

Book Reviews

EVOLUTION IN RELIGION.

A Study in Sri Aurobindo and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin.

By R. C Zaehner.

(Clarendon Press: Oxford University Press. £1.90).

Review by Whitall N. Perry

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Mysticism works within that microcosmic space enclosed in the heart ("smaller than a mustard seed" as taught in the Upanishads); *science* works throughout its macrocosmic counterpart ("greater than all these worlds"—to misconstrue the Vedic teaching); the eventual evolutionary intercosmical fusion of the two—achievable only if and when a transgalactic humanity can simultaneously be "compressed" into a non-egotistical love conglomerate synthesized in a Divine Emperor, "Son of God"—is crucial for the apocatastatic Parousia. Such according to the author (an Anglo-Swiss convert to Catholicism appointed Spalding Professor of Eastern Religions and Ethics at Oxford University) is the sense of St. Paul's "dispensation of the fullness of times," when God will "gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth"; and such at any rate is the theme of this book.

Now if nothing is more untrue than Marx's dictum about the opium of the people (a reference obliquely planted in the opening paragraph), certainly nothing is more obvious than that esoterism is the poison of the masses, and this is what *Evolution in Religion* best demonstrates.

While Teilhard de Chardin may need no introduction to Western readers, it is probably less well-known of Sri Aurobindo that he left India for England at the age of seven, only returning from King's College, Cambridge, after having thoroughly imbibed Marxian socialism, Darwinism, the creative evolution of Bergson, and Bucke's "cosmic consciousness" (a term also in Teilhard's vocabulary). Both men opposed organized religion, since according to Zaehner, established law and order mean stability, which is irreconcilable with evolution, the spirit of change; and this would be the meaning of the excoriating "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!" which was "addressed to the religious establishment of the time, but addressed also to all the establishments, whether religious or secular, of all time." For the Holy Spirit, says Zaehner, "is perhaps the Spirit of evolution itself"—the "perhaps" being used advisedly, as elsewhere he opines that the Spirit of evolution may really be the serpent. But then so is God "not only Yahweh... but also the serpent... In the Old Testament there is no clear distinction between God and the Devil any more than there is in Hinduism"—or in the mind of the author for that

matter, who teaches that even the Ātman has to die for its "selfishness" (a reading he gets out of the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, 11.63; XVI.21), "the lot reserved for the very vilest of sinners", in the same way that "Christ was 'cursed for our sake' " and suffered in the Crucifixion "the ultimate humiliation of spiritual pride" in order to be resurrected as the egoless Adam, prototype for the Omega-point or noosphere: "For the risen Christ was so different from the man Jesus who died on the Cross that even his closest disciples could not at first recognize him."

"Matter is willing," says the author inverting the words of Jesus, "but the spirit is weak." This goes with Teilhard's "Son of man, bathe yourself in Matter. Dive into it where it is at its most violent and deep... It is she who will carry you right up to God." For how, asks Zaehner, "can the rejection of life as we know it really be the goal of *life*?" Christ said (*St. John* X.10), "I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly"; whereas India's error was to discover "the deathlessness of Nirvāna at the price of making nonsense of samsāra", just as Buddhism—whatever its worldly merits—is "a refusal of our human condition... and of any possibility of further development." Thus Nirvāna is equated with "the passionless Limbo of the Patriarchs". And this is "the great defect of mysticism", that it "is not concerned with morality... that it tends to by-pass the problem of evil either by writing it off as illusory or at most an appearance, as with Sankara." What is still lacking is "the discovery of a new relationship with a personal God on whom the impersonal Absolute itself depends." And here is where Marxism, one of the "great religions of the world", comes in, for its founder had "prophesied" that "we shall have an association in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all." Hence, once it is under-stood that communal and not individual salvation is what matters, one can better appreciate the place for "religions of solidarity" over "religions of solitude", and the "ideal of a true anarchy and true fraternity", to be achieved not by separative ego-seeking reason but by Aurobindo's "deeper brotherhood" of uniting love. After all, did not Julian of Norwich say, "In the sight of God all man is one man, and one man is all man"? This—to believe Zaehner—was the state of early man in rudimentary mode, "a primitive form of cosmic consciousness, the shared collective consciousness of primitive human society which the Bible calls Adam", a man who did not know death because possessed only of Teilhard's "collective co-consciousness" which "had not yet learned to say 'I'". The serpent's contribution was to endow this creature with free will and an ego—a tremendous cosmic event, as "with man evolution is no longer automatic", which permits the author to add: "There never was a Garden of Eden, there never was a Fall." But by the same token, whoever did not go down from the Garden must have come up from the Jungle, and for humanity at its present stage of technological triumph, the kiss of the serpent has turned to a warning hiss in the ear that the once-liberating ego has now become an atavistic instrument of scission whose destruction is the *sine qua non* for the next Great Leap forward. Thus Aurobindo, while accepting the *Mahābhārata*'s cyclical picture of mankind degenerating over the eras from the reign of the Brahmin to the ultimate degradation of a *mleccha*-oriented society, rejected the doomsday message therein; and far from seeing our times as bordering on the "abomination of desolation", he welcomed them as the indispensable pangs of parturition to precede the evolutionary birth of the Superman. It must be remembered moreover, Zaehner tells us, that "Christianity itself is as yet, in terms of evolutionary time, a babe in arms; for if it is true that 'with the Lord a day can mean a thousand years, and a thousand years is like a day', then the Church is not yet quite two days old." Hence the optimism of Paul VI—quoted by the author—in a world reaching for the moon: "This new discovery of created

life is very important for our spiritual life. To see God in the world and the world in God, what is more exciting? Is it not thus that we escape the terror of the void that unmeasured time and unconfined space produce around the microcosm that is us?"

In the context, the answer is no. The *perpetuum mobile* fallacy that science discarded long ago still animates the thinking of the evolutionary utopians whose credo reads: "In the beginning was the flesh... and the flesh was made Word." To believe that by larding modern civilization with more technology and sugaring it with "cosmic consciousness" one can reach the Millennium is a way of endeavoring to lift oneself by one's own philosophical bootstraps. Ancient man accepted the limitations organic with this world while patterning his ideal behavior on the archetypal incorruptibility of the next world, and thus enjoyed a relative perfection (all that is possible) here. Coomaraswamy, who relentlessly drove this message home, would have been dismayed to see the author of *Evolution in Religion* now teaching from the very chair he helped establish to promulgate traditional doctrines. St. Gregory of Nyssa admirably closes the argument with a citation that providentially found its way into this book: "You alone are made in the likeness of that nature which surpasses all understanding... Nothing in all creation can equal your grandeur... If you realize this you will not allow your eye to rest on anything of this world. Indeed, you will no longer marvel even at the heavens... For the heavens pass away, but you will abide for all eternity with Him who is forever."