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Book Review: "A New Look at Aurobindo"

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A New Look at Aurobindo. By Frank Thompson. Delhi: ISPCK, 1990, 106 p. n.p.

A FINE ANALYSIS of Aurobindo's view of other religions is available in Robert Minor's excellent essay "The Response of Śrī Aurobindo and the Mother," Chapter Five in *Modern Indian Responses to Religious Pluralism*, edited by Harold Coward (Albany: SUNY, 1987, pp. 85-104). In it Minor demonstrates that Aurobindo viewed all religions as partial approximations of the one divine truth that is above them and towards which they are evolving (p. 101). That spiritual goal Aurobindo equated with the experience of Brahman as both Being and Becoming (p. 91). This he saw as arising from the Vedas and Upaniṣads—a view of *Saccidānanda* that led not to Śāṅkara's *māyā* or illusionary world, but to a Becoming that affirms the historical world and guides its spiritual evolution (p. 94). It is the further analysis of Aurobindo's understanding of this historical process of spiritual evolution that Frank Thompson takes as his focus in *A New Look at Aurobindo*. Thompson shows that Aurobindo's understanding of this goal and process was influenced by and is at points quite comparable to Christian doctrines such as the incarnation.

Thompson suggests that Aurobindo took more notice of and was more influenced by Christianity than other religions. This was partly due to the fact that as a boy he grew up in the context of an English Christian family with whom he read the Bible and attended church. There was also his education at St. Paul's School in London followed by King's College at Cambridge. But Aurobindo judged Christianity to have made both positive and negative contributions and these Thompson outlines in Chapter Four. Aurobindo was critical of the medieval Christian civilization of Europe in which the church had erected a superstructure of intellectual and spiritual privileging in monasticism and the church hierarchy. He also criticizes the emphasis on reason in the enlightenment and its tendency to dissolve religious and communal order—the sense of the whole. The reformers Aurobindo sees as

being too negative and too influenced by rational religion which tends toward a bare and cold religion lacking in spiritual intensity and insight. Aurobindo's most serious critique of Christianity, says Thompson, is that it has allied itself with oppressive political power (see its historical record since Constantine). It has been used to sanction customs and institutions that are essentially political in nature (p. 44). Hinduism, Aurobindo thinks, is superior here due to its relative absence of structure. With all of this in mind Aurobindo calls for a constant "deconstruction" of organized religion.

On the positive side (and this is the real thrust of Thompson's book) Aurobindo is shown to make significant use of the notion of "incarnation," and it is this topic which is of supreme interest for Hindu-Christian Dialogue. Therefore, other chapters of Thompson's book which focus on ethics and the doctrine of God will be passed over in favour of a focus on incarnation (Chapter Five). In this chapter Thompson makes a good case for influence and overlap from Christian thinking to the ideas Aurobindo develops in his *Essays on the Gītā* and his poem *Savitri*. Aurobindo uses the notion of incarnation to represent the vision toward which the evolution of spiritual development is moving—God's manifestation on earth as "the universal incarnation." This unfolding of God's spiritual manifestation on earth is seen as history by Aurobindo—a history in which *avatāras* such as Christ, Buddha and Kṛṣṇa play key roles. Although he toys with docetic notions of the *avatāras* as not being fully human, Thompson argues that Aurobindo benefitted from his knowledge of Christian discussions of docetism and adoptionism. In the end Aurobindo insists that an *avatāra* assumes a genuine historical human life. Thompson concludes that Aurobindo ends up stating a two natures view as did the creed of Chalcedon, "The Avatar is always a dual phenomenon of divinity and humanity; the Divine takes upon himself the human nature with all its outward limitations and makes them

48 Book Reviews

the circumstances, means and instruments of divine power, a vessel of divine works." (*Essays on the Gītā*, SABCL, Vol. 13, p. 155).

Not only does Aurobindo maintain that God must become human and be born on earth (echoing Athanasius) but in his long poem Savitri the *avatār* as female is presented as the fully human incarnation. Surely this will be of great interest to Christian and Hindu feminist scholars. Aurobindo presents Savitri not as the cyclically recurring mother goddess (as one might expect from a Hindu) but as a unique fully human incarnation with the task of "Translating heaven into a human shape..." (*Savitri*, SABCL, Vol. 29, p. 353). Thompson suggests that nothing could better confirm Aurobindo's insistence on the full humanity of the incarnation than his selection of a female subject for his poem—Savitri presented in the three archetypes of femininity: a Mary figure, a warrior goddess, and a symbol of Wisdom (pp. 60-61). It is through Savitri in the unity of all her incarnation roles, says Thompson, that she functions as mediatrix, as the initiator and culminator of a unique atonement (p. 61). In

Essays on the Gītā, concludes Thompson, the incarnations of Christ, Kṛṣṇa and Buddha are shown as functioning within the plurality of religions attuned to the one end—Savitri as symbol of the universal integration of all human life (p. 62).

While Thompson has alerted us to a most interesting comparative analysis of incarnation between Christianity and one contemporary Hindu thinker, it is clear that the full study remains to be done. Thompson's little book is suggestive at best, but is all the more valuable for that. What he does indicate is that the comparative study of incarnation between Christianity and Hinduism is far from complete (notwithstanding Geoffrey Parrinder's *Avatar and Incarnation* Oxford, 1982). Aurobindo's integration of the evolutionary and historical thrusts along with his culmination in the feminine incarnation calls for a new study to be undertaken.

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