

Trousered Apes and Barking Plants: Contra Darwinism*

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...the evolutionary leap from matter to intelligence is the most arbitrary, the most inconceivable and the most foolish hypothesis possible, in comparison with which 'simple faith' seems like a mathematical formula.

Frithjof

Schuon¹

Evolutionism is not a science; it is a science fiction, even a kind of hoax... that has imprisoned modern man in what looks like an irreconcilable conflict between 'science' and 'religion'. It has destroyed all faiths that pull mankind upward and has substituted a faith the pulls mankind down... it is the most extreme product of the materialistic utilitarianism of the nineteenth century.

E.F. Schumacher²

Surveying the emergence of a materialistic and profane science in *The Reign of Quantity* (1945), René Guénon wrote,

Thus it comes about that there has grown up in the 'scientistic' mentality, which is...more or less the mentality of the great majority of our contemporaries, a real 'mythology': most certainly not in the original and transcendent meaning applicable to the traditional 'myths', but merely in the 'pejorative' meaning which the word has acquired in current speech.³

The French metaphysician refers to the way in which various 'scientific' hypotheses and theories are governed less by empirical evidence than by 'certain preconceived ideas and by some of the predominant tendencies of the modern mentality'.⁴ Our purpose here is to explore one of the most deeply entrenched of scientistic pseudo-mythologies, evolutionism, in its various biological, social and 'spiritual' guises. However, to expose the roots of this phenomenon we must first take an overview of the development of those 'predominant tendencies of the modern mentality' to which Guénon alludes.

Modernism and the Tyranny of Scientism

Modernism: we may loosely define this portmanteau term as encompassing the prevalent assumptions, values and attitudes of a world-view fashioned by the most pervasive intellectual influences of recent European history, an outlook in conformity with the spirit of the times.⁵ One might classify the constituents of modernism under any number of different schema. Lord Northbourne typifies modernism as 'anti-traditional, progressive, humanist, rationalist, materialist, experimental, individualist, egalitarian, free-thinking and intensely sentimental'⁶ while Seyyed Hossein Nasr identifies its defining characteristics

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¹ F. Schuon, 'Consequences Flowing from the Mystery of Subjectivity', *Studies in Comparative Religion*, 10:1, 1976, 197-198. (This essay, in another translation, can be also be found in *From the Divine to the Human*, Bloomington: World Wisdom, 1982, 5-12.)

² E. F. Schumacher, *A Guide for the Perplexed*, London: Jonathan Cape, 1977, 129-130.

³ R. Guénon, *The Reign of Quantity & the Signs of the Times*, Ghent, NY: Sophia Perennis et Universalis, 1995, p. 151.

⁴ R. Guénon, *The Reign of Quantity*, 149.

⁵ It will already be clear to the reader that we are not here using 'modernism' in its restricted meaning, signifying various 'experimental' early 20th century movements in the arts, but in a much more wide-ranging sense.

⁶ Lord Northbourne, *Religion in the Modern World*, London: J.M. Dent & Perennial Books, 1963, 13.

as anthropomorphism (and by extension, secularism), evolutionist progressivism, the absence of any sense of the sacred, and an unrelieved ignorance of metaphysical principles.⁷ From the vantage point of Guénon and other traditionalists, modernism is a spiritual malaise which continues to spread like a plague across the globe, ravaging ancestral cultures wherever they are still to be found. Although its historical origins are European, modernism is now tied to no specific area or civilization. Its symptoms can be detected in a wide assortment of inter-related ‘mind sets’ and ‘-isms’, sometimes involved in cooperative co-existence, sometimes engaged in apparent antagonisms but always united by the same underlying principles. Behind the bizarre array of modern ideologies we can discern an ignorance of ultimate realities and an indifference, if not always an overt hostility, to the eternal verities conveyed by tradition. The catalogue of such proliferating ‘-isms’ might include rationalism, relativism, materialism, empiricism, positivism, historicism, psychologism, individualism, humanism, existentialism, to name just some of the prime follies of modernist thought. The pedigree of this family of ideas can be traced back through a series of intellectual and cultural disruptions in European history and to certain vulnerabilities in Christian civilization which left it exposed to the subversions of a profane science.⁸ The Renaissance, the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment were all incubators of ideas and values which first decimated Christendom and then spread throughout the world like so many bacilli.

The foundations of the modern worldview are to be found in post-medieval philosophy and in the ideology of modern science. Western philosophy, since the time of Descartes, has been belligerently anti-traditional and the sponsor of that ‘Single Vision’ which so appalled Blake and the Romantics.⁹ But here we turn to modern philosophy’s accomplice, scientism. For several centuries now the West has trumpeted the onward march of ‘Science’, extolling its intrepid explorers who, so the story goes, have heroically pushed back the frontiers of knowledge and banished the religiously-based superstitions of our credulous ancestors. The luminaries of modern science – Bacon, Descartes, Copernicus, Galileo, Newton, Darwin, Einstein et al. – form modernity’s intellectual pantheon. And, indeed, our world has been shaped by the ideas and ‘discoveries’ of such philosophers and scientists. There is no gainsaying the fact that science, through its technical applications, has conferred some benefits on the modern world, though these are often much more ambiguous than was first supposed; we are all too familiar with scientific and technological ‘advances’ whose sinister ramifications took some time to manifest. (A short-hand sample: eugenics, DDT, thalidomide, electro-shock ‘therapy’, acid rain, Chernobyl, Bhopal, Fukushima.) Not without reason have some of the most disturbing literary works of the past two centuries been concerned with the unforeseen effects of a runaway science – *Frankenstein*, *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, *Brave New World*. Increasingly, many thoughtful people are questioning the modern shibboleth of an inexorable ‘progress’, fuelled by ‘science’ and implemented by technology. In the face of ever-mounting evidence on all sides it is now dawning on even the most sanguine apostles of a progressivist science that there is something profoundly amiss with our understanding of reality, of ourselves and our place in the natural order, and that this malady is somehow connected with the despotism of modern science. The contemporary ‘ecological crisis’ is but one token of this state of affairs. There are many others; one might mention, amongst much else, genetic

⁷ S.H. Nasr, ‘Reflections on Islam and Modern Thought’, *The Islamic Quarterly*, 23:3, 1979, 119-131.

⁸ For a profound analysis of this process see S.H. Nasr, *Man and Nature*, London: Allen & Unwin, 1968, esp. Chs 1&2. See also W. Perry *The Widening Breach: Evolutionism in the Mirror of Cosmology*, Cambridge: Quinta Essentia, 1995, and P. Sherrard, *The Rape of Nature*, Colombo; the Sri Lanka Institute of Traditional Studies, 1987.

⁹ And how suggestive it is that the terms ‘romantic’ and ‘romanticism’ have become pejorative in scientific circles: this is hardly surprising as it was the Romantic philosophers and poets who fought a valiant rearguard action against the scientism of their day.

engineering, cloning, cryogenics, industrial diseases, ‘behaviour modification’, drug-resistant viruses, nuclear/chemical/biological warfare, and a projected planetary migration, all of which are cause for the gravest apprehension amongst those who have not been seduced by the materialist ideology and the rhetorical self-aggrandizement of modern science, or more precisely, of *scientism*.

The Scientific Revolution of the 17th century heralded the triumph of a particular philosophical outlook (rationalist, materialist) with its attendant epistemology (empiricism) and procedures and protocols (the ‘scientific method’). Contrary to popular assumption, modern science is *not* simply a disinterested, detached, and value-free mode of inquiry into the material world; it is a complex of disciplines and techniques anchored in culture-bound *assumptions* and *attitudes* concerning the nature of reality and the proper means whereby material phenomena might be explored, explained and, perhaps most tellingly, controlled. It is, in fact, impossible to separate the methods of modern science from the theories and ideologies which provide its motive force, and it is to this tangled skein that the term ‘scientism’ refers. And like any other ‘ism’, scientism has its own repertoire of narratives, fables and images, its own vocabulary and conceptual apparatus, its own paradigms and modes, all these together amounting to what René Guénon called a ‘pseudo-mythology’.

The keystone of scientism is the assumption that modern science contains within itself the necessary and sufficient means for any inquiry into the material world, and that it can and should be an autonomous and self-validating pursuit, answerable to nothing outside itself. This was a new idea in the history of human thought, at radical odds with the traditional view that any inquiry into the natural world could only properly proceed within the cadre of philosophy and religion. Shankara, the 8th-century Indian sage, stated that ‘the world of *maya* is not inexplicable; it is only not self-explanatory’. In other words, the tissue of fugitive relativities which comprise the time-space world cannot be properly understood in its own terms but only by recourse to a knowledge which surpasses it. The nature of the material universe is known only in the light of metaphysics, which sees beyond mechanical and auxiliary causes (i.e., the physical ‘laws’, processes, properties and appearances with which modern science is solely concerned) to the fundamental spiritual causes which underlie all phenomena and without which the chimerical material world would instantly vanish. This principle informs all traditional sciences and, by the same token, is violated on all sides by modern science which is a profane inquiry, governed by materialistic assumptions and by an empirical and quantitative methodology. Not for nothing did Guénon characterize modernity as ‘the reign of quantity’. Indeed, it might be said that modern science, in its most fundamental aspect, is based on *negation*, on the denial of all the suprasensorial dimensions of reality and of the possibilities of human knowledge thereof, vouchsafed by all integral religious and sapiential traditions. In any event, a profane science can only ever tell us about secondary causes; it can never get to the root of things, just as it must remain mute whenever we confront questions about *meaning* and *value*. As to modern science’s endless accumulation of empirical data we need only recall Gai Eaton’s remark that this is a matter of knowing more and more about less and less, and that ‘our ignorance of the few things that really matter is as prodigious as our knowledge of trivialities’.¹⁰

Critiques of scientism are much in vogue these days. The precarious philosophical foundations of modern science, its epistemological ambiguities, its inability to accommodate its own findings within the Cartesian-Newtonian frame, the consequences of a Faustian pursuit of knowledge and power, the diabolical applications of science in the military industry, the dehumanizing reductionisms of the behavioural sciences – all have come under fierce attack. New ‘discoveries’ by physicists and the paradoxes of Quantum Theory throw conventional

¹⁰ Cited as an epigraph in *Tomorrow* 12:3, 1964, 191.

assumptions about time, space and matter into disarray; Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle, Chaos Theory and the 'New Physics' jeopardize the much-vaunted 'objectivity' of science; the mechanistic conceptions of a materialistic science, the very language of science, are found to be inadequate in the face of bewildering phenomena which simply do not fit the prevailing models. Commentators as disparate as Guénon, Theodore Roszak, Mary Midgley, Philip Sherrard, Wendell Berry, Marilynne Robinson and Seyyed Hossein Nasr awaken us to the provincialism of modern science and the dangers of a corrosive materialism, an instrumentalist rationality and its attendant technology. We see that rationality has been allowed to become man's definition instead of his tool, a tyrannical overlord rather than a humble servant. We sense that the disfigurement of the environment mirrors our internal state, that the ecological calamity mirrors a spiritual crisis which no amount of science and technology can, of itself, remedy. We know the truth of Victor Frankl's claim that

The true nihilism of today is reductionism...Contemporary nihilism no longer brandishes the word nothingness; today nihilism is camouflaged as nothing-but-ness. Human phenomena are thus turned into mere epiphenomena.¹¹

Guénon was the first in a 'school' of thinkers who have cleaved to the *sophia perennis* which informs all integral traditions and have explicated the metaphysical and cosmological principles enshrined in mythological and religious forms. They have resolutely defended Tradition and, by the same token, have stood squarely opposed to modernism in general and scientism in particular. Among their number we find such figures as Frithjof Schuon, Ananda Coomaraswamy, Titus Burckhardt and Seyyed Hossein Nasr. In their implacable repudiation of scientism Schuon and other perennialists do not appeal to some vague humanism nor do they entertain a vision of a 'reformed' science. Their impeachment of modern science is authorized by a set of clearly articulated metaphysical principles and by the truths and values enshrined in religious traditions. Much of this critique of modern science is predicated on the distinction rehearsed by Whitall Perry:

Traditional learning is basically qualitative and synthetic, concerned with essences, principles and realities behind phenomena; its fruits are integration, composition and unity. Profane academic learning – whether in the arts or sciences – is quantitative and analytical by tendency, concerned with appearances, forces and material properties; its nature is to criticize and to decompose; it works by fragmentation.¹²

Furthermore, traditional learning proceeds within a larger framework, that of religious values and of cosmological and metaphysical principles derived from Revelation and gnosis. Modern science, by contrast, asserts a Promethean autonomy and scorns all other avenues of knowledge. This is the crux of the problem. Two particular issues, the cleavage between religion and science, and the epistemological limits of a materialistic science, call for brief comment.

The modern scientific outlook is, *in principle*, unable to countenance God (by whatever name), who is either discarded as an obsolete 'hypothesis' or altogether ignored – which amounts to the same thing. Likewise, scientism cannot allow any *sense of the sacred*, the absence of which defines modernity as a whole. As to the empiricism of modern science Schuon remarks, 'there is no worse confession of intellectual impotence than to boast of a line of thought because of its attachment to experiment and disdain for principles and speculations'.¹³ Schuon states the nub of the case against modern science directly:

¹¹ Quoted in E.F. Schumacher *A Guide for the Perplexed*, 15.

¹² W. Perry, *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, London: Allen & Unwin, 1971, 731. Nasr makes a more explicit distinction between modern and traditional science: 'modern science studies change with respect to change, where a traditional science studies change *vis-à-vis* permanence through the study of symbols, which are nothing but reflections of permanence in the world of change'; S.H. Nasr, *Sufi Essays*, London: Allen & Unwin, 1972, 88.

¹³ F. Schuon, *Stations of Wisdom*, London: Perennial Books & John Murray, 1961, 40.

...modern science is a totalitarian rationalism that eliminates both Revelation and Intellect, and at the same time a totalitarian materialism that ignores the metaphysical relativity—and therewith the impermanence—of matter and the world. It does not know that the supra-sensible, situated as it is beyond space and time, is the concrete principle of the world, and consequently that it is also at the origin of that contingent and changeable coagulation we call ‘matter’. A science that is called ‘exact’ is in fact an ‘intelligence without wisdom’, just as post-scholastic philosophy is inversely a ‘wisdom without intelligence’.¹⁴

Though modern science has doubtless revealed much material information that was previously unknown it has also supplanted a knowledge which infinitely outreaches it. We see this in the complacencies and condescensions of those scientists who suppose that we have ‘outgrown’ the ‘superstitions’ of our ancestors.¹⁵

It is nowadays a commonplace that many of the ills of our time stem from the rift between ‘faith’ and ‘science’ but few people have suggested any convincing means of reconciling the two. Certainly the effusions and compromises of the liberal theologians and ‘demythologizers’ are of no help, marking little more than a thinly-disguised capitulation of religion to science. (One might adduce the works of the English theologian, Don Cuppitt, as a case in point.) Nor should we be seduced by those apparently conciliatory scientists who seem willing to allow some sort of place for religious understandings, all the while making it clear that science will concede nothing of substance (and here we can find no better exemplar of the mentality in question than E.O. Wilson in his popular and muddle-headed work, *Consilience*.¹⁶) However, in the light of traditional metaphysical understandings many of the apparent contradictions between ‘science’ and ‘religion’ simply evaporate. As Schuon remarks,

...the tragic impasse reached by the modern mind results from the fact that most men are incapable of grasping the *compatibility* between the symbolic expressions of tradition and the material discoveries established by modern science.¹⁷

This is a vital point. It is important to understand that Schuon’s disapprobations do not fall on the findings of science as such – he is not an obscurantist – but on the absence of such principles as would situate these discoveries in a context which could preserve the incomparably more important truths incarnated in tradition. A concrete example from Schuon will give the point more weight:

According to the observations of experimental science, the blue sky which stretches above us is not a world of bliss, but an optical illusion due to the refraction of light by the atmosphere and from this point of view it is obviously right to maintain that the home of the blessed does not lie up there. Nevertheless it would be a great mistake to assert that the association of ideas between the visible heavens and the celestial Paradise does not arise from the nature of things, but rather from ignorance and ingenuousness mixed with imagination and sentimentality; for the blue sky is a direct and therefore adequate symbol of the higher and supersensory degrees of Existence; it is

¹⁴ F. Schuon, *Light on the Ancient Worlds*, Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2006, 117.

¹⁵ Here is a random example from a prestigious Nobel-laureate: ‘I myself, like many scientists, believe that the soul is imaginary and that what we call our mind is simply a way of talking about the function of our brains... Once one has become adjusted to the ideas that we are here because we have evolved from simple chemical compounds by a process of natural selection, it is remarkable how many of the problems of the modern world take on a completely new light’; from F. Crick, *Molecules and Men* (1967), quoted in T. Roszak, *Where the Wasteland Ends*, New York: Doubleday, 1972, 188. (It was Crick who was also responsible for the ‘witticism’, ‘Christianity may be OK between consenting adults in private but should not be taught to young children.’ See ‘Francis Crick’ in *Wikipedia*.) Here indeed is an ‘intelligence without wisdom’ or what Roszak calls a ‘well-informed foolishness’. The kind of materialism exemplified by Crick became ‘the reigning orthodoxy among philosophers of the mind’; Daniel Dennett quoted in H. Smith, *Beyond the Post-Modern Mind*, Wheaton: Theosophical Publishing Company, 1982, 135-136.

¹⁶ E.O. Wilson, *Consilience: the Unity of Knowledge*, New York: Vintage, 1999. This work has been subjected to the most searching criticism by Wendell Berry in *Life is a Miracle: An Essay Against Modern Superstition*, Washington DC: Counterpoint, 2000.

¹⁷ F. Schuon, *Stations of Wisdom*, 8-9 (emphasis mine). See also Lord Northbourne, *Looking Back on Progress*, London: Perennial Books, 1970, 23-41.

indeed a distant reverberation of those degrees and it is necessarily so since it is truly a symbol consecrated by the Sacred Scriptures and by the unanimous intuition of peoples...The fact that the symbol itself may be no more than an optical illusion in no way impairs its precision or efficacy, for all appearances, including those of space and of the galaxies, are strictly speaking only illusions created by relativity.¹⁸

The key to traditional understandings lies in their symbolism – a mode of knowledge quite inaccessible to the scientific mentality. No one will deny that, from one point of view, the earth is not the centre of the solar system; this is no reason for jettisoning the more important truth which was carried by the geocentric picture of the universe.¹⁹ (A heliocentric cosmology could also have been the vehicle for the same truth.²⁰) Indeed, without the protective truths of traditional symbolisms such material discoveries as do issue from a profane science are likely to be more or less useless, or positively destructive. A materially inaccurate but symbolically rich view, proportioned to human intelligence, is always preferable to the reign of brute fact. In falling under the tyranny of a fragmentary, materialistic and quantitative outlook modern science is irremediably limited by its epistemological base. Of spiritual realities, modern science knows and can know absolutely nothing. As Schuon observes

There is scarcely a more desperately vain or naive illusion – far more naive than Aristotelian astronomy! – than to believe that modern science, in its vertiginous course towards the ‘infinitely small’ and the ‘infinitely great’, will end up by rejoining religious and metaphysical truths and doctrines.²¹

Equally absurd is the proposition that modern physics might ‘verify’ the cosmologies of ancient traditions and scriptures, as if it is the right of the lesser to stand in judgement of the greater. Furthermore, there is something alien in science’s obsessive interest in the ‘infinitely small’ and the ‘infinitely great’: as Schuon remarks elsewhere, ‘the world of atoms as well as that of galaxies – to express ourselves *grosso modo* – is hostile to human beings, and comprises for them, in principle or potentially, a climate of alienation and terror.’²² No wonder Goethe refused to peer down the microscope!

By now it should be clear enough why it is a dangerous prejudice to believe that a materialistic science is harmless enough if it be confined to its own domain – the material world. This realm does not exist *in vacuo* and to pretend that it does only breeds trouble, as the history of modern science so starkly demonstrates. Titus Burckhardt, one of the most authoritative commentators in this field, exposes some of the issues involved:

...modern science displays a certain number of fissures that are not only due to the fact that the world of phenomena is indefinite and that therefore no science could come to the end of it; those fissures derive especially from a systematic ignorance of all the noncorporeal dimensions of reality. They manifest themselves right down to the foundations of modern science, and in domains as seemingly ‘exact’ as that of physics; they become gaping cracks when one turns to the disciplines connected with the study of the forms of life, not to mention psychology, where an empiricism that is relatively valid in the physical order encroaches strangely upon a foreign field. These fissures, which do not affect only the theoretical realm, are far from harmless; they represent, on the contrary, in their technical consequences, so many seeds of catastrophe.²³

These fissures might be probed at some length. However, enough has been said to provide a framework within which we can examine one cancerous manifestation of the scientific spirit, evolutionism, which has such a tenacious grip on the mentality of most moderns.

¹⁸ F. Schuon, *Light on the Ancient Worlds*, 36-37 (emphasis mine).

¹⁹ F. Schuon, *To Have a Center*, Bloomington: World Wisdom, 1990, 171-177.

²⁰ F. Schuon, *Roots of the Human Condition*, Bloomington: World Wisdom, 27.

²¹ F. Schuon, *Dimensions of Islam*, London: Allen & Unwin, 1969, 156.

²² F. Schuon, *Roots of the Human Condition*, 18-19.

²³ T. Burckhardt, ‘Cosmology and Modern Science’, in *The Sword of Gnosis*, ed. J. Needleman, Baltimore: Penguin, 1972, 131. Some of these fissures are dealt with in Guénon’s *The Reign of Quantity*, esp. Ch XXIV and following. See also P. Sherrard, ‘Science and the Dehumanisation of Man’, *Studies in Comparative Religion*, 10:2, 1976, 74-92, and G. Eaton, *King of the Castle*, London: Bodley Head, 1977, 142-164.

‘Scientific’ Darwinism: Mega-Evolution and the Transformist Hypothesis

Darwin’s hypothesis, foreshadowed in the work of many other contemporary scientists and social theorists, and germinated in the sinister population theories of Malthus, is one of the most elegant, seductive and pernicious of ‘pseudo-mythologies’ – those grandiose explanatory theories rooted in metaphysical ignorance and fashioned to the prejudices of the age. In a beguiling admixture of fact, imaginative speculation, circular argumentation and painstaking system-building Darwin seemed to produce an ‘objective’ account of the development of species. Evolutionism may be defined as the concurrence of certain palaeontological and biological facts, assumptions and speculations wedded to a cluster of philosophical and socio-political ideas and values. Thus Darwinism has both a scientific/biological and an ideological/social dimension. Indeed, in the end, as Schuon insists, Darwinism pertains not to science but to philosophy.²⁴ While these are two sides of the same coin it will save some confusion if we separate them for the purposes of our discussion. Let us start with the zoological theory itself, a foundational prop of modern science but one riddled with contradictions, anomalies, absurdities and lacunae.

A preliminary caution. Evolutionism is under attack from several directions. Some critics take their stand on entirely the wrong ground and not all critiques carry the same authority although many share the basic intuition that evolutionism is, in the words of one of its critics, ‘a hoax’. Michael Negus alerts us to some of the dangers which attend this field:

There is a need to avoid two errors: the first is the error of rejecting adequately established scientific fact, eg. the age of the earth or the space-time dimensions of the universe. This is the trap into which the biblical fundamentalists fall. The second error is that of accepting pseudo-doctrines like evolutionary progress with all its implications and thereby subverting Tradition. This is the trap into which the followers of Teilhard de Chardin fall.²⁵

The balance lies in firstly acknowledging the supremacy of traditional doctrines over any profane science whatever but at the same time accepting, within appropriate limits, such facts as scientific inquiry has uncovered even though these often have no relevance to man’s spiritual destiny. The denial of such facts only tarnishes legitimate opposition to evolutionism with the suspicion of crankiness and obscurantism. It is crucial not to confuse the perennialist position espoused by Schuon and others with a literalist fundamentalism which goes on insisting, in the face of incontrovertible evidence, that the earth is only a few thousand years old or that all life was created in a few days.²⁶ No perennialist wishes to evade or hide scientific discoveries but only to separate fact from fiction and to situate the former in a framework which allows adequate interpretation.

Material and logical objections to evolutionism by no means exhaust the case but they are a significant component of it. There is a growing body of literature by reputable scientists – palaeontologists, botanists, zoologists, geneticists, mathematicians and others – which throws many of the central tenets in the Darwinian hypothesis into very serious question. Scientific critiques of evolutionary theory by men like Douglas Dewar, Evan Shute, Guiseppi Sermonetti,

²⁴ ‘...the deficiency of modern science is essentially related to the question of universal causality; it will no doubt be objected that science is not concerned with philosophical causality but with phenomena, but this is false, for all of evolutionism is nothing but a hypertrophy imagined as a result of denying the real causes; and this materialist negation as well as its evolutionist compensation pertains to philosophy and not to science’; F. Schuon, *Form and Substance in the Religions*, Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2002, 221-222.

²⁵ M. Negus, ‘Reactions to the Theory of Evolution’, *Studies in Comparative Religion*, 12:3-4, 1978, 194. See also S.H. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, New York: Crossroad, 1981, 205-214.

²⁶ Nor is it of much use to put forward counter-theories of a quasi-scientific kind which are even less credible than those of the evolutionists. See Michael Negus’s review of Anthony Fides’s *Man’s Origins* in *Studies in Comparative Religion*, 13:1-2, 1979, 188-194.

Roberto Fondi and L. Bournoure, proceed through the premises and methodologies of modern science itself; the theory is being white-anted from within.²⁷ The debate hinges on some very complex evidence which cannot be reviewed here. Rather, brief mention will be made of three lines of attack concerning the evolutionary conception of life's beginnings, the transformist thesis of 'mega-evolution', and the notion of man's primate ancestry.

The conception of life's beginnings and its subsequent development as presented by the evolutionists is quite illogical and defies all common sense. Some years ago a psychiatrist had this to say:

If we present, for the sake of argument, the theory of evolution in a most scientific formulation we have to say something like this: 'At a certain moment of time the temperature of the earth was such that it became most favourable for the aggregation of carbon atoms and oxygen with the nitrogen-hydrogen combination, and that from random occurrences of large clusters molecules occurred which were most favourably structured for the coming about of life, and from that point it went on through vast stretches of time, until through processes of natural selection a being finally occurred which is capable of choosing love over hate, and justice over injustice, of writing poetry like that of Dante, composing music like that of Mozart, and making drawings like those of Leonardo.' Of course, such a view of cosmogenesis is crazy.²⁸

As William Stoddart has so rightly observed in a recent work, 'It is impossible that blind, deaf and dumb evolution could have given rise to eye, ear and voice'; and, 'The miracle of consciousness did not arise from a heap of pebbles'.²⁹

Darwinian theory pivots on the notion that one species can, over time, be transformed into another – mega-evolution. The testimony of many reputable scientists on this subject calls for our attention. Martin Lings, drawing on the work of Evan Shute, points out that,

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... micro-evolution demonstrates the presence in nature of all sorts of unseen barriers that ensure the stability of the various classes and orders of animals and plants and that invariably cause transformation, when it has run its little course, to come to a dead-end.³⁰

In similar vein, Jean Rostand, a French biologist, argued that

The world postulated by transformism is a fairy world, phantasmagoric, surrealistic. The chief point, to which one always returns, is that we have never been present at one authentic phenomenon of evolution...we keep the impression that nature today has nothing to offer that might be capable of reducing our embarrassment before the genuinely organic metamorphosis implied in the transformist thesis.³¹

Lemoine and other European scientists have shown how the fossil record on which the evolutionists base their arguments displays the abrupt appearance of whole new species and thus contradicts the transformist hypothesis.³² Not all evolutionists have been able to turn a

²⁷ For some of this literature see: D. Dewar, *The Transformist Illusion* (Tennessee: Dehoff, 1957); L. Bournoure, *Determinisme et finalite double loi de la vie* (Paris: 1957); E. Shute, *Flaws in the Theory of Evolution* (New Jersey: Craig Press, 1961); P. Moorehead & M. Kaplan (eds), *Mathematical Challenges to the neo-Darwinian Interpretation of Evolution* (Philadelphia: Wistar Institute Press, 1967); G. Fremondi & R. Fondi, *Dopo Darwin* (Milan: Rusconi, 1980), Michael Pitman, *Adam and evolution: a scientific critique of neo-Darwinism*, London: Hutchinson, 1984; Michael Denton, *Evolution: A Theory in Crisis* (Adler & Adler, 1996). For a lawyer's critique of evolutionism see Phillip E. Johnson, *Darwin on Trial* (Intervarsity Press, 1993). For an example of a book which exposes some of the absurdities of Darwinism but which refuses to jettison the evolutionary model, see Soren Lovtrup, *Darwinism: The Refutation of a Myth*, London: Croom Helm, 1987. See also O. Bakar, 'The Nature and Extent of Criticism of Evolutionary Theory' in *Science and the Myth of Progress*, ed. M. Zarandi, Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2003, 159-180.

²⁸ Karl Stern quoted in E.F. Schumacher, *A Guide for the Perplexed*, 127-128.

²⁹ W. Stoddart, *Remembering in a World of Forgetting*, Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2008, 34.

³⁰ M. Lings, 'Signs of the Times', in *The Sword of Gnosis*, 113.

³¹ J. Rostand *Le Figaro Littéraire*, quoted in T. Burckhardt, 'Cosmology and Modern Science', 143.

³² See S.H. Nasr, *Man and Nature*, 125ff and S.H. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 238ff.

blind eye to this evidence but rather than questioning the whole theory they have developed new hypotheses which are somehow assimilated into the Darwinian framework. Having scorned the idea of the Creator some evolutionists now find themselves endowing nature itself with powers of instantaneous creation – thus we have, for example, Schindewolf's theory of 'explosive evolution' or Severtzoff and Zeuner's theory of 'aramorphosis', or again the theory of 'quanta of evolution' or 'tachygenesis',³³ or recent 'neo-Darwinian' speculations about 'organistic revolutions',³⁴ or Stephen Jay Gould's 'punctuated equilibrium', or Lovtrup's 'epigenesis'. All these theories involve so much hocus-pocus concealed by the technical jargon which insulates these speculations from the inquiries of any lay person trying to follow the logic of the argument.³⁵

The mega-evolution and transformist thesis is, of course, the platform for the idea that there is an essential continuity between man and the animals, and that *homo sapiens* is a highly-evolved primate. The debate about the 'missing link' between man and the other primates now takes on the characteristics of farce. The spectacle of evolutionists falling over each other in their attempts to find this link shows no sign of ending. Nor is another vexing question any closer to solution: what precisely are the criteria which distinguish humans from apes? Why are scientists unable to answer these questions? In this context we might note the words of an American palaeontologist:

You can, with equal facility, model on the 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.³⁶

That there are certain physical similarities between men and apes no one will deny: what is at issue is the significance of these similarities (an issue to which we will return presently).

Here is yet another embarrassment to evolutionism's portrayal of man as a 'superior ape': man's ability to create an extraordinary number of artefacts. Now, according to the Darwinian theory of natural selection and adaptation, these skill must evolve in response to environmental pressures; they represent 'adaptations' necessary for survival. In most species we find that an animal has only 'evolved' the skills necessary to manufacture one artefact – say, a nest in the case of a bird. (We will leave aside for now the awkward fact that where evidence is available it suggests that the species in question appeared with this skill ready-made: spiders, for example, were, as far as we can tell, always able to spin webs. There is not an iota of evidence to suggest that this was an 'adaptation', 'evolved' over a period of time.³⁷) Similarly, the scientists adduce the development of one adaptive survival strategy as evidence of 'evolution' – the camouflage on the wings of a moth, for instance. But in the case of man we are asked to swallow the same explanation for the fact that he is capable of making not one nor even half-dozen different artefacts but hundreds of thousands. Likewise he seems to have developed countless survival strategies. And what of the astounding variety and richness of human languages? Wherein is the explanation of this singularity? Howbeit that man alone can evolve these skills in what, from a geological point of view, must have been a minuscule period of time in his prehistory? The massive disjunction between man's unprecedented cultural achievements and the theory of adaptation and natural selection is one that no evolutionist has been able to explain in terms which have the slightest plausibility.

Darwin and his epigones offer us a spectacular instance of the truth of René Guénon's observation that

³³ See M. Lings, *Ancient Beliefs and Modern Superstitions*, London: Allen & Unwin, 1980, 77-78, T. Burckhardt, 'Cosmology and Modern Science', 146-147, and S.H. Nasr, *Man and Nature*, 126.

³⁴ See S.H. Nasr, *Man and the Order of Nature*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1996, 146.

³⁵ M. Lings, *Ancient Beliefs and Modern Superstitions*, 78-80.

³⁶ E.A. Hooton quoted in M. Lings, 'Signs of the Times', 113n7.

³⁷ See T. Burckhardt, 'Cosmology and Modern Science', 144-146.

when profane science leaves the domain of the mere observation of facts, and tries to get something out of an indefinite accumulation of separate details which is its sole immediate result, it retains as one of its chief characteristics the more or less laborious construction of purely hypothetical theories. These theories can necessarily never be more than hypothetical, for facts in themselves are always susceptible of diverse explanations and so never have been and never will be able to guarantee the truth of any theory....³⁸

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The perennialists, Titus Burckhardt and S.H. Nasr pre-eminently, have made some forays into the *scientific* debate about evolutionary theory. However, this is really only a side-show. The most fundamental grounds for a rejection of evolutionism are metaphysical. Schuon:

People accept transformist evolution as a useful and provisional postulate just as they are ready to accept no matter what on condition that they do not have to accept the primacy of Spirit. And yet, starting from this immediately tangible mystery which is subjectivity or intelligence, it is easy to understand that the origin of the Universe is not inert and unconscious matter, but a spiritual Substance which, from coagulation to coagulation and from segmentation to segmentation – and other projections, both manifesting and limiting – finally produces matter by causing it to emerge from a more subtle substance, but one that is already distant from principal Substance.³⁹

In similar vein:

...evolutionism – that most typical of all the products of the modern spirit – is no more than a kind of substitute: it is a compensation ‘on a plane surface’ for the missing dimensions. Because one no longer admits...the supersensible dimensions... one seeks the solution to the cosmogonic problem on the sensory plane and one replaces true causes with imaginary ones which, in appearance at least, conform with the possibilities of the corporeal world... In doing this, one forgets what man is, and one forgets also that a purely physical science, when it reaches vast proportions, can only lead to catastrophe...⁴⁰

Evolutionism flagrantly contradicts certain axiomatic metaphysical/cosmological principles. At the heart of the Darwinian schema lies a preposterous inversion of traditional understandings. In the opening passage of St John’s Gospel, one of the most exalted mystical texts, we are told that ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...and the Word became flesh...’.⁴¹ Darwin proposes precisely the opposite, that ‘In the beginning was the Flesh (that is, matter), which became Word (consciousness, life or Spirit’. Furthermore, as Schuon observes, ‘Transformist evolutionism offers a patent example of “horizontal” in the domain of the natural sciences, owing to the fact that it puts a biological evolution of “ascending” degrees in place of a cosmogonic emanation of “descending” degrees.’⁴² The whole evolutionary conception rests on the metaphysically absurd notion that the greater can emerge from the lesser. In brief, the microscopic organisms from the prehistoric algal slime – organisms whose origins Darwin is utterly unable to explain – turn into Man. Or to put it even more tersely, the primeval amoeba turns into a St Francis, an Ibn ‘Arabi, a Lao Tze!

Darwin’s thesis hinges on the claim that one species can transform itself into another. Whatever partial insights Darwin’s work might yield this theoretical linchpin is an absurdity which flies in the face of all traditional wisdom. The notion of organic transformation, of mega-

³⁸ R. Guénon, *The Reign of Quantity*, 149.

³⁹ F. Schuon, ‘Consequences Flowing from the Mystery of Subjectivity’, 197-198. See also S.H. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 235.

⁴⁰ F. Schuon, *Dimensions of Islam*, 153-154. On this subject it is also worth considering the following passage from Schuon: ‘transformist evolution is but a materialist substitute for the ancient concept of the solidifying and segmenting “materialization” of a subtle and suprasensorial primordial substance, in which were prefigured all the diverse possibilities of the *a priori* material world. The answer to evolutionism is to be found in the doctrine of archetypes and “ideas”, the latter pertaining to the primordial substance in which the archetypes became “incarnated” as it were by reverberation’; *Logic and Transcendence*, Bloomington: World Wisdom, 1984, 13n.

⁴¹ *John* 1: 1,14.

⁴² F. Schuon, *Roots of the Human Condition*, 5.

evolution, is from the outset quite incompatible with the doctrine of archetypes which finds one of its applications in the animal realm. Metaphysically, each species 'is an archetype, and if it is only manifested by the individuals belonging to it, it [the archetype] is nonetheless as real and indeed incomparably more real than they are.'⁴³ Titus Burckhardt reminds us that

... a species in itself is an immutable 'form'; it could not evolve and become transformed into another species, although it can include variants, all these being 'projections' of a single essential form from which they will never become detached.⁴⁴

Darwinism postulates such variants to be 'buds' of new species, a quite illegitimate assimilation and one that does nothing to hide either the gaps in the palaeontological 'succession' of species or the fact that whole new species appeared abruptly. The facts which palaeontology has uncovered, some of them indisputable, are amenable to a quite different interpretation, as Burckhardt demonstrates.

All that palaeontology proves to us is that the various animal forms such as are shown by fossils preserved in successive layers of the earth made their appearance in a vaguely ascending order, going from relatively undifferentiated organisms – but not simple ones – to ever more complex forms, without this ascension representing, however, a univocal and continuous line. It seems to move in jumps; that is to say, whole categories of animals appear at once, without real predecessors. What means this order, then? Simply that on the material plane, the simple or relatively undifferentiated always precedes the complex and differentiated. All 'matter' is like a mirror that reflects the activity of the essences by inverting it; that is why the seed comes before the tree, and the leaf bud before the flower, whereas in the principial order perfect 'forms' pre-exist. The successive appearance of animal forms according to an ascending hierarchy therefore in no wise proves their continual and cumulative genesis.⁴⁵

All traditional teachings affirm that there is a radical discontinuity between humankind and other life forms. The fact that some oriental exoterisms understand this distinction in terms of *karma* rather than ontologically in no wise affects the principle itself. The privileged and axial position of man in the cosmos is completely ignored by evolutionism which would have it that man is a kind of 'more evolved' ape. How can the similarities between man and the primates be explained without resort to evolutionary speculations?

The anatomical similarities between men and apes are always explained tendentiously by evolutionists. However, if we start from the doctrine of archetypes and the multiple states of being, these physical correspondences appear in a completely different light.

However paradoxical this may seem, the anatomical resemblance between man and the anthropoid apes is precisely explainable by the difference, not gradual but essential, separating man from all other animals. Since the anthropoid form is able to exist without that 'central' element that characterizes man – and that moreover is manifested anatomically by his vertical position, among other things – that form must exist; in other words there cannot but be found, at the purely animal level, a form that realizes in its own way – that is to say, according to the laws of its own level – the very plan of the human anatomy. It is in this sense that the monkey is a prefiguration of man, not as an evolutionary phase, but in virtue of that law that decrees that at every level of existence analogous possibilities will be found.⁴⁶

It is, of course, for this very reason that it is impossible to define the differences between the apes and man in purely physiological terms. Similarly, taking as a starting point traditional emanationism, Schuon dismisses the grotesque evolutionist portrayals of early man as a shuffling, grunting, hunched-over, club-wielding creature:

⁴³ T. Burckhardt, 'Cosmology and Modern Science', 141. See also M. Pallis, *A Buddhist Spectrum*, London: Allen & Unwin, 1980, 150. Schuon: 'Evolutionism is the very negation of the archetypes and consequently of the divine Intellect; it is therefore the negation of an entire dimension of the real...'; *To Have a Center*, 50

⁴⁴ T. Burckhardt, 'Cosmology and Modern Science', 141. See also S.H. Nasr, *Man and Nature*, 124.

⁴⁵ T. Burckhardt, 'Cosmology and Modern Science', 143-144. One might add that the evolutionary hypothesis also depends on a linear and one-dimensional view of time. Nasr has discussed the effects of neglecting the doctrine of cosmic cycles; see S.H. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 209ff.

⁴⁶ T. Burckhardt, 'Cosmology and Modern Science', 149-150.

Original man was not a simian being barely capable of speaking and standing upright: he was a quasi-immaterial being enclosed in an aura still celestial, but deposited on earth; an aura similar to the 'chariot of fire' of Elijah or the 'cloud' that enveloped Christ's ascension. That is to say, our conception of the origin of mankind is based on the doctrine of the projection of the archetypes *ab intra*; thus our position is that of classical emanationism... Evolutionism is the very negation of the archetypes and consequently of the divine Intellect; it is therefore the negation of an entire dimension of the real...⁴⁷

The modern denial of God and of the transcendent inevitably leads to a debased understanding of human nature and to corrupting definitions of 'man', more often than not based on evolutionistic notions. Man, we might be told, is a large-brained and exceptionally intelligent animal, or a tool-making or game-playing or language-using or self-conscious or rational or political animal. To the traditional ear such definitions simply sound inane; as E.F. Schumacher remarks, one might just as well define a dog as a 'barking plant' or a 'running cabbage'. Furthermore,

Nothing is more conducive to the brutalization of the modern world than the launching, in the name of science, of wrongful and degraded definitions of man, such as 'the naked ape'. What could one expect of such a creature...?⁴⁸

Man's especial estate is not due to the fact 'that he has two hands which he manipulates or that he can make planes that fly or calculating machines that perform difficult mathematical operations in a short time. These and other abilities are no more than accidental to his real nature'.⁴⁹ About this real nature a materialistic science can tell us nothing.

There are plenty of other puzzles concerning early man which embarrass evolutionary science. To think clearly about these matters involves balancing the modern scientific preoccupation with time, matter and change with traditional conceptions of space, Substance and Eternity. One then has a more comprehensive framework within which to work and all sorts of new possibilities present themselves. To give but one example: it is possible that the first humans in this particular terrestrial cycle left no solid traces, either because their bodies were not yet so materialised or because the spiritual state normal in those times, together with the cosmic and cyclic conditions then obtaining, made possible a resorption of the physical into the subtle body at the moment of death.⁵⁰ But so deeply is evolutionism entrenched in the modern consciousness that it is no easy matter to explore different modalities of thought on the questions with which evolutionary theory deals.

Social Darwinism and the Gospel of 'Progress'

Darwin's biological hypothesis became a Pandora's Box for 19th century social theory. His work was pillaged for new tools of social and historical analysis and for new categories of thought. The evolutionist schema and its methodology soon came to be applied to non-biological categories such as classes, races and nations, even religions. The first authors of what came to be known as 'Social Darwinism' were E.B. Tylor and Herbert Spencer. The earliest formulation of their ideas actually *preceded* Darwin's *The Origin of Species*; indeed, it was Spencer rather than Darwin who coined the term 'survival of the fittest', a slogan under which all manner of social, racial and imperial brutalities were to be justified. (The fact that the cultural theory preceded the biological adds weight to Guénon's claim that such theorizations coalesce around the 'predominant tendencies of the modern mentality' rather than simply arising from empirical evidence.) The ideology of Social Darwinism was to be

⁴⁷ F. Schuon, *To Have a Center*, 50.

⁴⁸ E.F. Schumacher, *A Guide for the Perplexed*, 31. The repugnant 'naked ape' theories of the bastard science of 'ethology' perhaps reached their zenith in the 1960s with the popularity of works such as Robert Ardrey's *African Genesis* (1961), Konrad Lorenz's *On Aggression* (1966), and *The Naked Ape* (1967) by Desmond Morris.

⁴⁹ S.H. Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam*, London: Allen & Unwin, 1966, 23.

⁵⁰ See T. Burckhardt, 'Cosmology and Modern Science', 150.

harnessed to a wide range of purposes: the assertion of Anglo-Saxon racial and cultural superiority; the colonial exploitation of other countries and peoples; the justification, in pseudo-scientific terms, of a rapacious capitalism and of various policies of social and economic *laissez-faire*; the shoring up of nationalist and racist ideologies, not only in Britain but in Europe and America as well.

More than most theories, Darwinism lent itself to such stratagems of persuasion, enjoying not only the prestige and authority attached to science, but also the faculty of being readily translated into social terms. That this translation was rather free and loose was an added advantage, since it gave license to a variety of social gospels.⁵¹

Darwinism was a 'grand narrative' perfectly suited to the temper of the age – an account of the beginnings and the development of life which erased the Creator, now replaced by a clutch of more or less inexorable 'laws', an account, moreover, which looked to an inevitable *advance* or *progression*. Evolutionism lent itself to social ideologies in which the remorseless imperatives of competition, self-interest, 'survival' and 'racial hygiene' were all valorized as 'natural' and assimilated into the idea of Progress.⁵² Consider the chilling implications of a passage such as the following, from Darwin's *The Descent of Man* (1871):

At some future period, not very distant as measured by centuries, the civilized races of man will almost certainly exterminate and replace the savage races throughout the world. At the same time the anthropomorphous apes...will no doubt be exterminated. The break between man and his nearest allies will then be wider, for it will intervene between man in a more civilized state, as we may hope, even than the Caucasian, and some ape as low as a baboon, instead of as now between the negro or Australian and the gorilla.⁵³

Through its connections with a fraudulent dogma of Progress, evolutionism has seeped into our way of looking at history and has subverted the whole idea of tradition. Although social Darwinism has been thoroughly discredited on a theoretical level the average mentality is still very much under its sway. Progress, after all, is one of the most comfortable of illusions. It is still not uncommon to find formulations such as this one from a very well-known anthropological theorist: 'Man has made objective progress in improving his society and... we in the West seem at this stage to have the best society in recorded history.'⁵⁴ This is a staggering claim. It is a measure of the influence of the idea of progress, buttressed by evolutionism, that this kind of statement will be swallowed without demur by many people today. Indeed one could easily catalogue a more or less endless list of the tokens of evolutionist assumptions in almost every aspect of contemporary thought.

The ideal of progress is by now looking very tawdry to those who see our present situation clear-eyed. Writing some years ago – since when our global circumstances have deteriorated even further – Theodore Roszak wrote this:

The Last Days were announced to St John by a voice like the sound of many waters. But the voice that comes in our day summoning us to play out the dark myth of the reckoning is our meager own, making casual conversation about the varieties of annihilation... the thermonuclear Armageddon, the death of the seas, the vanishing atmosphere, the massacre of the innocents, the universal famine to come... Such horrors should be the stuff of nightmare... They aren't. They are the news of the day... we have not stumbled into the arms of Gog and Magog; we have *progressed* there.⁵⁵

'Spiritual Evolutionism' and Evolutionism as Pseudo-Religion

⁵¹ G. Himmelfarb, *Darwin and the Darwinian Revolution*, London: Chatto & Windus, 1959, 340.

⁵² On the social effects of Darwinist ideas see Marilynne Robinson's essay, 'Darwinism', in *The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought*, New York: Picador, 2005, 28-75.

⁵³ quoted in M. Robinson, 'Darwinism', 35.

⁵⁴ I.C. Jarvie, *The Revolution in Anthropology*, Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1969, 14.

⁵⁵ T. Roszak, *Where the Wasteland Ends*, ix. As Gai Eaton observes, 'A superstitious faith in progress endures even when the dogma of progress has been exposed as an illusion'; *King of the Castle*, 10.

It is a sign of the times that an anti-traditional, evolutionist Utopianism should find its way into domains where it should not for a moment have been countenanced. A symptom of this state of affairs is the fact that many people, without a moment's hesitation, should resort to the nonsensical term 'spiritual evolution'. The Spirit – whether it be conceived as Logos or Intellect, or as the 'divine spark' within – cannot 'evolve'; man's capacity for the Absolute, his 'spiritual intelligence', if such a term be permitted, is part of his birthright and does not change. This is also to say that there is no reason to suppose that we are better situated than our distant ancestors to attain *gnosis* – certain knowledge of divine things. As Schuon has remarked,

We say not that evolution is non-existent but that it has a partial and most often quite external applicability; if there be evolution on one hand, there are degenerations on the other, and it is in any case radically false to suppose that our ancestors were intellectually, spiritually or morally our inferiors. To suppose this is the most childish of 'optical delusions'; human weakness alters its style in the course of history, but not its nature.⁵⁶

In the light of these realities, 'spiritual evolution' is an absurdity. And yet evolutionism has permeated our thinking so deeply that otherwise intelligent folk are seduced into constructing elaborate systems claiming to chart man's ascending spiritual path and anticipating a 'new age' in which 'cosmic consciousness' will be the order of the day. Indeed, it is actually quite difficult to find religious and spiritual works which are not, in one way or another, contaminated by evolutionistic assumptions, even when many aspects of the work in question might be quite orthodox and traditional – we might adduce the writings of the English Benedictine, Fr Bede Griffiths, as a case in point. A great deal of Griffiths' work is thoughtful, insightful and illuminating but is, at various points, vitiated by evolutionism and by the accompanying idea that 'religion' and 'modern science' can find some sort of *rapprochement*. This is plainly evident in one of Griffiths' last major works, *A New Vision of Reality*.⁵⁷ (We might note in passing that, in contrast, the work of his colleague and fellow-Benedictine, Fr Henri Le Saux – aka 'Swami Abhishiktananda' – is quite free of this kind of thinking: the French monk understood that modern science could add nothing whatever to the wisdom of the *Upanishads*.⁵⁸)

The ravages of 'spiritual evolutionism' are much more serious and disabling in those many philosophers, theologians and spiritual teachers for whom this theme becomes pivotal. Let me identify just a few representative cases: Swami Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, Rudolf Steiner, Aldous Huxley, Gerald Heard, Teilhard de Chardin, Jean Gebser, Ken Wilber.⁵⁹ (Here I leave aside the legion of vaporous 'New Age' writers whose work will not bear even cursory interrogation. Eckhart Tolle might serve as a representative specimen.) Teilhard is a conspicuous example of what results when one tries to reconcile the platitudes of evolutionist ideology with a traditional theology. The attempt is ingenious, even subtle if somewhat opaque, but the result is none the less dangerous for that. Kurt Almqvist rightly pilloried it as a 'pseudo-metaphysical synthesis of neo-modernism, where evolutionist and pantheist materialism substitutes itself for religion by means of subversion and parody.'⁶⁰ That the Catholic hierarchy should have allowed this to pass as 'Catholic' thought

⁵⁶ F. Schuon, 'No Activity Without Truth', in *The Sword of Gnosis*, 38-39.

⁵⁷ B. Griffiths, *A New Vision of Reality: Western Science, Eastern Mysticism and Christian Faith*, London: HarperCollins, 1992.

⁵⁸ On Abhishiktananda see H. Oldmeadow, *A Christian Pilgrim in India: the Spiritual Journey of Swami Abhishiktananda*, Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2008.

⁵⁹ The work of such figures is discussed in K. Oldmeadow, *Traditionalism: Religion in the light of the Perennial Philosophy*, Colombo: Sri Lanka Institute of Traditional Studies, 2000, Ch 11, and in H. Oldmeadow, *Journeys East: 20th Century Western Encounters with Eastern Religious Traditions*, Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2004.

⁶⁰ K. Almqvist, 'Aspects of Teilhardian Idolatry', *Studies in Comparative Religion*, 12:3-4, 1978, 195. For traditionalist commentary on Teilhard see also S.H. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 240-244; T. Burckhardt, 'Cosmology and Modern Science', 150-153; P. Sherrard, 'Teilhard and Christian Vision', *Studies in*

in any sense whatsoever is in itself a sad commentary; would that we could still accede to G.K. Chesterton's remark that 'the Church is the only thing that saves us from the degrading slavery of becoming children of our times'.⁶¹ Ken Wilber, on the other hand, furnishes us with an example of the ways in which evolutionism and psychologism become natural accomplices in perpetrating what Guénon signalled as one of the identifying features of modern thought – the confusion of the psychic and spiritual.⁶²

The perennialists have been concerned, in the main, with the effects of evolutionism on attitudes to religion, to the past, to tradition; in all these areas they find evolutionism's bequeathals to be malign. The enervating effects of both biological and social Darwinism on Christian faith are well-known. It is no accident that one of the most popular contemporary critics of religion, Richard Dawkins, should be an evolutionary scientist who has been dubbed 'Darwin's Rottweiler'. Never mind that his argument for atheism is glib and superficial; its appeal derives in large part from his ostensible authority as a scientist.⁶³ Also pertinent in this context is Schuon's observation that

One of the effects, among others, of modern science has been that of mortally wounding religion by posing in concrete terms problems which esoterism alone can resolve and which remain unresolved because esoterism is not heeded... Faced by these new problems, religion is disarmed, and it borrows clumsily and gropingly the arguments of the enemy, and this obliges it to falsify imperceptibly its own perspective and more and more to disavow itself...⁶⁴

Indeed, evolutionism has become a kind of pseudo-religion, with its own inviolable dogmas, a fact which explains the zealotry with which many scientists remain wilfully blind to the mounting scientific evidence against the Darwinian scheme. Over seventy years ago the distinguished entomologist F.R.S. Thompson remarked:

The concept of organic Evolution is very highly prized by biologists, for many of whom it is an object of genuinely religious devotion, because they regard it as a supreme integrative principle. This is probably the reason why the severe methodological criticism employed in other departments of biology has not yet been brought to bear against evolutionary speculation.⁶⁵

Rather than discarding a hypothesis with which the facts do not conform the evolutionists go on endlessly modifying, qualifying and hedging their theories with ever more subtlety and ingenuity whilst all the time clinging to the basic premises on which the whole edifice of evolutionary theory rests. As Murray Eden observes, 'Neo-Darwinian evolutionary theory has been modified to the point that virtually every formulation of the principles of evolution is a tautology.'⁶⁶ It may be that the tide is turning. Certainly evolutionary theory has been subjected to more penetrating criticism in the last half century and increasing numbers of people, scientific and lay, are no longer prepared to accept the evolutionary account of life. No doubt someone will observe that we have not here taken into account the 'latest findings' and most recent scientific 'theorizations' – such a remark simply betrays the kind of thinking which imagines that timeless principles can be arraigned in the court of a materialistic, relativistic and progressivist 'science'.

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Comparative Religion, 4:3, 1970, 150-175; and W. Smith, *Teilhardism and the New Religion*, Rockford: Tan, 1988.

⁶¹ Quoted in a review by W. Perry in *Studies in Comparative Religion*, 12:3-4, 1978, 247.

⁶² On this subject see Guénon's *The Reign of Quantity*, Ch XXXV.

⁶³ Dawkins' most popular work is *The God Delusion*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006.

⁶⁴ F. Schuon, *Light on the Ancient Worlds*, 227.

⁶⁵ F.R.S. Thompson, *Science and Common Sense* (London, 1937) quoted in S.H. Nasr, *Man and Nature*, 139n. See also S.H. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 234-235.

⁶⁶ M. Eden, 'Inadequacies of neo-Darwinian Evolution as Scientific Theory' in *Mathematical Challenges to the neo-Darwinian Interpretation of Evolution*, ed. P. Moorehead & M. Kaplan, 109. See also S.H. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 237.

An essay of these proportions can do no more than identify some of the issues at stake in the debate about evolutionism and signal some of the metaphysical and cosmological principles which might most profitably be brought into play. A properly constituted science can only proceed in a metaphysical and cosmological framework which it cannot construct through any amount of observation, experimentation and hypothesizing. Nearly a century has passed since Guénon wrote the following words, no less true today than they were then:

...in disavowing the principles [of traditional metaphysics and cosmology] and in refusing to re-attach itself to them, [modern science] robs itself of the highest guarantee and the surest direction it could have; there is no longer anything valid in it except knowledge of details, and as soon as it seeks to rise one degree higher, it becomes dubious and vacillating.⁶⁷

Evolutionism provides us with a conspicuous example of this phenomenon.

(This essay combines material from several different pieces of published work but comes primarily from *Frithjof Schuon and the Perennial Philosophy*, Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2010.)

⁶⁷ R. Guénon, *East and West* (1924), Ghent, NY: Sophia Perennis et Universalis, 1995, 59.