

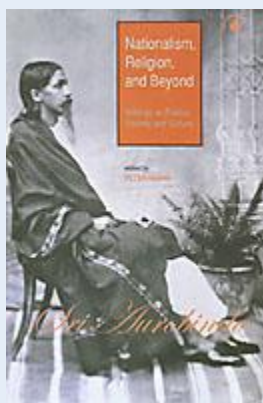
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## **India as a Synthesis of Cultures**

### **Review of Heehs (Ed.): *Nationalism, Religion, and Beyond* by Marcel Kvassay**



#### **Nationalism, Religion, and Beyond**

#### **Writings on Politics, Society, and Culture**

— Edited by Peter Heehs

ISBN: 81-7824-139-0

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Peter Heehs was the first member of the Ashram whom I could meet and talk to personally. This was in 1998 while he was attending a conference on South Asia held in Prague, Czech Republic. I travelled there from neighbouring Slovakia. By then I was already aware of Heehs's books published by Oxford University Press. Well-researched, factual and dispassionate, yet immensely readable, they help make Sri Aurobindo's thought more accessible to academic audiences. Heehs has understood and mastered the art of writing for this difficult and demanding group of readers. First and most important, he respects their right to learn about Sri Aurobindo without being pushed, directly or indirectly, out of their current and often secular world-views. Sri Aurobindo has a lot to offer even when measured by purely objective and scientific standards of achievement.

Secondly, academics tend to see each book as a sort of argument. In order that they should perceive it as *valid*, the book must satisfy certain professional criteria. Externally, nothing can impair its message more than a sloppy production with typographical errors, or clumsy style betraying the author's insufficient command over the language. But "internal validity" is even more important. With regard to anthologies, academics are prone to ask a whole set of

inquisitive questions: Is the editor impartial? Is his selection of material truly representative and well-balanced? Are his claims justified in the light of the objective, primary evidence that he can muster in favour of his proposition? What exactly is he trying to prove?

Heehs's present anthology of selections from Sri Aurobindo's writings published by Permanent Black, an associate of Orient Longman, is aimed at well-educated and critically-minded people both in India and abroad. For many of them this would be the first detailed encounter with Sri Aurobindo's writings, and the selection of texts is therefore meant to be representative: the earliest piece is dated 1893, the latest 1949. The book is arranged in six thematic parts which are roughly chronological: (1) Cultural Nationalism, (2) Political Nationalism, (3) Religion, (4) Religion and Nationalism, (5) Beyond Nationalism, and (6) Beyond Religion. Within the general framework of "politics, society, culture" it also briefly deals with the related aspects of Sri Aurobindo's thought. The problem of society can hardly be divorced from the problem of the individual, or culture from that through which it tries to reach beyond itself: religion and spirituality.

It is a commonplace among critics that the very act of compiling is interpretive. In this sense, compilations consisting only of the compiled material without a word from the editor are not necessarily objective, but merely hide the editor's personal views without eliminating them. The established "standards of the profession" therefore require that the editor clearly explain his approach and criteria for selection. This and much more Heehs does in an extensive introductory essay where he first situates Sri Aurobindo's thought in the general trends of the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, and then explains its relevance for the present-day readers by relating it to contemporary social and cultural theory. For the rest of the anthology he then steps back and lets Sri Aurobindo "speak for himself". To illustrate the general drift of the anthology and its relevance even for the ultra-modern, non-religious mentality of today, we quote two substantial extracts from the first part, "Cultural Nationalism":

No, it is not in the stress of an intolerant patriotism that I turn an eye of disparagement upon Europe. The immediate past of these Western peoples I can admire more than I admire the immediate past of our Indian nations. It is their present that shocks my aspirations for humanity. Europe is full of the noise and the apparel of life, of its luxurious trappings, of a myriad-footed material clang and tread, but of that which supports life she is growing more and more empty. When they had less information, her people had wiser and stronger souls. They had a literature, a creative intellectual force, a belief, a religion good or bad, a light that led onwards, a fixed path. Now they have only hungers, imaginations, sentiments & passions....

They criticise everything subtly rather than well, but can create nothing—except machines. They have organised society with astonishing success and found the very best way to spread comfort and kill their souls.... A thousand newspapers vulgarise knowledge, debase aesthetical appreciation, democratise success and make impossible all that was once unusual & noble.... The very churches & chapels are now only the theatres of a habitual stage performance of portentous & unnecessary dullness. With the exception of a small minority full of a grotesque, superficial but genuine passion, nobody believes, nobody feels; opinion, convention, preference and habit are alive and call themselves religion, but the heart that loves God is not to be found. Only a few of the undeveloped are really religious, the castbacks and atavists of this European evolution.

For more than half a century the whole of Europe has not been able to produce a single poet of even secondary magnificence. One no longer looks for Shakespeare or Dante to return, but even Wordsworth or Racine have also become impossible. Hugo's flawed opulence, Whitman's formless

plenty, Tennyson's sugared emptiness seem to have been the last poetic speech of modern Europe.... Of all literary forms the novel only has still some genius and even that is perishing of the modern curse of overproduction.

Learning and scholarship are unendingly active over the dead corpse of creative power as in Alexandria and with the later Romans before the great darkness. Eccentricity and the hunting after novelty & paradox play in it over an ostentatious precision and accuracy. Yesterday's opinion is today exploded & discarded, new fireworks of theory, generalisation and speculation take the place of the old, and to this pyrotechnic rushing in a circle they give the name of progress....

The moral nerve is equally relaxed. Immorality which does not know how to enjoy, impotence and dullness of the capacity for enjoyment masquerading as virtue, decorum and prudery covering a cesspool, the coarseness, appetite and rapid satiety of the imperial Romans combining in various proportions or associating on various terms with the euprepeia & looseness of the Greeks. But the Pagan virility whether united to Roman coarseness or Greek brilliance is only to be seen in a few extraordinary individuals.... In a word, the whole of Europe is now a magnified Alexandria, brilliant forms with a perishing soul, feverish activity in imitation of the forms of health with no capital but the energy of the sickbed. One has to concede however that it is not altogether sterile, for all Europe and America pullulate with ever multiplying machinery.

1910 (published posthumously)

Almost a century has passed since, and is it less true of Europe today than of Europe then? Two years later, when Sri Aurobindo turned towards India in the same context, his eye was equally sharp and language equally acute:

Few societies have been so tamasic, so full of inertia and contentment in increasing narrowness as Indian society in later times; few have been so eager to preserve themselves in inertia. Few therefore have attached so great an importance to authority. Every detail of our life has been fixed for us by Shastra and custom, every detail of our thought by Scripture and its commentators,—but much oftener by the commentators than by Scripture. Only in one field, that of individual spiritual experience, have we cherished the ancient freedom and originality out of which our past greatness sprang; it is from some new movement in this inexhaustible source that every fresh impulse and rejuvenated strength has arisen. Otherwise we should long ago have been in the grave where dead nations lie, with Greece and Rome of the Caesars, with Esarhaddon and the Chosroes. You will often hear it said that it was the forms of Hinduism which have given us so much national vitality. I think rather it was its spirit. I am inclined to give more credit for the secular miracle of our national survival to Shankara, Ramanuja, Nanak & Kabir, Guru Govind, Chaitanya, Ramdas & Tukaram than to Raghunandan and the Pandits of Nadiya & Bhatpara.

The result of this well-meaning bondage has been an increasing impoverishment of the Indian intellect, once the most gigantic and original in the world. Hence a certain incapacity, atrophy, impotence have marked our later activities even at their best. The most striking instance is our continued helplessness in the face of the new conditions and new knowledge imposed on us by recent European contact. We have tried to assimilate, we have tried to reject, we have tried to select; but we have not been able to do any of these things successfully. Successful assimilation depends on mastery; but we have not mastered European conditions and knowledge, rather we have been seized,

subjected and enslaved by them. Successful rejection is possible only if we have intelligent possession of that which we wish to keep. Our rejection too must be an intelligent rejection; we must reject because we have understood, not because we have failed to understand. But our Hinduism, our old culture are precisely the possessions we have cherished with the least intelligence; throughout the whole range of our life we do things without knowing why we do them, we believe things without knowing why we believe them, we assert things without knowing what right we have to assert them,—or, at most, it is because some book or some Brahmin enjoins it, because Shankara thinks it, or because someone has so interpreted something that he asserts to be a fundamental Scripture of our religion. Nothing is our own, nothing native to our intelligence, all is derived....

We preserve indeed a certain ingenuity and subtlety; we can imitate with an appearance of brightness; we can play plausibly, even brilliantly with the minutiae of a subject; but we fail to think usefully, we fail to master the life and heart of things. Yet it is only by mastering the life and heart of things that we can hope, as a nation, to survive.

How shall we recover our lost intellectual freedom and elasticity? By reversing, for a time at least, the process by which we lost it, by liberating our minds in all subjects from the thralldom to authority. That is not what reformers and the Anglicised require of us. They ask us, indeed, to abandon authority, to revolt against custom and superstition, to have free and enlightened minds. But they mean by these sounding recommendations that we should renounce the authority of Sayana for the authority of Max Muller, the Monism of Shankara for the Monism of Haeckel, the written Shastra for the unwritten law of European social opinion, the dogmatism of Brahmin Pandits for the dogmatism of European scientists, thinkers and scholars. Such a foolish exchange of servitude can receive the assent of no self-respecting mind. Let us break our chains, venerable as they are, but let it be in order to be free,—in the name of truth, not in the name of Europe....

We must begin by accepting nothing on trust from any source whatsoever, by questioning everything and forming our own conclusions. We need not fear that we shall by that process cease to be Indians or fall into the danger of abandoning Hinduism. India can never cease to be India or Hinduism to be Hinduism, if we really think for ourselves. It is only if we allow Europe to think for us that India is in danger of becoming an ill-executed and foolish copy of Europe. We must not begin by becoming partisans but know before we take our line. Our first business as original thinkers will be to accept nothing, to question everything.... The necessity of such a process not for India, but for all humanity has been recognised by leading European thinkers. It was what Carlyle meant when he spoke of swallowing all formulas. It was the process by which Goethe helped to reinvigorate European thinking. But in Europe the stream is running dry before it has reached its sea. Europe has for some time ceased to produce original thinkers, though it still produces original mechanics.... Europe is becoming stereotyped and unprogressive; she is fruitful only of new & ever multiplying luxuries and of feverish, fiery & ineffective changes in her political and social machinery. China, Japan and the Mussulman States are sliding into a blind European imitativeness. In India alone there is self-contained, dormant, the energy and the invincible spiritual individuality which can yet arise and break her own and the world's fetters.

circa 1912 (published posthumously)

It is not easy to grasp the full depth and wideness of Sri Aurobindo's thought—not only for the public at large, but even for his admirers and followers. Dazzled by the light and vividness of his main propositions, we often fail to perceive the subtler shades of meaning in his complex arguments. Thus the piece about Europe might seem, at first glance, to justify and indirectly advocate a wholesale rejection of everything coming from the West as incurably infected with

a mortal disease. Yet in the second piece written two years later he recommends the typically “European” process of free and original thinking as part of the remedy for India. What he really fights and detests is the cheap superficial imitation and uncritical acceptance of the results of European thought, since that would be the very antipodes of original thinking.

But if neither Europe nor traditional India can satisfy him, what else remains, what else can be attempted? Where is he trying to point by alluding to India’s “invincible spiritual individuality which can yet arise and break her own and the world’s fetters”? Some, taking their cue from the many places in Sri Aurobindo’s writings where he expresses his genuine admiration for the rich and flexible culture of ancient India as opposed to the increasingly narrow and rigid developments of later Brahmanism and Hinduism, would say that he is pointing to the rejuvenated “older & mightier Vedanta” which does not reject the world. After all, it was the Isha Upanishad that gave Sri Aurobindo the first glimpse of spiritual awakening, and provided him with the basis for his own system of world- and life-affirming spirituality. It can hardly be a coincidence that his *magnum opus* of spiritual practice is called *The Synthesis of Yoga*, or the institution he founded an *ashram*. External forms of devotion witnessed in the Ashram also trace their roots mostly to Indian tradition. No wonder many people find such an interpretation convincing. In this view, India needs to reconstruct the simpler, adaptable Vedantism of the Upanishadic times with its plastic social framework, and so reunited, vigorously “push out” of its social body first the decadent European materialism, promptly followed by whichever other systems of faith happen to be lumped with it as unwelcome intruders on the sacred Indian soil. Yet the fact remains that Sri Aurobindo has explicitly spoken and written to the contrary—not once, but many times. The social and cultural forms of the Upanishadic Vedantism simply cannot be revived. Readers of the anthology will find the reasons explained by Sri Aurobindo himself, and we assure them that those pieces are as powerful and penetrating as the ones we have already quoted. Here is what Sri Aurobindo thinks of the approaches that we have previously referred to as “pushing out”:

We do not believe that by multiplying new sects limited within the narrower and inferior ideas of religion imported from the West or by creating organisations for the perpetuation of the mere dress and body of Hinduism we can recover our spiritual health, energy and greatness. 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, 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.

June 1909

Nothing and nobody then needs to be “pushed out” in order that India may realise her fullness of being. Rather the opposite—at least in Sri Aurobindo’s view. He indeed speaks of Hinduism as superior to other religions but applies this attribute to a “wider Hinduism” of which the Bible and the Koran are valid scriptures and of which, therefore, Christians and Muslims are already legitimate members. Moreover, he praises this “wider Hinduism” for a virtue precisely opposite to that of “pushing out”: the inexhaustible capacity to absorb, to reject nothing but to test and experience everything, and to turn it to the soul’s uses. To sum up, in Sri Aurobindo’s words of September 1906, “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. To try to build it up in any other way will be impossible.”

Throughout the anthology, Heehs remains focused on the needs of readers who may view the claims of spirituality with scepticism. Therefore, as in his other books, Heehs distances himself from his subject and accepts scepticism as his starting point. Aware that his readers need to know not only *what* Sri Aurobindo had said but also *why*, he has carefully selected passages which stand as mini-arguments on their own, yet mutually support and throw light on each other, woven into the larger argument of the chapter or section. Thus the anthology takes on a whole new quality—as if the pieces, from such diverse periods, were meant to form a single book. Overall, Heehs has managed to prove beyond reasonable doubt that, however sceptical our initial approach, so long as it remains fundamentally unbiased, Sri Aurobindo will always break through as a unique and original thinker with something to offer to all, not just to those with overt spiritual inclinations. And if secularists cannot accept him *in toto*, yet they will surely enjoy his thought-provoking analyses of the burning social, political and cultural issues of the day. For his ideas have withstood the test of time; even after a century they resonate in us more deeply than many contemporary theories.

To conclude, I would not be surprised if the anthology were to become a highly-valued possession not only of academic institutions and scholars, but of all who are serious in their intent to study and understand Sri Aurobindo. It has every chance of becoming a “standard” one-volume reference to Sri Aurobindo’s social and political thought. With a protective hard cover and 360 pages tightly packed with riveting material, it is certainly worth its price. Given its indisputable qualities, we can only wish it the best of luck on its way to readers.