

Minor, Robert N., *The Religious the Spiritual and the Secular: Auroville and Secular India*. State University of New York Press, Albany, 1999. ISBN 0-7914-3992-5. \$19.95.

Academic disciplines worry sometimes very differently about ethnocentrism and cultural bias. Religious Studies, a discipline that has developed in the last half-century almost exclusively in North America, takes as axiomatic that religious advocacy is ethnocentric and has no part in disciplinary discourse. Objectivity is to be achieved through methods sometimes designated *phenomenology* (after the philosophic movement) or through imitation of anthropology. Conveniently, horror at advocacy plays well against a backdrop of a political tradition of separation of Church and State, and state-funded universities (who find money for Religious Studies chairs and special programs among those who go to church) are able to disclaim religious promotion.

Of course, it would be unfair to paint Religious Studies professors as all following the same methodology. Among them interdisciplinary studies flourish, in particular (as hardly needs mentioning to this audience) scholarship in classical literatures including Greek, Hebrew, and Sanskrit. Nevertheless, I speak of a deep-set tendency to valorize—to use a favorite word of founding father Mircea Eliade—description over advocacy and object-level argument. But not everyone need be restricted to description and anti-advocacy prejudice. Thus there is irony—and a lesson to be learned—from the ethnocentrism of projecting such descriptivism on a political culture with a different history of relation with religion. The lesson is that the “religious” as marked off by American professionals need not be roped off from responsible and legitimate argument and that “religious” advocacy in politics is not everywhere *eo ipso* wrong.

Robert Minor expresses shock at the role of the Indian Government in *l'affaire Auroville*, shock both at the Acts passed by Parliament and by the decisions of the Supreme Court. His complaint is that there is self-deception or pretense in the Government's sponsorship of the utopian community viewed in the light of Constitutional protection of religious institutions (among which Auroville should be counted, says Minor, contrary to the decisions of the Supreme Court). He alleges that the ambiguity of the words ‘religious’, ‘spiritual’, and ‘secular’ have

allowed legislators and judges to fool themselves into believing that the yogic teaching of Aurobindo Ghose (1872-1950), after whom the city is named and whose ideals its Charter expresses, is as spiritual not religious and as universalist or egalitarian (i.e., “open to all”) is secular. Minor parleys this into an indictment of a wedding between Hinduism and politics in the chapel of what he calls Neo-Advaita. The Indian officials, who, he insinuates, are probably themselves Neo-Advaitins, are plainly motivated by pride and worried about national prestige in their endorsement of Auroville and by implication Aurobindo’s teaching, and thus their equivocal language. The Government has its own Constitutionally mandated concerns which should preclude promotion of what is, Minor tries to show, a religious and sectarian institution and teaching.

Minor is to be taken to task principally, I think, for being deaf to legitimate endorsement of values distinct from those of his own academic ethos. He is deaf to the peculiar language employed, missing the appropriateness, for example, of the imprecision of the words *spiritual* and the like. But before developing this criticism, let me give a different reading of *l’affaire*, giving it a positive spin. I’d like to show by contrast how negative Minor’s is if nothing else.

Aurobindo, Cambridge-educated and with exceptional literary talent demonstrated from a young age, had in India an early career as a speech-writer and academic, turned to nationalist politics in his thirties, and to yoga and mysticism in later life. His writings are directed mainly to yogic teaching organized around a mystic psychology. His philosophy is Vedāntic in concept and outlook, but it is not classically Vedāntic in argumentation. Aurobindo endorses no scripture as revelation, holding that his views are supported by mystical evidence (and arguing that the Upaniṣads themselves are reports of and reasonings based on yogic experiences). The experiences to which yogic practice leads have cognitive value, Aurobindo says. But he also complains about the difficulty of capturing in precise language what the experiences indicate. More broadly, he finds arguments of “natural theology,” as we would say in the West, to converge with the testimony of mystical experiences.

Like all free-thinking metaphysicians not parroting some predecessor, Aurobindo has his own peculiar ontological

positions. For Minor this seems to be why the views are religious. Apparently, all metaphysical views as distinct from rival views are arbitrary and as arbitrary are religious. The best we can do is admit that our own view, our own religion, is one among many, all without reason staking their claims. Aurobindo's views center on the reality of what he calls the Divine in relation to the world as explained by science and in relation to us as revealed mystically. For Minor, the religion of Aurobindoism centers on (an irrational) acceptance of these views. But it seems a bit rash, and worse, to pronounce, in effect, a philosopher's arguments irrelevant to acceptance of his conclusions without digging into those arguments, and no such digging do we find in Minor, for whose purposes much about Aurobindo's philosophy has simply to be assumed. It may well be that the philosophy has nothing whatsoever to say in its favor, but my point is that Minor takes for granted its being religious in character according to an irrationalist view of religion.

There is, to be sure, a chapter where Aurobindo's philosophy is sketched. But one can also see my point in the fact that there Minor neglects the non- or anti-intellectual element in Aurobindo's message. The yogin himself says that a non-intellectual contact with the Divine is the heart of his teaching. He says his *statements* about the Divine are speculative and corrigible. The point of his writing including the philosophical is, he tells us, pragmatic, to encourage people to try to have mystical experiences and to guide them. The experiences, not beliefs, have value intrinsically. However for Minor it's all about (irrational, non-empirical) belief.

Aurobindo himself apparently personally guided the yogic training of some, and in his fifties founded an ashram, entrusting its management to a woman whom he had come to see as as advanced as himself in yogic endeavors. "The Mother" (Mirra Alfassa, 1878-1973) picked up his anti-intellectualism, though, like him, she also had a lot to say about how one might make progress spiritually. She insisted to a growing number of disciples that beliefs could be severe obstacles on a yogic path, and that not even Aurobindo's philosophy should be believed dogmatically, that a person's own experiences are what matter. Minor depicts Aurobindoism as the religion where the Mother's words, as well as Aurobindo's, have to be obeyed, whereas what

in fact they teach is that no words are to be obeyed but rather a mysterious Divine contact is to be fostered. Now the very possibility of this is something they may well be wrong about. But neither this nor any other issue of the right way to interpret them or yogic discipline in general is engaged by Minor, who, I repeat, simply presumes arbitrariness and baseless authority. And such presumption feeds his political judgment.

Various moral and aesthetic qualities are supposed to develop in people beginning to have yogic experiences according to Aurobindo and the Mother. They encouraged their followers to try to express the Divine in action. Meditative effort and openness to the Divine (which, again, Minor interprets as surrender to the words of Aurobindo and the Mother) were to extend to all dimensions of life with a goal of transforming the everyday consciousness, which they saw as the *summum bonum*. (For Minor, this soteriology is the heart of the cult.) But of course many found, and would find, the discipline too difficult, their natures too bound to habits and natural desires to be very expressive of the spiritual or Divine. In part to have a place to send aspirants for whom celibacy and other yogic attitudes common in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram were impractical, the Mother founded Auroville in 1967. It would be a communitarian experiment in consciously harmonious living, as individuals tried and achieved varying degrees of expression of the Divine in life. It would be international initially as reflective of the diverse national origins of its residents (mainly young Europeans and North Indians during its first decade) and ultimately as a new form of social organization more attuned to prospects of Divine life.

Very few Aurovillians were living in the land purchased under the Auroville banner when the Mother died in 1973, maybe 50 as opposed to about 1,200 in 1999. She had put in place only a handful of rules and administrative policies, apparently out of a sense of people's variable natures and the individuality of Divine expression. No successor emerged, and money collected had to be distributed by committee. A conflict arose between the Aurovillians and the group (the SAS, the Sri Aurobindo Society) that had raised the money for the initial Auroville land purchases who did not live in Auroville. Graft and mismanagement were alleged. To resolve the conflict, the Indian Parliament passed a

series of Acts structuring the governance of Auroville. The Government also won approval of the project from UNESCO, and provided some funding. And there were some rather remarkable discussions of yoga and matters spiritual in the Lok and Rajya Sabhas (the Indian Parliament).

The Acts were challenged in court by the SAS, the original overseers of Auroville. The Indian Supreme Court, whose justices took the time to read and interpret Aurobindo (with an adroitness visible despite the distortions in Minor's account), sided with Parliament and the Aurovillians. The Court concluded that Aurobindo's teaching is not religious and thus that an institution based thereon is not protected from Parliamentary regulation. Minor is outraged at the breach of separation of Church and State.

Now, the term *spiritual* is indeed vague, but its crucial usages by the justices and legislators are not ambiguous in the way Minor excoriates, namely, as the equivalents of *religious* in the Indian political context. The spiritual, for Aurobindo and his Government interpreters, is the province of the Divine and accessible through yogic practice and experience. It is also considered the underpinning of a wide range of moral and aesthetic values. No one is supposed to be able to say very precisely what it is because its nature eludes description, being a matter of experience, of immediate acquaintance as opposed to intellectual understanding. An endorsement of Aurobindo as a spiritual philosopher is an endorsement of yoga and meditation and roughly of the moral and aesthetic values that Aurobindo and the Mother taught. The Supreme Court found nothing objectionable in Parliament's endorsement of those values which they themselves apparently approved of, too (in an appropriately, I would say, general manner, something like, "Meditation and the practice of compassion and self-sacrifice are largely good things"). Furthermore, though Minor rarely mentions Islam or Muslims today in India, Muslims are Constitutionally granted a separate civil code such that *religious* categorization is of momentous consequence. The considerations (a) that admission to Auroville is "open to all," and (b) that Aurobindo teaches that nothing about prior culture need block spiritual accomplishment (anyone can become a yogin) apparently led the justices to conclude that the philosophy is universalist and secular, not

religious, and so too the institution.

Beyond equivocation, Minor cites another basis for the justices' delusions, pride in "Neo-Advaita" or Hinduism connected to the idea that as inclusivist it is better than exclusivist (religious) positions. Minor correctly attributes the judgment to Vivekananda and Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan. But it is not, I think, in Aurobindo, and it has no relevance to the Auroville case. (Furthermore, at least Vivekananda meant less to glorify Hinduism than to affirm others' religions from his own point of view.) Minor wants us to see that Hinduism is thought of not only as universalist and secular but "more secular" which shows that it is not secular at all. And maybe some do so regard it. But the justices' reading of Aurobindo has nothing to do with this; Minor unfairly projects an apologetical pride.

The true political issues that Auroville raises are much deeper than those discussed by Minor, but we may align his instincts with a certain libertarianism which I would like briefly to review. Libertarian political philosophy proclaims that the State should be neutral concerning the content of the good, that markets and individual preference (for religion, for art, for employment) are to be respected absolutely. Taxation used to support arts or humanities (much less religion!) would not treat all citizens equally. An equal liberty for all is thought to prohibit State promotions in these areas of variable preference. An Aristotelian political philosophy, in contrast, finds a State duty to further the welfare of its citizenry, including moral and aesthetic development. Now, what actual State, let us ask, conforms to the libertarian to the exclusion of the paternalist or Aristotelian line? And that line presupposes determinate views about good character. Why, then, should we presume that the Indian Government is wrong to promote yoga and such moral values as compassion and self-sacrifice? What commits us to the minimalism of the libertarian position? And any non-libertarian reason that might be given in favor of positive program or policy X would appear available to the Indian Government regarding its policy on Auroville.

"But in this case the Indian Government is promoting yoga et cetera by endorsing in effect Aurobindo's philosophy which is a religious metaphysics just as arbitrary as other religious systems." True, in the United States politicians rarely try to

articulate the metaphysical foundations of values. True, few academics claim to know what these could be (the dominant materialism being hard to square with human values). True, there is in India a peculiarly Indian, or Hindu, or Vedāntic tradition of finding values underpinned in a Divine Absolute accessible through ascetic discipline. But I fail to find pretense or self-deception but rather a legitimate (Aristotelian) attempt to nurture—according to Vedāntic conceptions of good character.

What is most remarkable is that the Indian Government would be willing to give up some *sovereignty* on such high-minded grounds (in allowing, for instance, Auroville to determine who gets to immigrate and live permanently in that portion of India). Aurovillians have a lot to live up to. Auroville's projects include ecological development and "first-world" integration of village societies sorely needed throughout India as well as meditational discipline that is more a matter of individual pursuit. It is unfortunate that Minor would give it such bad press.

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