

# Signs of the Times

By  
Martin Lings

*Studies in Comparative Religion*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (Winter, 1970) © World Wisdom, Inc.

[www.studiesincomparativereligion.com](http://www.studiesincomparativereligion.com)

IN the Uncreated Principial Substance, which Hinduism terms *Prakriti*, there is perfect equilibrium between the upward, the expansive and the downward tendencies, *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*. The creation itself breaks this equilibrium, being in a sense a "victory" of *tamas* over *sattva*. This is inevitable, for creation means separation, and *tamas* is the tenebrous downward separative pull of manifestation away from the Principle. "Darkness was upon the face of the deep", says *Genesis*. The balance is partly restored, though still as it were within the framework of *tamas*, by the *Fiat Lux*. But "the rest on the seventh day", after the creation of man, celebrates the restoration of equilibrium at a higher level, for this final creation goes beyond separativity and introduces an element of reintegration. It is through the human species that this world is connected with the higher states of being; through the Heart of man alone lies the path of return; through this center manifestation "flows" back to its Principle in conformity with *sattva*, the luminous upward tendency which counter-balances the tamasic impetus with which all creation is penetrated. Hence the enmity, so much stressed in sacred texts, between man and Satan who is a personification of unbridled *tamas*, the "desire" inherent in manifestation to be separate from the Principle and to remain separate in an illusory self-sufficient independence.<sup>1</sup> Hell is the special domain of Satan because it is situated at the outermost edge of creation where the illusion of separate existence, that is, of the absence of God, is sharpest; and the domain of man is Paradise because he is inwardly one with God, while outwardly, as a tree growing out of that root of union, he is a living witness to the Divine Presence. He can say "I" and mean "God", for his supreme quality is his capacity for individual extinction.

After the Fall, which again breaks the equilibrium, the human species is no longer sufficiently true to itself to be able to counterbalance the downward pull of *tamas*. The balance is partially restored by the establishment of religion on earth, which inaugurates the Golden Age; and the continuance of religion is ensured, when it becomes endangered, by subsequent Divine Revelations.<sup>2</sup> The downward impetus is thus checked for many individuals and for some, an ever decreasing number, is overcome altogether; it none the less continues as a general tendency down to the end of the cycle when the world as a whole reaches its maximum of "separation" from its Divine Origin and when man reaches his most abject state of submission to the powers of darkness.

The outlook which governs the modern civilization and which characterizes anyone who can be described as "a typical product of the twentieth century" may be considered as a "sign of the times" in that it represents no less than man's capitulation to his arch-enemy—a capitulation which is all the more total for being unconscious. That is indeed the crux of the matter, for instead of being bent on revenge, the loser has finally been induced to believe that he has suffered no loss whatsoever, that his enemy is non-existent, and that man, having evolved from next to nothing, is now better than he has ever been.

So total a defeat would have seemed impossible, even in a relatively near past. But the

parable of the talents explains how the apparently impossible can be realized in a downward as well as in an upward direction. For just as the spiritual path, that is, the path of excelling oneself, is only practicable because "unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance", so also because "from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath", the unspiritual man is liable to find himself suddenly lacking in those very endowments which seemed most securely his. Thus for example the rationalist and the modern scientist, having closed themselves to the Spirit by demanding rational and scientific explanations of transcendent truths, are liable to find themselves deserted by logic and by science in the hour of greatest need. Still bristling with anti-religious arguments, they have meekly let themselves become the dupes of one of the most subrational persuasions and one of the most unscientific theories that have ever trespassed upon the mind of man.

Though in many respects they overlap, rationalism and scientism may be considered as the two poles, subjective and objective, of the pseudo-religion of the modern world: rationalism, with its false logic, wishful thinking and warped sense of values supplies the pseudo-faith, namely, the belief that man has progressed throughout the ages and that he will inevitably continue to progress in the future. The error here is almost entirely subjective: progressism is rooted in complacency; and it depends, not on false data, but on a false interpretation of certain facts coupled with a perpetual readiness to turn a blind eye to other facts. In scientism, which supplies the pseudo-doctrine of evolution, the error is mainly objective, at any rate as far as the "lay-man" is concerned. Here the scientist, who is the "high priest" of the modern world, and who alone has power to speak *ex cathedra*, misleads his flock with a false object of faith. This is by far the greatest triumph of the enemy,<sup>3</sup> for the question of progress must always remain a matter of opinion, but evolution is presented as a scientific fact which "transcends" all discussion; and whereas truly transcendent doctrines lend wings to the intelligence, the pseudo-transcendent paralyses it, and sets up a stifling "dictatorship" in the soul.

As to the "layman", it must be admitted that he is subject to considerable pressure. He is pounded by a battery of scientific terms which he does not understand; and on the face of it there would seem to be no reason why the scientist—dry, matter of fact, purely objective and infallibly accurate, as he is supposed to be—should wish to deceive as regards evolution. The public is not to know that the scientist is evolutionist, not in virtue of his science, but by "religion". But this secret is not always well kept<sup>4</sup>; and in any case the victims of the deception are for the most part only too eager to be deceived. Progressism is, for evolutionism, the most fertile of soils.

In this context the theories of evolution and progress may be likened to the two cards which are placed leaning one against the other at the "foundation" of a card house. If they did not support each other, both would fall flat and the whole edifice, that is, the outlook which dominates the modern world, would collapse. The idea of evolution would have been accepted neither by scientists nor by "laymen" if the nineteenth century European had not been convinced of progress, while in this century evolutionism has served as a guarantee of progress in the face of all appearances to the contrary. To those who refuse to see these appearances, and who continue to believe in progress "because of all that man has achieved in the last hundred years" and "because there is such promise for the future", there is clearly nothing to be said. But for those whose progressism is only propped up by evolutionism and leans with all its weight on the teaching that evolution is "a scientifically proved fact", it can be a relief comparable to waking up after a bad dream to read an objective assessment of evolutionism by a scientist who is not an evolutionist. One such assessment is Douglas Dewar's book *The Transformist Illusion*. To avoid

repetition, readers may be referred to the review of it in a previous number of this journal.<sup>5</sup> More recent is Evan Shute's *Flaws in the Theory of Evolution*.

The title is an understatement, for the book is a demonstration that the theory in question is pure conjecture: the only evolution that has been scientifically attested is on a very small scale and within narrow limits; to conclude from this "micro-evolution", which no one contests, that there could be such a thing as "mega-evolution", that for example the class of birds could have evolved from the class of reptiles, is not merely conjecture but perverse conjecture, for as Shute points out, micro-evolution demonstrates the presence in nature of all sorts of unseen barriers which ensure the stability of the various classes and orders of animals and plants, and which invariably cause transformation, when it has run its little course, to come to a dead end.

The realm of conjecture is always the realm of disagreement. Moreover some evolutionists are more scientific and more objective than others, and when their sense of science has been outraged beyond measure, they have not always been able to resist pouring scorn on some of the more fantastic ideas of their fellow evolutionists. As a rule such sallies are isolated and have little effect, if indeed they do not pass unnoticed; but when gathered together, as they are in this book, their weight is considerable; and by quoting from the evolutionists themselves<sup>6</sup> Shute has been able to show that the theory of mega-evolution is no more than a shell inside which its champions have demolished each other's conjectures until there is nothing left.

To sum up his thesis, the more science delves into the amazing intricacies of nature, the more overwhelming is the evidence which piles up against evolutionism. As he himself puts it: "Mega-evolution is really a philosophy dating from the days of biological ignorance; it was a philosophic synthesis built up in a biological kindergarten".

Looking at the question from quite a different angle—one that is closer to that of our main theme—it must be remembered that only by escaping from time can man escape from the phases of time. The spiritual path escapes from these phases because only its starting point lies within time. From there onwards it is a "vertical" upward movement through supratemporal domains as represented in Dante's *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*. But modern science does not know of any such movement, nor is it prepared to admit the possibility of an escape from the temporal condition. The gradual ascent of no return which is envisaged by evolutionism is an idea which has been surreptitiously borrowed from religion and naively transferred from the supratemporal to the temporal. The evolutionist has no right whatsoever to such an idea, and in entertaining it he is turning his back on his own scientific principles. Every process of development known to modern science is subject to a waxing and waning analogous to the phases of the moon, the seasons of the year, and the different periods of man's life. Even civilizations, as history can testify, have their dawn, their noon, their late afternoon and their twilight. If the evolutionist outlook were genuinely "scientist", in the modern sense, it would be assumed that the evolution<sup>7</sup> of the human race was a phase of waxing which would necessarily be followed by the complementary waning phase of devolution; and the question of whether or not man was already on the downward phase would be a major feature of all evolutionist literature. The fact that the question is never put, and that if evolutionists could be made to face up to it most of them would drop their theory as one drops a hot coal, does not say much for their objectivity.

All religions agree that we are passing through the final phase of one of the great cosmic cycles. The end of a cycle means that the possibilities which were contained within it from the beginning have reached their extremity of development, that is, their extremity of separation

from the Principle. Such a period is one of "remoteness" from God, and one of its necessary characteristics is a world largely peopled by men and women who have no conception of man's true nature and responsibility. He is, for them, not the representative of God on earth, but merely the summit of the animal kingdom. With their backs turned to that center which is man's rightful place as mediator between Heaven and earth, their "orientation" is entirely outward, in the direction of the boundary which separates humanity from the lower orders. The centrifugal tendency of modern man is often written on his face so clearly that if an evolutionist were at the same time something of a physiognomist,<sup>8</sup> he would indeed see reason to suppose that mankind, having reached its highest point of evolution, was already well advanced in the complementary phase of devolution.

Although such a supposition would bring him, as we shall see, far nearer the truth than he is now, he would none the less be wrong to suppose that the dividing line which separates humanity from the lower orders, as far as life on earth is concerned, could be crossed by anything but a miraculous suspension of the laws of nature. Sacred texts tell us of men having been transformed suddenly into apes by an overflow of Divine anger; but mankind could never, by any natural course, devolve into apekind any more than the reverse process could take place. Such transformations would require organic changes which, miracles apart, could only be effected by drastic surgical operations.<sup>9</sup> But a man can, after death, "become an ape" in the sense that he can pass on into another state of existence in which, having lost his centrality, he might occupy a position analogous to that of an ape in this world; and an ape "could become a man" in the sense that through some mysterious working of Divine Grace<sup>10</sup> he might, after his death in this world, be born at the center of the world which comes "next" to it on the rim of the Samsara, the great wheel of universal existence. But there is nothing collective about such possibilities. The threads of which the universe is woven are individual existences moving divergently, as it were at different angles, throughout the Samsara, some steeply ascending, others steeply descending, others moving more horizontally in a gradual descent or a gradual ascent. But though the threads cross each other's paths, each must be considered entirely alone in its relationship with the Absolute. Consciousness of this solitude, which every religion insists on, is an indispensable starting point for any spiritual path; and one of the attractions of progresso-evolutionism is that it blurs the "terrible" (to some) fact of this solitude by sugaring it over with a comforting illusion of collective security.<sup>11</sup>

It is partly the function of religion to convey to man as much knowledge as he can assimilate with profit; religions differ in exactly what they convey and what they withhold because of the difference of human collectivities. The scope of this article clearly will not allow us to dwell on the question at any length, but it may be remarked in passing that the doctrine of the Samsara, which was not unknown to pre-Christian Europe but which is no more than implicit in Semitic monotheism, has become once more accessible to the Western world from Hinduism and Buddhism—accessible, that is, to anyone who feels impelled to make a serious study of religion; and in fact this doctrine is becoming more and more necessary because the present state of the world, especially in one of its already mentioned aspects, is for some minds so unintelligible as to be a real stumbling block. Without the doctrine of the Samsara, how is one to explain the thousands of souls which are being born day after day into conditions spiritually so unfavorable as to offer no apparent hope of salvation? But if one knows that our position in this state was "earned" in our previous state upon the great round of existences, the problem no longer looms so large. The state of those countless people in the modern world who do not seem to have been given "a fair chance" can only be the result of their having already developed a centrifugal

impetus in one of the Samsara's other worlds and, since God is Just, they must be said to have developed it willfully. But since He is also long-suffering, the process of losing centrality may be spread over more than one states of existence. The people in question are born into this world at the outside edge of humanity because they were "already" well on their way out of the central state, yet at the same time, since they have not actually left that state, there is always, despite appearances, an element of hope.

The doctrine of the Samsara is bound to lead to the idea of reincarnation, for it is difficult to speak of other worlds except in terms of the one world we know. Everything depends on what may be called the "spiritual imagination" of the one who receives the doctrine. The statement that a man could be born in his next life as a lower animal or even as a vegetable or a mineral, conveys adequately a truth, provided that the imagination of the hearer is large enough to take in all the terrible implications and sharp enough to galvanize him into the determination to make the most of the inestimable privilege of a central state, "so hard to obtain".<sup>12</sup> The danger of the doctrine is always that an unimaginative wishful thinker will abstract from it the notion that he will be given "another chance" and turn a blind eye to all the rest. But this danger is as nothing compared with the danger of believing that there is no life of any kind after death, a danger which hangs like a shadow over every child that is born into all but the most traditional parts of the modern world.

In any case, the error of reincarnationism cannot be put on a level with the error of evolutionism. The word "reincarnation", as currently used, expresses metaphorically, if not literally, what does actually take place. But evolutionism, together with its inseparable complement of progressivism, is nothing but a Satanic parody of the spiritual path of escape from the Samsara, a parody that flattens the vertical to the horizontal and, for having "played one's part", offers as prize, to be awarded not posthumously but "humously", that is, not to a blessed Spirit but to a corpse, an ever receding earthly "welfare" of doubtful possibility and doubtful desirability. To come back almost to our starting-point, what worse thing could be desired for man by his worst ill-wisher than this two-fold pseudo-religion of the modern world which systematically eliminates everything that its victim has an imperative need to know and to do?

And what of God? In Communist countries, where the modern pseudo-religion is *de facto* and *de jure* the state religion, God is officially excluded, which is logical and consequent enough, for what function can Divinity have in an entirely flat, "horizontal" universe? In so-called "Christendom" the pseudo-religion prevails *de facto* but not *de jure*. In consequence, God is tolerated; and some would maintain that faith is even encouraged. "And", they add, "it is sincere belief in God that matters; all the rest is of no importance". But supposing that all or some of "the rest" colors their conception of God? Let us consider what sort of faith is "encouraged" by the modern Western world. What place, in other words, does its educational system allot to Christianity? Generally speaking, and always allowing for exceptions, it would be true to say that in most of their lessons, partly through what they are taught and partly owing to the general outlook which all too clearly prevails among the teachers, the pupils are indoctrinated with the modern pseudo-religion; and in the hour or two a week set aside for the study of the Bible they are given a glimpse of an opposite perspective, though the contradictions are presented as "tactfully" as possible, always at the expense of religion. In some cases the first chapters of Genesis are omitted; in others they are taught without comment; in others they are taught as "myths"—in the modern ignoble misuse of that noble word; but one may be certain that the pupils' attention will never be drawn to the fact that Christianity has some of its deepest roots

in these very chapters. In short, the whole implacable "either... or" is put into the mind of every pupil as if it were a "both... and", with its sharp edges so wrapped up that they appear to be round. But the sharp edges are none the less there, and a little reflection will cause them to work their way out. Nor does religion, lukewarmly, fragmentarily, apologetically presented as it is, stand much chance when the pupils are faced with a sharp choice between it and modernism. The result is that those who cling to their already precarious faith instinctively block their own channels of spiritual thought, and by a kind of self-imposed mental paralysis, scarcely daring to think about their religion, they sacrifice a vital aspect of sincerity as defined by Christ in his first commandment: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy mind..."; and it is precisely this part of the commandment which depends most on human initiative, that is, which we should be best able, by our own efforts, to fulfill, though the question of Grace can never be absent.

Keeping well within this framework of mental paralysis, Teilhard de Chardin also blocks the main and obvious channels of thought. His appeal lies in his providing certain ingeniously devised side channels which relieve the paralytic by keeping up an illusion of normal mental activity. In other words, with an extraordinary capacity for turning a blind eye and a deaf ear to this and that, he creates a kind of mental hubbub in order to drown the voice of reason—refusing altogether to put to himself the following questions which, for anyone who has received a modern Western education, loudly cry out to be asked:

"If God exists, as we are taught to believe, and if evolution is a scientific fact, as we are forbidden to doubt, what sort of being can God be? Why did He choose to turn mankind back towards the past in longing for a lost Paradise, and to leave them so turned, in all parts of the world, for thousands of years, if He knew that the truth lay in just the opposite direction? Why could He not have taught them about evolution to begin with? Or at least brought them gradually to it, instead of allowing religion after religion to repeat and confirm the same old way of thinking? And why did He allow this to culminate, at any rate for the Western world, in a religion which, perhaps more inextricably than any other, is bound up with the doctrine of the Fall of Man?<sup>13</sup> And why, having prevented all His Prophets from divulging evolution, did He allow a mere layman to stumble upon it and to propagate it in defiance of all the spiritual authorities of the day, thereby causing millions of people to lose their faith in religion and in Him?"

"God moves in a mysterious way...", some will argue, in a frantic attempt to retain both God and evolutionism. But you cannot sew up a gaping chasm with such a needle and thread. Seek to retain these two incompatibles, and you will be left with a deity who is not the Lord of All Mystery but a subhuman monster of incompetence, which is precisely what Teilhardism implies of God. But outside the very special climate of this pseudo-mystical fantasy, one only needs to be able to "put two and two together" to see that either evolutionism or God must go; and modern education begins to tip the scale in favor of evolutionism at an increasingly earlier age. Many Westerners, even before they have left school, have already opted, if not for atheism at least for an agnostic reserve of judgment which they, like their parents, will probably never see fit to unreserve. But a normally functioning mind, which is just what they are systematically deprived of, that is, a mind neither warped by rationalism nor spellbound by materialist scientism, would have no difficulty, when faced by the above questions, in finding the right answer and in razing the whole "card house" of modern ideology to the ground.

---

<sup>1</sup> Skepticism as to the possibility of creation is nothing other than a prolongation or projection of this desire. The same may be said of the belief that the material world has always existed and will always continue to exist.

<sup>2</sup> The spiritual path, that is, the path of return to the Principle, is also in a sense a chain of losses and restorations of equilibrium. But there it is always a question of sacrificing a lower equilibrium in order to gain a higher one, whereas in the unfolding of the cycle of manifestation it is the inverse which takes place.

<sup>3</sup> It is typical of his tactics to allow certain lesser truths—that "discovered" by Copernicus, for example—to pave the way for an enormous lie.

<sup>4</sup> Some evolutionists make it very clear in their writings and broadcast talks that their case is an outstanding illustration of the truth that man is nothing if not religious, and that if he gives up his religion he inevitably transfers his religious sentiments to something else, endowing it with all those rights and privileges which are the due of religion alone.

<sup>5</sup> *Tomorrow*, Summer, 1964.

(Since this is now difficult to obtain, we have decided to reprint it in this issue. Ed.).

<sup>6</sup> By way of example, he quotes from the American palaeontologist, Professor E. A. Hooton: "You can, with equal facility, model on a Neanderthaloid skull the features of a chimpanzee or the lineaments of a philosopher. These alleged restorations of ancient types of man have very little, if any, scientific value, and are likely only to mislead the public".

<sup>7</sup> There could be no question of any such evolution from the standpoint of ancient natural science, which did not claim to have everything within its scope, that is, within the temporal domain. It could therefore admit to being transcended by the origins of earthly things. For these origins it looked beyond temporal duration to the Divine creative act which places man (and the whole earthly state) on a summit from which there can only be a decline. The same applies to the different religions which also have their origins outside time. If civilizations wax and then wane it is because each represents the temporal development of the religion on which it is based (for a fuller treatment of this question, see Martin Lings' *Ancient Beliefs and Modern Superstitions*, ch. II).

<sup>8</sup> An unlikely combination, for physiognomy presupposes the knowledge of what man is and, above all, what God is. The Prophet of Islam said: "When anyone of you strikes a blow (in battle) let him avoid striking the face (of his enemy), for God created Adam in His image". This somewhat elliptical *Hadith* demands, by way of commentary, the addition: "... and it is in the face that the image is especially concentrated". The human face is a mirror which reflects the Divine Qualities. The human hand is also such a mirror, but to be read it requires knowledge of a special science, whereas the face is an open book to be read by effortless intuition; and physiognomy is nothing other than the ability to see, in any given face, how full and direct (or, as the case may be, how fragmentary and oblique) the reflection is. Traditionally, physiognomical powers are associated with faith (the Prophet said: "Beware of the believer's power to read the face"); and in fact the man best qualified to judge of the quality of a mirror, that is, to judge how faithfully it mirrors an object, is the man who has the clearest vision of that object in itself, apart from the mirror.

<sup>9</sup> Evolutionist texts continually rely on the ignorance or unobservance of the layman. Dewar (pp. 219-241) gives many outrageous examples from which we may quote Darwin's remark: "With some savages the foot has not altogether lost its prehensile power, as is shown by their manner of climbing trees, and of using them in other ways". The truth is, as Darwin must have known, that any human being can develop with practice, if driven by circumstances, certain powers of grasping with the feet. But such development can only be within very narrow limits, for organically the human foot, unlike the human hand, is not made for grasping. It is made to serve as a basis for man's upright posture and gait, whereas the "foot" of an ape, is organically as prehensile as a hand. In the human foot the transverse ligament binds together all five toes, whereas in the ape it leaves the big toe free like a thumb. Let any reader of this article look at his own hand, which in the above respect is similar to the foot of an ape, and ask himself whether it is imaginable that even in millions of millions of years the ligament which binds together the four fingers could ever come to throw out a kind of noose, lasso the thumb, and bind it up together with the fingers, all this, presumably, taking place under the skin. When Darwin says: "... the foot has not altogether lost

---

its prehensile power", does he mean "the lassoing has already taken place but the roping in has not quite been effected?" But he relies on such questions not being asked.

<sup>10</sup> Generally speaking, the most desirable destiny in this life for a peripheric being is to be intimately associated with a man who fulfils his centrality enough to be, in some degree, *pontifex*. It is also as *pontifex* that a man sacrifices an animal; and it is typical of our times that societies for the prevention of cruelty to animals should so confuse the issue as to include amongst their many admirable aims the deplorable one of seeking to "save" some animals from being sacrificed ritually (the most truly evolutionary fate that could befall them) and to consign them instead to the profane slaughter-house. As to ascents made at lower levels in the hierarchy, from one peripheric degree to another, it is clearly auspicious for a lower being to be overwhelmed and absorbed by a higher one. The law of the jungle would seem to be woven upon the hidden mercies of such evolutions.

<sup>11</sup> Teilhard de Chardin, with his "point Omega", is one of the worst offenders in this respect.

<sup>12</sup> See Marco Pallis, *Is there room for Grace in Buddhism?*, in this journal, Autumn, 1968.

<sup>13</sup> Islam is just as explicit about the Fall as Christianity is; but unlike Christianity, it is not centered on any historical redeeming sacrifice in view of the Fall.