The Kabbalah, the Philosophie Cosmique, and the Integral Yoga.  
A Study in Cross-Cultural Influence

Peter Heehs  
Independent Scholar

Abstract


Keywords
Sri Aurobindo (Aurobindo Ghose); Mirra Alfassa; Max Théon; philosophie cosmique; kabbalah; yoga

1. Introduction

Many forms of Western Esotericism claim Eastern roots or influence. Some of these claims have little historical basis, as in the “pseudo-Egyptianism” of seventeenth-century Hermetic writers such as Robert Fludd, Michael Maier, and Athanasius Kircher.¹ In other instances the Oriental influence is well

attested, as in the Sabbatean reinterpretation of the kabbalah by Sabbatai Zevi and Nathan of Gaza during the seventeenth century.\(^2\) Helena Petrovna Blavatsky drew on Egyptian, Indian and other sources in writing the primary texts of the Theosophical Society at the end of the nineteenth century.

Cases in which the influence flowed in the other direction, that is, in which a form of Western esotericism had some impact on an Eastern occult or spiritual teaching, are more rare. I leave out of consideration modern reinterpretations of Indian, Islamic or Chinese teachings by Western exegetes and practitioners. Such reinterpretations are legion; they began with the European discovery of Oriental knowledge in the eighteenth century and continue to this day.\(^3\) Much less common are cases in which the formulator of a significant Eastern teaching was directly or indirectly influenced by Western esoteric ideas or practices. The case I study in this paper may be the only one in which ideas with a kabbalistic pedigree left some trace on the writings of a notable Indian spiritual teacher. Whether this trace can rightly be characterized as influence depends on how the term influence is understood, and I will look into this question in the concluding section of the paper.

The Indian figure whose teachings I will examine is Sri Aurobindo (birth name Aurobindo Ghose, 1872–1950). Best known today as a spiritual leader with a large following, Aurobindo is also remembered as a revolutionary politician, a poet, and a philosopher. Born in Calcutta, he was sent to England at the age of seven, and received a solid classical education at St. Paul’s School, London, and King’s College, Cambridge. Returning to India in 1893, he immersed himself in the Indian cultural tradition, reading the classics of Sanskrit literature and later the foundational texts of Hinduism: the Bhagavad Gita, the Upanishads, and the Rig Veda. He wrote later that his own philosophy ‘was formed first by the study of the Upanishads and the Gita’, but insisted that the primary source of his ideas was personal spiritual experience, accompanied by ‘knowledge that flowed from above when I sat in meditation’.\(^4\)


\(^3\) In recent years, many critiques of such reinterpretations have been published. See, for example, David Gordon White’s studies of Tantrism, notably *Kiss of the Yogini*; Joseph S. Alter’s works on yoga, notably *Yoga in Modern India*; and Donald J. Lopez’s reconsiderations of Tibetan Buddhism, notably *Buddhism and Science*.