurobindo was anxious to encourage people to regard their physical and mental development, together with their spiritual progress, as part of a single exercise. The definition of Integral Yoga which is at once brief and illuminating is the phrase "all life is Yoga." Aurobindo hoped that people would find in his teaching a system of yoga which would fit naturally into their daily life and the life of the world, accepting both physical and human nature as it is, and beginning from the aspirant's present stage of physical, mental, and spiritual development. The aim of Integral Yoga is to enable people to "live in the Divine," but not yet apart from nature or other human beings. Aurobindo wrote of this aim:

It neither accepts our earthly existence as it is, nor can it be satisfied with some kind of moral perfection or religious ecstasy, with a heaven beyond or with some dissolution of our being by which we get satisfactorily done with the trouble of existence. Our aim becomes quite other; it is to live in the Divine, the Infinite, in God and not in any mere egoism and temporality, but at the same time not apart from Nature, from our fellow human beings, from earth and the mundane existence, any more than the Divine lives aloof from us and the world.¹⁶

It is clear from this, as from other sections of Aurobindo's teaching, that the life which Integral Yoga is meant to encompass is not simply the mundane life of the world, but also a "higher conscious existence." But the aim is not to escape from daily life into a spiritual heaven, but to cooperate with the Divine so as to bring the life of the Divine into the everyday life of the world.

Aurobindo was suspicious of the emphasis which renunciation has received in much traditional Hindu spirituality, fearing that such an emphasis makes renunciation, and a consequent divorce from the

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 497.

realities of life, the chief aim of the devotee. Renunciation for Aurobindo was regarded as a useful instrument but not as an end in itself. Because the world is to be regarded as in some sense a manifestation of the Divine, it could not of itself be blamed for all human ills, nor viewed as the delusion from which we must at all costs escape.

We regard the world, not as an invention of the devil or a self-delusion, but as a manifestation of the Divine, although as yet a partial because a progressive and evolutionary manifestation. Therefore for us renunciation of life cannot be the goal of life nor rejection of the world the object for which the world was created.¹⁷

Thus there is in Aurobindo no trace of that rather despairing view of the world as a place from which to escape at all costs and at the earliest opportunity which sometimes results from extreme applications of the doctrine of *māyā*.

The life of the world and the life of the spirit are regarded as interdependent in Aurobindo's scheme. But his Integral Yoga is also comprehensive in its general philosophical scope, and he suggests none of the exclusiveness that is found in Vivekananda's Rāja Yoga. Aurobindo states categorically that three conceptions are necessary to his Yoga, a trinity of God, nature, and the human soul, which from a slightly different viewpoint may be regarded as the transcendent, the universal, and the individual. Whilst in Vivekananda's teaching the place of Ishvara is uncertain, in Aurobindo's system Ishvara has an essential part to play. It is Aurobindo's hypothesis that God and the individual have need of one another; as Bhakta needs Bhagavān, so does Bhagavān need the Bhakta. Here the concept of the relationship between human and divine, never very certain in Rāja Yoga, is clear and definite. Aurobindo does not consider yoga to be simply a method of self-help or self-improvement. On the contrary, he wrote:

The contact of the human soul and individual consciousness with the Divine is the very essence of Yoga. Yoga is the union of that which has become separated in the play of the universe with its own true self, origin and universality. . . . Its method is

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 375.

a direct commerce between the human Purusha in the human body and the divine Purusha who dwells in every body and yet transcends all form and name.¹⁸

This expresses a most important element in Aurobindo's thought. For Aurobindo the purpose of yoga is not only to rise to the divine consciousness, but also to bring the "supramental power" down into human consciousness. Indeed, he considered the central principle of Integral Yoga to be God, who brings together the different aspects of yoga, so that its purpose is "to put our whole conscious being into relation and contact with the Divine . . . so that . . . God Himself, the real person in us, becomes the sadhak of the sadhana."¹⁹

Aurobindo conceives of a "higher" working on a "lower" nature in the practice of yoga, and in his system there are inevitably two distinct movements, the surrender of the individual to a divine power being followed and accompanied by a response of divine grace. The yogi seeks to discipline and subdue his body and mind, as in Rāja Yoga, but the end he has in view is quite clearly that the force of the Divine may "descend" upon him. Partly because of this clear understanding of and dependence upon the transcendent, Aurobindo urged his followers to have faith in a way that would not have come naturally to Vivekananda. He exhorted his disciples:

Have faith in the Divine, in the Divine Grace, in the truth of the sadhana, in the eventual triumph of the spirit over its mental and vital and physical difficulties, in the Path of the Guru, in the experience of things other than are written in the philosophy of Haeckel or Huxley, or Bertrand Russell, because if these things are not true, there is no meaning in yoga.²⁰

Vivekananda, in common with other advaitins, would doubtless have counted it an advantage not to demand so clear a commitment to belief in a transcendent divine power.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

²⁰ Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga*, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, 1969, p. 524.

Aurobindo's clearly-stated belief in transcendence played a vital part in his enunciation of Integral Yoga. For him the Divine was not an abstraction, neither was it the "ultimate generalisation" of Vivekananda, but a conscious being with whom one could enter into a relationship. He wrote of this:

... that there may be any possibility of a Yoga of Devotion, we must assume first that the Supreme Existence is not an abstraction or a state of existence, but a conscious being; secondly that he meets with us in the universe, and is in some way immanent in it as well as its source—otherwise we should have to go out of the cosmic life to meet him; thirdly that he is capable of personal relations with us and must therefore be not incapable of personality; finally, that when we approach him by our human emotions we receive a response in kind.²¹

Aurobindo, then, conceived of a God who is personal and capable of personal relationships. Yet his thought was far too subtle for him to be able to think of God simply as "a person." He was aware of the problems raised by some popular forms of Christian belief, in which an often unexamined idea of God as "a person" has some currency. He criticised such a simplistic view when he wrote:

... the conception of the Divine as an external omnipotent Power who has 'created' the world and governs it like an absolute and arbitrary monarch – the Christian or Semitic conception – has never been mine; it contradicts too much my seeing and experience during thirty years of sadhana.²²

He concluded that atheism in Europe had been a reaction against an over-simplified view of deity. He was concerned by questions which arise if we think of God as "a person," tending to project fixed attributes onto him, and then to think of such qualities as divine and therefore ideal. Apart from problems which such an attitude creates in leaving the believer with static moral attitudes and judgements in a changing world, it also may result in eliminating

²¹ *The Synthesis of Yoga*, p. 635.

²² *Letters on Yoga*, p. 167.

other and non-ideal qualities from our thinking about the Divine—and this is contrary to Aurobindo's hope of an Integral Yoga which could gather up all facets of experience and weave them into a coherent pattern. God can be met, Aurobindo agreed, as Love, Truth, Justice, Power and Beauty. Yet he also went on to say:

The courage of an unflinching and spiritual vision and experience can meet him also in more severe or in terrible forms. None of these are (sic) all the Divinity; yet these forms of his personality are real truths of himself in which he meets us and seems to deal with us, as if the rest had been put away behind him. He is each separately and all together. He is Vishnu, Krishna, Kali . . .²³

Vishnu, the creator and great sky-god; Krishna, the avatāra beloved of devotees, symbolising the devotional aspect of religion; and Kālī, the destroyer of life—all these together help to provide a picture of what is meant by divinity. It is a profound comment of Hinduism to say that all this is God, suggesting that divinity is to be found in all life and experience, in the perplexing and the terrible as well as in the obviously good and desirable. Aurobindo, in common with many other Hindus, could not reconcile his belief in deity with a picture of a capricious person who could be called upon to justify some elements of human existence, but could be judiciously judged to be absent from others. His notion of divinity had to be capable of embracing all life and experience.

Aurobindo's view of divinity included the belief that God is personal; that individuals can relate to Him; that His power is somehow available to help and guide the individual; that people can be in communion with God. But he also believed that God is more than simply a person; that because God is the ground and source of *all* life the puzzling contradictions and inconsistencies of life are also part of what "God" means. He believed that Europeans had often had difficulty in understanding Indian religion "apart from Vedantic or Samkhya philosophy" because of the richness and variety of conceptions of divinity in Indian thought compared with what he regarded as the rather restricted concepts of God in much western thinking.²⁴ But unlike Vivekananda he did not take refuge in the belief

²³ *The Synthesis of Yoga*, p. 668.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 435.

that personal conceptions of God necessarily represent less developed religious understanding than advaita. For Aurobindo it was important to hold together the varied insights of the different systems, and to acknowledge the reality and value in all of them, without assuming that one must be able to stand by itself as pre-eminent over the rest.

Aurobindo achieved a synthesis of many of the ideas of God and the Absolute which are to be found in Hinduism. He genuinely attempted to hold together a variety of different concepts of the divine and to give them all real value. His teaching combines in a remarkable way views which stress the identity of the divine and the universe with those which assert the reality of the "supracosmic Reality"; attitudes which conceive of the divine as an ineffable Absolute with those which regard God as personal being with whom one may enter into a relationship.

The Divine Being, Sachchidananda, is at once impersonal and personal; it is an Existence and the origin and foundation of all truths, forces, powers, existences, but it is also the one transcendent Conscious Being and the All-Person of whom all conscious beings are the selves and personalities; for he is their highest Self and the universal indwelling Presence.²⁵

His acceptance of the idea of the transcendent, the "Supracosmic Existence," is most important in Aurobindo's Yoga. His whole system assumes that the devotee can reach out towards the divine, and in so doing enjoy a real personal relationship with God, and then come to recognize the "divinity within" and the divine activity within the universe. A central part of Aurobindo's Yoga stresses a double movement from the individual to the divine; and from the divine back to the individual.

Aurobindo's conception of Yoga is not simply that of a disciplined and dedicated individual realizing his own potential, or awakening to a recognition of the divinity within, but of a reciprocal movement in which the devotee who seeks the knowledge and inspiration of the divine is transfigured by a power coming from beyond his own resources. Because of this emphasis, Aurobindo's understanding of

²⁵ Sri Aurobindo, *The Life Divine*, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, 6th edn., 1970, p. 662.

the aim of yoga is consistent with the original meaning of the word; he sees the end of yoga in union rather than simply in liberation.²⁶

As we have seen, Aurobindo asserted that three conceptions are necessary in the practice of yoga. The three "consenting parties," as he called them, are "God, Nature and the human soul, or, in more abstract language, the Transcendental, the Universal, and the Individual."²⁷ And he saw it as part of the purpose of yoga not only to unite God and the human soul but also to reconcile God and nature. The transcendent, said Aurobindo, acts upon nature and the individual, drawing both towards itself in a process of evolution. In this process, the transcendent power or reality is quite essential.

It is this truth which makes necessary to every philosophy of Yoga the conception of the Ishwara, Lord, supreme Soul or supreme Self, towards whom the effort is directed and who gives the illuminating touch and the strength to attain.²⁸

In Aurobindo's scheme of Integral Yoga the place of the divine Personality is retained even when liberation is attained. At no point does he envisage a situation in which the divine Personality is recognized simply as a guide on the way to liberation in a kind of nirvana.²⁹ For Aurobindo, God is always transcendent and yet always indwelling the cosmos and the human soul. It is this conviction about the permanent place of the transcendent divine in the scheme of things that makes essential to Aurobindo's Yoga a belief in God and an attempt to relate to Him.

This can be seen in the method of Aurobindo's Yoga, which involves the "progressive surrender of the ego to the Beyond-Ego." As the devotee seeks to discover and to submit himself to the Divine will, so the other part of the "double movement" ensures that the

²⁶ The Sanskrit *yoga* is derived from the root *yuj* = "join." Derivations from this root are used to describe a team of animals yoked together, the joining of animals to a vehicle, and the connected parts of an army's equipment. Later developments of *yoga* led to its being used to describe a remedy or cure, or as the method of achieving an aim, and from this later meaning comes the usage which connotes the use of strenuous exercise as the means of achieving one's aim.

²⁷ *The Synthesis or Yoga*, p. 34.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 34

²⁹ See S. K. Maitri, *The Meeting of East and West in Sri Aurobindo's Philosophy*, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, 1968, pp. 261-271.

individual is led and supported by the divine power. Aurobindo's Yoga is not simply a natural ascent by means of the physical and mental disciplines of yoga, but a process in which a higher power works on the nature of man. And the first essential step in his Yoga is a process of surrender which is said to include ridding oneself of "the enjoyment of desire as the ruling human motive," allowing one's mind to be transformed by "divine illumination," and the supplanting of one's will by "the total working of a swiftly powerful lucidly automatic, divinely moved and guided Force."³⁰ Clearly there is a considerable contrast between the emphasis of Vivekananda's Rāja Yoga upon what the individual may attain by and for himself, and Aurobindo's repeated references to the need for surrender to a Force, or Power, or Divine will, which then takes hold of and transforms the individual.

Conclusion

The differences between Aurobindo and Vivekananda in their ideas of God are apparent. Vivekananda regarded the idea of a personal God as a necessity for most people at a certain stage in their development. But as they progress in spiritual discernment they should become capable of dispensing with belief in a personal God, for, according to Vivekananda, such a belief carries with it severe limitations. In this Vivekananda was being consistent with the philosophy of advaita and of Sankarācharya, although, of course, he was not here in agreement with the less consistent attitudes of his mentor, Sri Rāmakrishna.

For Aurobindo, on the other hand, a belief in God was an essential part of the religious life. The whole pattern of his teaching on Integral Yoga emphasises the "Supreme Existence (who is) a conscious being" as an object of devotion and the giver of gifts to men. What to Vivekananda was a step on the way, to be discarded once an advanced stage of spiritual development had been reached, was to Aurobindo an essential and permanent part of yoga. It was possible for Vivekananda to present his teaching to audiences in the West with the implied assurance that it was suitable for those who had become too sophisticated to believe in God. Such an attitude could not legitimately be reconciled with Aurobindo's teaching.

³⁰ *The Synthesis of Yoga*, p. 103.

There was also a contrast between the two in their understanding of faith.

Vivekananda's Lectures on Rāja Yoga stressed the reasonableness of the experimental method. The person who submitted himself to the discipline of Rāja Yoga did not have to adopt any particular belief, nor did he need anything other than the powers he discovered within himself to lead along the path towards samādhi. It would appear that Vivekananda considered that he was presenting a religious system which was rational and scientific when he said that no faith or belief is necessary to the practice of Rāja Yoga. Certainly some of his western disciples found great attraction in the thought that in Rāja Yoga they were dealing with something purely experimental, rather than with metaphysical propositions.

Aurobindo, on the other hand, is both more traditional and more profound in his teaching on faith. It need hardly be mentioned that the abstruse and difficult writings of Aurobindo were not created with popular appeal in view, and there is no indication that Aurobindo was influenced in the presentation of his system by the consideration of what men and women conditioned by the assumptions of a scientific age would make of his teaching. It has been seen that belief in God is essential to Aurobindo's system; faith, in the sense of such belief, is a pre-condition of Integral Yoga.

Faith in him [the Ishwara] is the most central thing in the sraddha of the integral yoga.⁸¹

Without a belief in the Divine, who descends into all life in order to raise all life to the Divine, it would not be possible to make sense of Aurobindo's teaching.

But although Aurobindo's teaching lacked the essential simplicity which won popular support for Vivekananda, the temper of the age appears to have had a deeper influence upon him. Aurobindo was concerned with notions of progress and evolution which were becoming generally accepted during his early years. His attempt was to relate the methods and insights of yoga to a whole trend of modern thought and to a wide range of religious ideal both within and beyond Hinduism. The most obvious expression of this attempt is to be found in the extensive writings of Aurobindo on evolution, in which he brought together a variety of strands from Hinduism,

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 893.

together with ideas of development and progress which are more commonly found within Judaism, Christianity, Marxism, and the whole tangled skein of contemporary western thought.

Vivekananda and Aurobindo were both influenced by the West, but represent quite different models of dialogue between Hinduism and western patterns of thought and belief. Vivekananda reacted against western philosophical and theological insights, and stressed the exclusive notion that in advaita Hinduism possessed the highest expression of religious truth. Other religions could be regarded as legitimate, and personal concepts of God could play their part, but only as preparations for the supreme truth of advaita. The success of Vivekananda and the Rāmakrishna Mission in the West encouraged the view that advaita is essential Hinduism.

Aurobindo, however, was more deeply influenced by western thought, and represents in his writings a more genuine meeting of East and West. The abstruse nature of much of his writing is perhaps chiefly responsible for a failure to recognize his importance. But the way in which he brings together varied strands of Indian tradition and weaves into his writing insights taken from western philosophy makes him an important figure for those concerned with dialogue between Christianity and Hinduism. His exposition of the idea of the Divine suggests how Hindu and Christian notions of God may be complementary rather than contradictory.