

The Third Eye and Two Ways of (Un)knowing: Gnosis, Alternative Modernities, and Postcolonial Futures

By Makarand Paranjape
 Professor of English, JNU, New Delhi 110067
 Presented at the Infinity Colloquium, 24-29 July 2002, New York

The starting point for this paper is the premise that alternatives to modern epistemology can hardly come from *modern* (Western) epistemology itself. This idea has been voiced quite forcefully in recent thinking by scholars such as Walter D. Mignolo s, from whose book *Local Histories/Global Designs* the above phrase is taken. But even if we were to agree with such a premise, it still begs the question of where to look for these alternatives. For critics such a Mignolo, the challenge is to rehabilitate subaltern knowledge systems so as to bring about, to invoke a phrase from Foucault, an insurrection of subjected knowledges. Gnosis, gnoseology and border thinking have been used to describe these knowledge systems that are on the margins of or outside the world colonized by Western modernity. My project is to oppose the dominance of rationality (or, more recently, *irrationality*) in modern and postmodern philosophy by invoking ideas of the supra-rational from Classical as well as modern traditions of thinking, especially in India. These traditions, for lack of a better word, may be called wisdom traditions. That they share something with gnosticism should be obvious. I would like to focus on the work of one modern Indian thinker, Sri Aurobindo, particularly his idea of the Supermind, to suggest a slightly different way of conceiving postcolonial futures. Sri Aurobindo s thought has important implications for the discipline of consciousness studies because it posits the naturalization of a higher conscious than the mental. Is there, I ask, a bridge somewhere between the secular critics of Western modernity or colonial discourse, on the one hand, and their rather more mystical counterparts, on the other? If this missing link were to be discovered, it might contribute to a critical step forward in conversations on planetary futures and actually pave the way for a new global renaissance.

1

It is being increasingly acknowledged that colonial difference is a factor not just of economic or political power but also of contending knowledge systems. These knowledge systems, apart from being differentiated by the amount of power they enjoy, are also based on alternative epistemologies. Those who wish to critique colonialism have done so in economic and political or in philosophical, even metaphysical terms. For instance, we might argue that modernity is imperialistic as an ideology and modernity in turn under girds colonialism ideologically. This M. K. Gandhi realized only too well, which is why, when he attacked imperialism in *Hind Swaraj* (1909) he also attacked modernity. But Gandhi was one of the few to do so in so clear a fashion.

In the discourse of postcolonial studies, it has taken critics almost a hundred year after Gandhi to make similar connections. In recent years a whole host of scholars and thinkers have begun to see that overthrowing imperialism requires a certain critique of what might be called Occidental reason. For instance, a recent book on the subject by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is tellingly entitled *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*. Those who wish to make a connection between postcolonialism and postmodernism quickly leap to the conclusion that the anti-foundationalism of the latter informs the eclectic critique of power of the former. Thus Aijaz Ahmed castigates Edward Said of abandoning the teleology of history and the grand narrative of Marxian emancipation, in favour of a neo-Nietzscheian critique of reality as linguistically constructed.

The Enlightenment project has its adherents both on the right and on the left-the classic debate has been between pro-market liberals and pro-statist socialists, both of whom accept the supremacy of reason as the arbiter of human destiny and as the primary tool to re-shape society. Those who debunk the Enlightenment project, on the other hand, resort to a sort anti-rationalism or irrationalism. What Mignolo and the others add to this debate is a different set of knowledge systems which are subaltern because they have been suppressed or because they are generated on or from outside the borders of the dominant West. Mignolo has used the word gnosis or gnoseology to characterize these knowledge systems.

For Mignolo, alternatives to modernity are located in spaces outside the imperium that is outside the dominant West. He characterizes colonial difference as the space where *local* histories inventing and implementing global designs meet local histories, the space in which global designs have to be adapted, adopted, rejected, integrated, or ignored. The colonial difference is, finally, the physical as well as imaginary location where the coloniality of power is at work . (ix). Border thinking or border gnosis is

the fractured locus of enunciation from a subaltern perspective a response to the colonial difference (x). So, gnosis here is a term given to knowledges which are suppressed by the dominant: border thinking is more than a hybrid enunciation. It is a fractured enunciation in dialogic situations with the territorial and hegemonic cosmology (x). One of Mignolo's interesting contributions to the discourse of decolonization is to propose a new kind of university, based on *a critique of knowledge and cultural practices* (xii) as opposed to the Kantian university based on *reason*, the Humboldtian university based on *culture* and the neoliberal university based on *excellence* and *expertise* (xii).

Speaking of the connection between imperialism and knowledge systems, Mignolo points out how Spanish missionaries judged and ranked civilizations in terms of whether they possessed alphabetic writing. They used *translation* (especially of the Bible into these languages) to absorb this difference; *border thinking* works to reconstitute that difference (3). He alludes to border thinking not just from Latin America, but also to African *gnosis*. The key text here is Valentin Mudimbe's *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge* (1988). Mudimbe says that *gnosko* means seeking to know, inquiry, methods of knowing, investigation, and even acquaintance with someone. Often the word is used in a more specialized sense, that of higher and esoteric knowledge (ix). Mignolo, too, uses the word gnosis in a special sense, which needs to be understood:

Border gnosis as knowledge from a subaltern perspective is knowledge conceived from the exterior borders of the modern/colonial world system, and border gnoseology as a discourse about colonial knowledge is conceived at the conflictive intersection of the knowledge produced from the perspective of modern colonialisms (rhetoric, philosophy, science) and knowledge produced from the perspective of colonial modernities in Asia, Africa, and the Americas/Caribbean. Border gnoseology is a critical reflection on knowledge production from both the interior borders of the modern/colonial world system (imperial conflicts, hegemonic languages, directionality of translations, etc.) and its external borders (imperial conflicts with cultures being colonized, as well as the subsequent stages of independence and decolonization). Finally, border gnoseology could be contrasted with territorial gnoseology or epistemology, the philosophy of knowledge, as we know it today (from Descartes, to Kant, to Husserl and all its ramifications in analytic philosophy of languages and philosophy of science): a conception and reflection on knowledge articulated in concert with the cohesion of national languages and the formation of the nation-state. (11)

But I would like to invoke the older meaning of the word gnosis. Gnosticism, a religious sect dating back at least to the first century C.E. held that salvation came from knowledge or what in India would be called *jnana*. But the moot question was knowledge of *what*. Hans Jonas in *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity* says:

As for *what* knowledge is about, the associations of the term most familiar to the classically trained reader point to *rational* objects, and accordingly to natural reason as the organ for acquiring and possessing knowledge. In the gnostic context, however, knowledge has an emphatically religious or supranatural meaning and refers to objects which we nowadays should call those of faith rather than of reason. *Gnosis* meant pre-eminently knowledge of *God*, and from what we have said about the radical transcendence of the deity it follows that knowledge of *God* is the knowledge of something naturally unknowable and therefore itself not a natural condition. On the one hand it is closely bound with revelatory experience, so that reception of the truth either through sacred and secret lore or through inner illumination replaces rational argument and theory. On the other hand, being concerned with the secrets of salvation, knowledge is not just theoretical information about certain things but is itself, as a modification of the human condition, charged with performing the function in the bringing about of salvation. *Thus gnostic knowledge has an eminently practical object.* (34)

Mignolo argues that the target of gnosis need not be God or salvation now but the uncertainties of the borders (12): Our goals are not salvation but decolonization (12). But, I would suggest, that decolonization is nothing but another name for a special kind of salvation, a secular salvation, perhaps, or salvation from oppression, from inequality, and therefore from ignorance.

The problem before us today is that of postcolonial or planetary futures. I agree with Mignolo that The future of a diverse planetary civilizations cannot simply be the universalism of either Western neoliberalism or Western neo-Marxism (8) and that Alternatives to modern epistemology can hardly come only from *modern* (Western) epistemology itself (9). That is why, I want to discuss the specific category of gnosis to ask if can be the basis for an alternative (post)modernity. Gnosis, which was a part of the Western semantics of knowledge, vanished after the ascendancy of rationality (9). The word was associated with gnosticism, which were branded as an anti-Christian sect by the Church fathers, which it

turn gave it a bad name. Mignolo uses *gnosis* and *gnoseology* to suggest these alternative knowledge systems. *Gignosko* verb to know, to recognize (like *jignasa*) and *epistemai* to know, to be acquainted with, suggest two different conceptions of knowledge and knowing (9). In ancient Greek thought, *gnosis* emerges as word to suggest a special or hidden kind of knowledge-but Greek philosophers do not establish a rigid distinction between *gnosis* and *episteme* (10).

To invoke the ancient Gnostics for just a minute longer, it s fundamental to recognize that The God of the Gnostics is not the God of this world. According to Gerd Ludemann and Martina Janssen The creator of the world to whom the Christians of the church pray is a lower God who out of envy leaves the human soul in ignorance about its heavenly home. The God who brings the Gnostic redemption is the good, unknown Father. He cannot be understood by human efforts. Accordingly, it can only be said of him what he is not. This negative theology occupies a good deal of space in all forms of Gnostic literature (17). What this quotation actually suggests is that Gnostics had a totally different theology from the Christians, one that is closer the Vedic view, which regards human beings as *amritasya putraha* or the children of immortality. In gnosticism there is no original sin, purgatory, or damnation, nor is God a vengeful and punishing deity.

Gnostics were branded as heretics by the Church and exterminated (11). What makes them special for us is that they believed in salvation by knowledge, *jnana*, or *vijnana*-the knowledge of the Self not by dogmas of belief or some prescribed set of ritual practices: For the Gnostic, knowledge is primarily self-knowledge This knowledge brings it salvation and reunites it with the Pleroma (=fullness) from which it comes (Ludemann and Janssen 12). Of course, it is important to remember that gnosticism is not uniform or homogenous, nor is it entirely Christian-there was Jewish, Iranian, Egyptian, and a philosophical Gnosticism. (12). Some sects include the Mandaeans of southern Iraq, the Manichaeans, the Hermeticists, and the Neoplatonics (12-13). For a long time, the Gnostics were known only by what was quoted against them by the heresiologists until the discovery of the Nag Hammadi corups around 1945 in a small town in Egypt by that name. Thirteen codices in Coptic were found which contains several Gnostic texts dating back to the 4th century C.E.

In his controversial book *Black Athena* (1987) Martin Bernal argues that much of the new knowledge, including the beginnings of modern science, that erupted after the renaissance was due to the Greek transmission of Egyptian wisdom (see Chapter II, 121-160). Bernal s thesis that the triumph of the Aryan Model and the defeat of the Ancient Model coincided with the emergence of a violent, racist, intolerant, and dominating Western modernity which saw itself as specially privileged and superior to the rest of the world. However, according to the Ancient Model which had prevailed right up to the first half of the nineteenth century, ancient Greece, which was the source of modern Europe, was itself a creature of the even more ancient Egypt, which was an Afro-Semitic civilization. What is pertinent to this paper in Bernal s argument is his positing a holistic wisdom tradition, derived from ancient Egypt, as both the precursor and the source of modernity itself, until it is overthrown by the regime of modern rationality after the Enlightenment. He identifies three strands of this tradition which influenced, even triumphed over Europe, until they were crushed: Hermeticism, Neo-Platonism, and Gnosticism. Before the advent of modern Egyptology, all of Egyptian wisdom was attributed to a single author, somewhat like Veda Vyasa in India. Called Hermes Trismegistos, this mythical figure was thought to be older than Moses. Major figures of the renaissance such as Copernicus, Giordano Bruno, and even Newton were hermeticists (see Chapter III, 161-188). The other interesting aspect of Bernal s argument is that the European enthusiasm for India also served to diminish its regard for Egypt. Of course, like Egypt, India too had to be degraded and discarded in the nineteenth century for the emergence of a racist and supremacist imperial Europe (see Chapter V, 224-280).

2

My paper, however, is concerned primarily with India and what it has to contribute to this debate. What seems to me to be very important here is that India had a variety of knowledge systems in mutually supportive, dialogic relationships. In other words, it had smaller, localized, subaltern knowledge systems, some of which survive to this day among our so-called tribal populations. It also had extremely well-worked out systems of rational thought, called the *sastras*. But what is more, its deepest philosophical urges were grounded neither in empiricism or rational speculation, but on what might be called wisdom or *gnosis*. It is commonplace to claim that Indian philosophy is intuitive while Western philosophy is rationalistic. S. Radhakrishnan called it the contrast between creative intuition vs. critical intelligence (quoted in Sinha 9). Both in Upanishadic and Buddhist thought not *buddhi* but *prajna* take us to the Absolute (4). And yet, as Ramesh Chandra Sinha puts it, though Indian philosophical tradition does not

regard reason as the supreme source of knowledge. It is reason which gives a coherent, systematic and consistent interpretation of intuitive experience (9).

If I were to sum up my argument I would say that this paper takes as its starting point Sri Aurobindo's critique of what might be termed Occidental reason. I first came across it in what was almost a textual aside in a long polemic that Sri Aurobindo first mounted in his periodical *Arya* from December 1918 to January 1921. These essays were later collected under the title *The Foundations of Indian Culture* and appeared as vol. 14 of the SABCL. In the Collected Works of Sri Aurobindo (CWSA), designed to supersede the former, the title of the volume has been changed. The ostensible pretext for Sri Aurobindo's critique was a wholesale dismissal of Indian culture by noted drama critic, William Archer. Archer's book, *India and Its Future* is certainly forgotten today, though it was immortalized by Sri Aurobindo's detailed rebuttal. The second series consisting of seven essays that Sri Aurobindo wrote against Archer was called 'A Rationalistic Critic on Indian Culture'. In essay four of this series, Sri Aurobindo says:

Modern Europe separated religion from life, from philosophy, from art and science, from politics, from the greater part of social action and social existence. And it secularised and rationalised too the ethical demand so that it might stand in itself on its own basis and have no need or any aid from religious sanction or mystic insistence. (SABCL 14: 83).

But it is after this remarkably clear but somewhat expected assessment of modernity occurs the radical insight that is so carelessly tucked away in the corner of what is a larger polemic:

At the end of this turn is an antinomian tendency, constantly recurring in the life-history of Europe and now again in evidence. This force seeks to annul ethics also, not by rising above it into the absolute purity of the spirit, as mystic experience claims to do, but by breaking out of its barriers below into an exultant freedom of the vital play. (ibid)

This struck me as quite a prophetic pronouncement on the anti-foundationalism of postmodernism thought, with its emphasis on absolute freedom and play, but which is not supra-rational as much as *anti-* or *irrational*. Sri Aurobindo's more extended critique on reason as the sole arbiter of human destiny in series of essays first published in *Arya* from 15 August 1916 to 15 July 1918 and collected later as *The Human Cycle* (SABCL: 15). Here he states in detail why reason cannot deliver humanity:

The whole difficulty of the reason in trying to govern our existence is that because of its own inherent limitations it is unable to deal with life in its complexity or in its integral movements; it is compelled to break it up into parts, to make more or less artificial classifications, to build systems with limited data which are contradicted, upset or have to be continually modified by other data, to work out a selection of regulated potentialities which is broken down by the bursting of a new wave of yet unregulated potentialities. (102)

Sri Aurobindo concludes that only a widespread spiritual transformation that will usher in a universal Spiritual Age will be the natural culmination of the human quest for individual as well as social perfection.

What emerges from such a critique is that the central philosophical enterprise of the West proceeds in cycles of affirmation and negation of a certain kind of rationality. In the last two hundred years or so, this has meant the enthronement of instrumental reason and then its recent repudiation at the hands of several thinkers. Neo-classicism, romanticism, modernism, and, now, postmodernism also show traces of a similar cycle of affirmation and negation. Seeing its own history in terms of a progression from the pre-modern, to the modern, to the post-modern, the West has relegated other societies to a space equivalent to its own irrational past, thereby turning geography into history. However, I would like to argue that a civilization such as India is neither pre-modern, nor modern. In fact, one cannot call it post-modern or anti-modern either, though that is how some choose to see it. I would argue that India is best understood either as a traditional or a non-modern society. By this is meant that it does not subscribe to the logic of History that the West has invented. In a non-modern society, what is central is neither rationality nor its opposite, but something else, call it wisdom, which includes but supercedes rationality. The debate between the West and India is not between modernity and tradition or between modernity and pre- or anti-modernity, but between modernity and non-modernity. Indeed, in the ultimate analysis, this is a debate between two kinds of rationality, two ways of seeing, two visions and versions of the world. A new global renaissance is possible not by rejecting or negating the West or by posting some kind of dissenting knowledge system against the dominant one, but by trying to change the world order on the basis of a mass inner awakening and transformation. In this process, wisdom, which is signified by the opening of the third eye, has to play a key role, not just the rationality-anti-rationality axis in which we seem to be ensnared at the present. The opening of the third eye is a symbolic way of suggesting the opening of higher consciousness; the third eye corresponds to the *ajnachakra* or forehead center, the sixth chakra in the

yoga-tantra system. It suggest the awakening of inner sight, or insight, what Sri Aurobindo calls occult vision and occult power (*Letters on Yoga* SABCL 22 372).

It seems to me that this aspect of Sri Aurobindo's thought has direct bearing on the crucial debate over the status and position of Enlightenment rationality within Western thought. The key text here is obviously Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944). Composed during World War II and in exile, this book is an anguished searching into the mind of Europe. How did fascism emerge in Europe in spite of the liberating ideals of the Enlightenment and the progressive Marxist doctrine of History? Their answer was sobering: "Enlightenment is totalitarian" (quoted in Young 7). The project of the Frankfurt school was to rescue the promise of the Enlightenment from the instrumental rationality that led to the will to power and to asphyxiating collectivism. If the Frankfurt School showed that irrationality lurked within the hidden recesses of rationality, the French post-structuralists went further to interrogate in Foucault's words, the relations between the Western project of a universal deployment of reason, [and] the positivity of the sciences and the radicality of philosophy (quoted in Young 8):

In the history of the sciences in France, as in German critical theory, it is a matter at bottom of examining a reason, the autonomy of whose structures carries with it a history of dogmatism and despotism a reason, consequently, which can only have an effect of emancipation on condition that it manages to liberate itself from itself. (Quoted in Young 9)

While most poststructuralists, postmodernists, and postcolonialists are in agreement that a new type of knowledge needs to be invented or discovered, its precise definitions or characteristics elude consensus. At best this auto-critique of the dominant has only produced various forms of negative dialectics, an example of which is Foucault's intriguing phrase that reason should liberate itself from itself. Typically, a positive statement of what this alternative epistemology will be is avoided for the fear that a statement of it will prove to be oppressive and totalizing. This is what accounts for what I've called the *chakravyuha* of much of post-structural thought: once you get in, you can't get out; it's a sort of prison-house of language, to invoke another famous phrase of Paul de Man's, from which there is no exit. Much of post-structural thought thus feeds off itself in a pathology of extreme self-reflexivity and narcissism. That is why it is useful to make it speak to another tradition, the so-called spiritual tradition of thought, which has addressed some of these concerns from a different location.

3

The remaining part of my presentation will be an exposition of exactly what this means in Sri Aurobindo's scheme of spiritual evolution.

In *Synthesis of Yoga*, Sri Aurobindo uses the words *vijnana* and *gnosis* interchangeably, as synonyms (457). He defines these terms carefully because they are central to his argument; in fact, he devotes several chapters to them (Chapter XXII-XXIV). For Sri Aurobindo, *vijnana* or *gnosis* is not only truth but truth-power, it is the very working of the infinite and divine nature; it is the divine knowledge one with the divine will in the force and delight of a spontaneous and luminous and inevitable self-fulfilment. By the *gnosis*, then, we change our human into a divine nature (457). He clarifies that *vijnana* is not the same as *buddhi*, neither is *buddhi* the same as reason (457). He argues that those who consider *buddhi* to be the same as reason and consider these to be the highest mental faculty pass at once from a plane of pure intellect to a plane of pure spirit (457); their error is in mistaking the limited human means for facing truth for the highest possible dynamics of consciousness (457). The opposite error is to identify *vijnana* with the consciousness of the Infinite free from all ideation (457). But for Sri Aurobindo, *vijnana* or *gnosis* is an *intermediate* power, at once concentrated consciousness and infinite knowledge of the myriad play of the Infinite (458). In other words, it contains all ideation but is not limited by ideation (458). Unlike reason, it is not intellectual or mental but self-luminous, supramental (458). That is, it is not accumulative, consciously deductive or inductive, but direct and spontaneous. Of course, Sri Aurobindo tells us rather intriguingly that there is relation, even a sort of broken identity between the two for one proceeds covertly from [the] other. Mind is born from that which is beyond the mind (458).

But having said this, he is quick to show how different the two modes are—they belong, as it were, to different planes of consciousness. To complicate matter farther, he posits other levels between them, for instance intuitive reason, which is akin to *buddhi*—higher than reason, but lower than *vijnana*. Thought and its movements for Sri Aurobindo are slow, methodical, while intuition is swift and sure, a leap, a flash, a supralogical process of rapid insight or swift discernment (459). But even this intuitive reason is not *gnosis*, it is only an edge of light of the supermind finding its way by flashes of

illumination (460). But the elevation of the mind from the rational to the intuitive is itself an important step up the ladder of consciousness; Sri Aurobindo believes that we can train our minds to attain it by purifying the interfering intelligence but this is difficult because the mind in nature is bound by the triple tie of mentality, vitality, corporeality to its own imperfection and ignorance (461).

The difference between the two, between reason and gnosis is a fundamental one: the former proceeds from ignorance to truth but the latter from truth and shows the appearances in the light of the truth (462-463). The reason proceeds by inference but gnosis proceeds by identity or vision (463).

To the reason only what the senses give is direct knowledge, *pratyaksa* to the gnosis all its truth is direct knowledge, *pratyaksa* (463). To define gnosis thus in contradistinction to reason is, Sri Aurobindo realizes, still to adhere to the rational process. On its own terms, it is hardly possible to speak of it except in figures and symbols (465).

For Sri Aurobindo, gnosis is the link which can give us back our lost divinity. It is the bridge between the Supreme Reality of Satchidananda and the lower reality of our world; both are triunes-infinite existence, consciousness, bliss on the one hand and lower triad of matter, life, and mind. That is why gnosis is not just light but force, creative knowledge the self-effective force of the divine Idea (465). It is an embodiment of will as conscious force of eternal knowledge (465). Described in the Vedas by the symbol of the sun, *tat savitur varenyyam*, the whole creation has been inspired by this divine delight, the eternal Ananda (466). Indeed, the supramental world that Sri Aurobindo wishes to harbingers is such a true and happy creation, *rtam, bhadram* (466). It is for gnosis to reestablish the link between Divine Nature, Prakriti as it is, and fallen nature, prakriti as she seems to be. In order to do so, *vijnana* has three powers: it receives supreme knowledge and transmits it; it concentrates supreme consciousness to act on matter; and a divine delight with which it harmonizes the illimitable diversity of manifestation (466).

As evolutionary beings, the Purusha or conscious being in us must ascend into the *vijnanamaya* so as to transform Prakriti-this, according to Sri Aurobindo, is the fundamental experience of the mental being transformed and fulfilled and sublimated in the perfection of the gnosis (467). According to Sri Aurobindo, a human being is constituted of multiple materials. Therefore, all of us carry the effects of these materials which have gone into building us. The human, the homo sapiens, or man -as the root of the word suggest, is primarily a mental being. That is we are distinguished from other species by our ability to think, by the fact that we possess what may be called a mind. Men and women, thus, are so called because of their minds, their *manas*. But we do not live in a mental world, except internally or occasionally. Our world is, in fact, primarily, physical. Our whole quest in the march of civilization which we call progress has been to gain greater and greater control over our physical environments. So, it is the physical existence that must be touched and transformed as the ultimate object of yoga. The proof of the pudding is in the eating-it is when this physical world around us is transformed that we can truly change the conditions of our existence.

How is this to be done? One step is to understand the nature of the physical itself. The body, made up of the gross elements, the same ingredients that make up matter, is nevertheless not untouched by something else, something other than itself and its own nature. The mental works on the body through the intermediacy of the nervous system. Even the most physical things that we experience are not without their mental component, or else we would never experience them. Between the mind and the body, connecting them both is the vital, the pranic. According to the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, prana is the essence, the subtle substance of life. It is indestructible and of the same material as the eternal divine. It may leave the body, but it does not perish.

By the same token, between the mind and what is above it, what is higher than it, are subtle connectors, sort of like an interface, which when activated, will help divinize our mental consciousness. That is the *vijnanamaya* sheath or envelope. This transformation of consciousness is what all yoga wishes to accomplish, regardless of the different philosophical or theological bases from which it proceeds. The ancient truth that the kabala presents was, as above so below. As the Tantrics say, what is not here, meaning in the human body, is nowhere. In other words, there is a correspondence above the human to what we experience in the human plane. Gnosticism would mean an awareness of this correspondence.

All will be originated from above; from above, all that corresponds in gnosis to our present mental activity takes place (471). So there is already a higher mind that ours to which we have access if we wish. Between the mental and the absolute is the supramental or the gnostic; between the mental and the gnostic are a whole range of levels which Sri Aurobindo calls the overmind planes.

As we gradually ascend to higher levels of consciousness, the mental faculty expresses itself in a differential rather than separative fashion. The centre-the brain, the body, is still there, but it is merely for convenience, a point of reference as it were; the being is not tethered to it, but expands and diffuses over a larger area. This is a different form of individuality or personality, one that operates universally: It

has become the awareness of an infinite being who acts always universally though with emphasis on an individual formation of its energies (471). This state of consciousness may appear to be rather abnormal at first, but as Sri Aurobindo says, it vindicates itself even to the mental intelligence by its greater calm, freedom, light, power, effectivity of will, verifiable truth of ideation and feeling (471-472).

In this state, the ultimate truth, the infinite reality, becomes more true to us than the world of phenomenal existence: it becomes, as Sri Aurobindo puts it, the primal, the actual reality (472). In the plane of gnosis the infinite is at once our normal consciousness of being, its first fact, our sensible substance unlike the normal state in which the finite, phenomenal world is our default mode of being, from which we rise only occasionally to glimpse intimations of immortality. Once we are seized of and by this power of gnosis or vijnana, Sri Aurobindo believes that it has the ability to transform and reshape the very physical and material aspects of our being in accordance with its own nature. Krishnamurti and David Bohm spoke of a similar process but in with a different terminology. But the idea was that the higher energy of gnosis or intelligence as Krishnamurti called it, can affect even the cells of the brain, altering them so that they function differently. This is the opening of the third eye, the rise of the kundalini, and the transformation of the jiva to Shiva or the pashu to pashupati.

According to Sri Aurobindo, in the *vijnanamaya*, there is no place for sin; for all sin is an error of the will, a desire and act of the Ignorance (474). As in Buddhism, When desire ceases entirely, grief and all inner suffering also cease (475). In the Vijnana, the Divine is no longer veiled in Maya. Therefore, there is no Jiva who says I think I act, I desire, I feel (476); what is left, instead, is the infinite play of what Swami Muktananda called *chitshakti vilasa* or as Sri Aurobindo puts it God himself by his Prakriti knows, acts, loves, takes delight through my individuality and its figures and fulfils there in its higher and divine measures the multiple *lila* which the Infinite for ever plays in the universality which is himself for ever (476). The gnostic soul is akin to the supreme Godhead, free, but active, sovereign but taking delight in its apparent limitedness. The freedom that it enjoys is the same as nirvana, not an annihilation, but play.

An important distinction before I conclude this section: in Sri Aurobindo's scheme, this transformation is not just for a few select individuals, but for the whole human species. It will happen because the Supramental will be naturalized and normalized on earth just as mental consciousness was a few million years ago. So, when this happens, what the earth will see is a quantum shift in consciousness, which will ensure that every dimension of human life, political, social, economic, cultural, and so on, will be radically transformed.

3

This paper has been premised on the idea of a dynamic absolute that through its force of love and knowledge can act to transform this world. As such, it departs from notions of a static absolute aloof from this world or from ideas that regard the world itself as an illusion. This world as it appears may not be taken as the ultimate reality; indeed to do so would be to make a category error. Yet, whatever is and appears to be has some basis in reality. This much we must concede. Otherwise, any attempt to be change agents in our world would be futile. In other words, we must act on the assumption that our collective efforts and intentions can, indeed, change the world for the better. What is more, we might even go on to assert that such a change can actually be proposed, explained, discussed, accepted or rejected by other actors and agents. It is only through such ceaseless interaction, even striving, that some breakthrough will occur. The path forward, moreover, may not be a single one, but may have multiple branches and possibilities. It would be an unfortunate error to attempt to impose one uniform prescription to the whole of humankind. My exposition of Sri Aurobindo's thought was to suggest one way forward, not to foreclose others.

The idea that the European renaissance of the 15th century was both incomplete and partial is not a new one. In the early 19th century, for instance, Friedrich Schlegel mooted the idea of an Oriental Renaissance (Clarke 55). The phrase itself occurs as the heading of a chapter in a book Edgar Quinet published in 1841 (Schwab 11). Raymond Schwab picked it up again towards the end of the last century, using it as the title of his book. As he says at the opening of the book,

An Oriental Renaissance a *second* Renaissance, in contrast to the first: the expression and the theme are familiar to the Romantic writers, for whom the term is interchangeable with Indic Renaissance. What the expression refers to is the revival of an atmosphere in the nineteenth century brought about by the arrival of Sanskrit texts in Europe, which produced an effect equal to that produced in the fifteenth century by the arrival of Greek manuscripts and Byzantine commentators after the fall of Constantinople. (11)

Of course, we might argue that what goes by the name of ancient wisdom was not especially Indian or Eastern, but prevailed in several parts of the world before the advent of modernity. What makes India special is the persistence of these traditions in a powerful and coherent form to this day.

Indeed, in the last two hundred years, there have been repeated attempts to bring Western and all such esoteric knowledges or inner sciences into some sort of grand synthesis. Apart from the more spiritualist attempts such as Theosophy or the New Age, such connections have existed in practically every branch of knowledge including literature, philosophy, religious studies, and even in certain aspects of the hard sciences (see Clarke for an account of some of these dialogues). Even if these attempts haven't succeeded entirely, we could argue that they haven't failed totally either. It is therefore not only possible but highly desirable to push such endeavours forward. The new global renaissance that Rajiv Malhotra and Bob Thurman wish to effect is thus very much the demand of our times. In this presentation I've argued against two ways of (un)knowing the absolutist rationalism that characterizes the dominant strand of Western thought as well as the dissenting irrationalism of the postmodernists. Instead, a third way of knowing suggested by the opening of the third eye has been suggested as the way forward. The way points to the development of a gnostic being with an enhanced consciousness, a being that may be able better to shape a global future for our numerous planetary civilizations.

Thank you.

Works Cited

- Ahmed, Aijaz. *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures*. London: Verso, 1992.
- Archer, William. *India and the Future*. London: Hutchinson & Co., 1917.
- Aurobindo, Sri. *The Synthesis of Yoga*. Sri Aurobindo Birth Centenary Library. Vol. 20. Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1970.
- Clarke, J. J. *Oriental Enlightenment: The Encounter between Asian and Western Thought*. London: Routledge, 1997.
- Gandhi, M. K. *Hind Swaraj*. 1909; Ahmedabad: Navjivan, 1984.
- Jonas, Hans. *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity*. New York: Beacon Press, 1958.
- Krishnamurti, Jiddu and David Bohm. *The Future of Humanity: A Conversation*. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986.
- Ludemann, Gerd and Martina Janssen. *Suppressed Prayers: Gnostic Spirituality in Early Christianity*. Trans. John Bowden. Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1998.
- Mignolo, Walter D. *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges and Border Thinking*. Princeton, NJ: UP, 2000.
- Mookerjee, Ajit and Madhu Khanna. *The Tantric Way: Art, Science, Ritual*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1977.
- Mudimbe, Valentin. *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1988.
- Muktananda, Swami. *Chitshakti Vilas: The Play of Consciousness*. Ganeshpuri: Sri Gurudev Ashram, 1972.
- Schwab, Raymond. *The Oriental Renaissance: Europe's Rediscovery of India and the East 1600-1880*. 1950. Trans. Vicor Reinking and Gene Patterson-Black. New York: Columbia UP, 1984.
- Sinha, Ramesh Chandra. *Concepts of Reason and Intuition: with Special Reference to Sri Aurobindo, K. Bhattacharya and Radhakrishnan*. Patna and New Delhi: Janaki Prakashan, 1981.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1999.