

HINDUISM AND THE FUTURE OF INTER-RELIGIOUS HARMONY IN INDIA: AN AUROBINDONIAN PERSPECTIVE

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Other Essays on Indian Society and Culture in the Light of Sri Aurobindo')

In one of his essays on Indian culture, Sri Aurobindo writes emphatically, “[Hinduism] is in the first place a non-dogmatic inclusive religion and would have taken even Islam and Christianity into itself, if they had tolerated the process” (CWSA, Vol. 20, p. 147). This statement, when taken literally by the so-called liberal, leftist intelligentsia of today might be interpreted through their lens of what they define as Hindu chauvinism.

On the other hand, those on the other side of the political spectrum who would like India to become a so-called ‘Hindu nation’ may view it as an endorsement of their extremely narrow Hindu-religio-political ideology. This essay tries to take the reader beyond any of these two surface-level readings of this statement and instead attempts to explore the relevance and significance of this deeply layered statement for present-day religiously diverse India while keeping in full consideration its deep implications for the future of inter-religious harmony in the country.

Diversity of Religions

Sri Aurobindo through his writings helps us see that human nature is very complex and this complexity also explains why different people need different ways or paths on their spiritual journey. Each religion has captured some essential aspect of the Great Truth and each has made some important contribution to the overall march of humanity. The Supreme Being and Nature will not want any uniformity; diversity is the principle of Truth. There will always be diverse paths, diverse religions and diverse teachers of the Truth showing different ways to the Truth.

Before the advent of Sri Aurobindo, the Overmind had been the highest Spiritual Truth established on the earth. And since multiplicity is an essential truth of the Overmind, at

present we see an even greater diversity of paths and ways to God. As we begin our analysis about the necessity for a healthy co-existence of diverse religions, it might be intellectually satisfying and also liberating to know some of these deeper reasons for the necessity of diverse religions.

Humanity's response to a diversity of religions has either involved a sense of disharmony and conflict, or in recent times, a somewhat more tolerant but often aimless, postmodern religio-moral relativism resulting in an ethical void. Sri Aurobindo tells us that the truth of the Supermind will surely and gradually compel more and more sections of humanity—and signs of this awakening are already there all across the world—to strive toward a greater harmony between the diverse religions and spiritual paths.

This may be accomplished either through something like a world-religion which will integrate the spiritual truths emphasized by different religions but harmonized in the light of a greater supramental truth that has not been a part of any religion so far, or through something that is sort of an a-religious spirituality that transcends all religions. In fact, the first may be a beginning step for the second. But regardless, a diversity of paths and ways will be there.

In an essay titled *Religion in the Post-Modern Condition: Some Lights from an Interesting Correspondence of Sri Aurobindo*, Supriyo Bhattacharya (2009) reminds us of a fundamental teaching of Sri Aurobindo that the spiritual truth is a truth of the spirit, a truth of the Infinite, which is one but expressed in an infinite diversity, and thus can assume an infinite variety of aspects and formations. He argues that the uniform blandness of the religio-ethical relativism of the postmodernist readily dissolves in the bright light of the deeper truth of the spirit which Sri Aurobindo speaks of in these words:

“...the domain of pure spiritual self realisation and self-expression need not be a single white monotone, there can be a great diversity in the fundamental unity; the supreme Self is one, but the souls of the Self are many, and as is the soul's formation of nature, so will be its spiritual self-expression. A diversity in oneness is the law of manifestation; the supramental unification and integration must harmonise these diversities, but to abolish them is not the intention of the spirit in Nature. ...in mental formulation the difference must remain until one can exceed mind altogether and in a highest consciousness integralise, unify and harmonise the many-sided truth of the Spirit.” (CWSA, Vol. 21-22, p. 921)

Universal Religion Which Embraces All Others

Let us now explore the implications of some of these deeper truths in the context of our topic of present interest. To begin with, we must ask ourselves the most basic question — what type of Hinduism does Sri Aurobindo speak of in his sentence? It is definitely not the externalized, religiosity-laden Hinduism that can assimilate the truths of other religions; only the real essence of Hinduism — or what we refer to as Sanatana Dharma — can take within its fold the spiritual truths that are the basis of other religions. As Sri Aurobindo said emphatically in his famous Uttarpara speech in 1909:

“But what is the Hindu religion? What is this religion which we call Sanatana, eternal? ... That which we call the Hindu religion is really the eternal religion, because it is the universal religion which embraces all others. If a religion is not universal, it cannot be eternal. A narrow religion, a sectarian religion, an exclusive religion can live only for a limited time and a limited purpose.... It is the one religion which impresses on mankind the closeness of God to us and embraces in its compass all the possible means by which man can approach God. It is the one religion which insists every moment on the truth which all religions acknowledge that He is in all men and all things and that in Him we move and have our being.” (CWSA, Vol. 8, p. 11)

Thus, we understand that Sri Aurobindo forcefully shuns the narrow sectarian variety of Hinduism, and is concerned with that Hinduism which is a truly universal, eternal religion having the ability to comprise and contain within itself the truths of all religions. We will explore this point further a little later on in this essay.

When we take a serious look at most of the problems related to the religious divide in India, especially with regard to the co-existence of Islam and Hinduism, we easily discover that these problems are primarily rooted in a messy religio-political nexus that is basically led by selfish interests and lust for power. Given the current state of affairs (in India and rest of the world), it may be more than obvious now that the problem of coming to terms with Islam in its current phase is not unique to India but it occurs here in a particularly difficult and complex form because of our peculiar history. And perhaps it is part of India's destiny to find a solution to it.

Nadkarni (1996) in an article titled *Hindu-Muslim Unity in Sri Aurobindo's Light*, has done a brilliant analysis of the problem. When giving some of the important historical

reasons, he writes that the Hindu-Muslim problem in India has been rendered so very difficult because of the tormenting memories of our history. “It is easy to whip up among the Hindus passions of revenge and hostility over the humiliation and oppression they are believed to have suffered according to history books during the long years of Muslim rule in India” (p. 10). Similarly, from the Muslim side, “it is equally easy to depict independence of India as a dispensation that gives the majority Hindu community all the power and prestige and reduces the Muslims to the status of a minority community at the mercy of the majority community. It has therefore been easy to whip up passions among Muslims at their allegedly fallen state by reminding them that not long ago they were the masters of the Hindus.” So, as Nadkarni explains, this creates a fertile ground for bigots and fanatics, whether Hindu or Muslim, to sow seeds of disharmony and conflict and to stir up communal strife, riots, bloodshed and destruction of innocent lives.

At the same time, an important reason for the Hindu-Muslim problem has to do with the exclusive creed of Islam. Sri Aurobindo is reported to have once said in an informal chat with his disciples: “You can live amiably with a religion whose principle is toleration. But how is it possible to live peacefully with a religion whose principle is ‘I will not tolerate you’? How are you going to have unity with these people?” (Evening Talks with Sri Aurobindo, 23 July 1923). Nadkarni (1996) gives a detailed analysis of this aspect of the problem:

“The basis of Islam is a creed, and there is no salvation outside this creed. Because of this, a certain kind of sectarian universalism comes natural to it – those who profess the creed, no matter of what nation, race, or community belong to a universal Islamic Society, and those who do not accept this creed cannot be part of this Society. (pp. 10-11)

[...]

“Very little seems to have happened in the Islamic world in the way of reform movements to bring to it a comparative liberal spirit and to change the stamp of the temperament of its adherents. If anything, there has been among Islamic nations a fundamentalist revival which is opposed to any kind of reformist spirit. (p. 13)

[...]

“There is bound to be within the folds of such a credal religion as Islam a fairly strong element which regards the intolerance of other religions as the mark of a true believer. ...Tolerance of other religions has never been claimed as basic to

Islam, at least in India except among the Sufis, whose influence is negligible on the opinion-makers among the Islamic leadership.” (p. 17)

Like in other religions, in Islam too there are highly evolved people who are capable of transcending narrow exclusiveness. But it is tragic indeed that in India as well as in most parts of the world outside India, Islam has not yet undergone the churning process of liberalism under the impact of the intellectual, rationalistic, cosmopolitan and humanistic thought of the eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe. In Indian context, it is important to remember that modern Hinduism reflects not only its traditional ethos of tolerance and acceptance of diverse ways to the Divine, but also the transformation that some of its more narrow and rigid aspects or strains went through as a result of India’s contact with the rationalistic intellectual traditions. We can see in today’s Hinduism influence of such movements as Brahma Samaj, Prarthana Samaj, Arya Samaj, the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda movement, etc.

Human nature being what it is, we can safely say that not every Hindu is a shining example of the liberal spirit. “But the Hindu temper as a whole in the country is to a considerable extent influenced by this liberal spirit, and the spirit of tolerance of other religions is traditional to the Hindu ethos.... And yet it must be recognised that in very many Hindu minds there is a feeling that our Muslim brother is the ‘other’, an alien - not one of us. (Nadkarni, p. 11)

Finally, we will not be accurate if we ignore the growing hold of fundamentalism on Islam in India, just like in rest of the world. The politicization of Islam has added fuel to the fire of fundamentalism. If an exclusive religion like Islam finds itself in the position of a minority, it can easily develop a persecution complex. This has been the case in India, thanks to the over-politicization of the religious divide. The more fanatic followers of this religion find various means of exploiting their minority status to blackmail the majority community. A firm and impartial handling of conflicts arising out of this mindset is as important for our political health and stability as safeguarding the identity of the minority religions. But it is important to realise that a purely opportunistic and political approach in such a situation is bound to aggravate it, which unfortunately has been often the case in India.

We can agree that for a healthy future of India, at the minimum we need — perhaps it is also inevitable, though it may not happen in the immediate future — a healthy co-existence of these two important religions. A purging and a cleansing have to happen, and for the

effective dislodging of the religio-political nexus, the two religions themselves will also have to transform into more inclusive versions of themselves.

We generally assume that as compared to Islam, Hinduism has been and is a much more pluralistic and inclusive religion. While this is true to a very large extent, it is also important to remember that the more orthodox, conservative or rigid versions of Hinduism don't allow any inter-mixing of religions. There are several temples in India where even today non-Hindus are not allowed to enter. The term '*meleccha*' has been used by people from within the Hindu fold to refer to outsiders, or people belonging to other religions. It is from within the Hindu social system that a group of social outcastes and untouchables emerged. So, exclusivity has not been entirely unknown to Hindu religion. But as Sri Aurobindo reminds us, these social evils were a result of the decay and decadence that had crept into Hinduism. Some of these practices might even have started in response to particular difficult circumstances prevalent in certain times, and are not part of the deeper truths that form the core of Hinduism.

K. D. Sethna (Amal Kiran) in an article published in 1950 and approved by Sri Aurobindo, writes:

“The institution of untouchability was indeed a stain on the social scheme that had got established in India. But with the advent of the modern age the conscience of the best Hindus has always rebelled against it. As far back as the days of Ram Mohan Roy the progressive movement started and reform organisations like the Brahmo-Samaj and the Arya-Samaj fought untouchability for decades on end. The biggest uproar against it came from a Hindu – Gandhi. And the Indian Constitution which expresses a good deal of the contemporary Hindu mind has abolished untouchability. It is absurd to claim that untouchability is part and parcel of Hinduism. It is certainly no part of those foundational scriptures of the Hindus: the Vedas, the Upanishads and the Gita. In ancient India the castes were guilds for different crafts and professions, with no odious distinctions or taboos. Later they got rigid. In the days of India's decline they became more and more obnoxious, particularly by thrusting several millions outside the pale. But even when we condemn the injustice to so many it is well to remember that injustice of this type in general is not something peculiarly associated with Hindu society.”

Though our present essay is not about the problematic concept of caste and its historical or social antecedents, two points from the above passage are worth noting for our purposes.

One, it is important to remember these words of caution from Sri Aurobindo, “The ancient *chaturvarnya* must not be judged by its later disintegrated degeneration and gross

meaningless parody, the caste system” (CWSA, Vol. 20, p. 170). Two, what we commonly and presently think of as the caste system was only one part of a three-fold social organisational arrangement; the other two being the organisation of individual life in four stages – that of student (brahmacharya), householder (grihastha), social recluse (vānaprastha) and mendicant (sanyāsa), and the four pursuits of life – material well-being (artha), physical and sensory pleasure (kāma), righteous and ethical conduct (dharma) and liberation from the worldly bondage (moksha). The four-fold varna system (Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra) was never meant to be a rigid and fixed arrangement, and in practice it is something that has been changing and must change over time. In fact, from within the Hindu fold there have been regular movements to do away with any rigidity that inevitably creeps into any social system¹ (See Nadkarni’s brilliant analysis mentioned in the references for more on this topic). And yet, if we are truly concerned with understanding our history and its relevance to our future as a civilization and as a nation, we must also pay close attention to these words of Sri Aurobindo:

“Apart from all phenomena of decline or deterioration, we should recognise without any sophisticated denial those things in our creeds of life and social institutions which are in themselves mistaken and some of them indefensible, things weakening to our national life, degrading to our civilisation, dishonouring to our culture. A flagrant example can be found in the treatment of our outcastes. There are those who would excuse it as an unavoidable error in the circumstances of the past; there are others who contend that it was the best possible solution then available. There are still others who would justify it and, with whatever modifications, prolong it as necessary to our social synthesis. The contention is highly disputable. The excuse was there, but it is no justification for continuance. A solution which condemns by segregation one sixth of the nation to permanent ignominy, continued filth, uncleanness of the inner and outer life and a brutal animal existence instead of lifting them out of it is no solution but rather an acceptance of weakness and a constant wound to the social body and to its collective spiritual, intellectual, moral and material welfare. A social synthesis which can only live by making a permanent rule of the degradation of our fellow men and countrymen stands condemned and foredoomed to decay and disturbance. The evil effects may be kept under for a long time and work only by the subtler unobserved action of the law of Karma; but once the light of Truth is let in on these dark spots, to perpetuate them is to maintain a seed of disruption and ruin our chances of eventual survival.” (CWSA, Vol. 20, pp. 89-90)

While the above reminder is directed primarily towards getting rid of any caste-related evils that have cropped up in our social setup, same can be said about the other key challenge of finding a harmony with other religions and faiths that have now made a permanent home in the Indian society. To put it more simply, unless we go back to the truer,

the wider, deeper, non-dogmatic and inclusive variety of Hinduism, we can't hope for any sustainable inter-religious unity. Similarly, we can't hope for any idea of unity to emerge from within the fold of the more exclusive, fundamentalist and orthodox Islam. But because there also exist other more tolerant, open and inclusive strains of Islam, it is those versions of Islam which will have to take the lead in such an endeavor.

A Deeper and Truer Formula for Co-existence of Diverse Religions

In any case, the effort to bring the different religions closer must start on a people-to-people basis, with the practitioners of these religions who have the most non-dogmatic and inclusive view of their religions coming together and recognizing the necessity for a closer union and synthesis. It must be understood that Hindu-Muslim unity cannot be achieved through political cleverness, or by flattering the Muslims. It can be achieved only by cleansing our hearts of prejudices and our minds of misunderstandings. At the same time, as Nadkarni (1996) reminds us the problems created by religious fundamentalism should not be papered over; we should learn to make a clear distinction between the real interest of a community and the attempts it can make to exploit its minority status. Thuggery and hooliganism must be severely dealt with, no matter in what community it is found. The liberal elements within Islam should be encouraged.

It may be argued by some that these things are much easier said than done, and the feeling of mistrust between the two communities often runs so deep that it is almost impossible to bridge the gap. While this may be true to a certain extent, we also can't deny the fact that often the mistrust is caused by lack of detailed knowledge of the complex historical relation between Hinduism and Islam in India – the good, the bad and the ugly of it; politics-created segregation of communities – both geographic as well as political, practiced via the sinister agenda of politicians who use certain religious communities as their vote bank without any regard whatsoever to the overall upliftment and material and social well-being of the communities; and the completely false notion of secularism that has been much abused by politicians in the form of minority appeasement, simply to hold on to their vote banks.

With slow, patient and careful de-politicization of religion, equitable educational and economic opportunities, healthy economic growth that benefits all sections of the society, positive steps can be taken in the right direction. In an editorial written as far back as 1906,

Sri Aurobindo envisioned the future of Indian nation where “the Mahomedan, the Hindu, the Buddhist, the Christian in India will not have to cease to be Mahomedan, Hindu, Buddhist, or Christian, in any sense of the term, for uniting into one great and puissant Indian nation. Devotion to one’s own ideals and institutions, with toleration and respect for the ideals and institutions of other sections of the community, and an ardent love and affection for the common civic life and ideal of all—these are what must be cultivated by us now, for the building up of the real Indian nation” (CWSA, Vol. 6-7, p. 169).

Particularly with respect to creating a meaningful Hindu-Muslim unity, Sri Aurobindo has given us the following deeper and truer formula:

“Of one thing we may be certain, that Hindu-Mahomedan unity cannot be effected by political adjustments...It must be sought deeper down, in the heart and in the mind, for where the causes of disunion are, there the remedies must be sought. We shall do well in trying to solve the problem to remember that misunderstanding is the most fruitful cause of our differences, that love compels love and that strength conciliates the strong. We must strive to remove the causes of misunderstanding by a better mutual knowledge and sympathy; we must extend the unfaltering love of the patriot to our Musulman brother, remembering always that in him too Narayana dwells and to him too our Mother has given a permanent place in her bosom; but we must cease to approach him falsely or flatter out of a selfish weakness and cowardice. We believe this to be the only practical way of dealing with the difficulty. As a political question, the Hindu-Mahomedan problem does not interest us at all, as a national problem it is of supreme importance.” (CWSA, Vol. 8, p. 31)

Even though Sri Aurobindo made this statement in 1909, it is amazing how applicable and relevant it is for today’s India. It is significant because since independence most of the efforts to address the problem of Hindu-Muslim divide in India have been led by a political motive, instead of really going to the roots of the problem and dealing with it at the level of the hearts and minds of the people from these religious communities. It is also true, at the same time, that despite the much politicization of this religious divide, there are very big sections of Indian population belonging to both these religions who continue to peacefully co-exist.

Given the present state of affairs concerning the religious divide in India and the world, even a mutually respectful co-existence of different religions will be a great step ahead. At the same time, we should recognize and remember that Sri Aurobindo and the Mother would want us to hope and aspire for a much more glorious future than mere respectful co-existence. This aspiration for that future will certainly have to co-exist with the

work we must do at present, starting with the individual level, by seeing the good and the true in all religions other than the ones we are born into or other than the one we practice.

Inclusive and Wide-Embracing Spirituality

With a consideration to all that has been said so far, let us now take another look at the opening statement and explore the implications of Hinduism, or the Sanatana Dharma, to be more accurate, completely integrating within itself Islam and Christianity (provided they had tolerated the process) for the present and future of inter-religious harmony in India.

When understood generously, we recognize that this statement does not mean that as a result of Hinduism integrating Islam and Christianity within its fold there wouldn't be any separate existence of these religions. It only implies that the literalist or fundamentalist factions of Islam and Christianity could also become more tolerant and Indian-ized by going through an assimilation process led by the more inclusive and non-dogmatic nature of Hinduism. Inclusiveness of a religion, however, implies a two-way flow of ideas. Therefore, as a result of this integration process, Hinduism too would become richer because of its assimilation with Islam and Christianity. This is an important point to be remembered because certainly no single religion has the monopoly over truth, just as no single viewpoint has an exclusive claim over truth.

Let us now go a bit deeper to see if Sri Aurobindo means something more when he says that Hinduism would have or could have taken religions like Islam and Christianity within itself. To do so it is also important to consider this assimilation process that is being spoken of here, and also what is meant when we say that Hinduism is an inclusive religion. In order to remain inclusive, Hinduism should have the capacity to integrate the spiritual realizations, truths, and experiences revealed within the fold of other religious traditions, otherwise it is not inclusive at all. Going by historical record, we can see that what we now know as Hinduism has taken in elements from various traditions—Vedic, Upanishadic, Buddhist, Jain, Tantric, Vaishnavism, Shaivism, Sikh—all of these and many others have been integrated into what has now become Hinduism, with the diversity of traditions and practices making for its richness and pluralism. But it is important to emphasize that for Sri Aurobindo, Hinduism is not any particular belief or practice but essentially an inner

experience that is available to all humans. It is this experience-based Hinduism that might become, as he says in an essay published in *Karmayogin* on June 19, 1909, the “basis of the future world-religion” (CWSA, Vol. 8, p. 26).

“God gives Himself to His whole creation; no one religion holds the monopoly of His Grace” (The Mother, CWM, Vol. 15, p. 27). Sri Aurobindo and the Mother remind us that each religion is only a partial expression of the Truth and they all, in their own unique ways, have helped the mankind in its progressive march. To quote from Sri Aurobindo:

“Each religion has helped mankind. Paganism increased in man the light of beauty, the largeness and height of his life, his aim at a many-sided perfection; Christianity gave him some vision of divine love and charity; Buddhism has shown him a noble way to be wiser, gentler, purer; Judaism and Islam how to be religiously faithful in action and zealously devoted to God; Hinduism has opened to him the largest and profoundest spiritual possibilities. A great thing would be done if all these God-visions could embrace and cast themselves into each other; but intellectual dogma and cult egoism stand in the way.” (CWSA, Vol. 13, p. 211)

Because each religion brought to mankind some important aspect of the Truth, the future of humanity requires that these religions embrace and “cast themselves into each other.” This is the kind of integration or assimilation process that Sri Aurobindo is speaking of in the statement we have been discussing.

A few more insights from Sri Aurobindo and the Mother will help us gain further clarity on this topic, especially about the future of religion itself (and thereby, the future of inter-religious harmony). While speaking of the role of religion in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Sri Aurobindo once said that there will be “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.” (Letter dated 23 February 1932, published in the *Bulletin*, Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education 52, February 2000, p. 80). This helps us see that for Sri Aurobindo religion is useful as long as it doesn’t turn into a rigid orthodoxy, no matter what religion it is. If present multi-religious India has to fulfill her mission of being a spiritual guru of the world, she has to move beyond the rigid orthodox religiosity to a more inclusive and wide-embracing spirituality (whether it is religion-based spirituality or religion-less spirituality). We must also remember that the true spirituality thrives on diversity and shuns uniformity. In

order to keep a healthy, pluralistic society we need healthy dialogue and acceptance of different religious truths and beliefs. These ideas are also echoed in the following words of the Mother (CWM, Vol. 15, pp. 27-29):

“Instead of excluding each other, religions ought to complete each other.”

“The spiritual spirit is not contrary to a religious feeling of adoration, devotion and consecration. But what is wrong in the religions is the fixity of the mind clinging to one formula as an exclusive truth. One must always remember that formulas are only a mental expression of the truth and that this truth can always be expressed in many other ways.” (6 December 1964)

“All religions are partial approximations of the one sole Truth that is far above them.” (April 1969)

Beyond Religion

But is there a future beyond religion? Perhaps the true harmony between religions is only possible when we can boldly envision and work towards creating a world without religion, but a world steeped in true spirituality. But before proceeding further it is important to understand the difference between the two. Sri Aurobindo makes an important distinction between two aspects of religion – religion as spirituality, and as religionism. Rejecting religionism or sectarianism in religion and ardently advocating spirituality he writes:

“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. On the other hand, religion when it identifies itself only with a creed, a cult, a Church, a system of ceremonial forms, may well become a retarding force and there may therefore arise a necessity for the human spirit to reject its control over the varied activities of life.” (CWSA, Vol. 25, p. 177)

The failure to make this distinction between true spiritual core of religion and its external shell of religionism is at the root of a lot of confused debate on issues concerning religious divide, both in India and elsewhere. But “religionism has not been the only perversion of true religion” (Nadkarni, 1996). In an essay titled, *Hindu-Muslim Unity in Sri Aurobindo's Light*, he very clearly explains the other perversion that Sri Aurobindo has also warned us of in the chapter titled, *Religion as the Law of Life* in his book, *The Human Cycle*. Nadkarni writes:

“This perversion sets in when religion tends to mean, as it has often done, something different and remote from earthly life, leading to ascetic renunciation. The spirituality of which Sri Aurobindo has been the most articulate spokesman in our time respects the freedom of the human soul, because it is fulfilled by freedom; and the deepest meaning of freedom is the power to expand and grow towards perfection by the law of one’s own nature. True spirituality gives freedom to philosophy and science, to man’s seeking for political and social perfection and to all his other powers and terrestrial aspirations. Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo exemplify best the spirit of liberalism which has created out of the medieval Hinduism a vibrant, modern Hinduism, more than willing to reaffirm what is basic to the Hindu faith - respect for all religions.” (pp. 6-7)

This sets the stage right for our further analysis. In an essay Sri Aurobindo wrote for the June 19, 1909 issue of *Karmayogin* he gives us a glimpse of where the world is moving in term of its religious or spiritual destiny. He writes:

“The world moves through an indispensable interregnum of free thought and materialism to a new synthesis of religious thought and experience, a new religious world-life free from intolerance, yet full of faith and fervour, accepting all forms of religion because it has an unshakable faith in the One. The religion which embraces Science and faith, Theism, Christianity, Mahomedanism and Buddhism and yet is none of these, is that to which the World-Spirit moves. In our own [referring to the true spirit of Sanatan Dharma], which is the most sceptical and the most believing of all, the most sceptical because it has questioned and experimented the most, the most believing because it has the deepest experience and the most varied and positive spiritual knowledge,— that wider Hinduism which is not a dogma or combination of dogmas but a law of life, which is not a social framework but the spirit of a past and future social evolution, which rejects nothing but insists on testing and experiencing everything and when tested and experienced turning it to the soul’s uses, in this Hinduism we find the basis of the future world-religion. This sanatana dharma has 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. It is in our inner spiritual experiences that we shall find the proof and source of the world’s Scriptures, the law of knowledge, love and conduct, the basis and inspiration of Karmayoga.” (CWSA, Vol. 8, p. 26)

We see that on one level, Sri Aurobindo tells us that the future world-spirit is moving in the direction of a syncretic and inclusive eternal way (Sanatana Dharma) which takes in its fold the spiritual essence from all present world religions. And on another level, the more we understand and appreciate Sri Aurobindo’s and the Mother’s vision of the future we find that they compel us to envision with them a world beyond religion, a world where the inner

seeking, the spiritual seeking is the basis for human unity. This is abundantly clear in the following words of the Mother (CWM, Vol. 15, pp. 29-30):

“Religions are based on creeds which are spiritual experiences brought down to a level where they become more easy to grasp, but at the cost of their integral purity and truth.”

“The time of religions is over.”

“We have entered the age of universal spirituality, of spiritual experience in its initial purity.”

[...]

“Religious teaching belongs to the past and halts progress.”

“Spiritual teaching is the teaching of the future—it illumines the consciousness and prepares it for future realisation.”

“Spiritual teaching is above religions and strives towards a global Truth.”

“It teaches us to enter into direct relation with the Divine.”

So essentially it comes down to each one of us to see which of these truths sits better with what we feel inside us – whether the world-spirit is moving towards a synthetic world-religion or to an age beyond religion. There is no right or wrong answer here because each answer will be an expression of a partial truth. The true Truth will be beyond any of these expressions. But in the answer that we discover for ourselves is hidden the seed of the future we envision for India, especially regarding the co-existence of diverse religions and faiths in India. In this answer also lies the beginning of the individual responsibility we give to ourselves, each one of us, regardless of our religious backgrounds or spiritual leanings, who is concerned with the present and future of inter-religious harmony in India.

At the very minimum, this answer helps us come face to face with the truth that we must move beyond the straitjacketed debate between the so-called secularist and religio-chauvinist arguments, and begin to look for deeper understanding of the core of the issue. Only through a deeper understanding of the problem we can envision a more sustainable and lasting solution.

Regardless of what the ultra-rationalists among Indian intelligentsia might say, India will never give up her deeply embedded religio-spiritual character. But if India has to fulfill her mission of being a spiritual guru of the world, she must raise herself above all sentiments and ideologies that smell of narrow chauvinism, no matter which religion they come from. And she must aspire for the Truth of the golden bright noon of the future which Sri Aurobindo sums up rather well in these words:

“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.” (Undated letter, published in the *Bulletin*, Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education 53, February 2001, p. 72)

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ENDNOTES

ⁱ In a thorough analysis of caste and its relation to Hinduism Nadkarni (2003) concludes:

...the emergence as well as survival of the caste system had nothing to do with Hinduism as a religion. The caste system was purely social phenomenon, very much in the mundane sphere. It is aihika sphere (mundane), and not paramarthika or adhyatmika (spiritual). Being in aihika sphere, rules of conduct and custom are liable to change from time to time, and not eternally fixed, as Hindu texts themselves concede. The support to it given by dharmashastras including Manusmriti could be only a result of the social significance and role of the caste system of the time, and not the cause of it. Dharmashastras reflected what is already there in the society. They also approved rejection of it like when Manusmriti (IV 176) indicated clearly that any dharmic rule could be rejected if it led to people's unhappiness and indignation. There can be no ground for fear that dharmashastras would give a new lease of life to the caste system in spite of its being redundant and irrelevant in the modern age. Most of the verses in dharmashastras have themselves become irrelevant, at least those parts supporting caste system. On the other hand, the collapse of the caste system would also pose no threat to the continuation and survival of Hinduism. Hinduism has been thriving with renewed vigour thanks to such leaders as Satya Sai Baba, Mata Amritanandamayi and Sri Sri Ravishankar, and institutions like Ramakrishna Mission, Brahmakumaris and ISKON on an entirely non-caste basis. This is because caste is not intrinsic to basic principles and tenets of Hinduism as enshrined in Hindu canon. Hinduism itself has fought and is still fighting against casteism in a significant way. If caste system were intrinsic to Hinduism, Shri Narayana Guru and Mata Amritanandamayi would not have worked within the framework of Hinduism. (pp. 4792-4793)

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