SRI AUROBINDO’S INTEGRAL VIEW OF OTHER RELIGIONS

Sri Aurobindo Ghose (1872–1950), the Indian Nationalist and yogi, developed in the period of his life at Pondicherry in Southeast India1 a system of thought, practice and experience which he called ‘Integral Yoga’. The title indicated, he said, that ‘it takes up the essence and many processes of the old Yogas – its newness is in its aim, standpoint and the totality of its method’.2 In the development of Integral Yoga Aurobindo believed he was speaking and acting as a ‘realized yogi’3 or, better still, a yogi who was in the process of realization. He had not attained a final experience of jñāna, but he believed he had experienced levels of supra-mental consciousness which would lead to the higher level of Supermind itself.4

In such yogic experiences Aurobindo found a knowledge that was ‘integral’ as well. The experience was a unitary experience in which the separativeness of knower, knowledge and the known was broken down; in which the knowledge was more of the nature of identity than of a knowledge which divides subject and object as on the level of Mind.5 Yet the individual self was not lost in the experience, as it is in the Advaita Vedanta of Śaṅkara, but its knowledge was ‘a cosmic vision which is all-comprehensive, all-pervading, all-inhabiting’.6

Such an experience for Aurobindo did not, however, negate the world or the type of knowledge known on the lower level of Mind. It transformed the

1 This paper is concerned with the final period of Aurobindo’s life after he had retired from direct political activity. For a delineation of his thought in the various periods of his life, see my forthcoming Sri Aurobindo: the Perfect and the Good (Calcutta: Minerva Associates, 1978).
2 Sri Aurobindo, Birth Centenary Library (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust, 1972), xxvi, 108. Hereafter this set of his complete works will be abbreviated BCL.
4 Aurobindo was very conscious of the progressive and yet revelatory nature of his experiences. However, 24 November 1926 was considered his ‘Day of Siddhi’. On that day Aurobindo experienced the descent of the Overmind consciousness to the level of the earth-consciousness. This was to him the assurance that the Supermind would descend. See for this experience the discussions of this event by his disciples: K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar, Sri Aurobindo: A Biography and a History (3rd rev. ed. Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust, 1972), n, 987–91; and Ranganath Ramchandra Diwakar, Mahâyogi Sri Aurobindo: Life, Discipline and Teachings of Sri Aurobindo (5th ed. Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1972), pp. 193–4. Introductions to Aurobindo’s thought are numerous. Besides Iyengar and Diwakar see Beatrice Bruteau, Worthy is the World: The Hindu Philosophy of Sri Aurobindo (Rutherford, New Jersey: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 1971). For his thought in the various periods of his life see my Ethics.
5 BCL xviii, 137–41, 542.
6 Ibid. p. 136.
level of Mind, raising it to a higher consciousness. Aurobindo's experiences, therefore, did not negate the possibility of the writing down of his revelations to guide others. They informed his thought so that it was no longer limited to the logical systems of the mental level, but could still use the mental in such a way as even to contradict the law of contradiction. Thus, he could affirm from his vision of the Absolute that it was beyond both Being and Becoming, as well as unity and multiplicity. The Absolute as known in this experience, then, must certainly not be limited to mental constructions, but it must not be limited to non-mental constructions either. Aurobindo's experiences of supramental knowledge resulted in the descent of such knowledge, and this descent integrated the supramental into the level of Mind. The resulting 'systemization' of the knowledge gained from the experiences is found in his writings. The integration of the supramental gives the 'system' a certainty because it is based upon 'integral' knowledge, though the system is admittedly incomplete.

The experience revealed to Aurobindo that the entire universe is the evolution of a previously involuted Absolute, Saccidananda (Being-Consciousness-Force-Bliss) in the level of consciousness known as Supermind, from the extreme position of involution, Matter, back to the level of Saccidananda itself. It is an evolution of consciousness involving both matter and spirit in which matter is the most inconscient, though it is actually the Supermind veiled. Because all in the universe is the Supermind evolving to its highest form, Saccidananda, the desire of the true Self of the individual is to progress toward higher levels of consciousness. The level of Mind in this progress is that level on which Nature has become conscious of itself and its laws of evolution. Thus, the human being is able to participate consciously in the evolution and even to promote or inhibit it. Mind is, however, a limited and only indirectly illuminated consciousness and, therefore, is unaware of the unity and totality of reality which is known at higher levels of consciousness. The ignorance of Mind, or rather, its only partial knowledge, creates evil in the process by egoistically attaching itself exclusively to its own partial viewpoint and hindering the evolutionary progression.

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2 BCL xxii, 176-84, 192.
3 BCL xix, 912.
4 Calling the result a 'system' in the sense of a definite method of classification is not meant to imply that it is complete at all points, for Aurobindo himself speculates in his writings on some questions on the basis of his knowledge. He admits that he has no complete answer to some questions. See BCL xix, 1013-14. Whether the certainty placed in this 'system' is 'misplaced' certainty as argued by Eliot Deutsch ('Sri Aurobindo's Interpretation of Spiritual Experience: A Critique', International Philosophical Quarterly iv, 4 (December 1964), 591), however, is a normative judgment.
5 For a summary see BCL xix, 824. For a chart of the levels of the involution/evolution see my Sri Aurobindo, pp. 108-9, or Robert A. McDermott, 'Sri Aurobindo: An Integrated Theory of Individual and Historical Transformation', International Philosophical Quarterly xxi (June 1972), 175. A number of helpful diagrams illustrating the movement of ascent and descent may be found in Bruteau, pp. 123-4, 126-7.
6 BCL xviii, 42, 843; xv, 396.
7 BCL xxi, 599; xviii, 167.
process. Evil, for Aurobindo, is anything that hinders the evolutionary process of the universe toward perfection and good is anything which promotes that process.

This Weltanschauung, taken by Aurobindo as certain, because realized in supramental consciousnesses, is the key to Aurobindo’s ‘integral’ view of other religions and religious positions. Other religions are good to the extent that they agree with Aurobindo’s own religious stance and, thereby, promote the evolutionary process, and evil to the extent that they do not. Aurobindo’s position, then, it is the contention of this paper, resulted in the affirmation of religious positions to the extent that they agreed with his ‘integral’ system and the negation of them to the extent that they disagreed.

THE AFFIRMATION OF THE ESSENCE OF RELIGION

When Aurobindo spoke of other religions, he was speaking in terms of the ‘isms’ categories, such as Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, etc. He gave little if any indication that there is a variety of significant beliefs held under these reified categories, but merely used them in discussing other religious positions. He held, for example, that ‘Christianity’ is historically a Western offshoot of ‘Buddhism’, and he spoke of ‘the Christian or Semitic conception’ of God in monolithic tones as ‘an external omnipotent Power who has “created” the world and governs it like an absolute and arbitrary monarch...’. In the category of ‘Hinduism’, with which he was most familiar, however, he did note differences. These exist, he said, because of a different emphasis of the ‘Indian mind’ from that of the West in religious matters:

To the Indian mind the least important part of religion is its dogma; the religious spirit matters, not the theological credo. On the contrary, to the western mind a fixed intellectual belief is the most important part of a cult; it is its core of meaning, it is the thing that distinguishes it from others. For it is its formulated beliefs that make it either a true or a false religion, according as it agrees or does not agree with the credo of its critics. This notion, however foolish and shallow, is a necessary consequence of the western idea which falsely supposes that there is no other. The Indian religious thinker knows that all the highest eternal verities are truths of the spirit. There are no true or false religions, but rather all religions are true in their own way and degree. Each is one of the thousand paths to the One Eternal.

Thus, by affirming the category ‘Hinduism’ he saw it to have the variety which he believed lacking in other of the isms because of ‘Hinduism’s’ tolerance and its ability to accept contradictory systems and positions as true ‘in their own way’.

1 BCL xviii, 611, 615.
2 For a full discussion of the problem of evil in Aurobindo’s thought see my Sri Aurobindo, pp. 137-42.
4 BCL xxii, 174. Cf. also xv, 412 on ‘the Islamic religion’.
5 BCL xiv, 123-4.
Aurobindo, finding himself within this spirit did not, therefore, blatantly reject any religion as false. He affirmed as true an essence of religion which underlies all religions:

The deepest heart, the inmost essence of religion, apart from its outward machinery of creed, cult, ceremony and symbol, is the search for God and the finding of God. Its aspiration is to discover the Infinite, the Absolute, the One, the Divine, who is all these things and yet no abstraction but a Being.¹

This search for the Divine is so much the heart of all religion that Aurobindo at times defined religion as 'that instinct, idea, activity, discipline in man which aims directly at the Divine'.² This definition of the essence of religion leaves much unclear. What is meant when the word ‘Divine’ is used remains uncertain except in terms of such general concepts as absolute, infinite, non-abstract (not rationalizable). Note, however, that this essence is defined in experiential terms and thus the emphasis is upon the experience of the Divine. The essential knowledge which one gains or attains is intuitive rather than intellectual.³

Religion is the seeking after the spiritual, the suprarational and therefore in this sphere the intellectual reason may well be an insufficient help and find itself, not only at the end but from the beginning, out of its province and condemned to tread either diffidently or else with a stumbling presumptuousness in the realm of a power and a light higher than its own.⁴

It is this essence, the search for the Divine in experiential terms, that Aurobindo affirmed in all religions. In doing so, however, he was actually affirming his own view of the evolution of the Divine from less conscient to more conscient planes. This is clearly revealed in passages which indicate that the essence of religion was interpreted by Aurobindo as the result of the evolutionary urge that is at work in all of creation. The search for the Divine is, he said, the evolutionary movement at work in man, manifested in the essence of the religions:

In order to exceed our Nature and become divine, we must first get God; for we are the lower imperfect term of our being, He its higher perfect term. . . . This necessarily is the imperative justification of religion; not of a church, creed or theology, for all these things are religiosity, not religion, but that personal and intimate religious temper and spirit which moves man to worship, to aspire to or to pant after his own idea of the Supreme; for without such worship in the heart or such aspiration in the will or such thirst in the emotions, we shall not have the impulse or the strength for this great difficult and supreme effort of human nature to transcend itself and climb to its super-nature . . . the aim of religion, – but not

¹ BCL xv, 132. Cf. p. 145. By ‘a Being’ in this quotation, Aurobindo does not mean to limit the Divine to a personal god but to indicate that the personal is contained in the Absolute as is the impersonal. Actually, the Divine transcends both the personal and impersonal, though Aurobindo prefers impersonal terms. Cf. p. 352. ² Ibid. p. 162. ³ Ibid. p. 125. ⁴ Ibid. p. 127.
unhappily of the creeds and churches, – is to further the great aim of Nature by pushing man towards his evolution.¹

The affirmation of the essence of all religions is, therefore, an affirmation of Aurobindo’s own evolutionary theory. It is a logical correlate of the belief that the Supermind is evolving in the universe to suprarational levels and that the human being is at a stage when he is able to participate consciously in the process.

THE NEGATION OF THE NON-ESSENTIALS OF RELIGIONS

From one of the supramental levels, the level of Overmind consciousness, all religions are affirmed as true, as developments of ‘the one eternal religion’.² Yet on the level of Mind, illuminated by the experience of supramental knowledge in Aurobindo’s case, there are certain non-essential elements of religion which Aurobindo denied. These elements are what Aurobindo called the ‘outward machinery of creed, cult, ceremony and symbol...’.³ Religious forms and systems, the non-essentials, Aurobindo claimed, suffer from corruption and exhaustion and must be destroyed. They are of ‘superstition and ignorance’ and tend to deny and, to a certain extent, to destroy the truth of religion’s essence.⁴

Aurobindo, in his discussions of religion throughout his works, gave three reasons for negating these non-essential elements. The first is that they are a result of human ignorance or, at best, of only partial understanding. This first critique, then, is one which bears upon the means of knowing and the content of other religions.

The religious life is a movement of the same ignorant human consciousness, turning or trying to turn away from the earth towards the Divine, but as yet without knowledge and led by dogmatic tenets and rules of some sect or creed which claims to have found the way out of the bonds of the earth-consciousness into beatific Beyond.⁵

The key word in terms of content and insight here is ignorance. The basic reason for Aurobindo’s other critiques of religion is this: though they may contain a true essence, they are a result of Mind and, thus, are thoroughly mixed with human ignorance.⁶ Aurobindo’s attitudes toward the use of images and the worship of a personal god are examples of this critique. Their use in worship is not to be ‘despised’, for it is a stage in the religious evolution, but both are the results of ‘imperfect vision’ and ‘the inferior

² *BCL* xviii, 283.
³ *BCL* xv, 122. Cf. xiii, 274.
⁵ *BCL* xxii, 137.
⁶ *BCL* xix, 784, 865; xv, 244–5.
As the result of unenlightened knowing, they are at best activities for those given to ignorance. However, there is a content to Aurobindo's critique which may be stated in terms of certain propositions which Aurobindo affirmed in the systemization of his integral knowledge and which he expected one to affirm as an indication that one was the recipient of such higher knowledge. These in turn judge the content of other religions. To the extent that other religions affirm these concepts they affirm higher truth. To the extent that they reject these concepts they indicate their ignorance or partial knowledge of higher truth.

First, they must affirm that the Divine is within the human being in a sense of identification with the true Self that could be stated in traditional terms: atman is brahman.

It is true in a sense that religion should be the dominant thing in life, its light and law, but religion as it should be and is in its inner nature, its fundamental law of being, a seeking after God, the cult of spirituality, the opening of the deepest life of the soul to the indwelling Godhead, the eternal Omnipresence.

The limited concept of an 'extracosmic Deity who has created a world outside and apart from his own existence', is a result of ignorance. Thus, in speaking of the aim of society Aurobindo said that, 'The possible godhead of man because he is inwardly of one being with God will be its one solitary creed and dogma.' The 'Religion of Humanity' which Aurobindo affirmed in The Ideal of Human Unity must be built upon this 'realization':

that there is a secret Spirit, a divine Reality, in which we are all one, that humanity is its highest present vehicle on earth, that the human race and the human being are the means by which it will progressively reveal itself here.

It is for this reason that brotherhood was more important to Aurobindo than liberty and equality in the 'triple gospel of the idea of humanity'. There must be a recognition of the Divine within, 'the same godhead in all human beings'.

A second proposition in the content which when missing Aurobindo deprecates in other religions is: Religion gives a positive, in the sense of

1 BCL xx, 149.
2 That this view is common to a large number of Indian religious thinkers probably need not be pointed out. Thus, that saguna brahman (Brahman with qualities) is a lower level object of devotion, while nirguna brahman (Brahman without qualities) is the absolute of higher knowledge, is the view of Śaṅkara (Brahma-sūtrabhāṣya i, 1, 11; i, 1, 20), and is accepted as 'the Hindu' belief by modern thinkers even though others who have been included by historians in the 'Hindu' tradition have affirmed that the Highest Reality has infinite qualities. (Cf. Sushil Kumar De, The Early History of the Vaisnava Faith and Movement in Bengal (Calcutta: Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyay, 1961), p. 273.) Aurobindo on the one hand wanted to affirm both positions, but clearly relegated the worship of a god as worshipped by the Goswamins of Bengal (sixteenth century) to a level of greater ignorance on the evolutionary scheme.
5 BCL xv, 166. Emphasis mine.
6 BCL xv, 213.
7 Ibid. pp. 545-7.
Divine, valuation of this life. Thus, Aurobindo criticizes ‘orthodox’ religions because they looked with eyes of pious sorrow and gloom on the earthly life of man and were very ready to bid him bear peacefully and contentedly, even to welcome its crudities, cruelties, oppressions, tribulations as a means for learning to appreciate and for earning the better life which will be given us hereafter.1

The blame for the fact that some religions in India devalue this life was placed not in ‘Hinduism’, but in the religion which Aurobindo believed initiated such a negation, ‘Buddhism’.2 In contrast, Aurobindo affirmed that true spirituality must affirm this life and work to better it. It is not surprising that this is the task of Aurobindo’s own stance:

Whatever may be done by other world-shunning or heaven-seeking disciplines, this is the difficult but unavoidable task of the integral Yoga; it cannot afford to leave unsolved the problem of the outward works of life, it must find in them their native Divinity and ally it firmly and for ever to the divinities of Love and Knowledge.3

It is clear that this affirmation, necessary in other religions on the non-essential level if they are to be affirmed by Aurobindo, is a result of his view of seeing the world as the evolution of the Divine from its previously involuted state. Since the world is the evolution of the Divine, to reject the world is to reject the Divine; to reject the world is to hinder the evolution of the Divine. In the negation of the world, then, other religions are rejecting what Aurobindo saw to be the truth of the matter from his higher vantage point: all is Brahman.

A third affirmation which expresses Aurobindo’s critique of the content of other religions is: religion must give priority and near exclusiveness to intuitive, unitary knowledge of the Real. Thus, he sides with those religious thinkers who affirm that ‘illumination’ is the key to true knowing, that the true experience of reality is intuitive, not one of logical thought.4 If reason is to play any decisive part, it must be an intuitive rather than an intellectual reason.5 True religion sees that reason is outside of its province when used as a means for knowing in spiritual matters. Intellectual concepts must, instead, be continually tested by vision. Reason is useful on the level of Mind to sharpen one’s expression and affirmation of Truth, but reason must be illuminated from above. Reason is not in error, it is limited in ignorance. It is to be used by supramental knowledge, which transcends reason and its limitations.

This third affirmation is an affirmation of the means by which Aurobindo came to know the nature of Reality. It is affirmed in this way because of the

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1 Ibid. p. 543.  
2 BCL xv, 163. Cf. BCL xv, 168–70, 543, 554; xviii, 126.  
3 BCL xv, 125, 127, 162.  
4 BCL xv, 23, 415.  
5 BCL xvii, 67–8.
fact that he believed he had seen truth in this manner. But his resulting systemization affirmed that as a critique of other religions this third affirmation is in fact an affirmation of his evolutionary view of the universe. It finds its basis in Aurobindo’s experiences of Reality. Since Aurobindo saw higher levels of understanding above the level of Mind on the evolutionary scheme, the inadequacies of mental constructs were to be expected, and the priority of knowing on higher levels was to be affirmed. Since logical reason by definition is found on lower, less-enlightened levels, intuitive knowledge, the means of higher knowing, is to be preferred. Thus, in affirming higher knowledge Aurobindo was affirming his evolutionary scheme.

Aurobindo’s content critique, then, can be reduced to three propositions: the Divine is within; the world is the Divine in evolution; true knowledge of the Divine is supramental. All three of these propositions may be reduced to the doctrine of the Supermind in evolution. This content must be affirmed by other religions for them to be affirmed as containing higher knowledge.

Aurobindo’s second critique of the non-essential elements of religion was that the religions grasp partial truths and elements, take these as universal truths and overemphasize them. This was Aurobindo’s critique of the form of the non-essentials of religions. In this manner, for example, he opposed Vivekananda’s idea of sevā, or service. No matter how universally Vivekananda perceived this matter Aurobindo viewed the doctrine as particular: ‘His ideal of sevā was a need of his nature and must have helped him – it does not follow that it must be accepted as a universal spiritual necessity or ideal.’

The problem Aurobindo saw was that instead of other religions recognizing the relativity of their stands and the partiality of their viewpoints, they fixed them, imposed them, and exclusivized them. His critique of form is first of all the critique of partial doctrines or conceptions which have become hard and fast: ‘men in the passion and darkness of their vital nature had chosen to think that religion was bound up with certain fixed intellectual conceptions about God and the world which could not stand scrutiny...’. Those conceptions are stressed by the religions in the form of intellectual dogmas, forms and ceremonies as well as fixed moral codes. Ethical standards of religion, for example, are formed in terms that are ‘either too narrow and rigid or complex and confused’. Aurobindo’s rejection was clear, and this critique as well is based upon his evolutionary confession:

This, then, stands fixed for us that all standards by which we may seek to govern our conduct are only our temporary, imperfect and evolutive attempts to represent to ourselves our stumbling mental progress in the universal self-realisation towards which Nature moves.

1 BCL xxii, 150. 2 BCL xv, 165. 3 Ibid. pp. 166–7. 4 BCL xx, 181.
The best that can be said of such doctrines is that they were temporarily used by the evolving Spirit to further the evolution, but when they are grasped as eternal truths, they impede the movement beyond them to higher truth. The evolution of the Divine calls for the relativity of all standards, creeds, dogmas, and ethics that are formulated on the lower levels of understanding as opposed to those which result from the intuitive understanding of supra-mental levels.

Religions, however, do not merely absolutize their non-essential elements. They impose them upon others:

The Church takes the place of the Spirit and a formal subscription to its creed, rituals and order is the thing universally demanded; spiritual living is only practiced by the few within the limits prescribed by their fixed creed and order. . . .

The ambition of a particular religious belief and form to universalize and impose itself is contrary to the variety of human nature and to at least one essential character of the Spirit.¹

In the process they are imposing partial truths, views of only one side of Reality, upon the views of others which also should be seen as partial views.²

This critique of the form of religions is an application of Aurobindo’s belief that evil is the result of the egoistic tendency of principles that arise in the evolutionary process to extend themselves beyond their partial and temporary place in the Supermind’s scheme. In the case of the nation one sees a nationalist egoism. In the case of the individual it is an individual egoism. So the forms taken by religious non-essentials are the result of the egoistic tendency of much that is used by the evolutionary process to continue to assert itself beyond its part in the process.³ Religions, then, fall under Aurobindo’s critique of form because they egoistically universalize and exclusively promote their partial views.⁴

Aurobindo’s critique of the form of other religions as well as his critique of their contents, it must be emphasized, receive their validity from his claim to have experienced a higher vision. This integral vision saw the whole of Reality and could thereby judge other stands because they universalized what from his knowledge he saw to be merely their own particular viewpoints. In doing so Aurobindo was consistent in rejecting the absolute claims of others who also claimed to have seen the Highest Reality and yet believed its content to be different. In their case, however, they may have seen the resulting system, creed, or viewpoint not as partial and particular, but more holistic.⁵ Aurobindo must view such a claim as indicating that the devotee had committed the fallacy of universalizing the particular and

¹ BCL xv, 249. Cf. BCL xix, 863. ² BCL xix, 609–701. ³ BCL xv, 386. ⁴ Cf. his critique: BCL xvi, 249. ⁵ One would hope that this is so obvious a historical case that examples need not be given. The difficulty might be in finding many devotees and religious thinkers who would agree that their own views were less than ultimate, and Aurobindo’s view more complete.
Aurobindo, thus, consistently upheld his yogic experience/vision over that of others. Thus, critiques of form as well as content are based upon the affirmation of the religious vision of Aurobindo as true. But, then, critiques of form, on this basis, would be eliminated to the extent that the contents of the religion were in agreement with that suggested above: affirmation of the Divine within and at work in the evolution of the universe, and the resulting affirmation of the present life. These content affirmations are universally true in Aurobindo’s work.

The Synthesis of yoga itself is an attempt to affirm the best in all the paths to the Divine, and that is affirmed which corresponds to Aurobindo’s content affirmations in his critique of religions. The result is the ‘synthesis’ which Aurobindo called ‘Integral Yoga’. As Aurobindo put it, ‘It is Nature’s aim and it should be ours to unveil in the perfected body and mind the transcendent activities of the Spirit.’ But in this short sentence Aurobindo assumes his view of Nature: its Divine dimension, and the evolutionary process of the Divine in it. This is the condition of acceptance of other formulations throughout his work: ‘Since this is the plan of the divine Energy in humanity...’ ‘It follows that the object of the material life must be to fulfil, above all things, the vital aim of Nature.’ Such statements indicate a priority in the content critique. Aurobindo’s critique of the universalization of the beliefs of other philosophical systems ends when their contents correspond to the affirmations of the Divine within and the evolution of the Divine in all reality. Where, for example, Śaṅkara is in conformity, it is ascribed to intuition. Where he is incorrect and exclusive, the error is ascribed to reason:

In the philosophy of Shankara one feels the presence of a conflict, an opposition which this powerful intellect has stated with full force and masterfully arranged rather than solved with any finality, – the conflict of an intuition intensely aware of an absolute transcendent and inmost Reality and a strong intellectual reason regarding the world with a keen and vigorous rational intelligence. The intellect of the thinker regards the phenomenal world from the standpoint of the reason; reason is there the judge and the authority and no suprarational authority can prevail against it; but behind the phenomenal world is a transcendent Reality which the intuition alone can see; there reason, – at least a finite dividing limited reason, – cannot prevail against the intuitive experience...

The content critique in Aurobindo’s system actually has a logical priority, and this because, of course, he believed he had a higher view of Reality from which he spoke.

2 BCL xx, 15.
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid. p. 17.
5 E.g. Śaṅkara and the Buddha, BCL xviii, 415–16, 454–5.
6 Ibid. p. 461.
Aurobindo’s third reason for negating the non-essentials of religions was based upon results. Other religions have failed to accomplish goals which they themselves set, as well as goals which he believed religions ought to have accomplished. Aurobindo claimed they have been the cause of strife in the world. But this is actually a result of their failures in form:

Religion, which ought to have led the way but owing to its greater dependence on its external parts and its infra-rational rather than its spiritual impulses, has been as much, or even more, a sower of discord as a teacher of unity, - religion is beginning to realise, a little dimly and ineffectively as yet, that spirituality is after all its own chief business and true aim and that it is also the common element and the common bond of all religions.1

They have actually retarded the progress of humanity in its striving for perfection.2 This perfection, it must be noted, is interpreted in terms of the evolutionary scheme, for Aurobindo speaks of religion as often in conflict with ‘the vital instincts, the dynamic life-power in man’ which is, of course, the Divine within.3

The crux of this criticism is, that the religions simply are not capable of success. In its ‘organized’ form Aurobindo declared religion cannot but fail.

But organized religion, though it can provide a means of inner uplift for the individual and preserve in it or behind it a way for his opening to spiritual experience, has not changed human life and society; it could not do so because, in governing society, it had to compromise with the lower parts of life and could not insist on the inner change of the whole being; it could only insist on creedal adherence, a formal acceptance of its ethical standards and a conformity to institution, ceremony and ritual. Religion so conceived can give a religio-ethical colour or surface tinge, - sometimes, if it maintains a strong kernel of inner experience, it can generalise to some extent an incomplete spiritual tendency; but it does not transform the race, it cannot create a new principle of the human existence.4

By its compromises religion has emphasized the non-essentials and lost its ability to change the human being. ‘Religions at best’, Aurobindo said, ‘modify only the surface of the nature. Moreover, they degenerate very soon into a routine of ceremonial habitual worship and fixed dogmas.’5 In contrast Aurobindo was convinced, on the basis of his vision and his own experience, that his integral yoga changes the inner being,6 and, since Aurobindo saw this change to be requisite for changing society, integral yoga stands above such criticism.7 The validity of this critique and whether Aurobindo’s yoga is an improvement, might be testable by time and experience, or by the integral vision of Reality. Aurobindo, remember, believed he was speaking from the experience and the vision.

1 BCL xv, 528. By ‘spirituality’ Aurobindo means the emphasis upon the Divine within and the evolutionary process of the Divine. Cf. ibid. p. 554.
2 Ibid. p. 164.
3 Ibid. pp. 152-3.
4 BCL xix, 1058-9.
5 BCL xxii, 139.
6 BCL xxii, 594.
7 BCL xix, 1022, 1023; xv, 339.
Aurobindo’s Integral View of Other Religions

Aurobindo, himself, denied that he was founding a new religion, and by this he meant religion in essentials and non-essentials. Whether he actually did do so depends upon one’s definition of religion. However, in *The Ideal of Human Unity* he spoke not of founding a religion, but of promoting a ‘religion of humanity’ which bears the marks of Aurobindo’s own position of ultimate concern. It is a religion which has a specific content. Yet he said it is not an ordinary religion: ‘a system, a thing of creed and intellectual belief and dogma and outward rite’. Instead he defined it as follows:

A religion of humanity means the growing realisation that there is a secret Spirit, divine Reality in which we are all one, that humanity is its highest present vehicle on earth, that the human race and the human being are the means by which it will progressively reveal itself here. It implies a growing attempt to live out this knowledge and bring about a kingdom of this divine Spirit upon earth. By its growth within us oneness with our fellow-men will become the leading principle of all our life, not merely a principle of co-operation but a deeper brotherhood, a real and an inner sense of unity and equality and a common life.

Such a religion clearly implies a creed, though one might see it as different in form in that it would be propagated differently from other religions. There, however, must be an affirmation of the Divine within, and of the human race as the highest evolute of the Divine in its movement toward manifestation.

In Aurobindo’s integral view, this religion must not be propagated with external enforcement even though it is true. It should rather be proclaimed and propagated for all to see so as to draw all human beings to it. But still in order to accomplish all its future, this idea and religion of humanity has to make itself more explicit, insistent and categorically imperative.

With confidence in the evolutionary process and the truth of his stance Aurobindo was able to allow the other religions to run their course and eventually fall away. He was even expecting that science and philosophy in their own progress would come to affirm the stance which he had taken. There was no doubt in the realized mind of Aurobindo that his vision would be accomplished and would succeed where others had failed.

Conclusion

Aurobindo affirmed, therefore, an essence of all religions which is identical to the faith he proclaimed. Other religions had failed in the emphasis and centrality they had given to that which Aurobindo on the basis of his vision

1 *BCL* xxi, 139.
2 This is the title and subject of chapter thirty-four, *BCL* xv, 541–7.
6 *BCL* xix, 672.
7 *BCL* xv, 215.
saw to be the externals of religion. He criticized other religions in terms of content, form and accomplishments, but the critique in effect always returns to his belief in the Divine within and the evolutionary theory of the Supermind in reality.

The critique of the emphasis upon externals in other religions and the fact that this emphasis is a means of retarding the evolutionary process constitute a more serious critique than one might first imagine. For as I have argued elsewhere, Aurobindo did have a basic principle which defined the good: that is good which promotes the perfection of the world in evolutionary terms. Evil, for Aurobindo, was anything which retards the evolutionary process.\(^1\) To the extent, then, that religions hinder or retard the evolutionary process, to that extent they are evil; as evil as anything can be in Aurobindo's view of reality. Religions that do not agree with the content, form and accomplishments of the Religion of Humanity as total entities (whether they be 'Christianity', 'Islam', 'Hinduism' or any other) are evil, even though they spring from a good essence. Such is the logical conclusion of Aurobindo's integral view of Reality.

Though Aurobindo believed that he had transcended the problem of identifying one creed as exclusively true and others as false, he had not in fact done this. His critiques of other religions return upon his own position with devastating consequences for such 'integral' claims. His vision had given him sight of the Supermind which, though he denied that a creed was involved, was the coloured glass through which he interpreted all else.

Aurobindo, himself, might answer such a critique by saying that this is only a problem on the level of Mind and not on the levels of supra-mental understanding.\(^2\) Such an answer would not solve the problem in any logical sense, however. Instead, it would proclaim the dissolving of the problem on the higher level of knowledge to which human beings would rise if they were willing to place their faith in his vision while on this lower level of Mind. But the so-called problem of exclusivism toward other religions dissolves in some such manner for every religion at 'higher' levels. In heaven, some affirm, the fact that there are many in hell will no longer bother us.

Thus, there seems to be no compelling factor for preferring Aurobindo's view as more universalistic than any other. Once one is inside the system the problem is not a problem. But the appeal of its 'integralness' is made to all mankind in order to convince them to rise to supramental levels. Yet to all mankind, who begin on the level of Mind, the system has no 'integral' appeal.

1 Cf. my *Sri Aurobindo*, pp. 137–42.  
1 Cf. *BCL* xiii, 301 n.