

Introducing the 7th Issue

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Worldwide the 200th anniversary of the birth of Charles Darwin is being celebrated this year — for all the wrong reasons, it appears. Evolution — descent with modification — is a fact. Its “mechanism” — far from being reducible, as naturalists claim, to random mutations and selection pressures — is largely unknown, although systems research, complexity theory, and non-equilibrium dynamics have uncovered significant contributing factors at odds with the central (neo-Darwinist) doctrine of molecular biology.

There is another and in our time more important Charles Darwin, even though he happens to be numerically identical with the above: the Darwin who, in *The Descent of Man*, “put together [his] notes, so as to see how far the general conclusions arrived at in [his] former works were applicable to man.” What does it tell us about Darwin that in the whole book of 475 fine print pages the phrase “survival of the fittest” occurred exactly twice — including an apology for ever using it? What does it tell us about Darwinists that in the index to this book, after 100 years, in every edition, in all the main languages, there is only a single entry for “love” — versus 95 occurrences in the text?

And what did Darwin conclude about the extent to which his former conclusions were applicable to humans? By placing his final conclusion on the penultimate page of the section titled “Concluding Remarks,” he obviously wanted to be sure his readers carried it away from this long book and his lifelong quest to understand and explain the evolution of life, including ours:

Important as the struggle for existence has been and even still is, yet as far as the highest part of our nature is concerned there are other agencies more important. For the moral qualities are advanced either directly or indirectly much more through the efforts of habit, by our reasoning powers, by instruction, by religion, etc., than through natural selection.

Darwin, a deeply religious man, who would of course condemn the violence and lunacy of regressive religion, would have equally condemned the materialist reductionism that today, sadly, is attached to his name. He would have agreed with Sri Aurobindo that “[t]he significance of the lotus is not to be found by analysing the secrets of the mud from which it grows here; its secret is to be found in the heavenly archetype of the lotus that blooms for ever in the Light above.” Thank you, **David Loye**, for swimming valiantly against the current.

In the next article, **G. William Barnard** explains why the reigning model of scholarship as disengaged, dispassionate, objective enquiry is based on an epistemic fiction.

We want to convince ourselves that our academic work and our teaching is neutral and unbiased, that we are simply discoverers and transmitters of information. So we fool our colleagues, our students and ourselves into thinking that we are just presenting the

facts, that we are merely describing, for instance, what Ramakrishna said or did, or that we are simply noting what, let's say, Oglala Sioux shamans believed or practiced years ago. As scholars of religion, most of us do not dare to admit that we might actually agree with Ramakrishna's worldview, or to confess that we actually think that the shamans' insights into different levels of reality are appealing. It seems slightly disreputable, or somehow unrigorous or somewhat unacademic, to come out and openly state that we believe that the mystics might well be onto something real, something valuable. Above all, we most certainly do not ever want to reveal that we have had mystical experiences ourselves, let alone that we have a regular spiritual practice. Then we would be opening ourselves up for academic ridicule. Then we would risk being seen as hopelessly subjective and utterly devoid of critical awareness.

It is much easier and safer to expose and analyse the raw underbelly of religious phenomena than it is to construct a workable and persuasive image of our spiritual potential as human beings. Barnard emphasizes the

need to encourage scholarship that acknowledges the very real, and perhaps to many scholars, very threatening, possibility that these diverse religious worlds might not simply be items for dispassionate, detached study, but instead might actually have something worthwhile to say to us, to our world, to our situation. I would like to see room in the academy for scholarship that recognizes the transformative potential of these religious worlds, a scholarship that is willing and able to affirm that the metaphysical models and normative visions of these different spiritual traditions are serious contenders for truth, a scholarship that realizes that these religious worlds are not dead corpses that we can dissect and analyse at a safe distance, but rather are living, vital bodies of knowledge and practice that have the potential to change completely our taken-for-granted notions of who we are, why we are here and what we could or should become.

If it is indeed the case that we are all approaching the material that we study and teach with a highly charged, often unexamined, set of assumptions and motivations, then the academic playing field is leveled.

If the secular critic of mystical phenomena has to acknowledge and defend his or her naturalistic worldview, has to admit the subtle ways in which the veneer of detached scholarship is often a convenient rhetorical camouflage for an emotionally charged desire to covert his or her audience to a sceptical or positivistic perspective, then the question becomes not so much 'is this scholarship objective?' but rather 'which impassioned set of arguments is most persuasive?'

Scholars who not only teach about different meditative and contemplative techniques but also practice them, scholars who not only study mysticism but are maybe even mystics themselves, scholars who are not resigned to learning about spirituality as it was lived in the past but who seek to be spiritually engaged in the present, threaten many of the most deeply rooted, and therefore perhaps least examined, assumptions that the academy holds.

"The academy as an institution simply does not want a bunch of potential Buddhas or St. Augustines on its hands. The academy does not want individuals who claim to have access to levels of knowledge that cannot be subject to its institutional scrutiny or approval. The academy does not want anyone in its midst who might challenge the comfortable insularity of the scholastic world.

Richard Hartz next examines the historical significance of an all but forgotten 9/11. On September 11, 1893, a large public meeting of representatives of religions from around the world opened in Chicago. Called the Parliament of Religions, it was the first gathering of its kind. It lasted for seventeen days and was attended by thousands. Ever since then a recognition of what Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has called “the dignity of difference” has been growing in the human consciousness. In the Parliament’s opening session, the chairman introduced a Swami from India. According to John Henry Barrows, chairman of the committee that organized the meeting, “when Mr. Vivekananda addressed the audience as ‘Sisters and Brothers of America,’ there arose a peal of applause that lasted for several minutes.” At that moment, one woman afterwards recalled, thousands of people “rose to their feet as a tribute to something they knew not what.”

One hundred years later, in 1993, Samuel Huntington published an article titled “The Clash of Civilizations?” in the influential American journal, *Foreign Affairs*. The article was the genesis of his controversial book, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. The provocative phrase “clash of civilizations” has acquired a life of its own, frequently connected with Huntington’s name but often with little relation to his ideas. This has distracted attention from his positive concept of “the remaking of world order.” In a world of diverse but increasingly interdependent cultures, “the constructive course,” he wrote, “is to renounce universalism, accept diversity, and seek commonalities.”

No better advice could be given to the world’s populations and their leaders, especially to those whose disproportionate power and influence might tempt them to envisage a unipolar political order and global monoculture as means of achieving their own security. Principles resembling those advocated by Huntington in the 1990s for international politics have been familiar to the interfaith movement since the Parliament in Chicago in 1893. The religions, despite their reputation as obstacles to unity and progress, have a head start in the emerging intercivilizational dialogue. With their many ways of unlocking the doors of the spirit and inspiring a commitment to self-transcendence, they may turn out to hold a master-key to the future.

An overemphasis on beliefs, taking them to be absolute because they purport to represent the Absolute, has often turned religion into a source of conflict. On the other hand, saints, sages and masters revered in all traditions have insisted that belief is only the first step on the path to realization.

If the doctrinal orientation is replaced by an experiential one, disputes between contending creeds will become irrelevant. Instead of an array of contradictory dogmas, the religious and spiritual traditions will be found to offer means of transcendence and inner transformation suited to the variety of human nature. All these lead out of the jarring discords of our present self-afflicting egoism to freer and happier, more luminous and harmonious states of being. The accelerating evolution of consciousness seems to point to something beyond the limits of the rational mind as the key to our destiny. It is not only the revelations and divinations of the religious spirit that bear witness to a hidden dimension of existence, but also the highest flights of philosophy and the epiphanies of artistic creation, not to mention the spontaneous “peak experiences” of countless individuals.

“The Parliament that opened in Chicago on September 11, 1893, showed that even in those days — and in the contentious area of religion — a crowd of fairly ordinary people could react enthusiastically to an unprecedented representation of human variety. The message of that distant event has become all the more relevant in view of regressive trends since a more recent September 11 that was the stark antithesis of the one 108 years earlier,” Hartz concludes.

In his second contribution, Hartz reflects on India and the world in the 3rd Millennium. “In India,” he observes,

it has been held, from time immemorial, that all are embodiments of the one Self (Atman). *Ekatva*, the oneness of existence, is central to the teaching of the ancient scriptures. Linked with it are the companion ideas of *mukti* or inner freedom and *samatā*, the equality of all as manifestations of one infinite Reality. If we choose to see ourselves in such terms, this vision of oneness will give spiritual depth and intensity to the growing idea and feeling of human unity. The sense of global identity which is emerging on this increasingly interconnected planet will become more living and effective.

If India’s resurgence is to have a genuinely transformative impact on the world, that impact is likely to be connected with the spread of this kind of self-perception, which may be summed up in the word spirituality. Spirituality is by no means unique to India, but it has been cultivated there for millennia with unparalleled persistence, passion and insight.

Needless to say, the influence of Indian spirituality on the world would depend on the fate of spirituality in modern India itself. It might be argued that spirituality is the last thing India needs today, that it will take the country back to the past rather than forward to the future, that it will be confused with religion, that religions quarrel and that Indians would do better after all to stick to secular ideas borrowed from the West. But perhaps India and the world are Westernized enough already and could benefit from some Easternizing to set right the balance. In any case, the failure to distinguish divisive religious conservatism from the liberating and unifying force of spirituality is an error that ought to be corrected rather than unthinkingly indulged.

“Spirituality,” Sri Aurobindo wrote, “is much wider than any particular religion”. At the time when he was writing, the neologism “Hindutva” (Hinduness) was not yet in circulation. The notion of Hindu nationalism was in the air, however. Sri Aurobindo unequivocally distanced himself from this idea and stated explicitly that he did “not understand Hindu nationalism as a possibility under modern conditions”. Not Hindutva, but *Ekatva* — oneness — should be the ideal.

For many centuries the characteristically Indian recognition of the unifying factor of spirituality as the essence of religion permitted the extraordinary religious variety of the subcontinent to flourish with remarkably little friction. India’s irrepressible spiritual tendency may yet reassert itself in an even more dynamic way than before and play a decisive role in overcoming the many challenges the country still faces. It would be short-sighted to limit our expectations from this vast people who are the heirs to such a splendid past and possess an incalculable potential for the future.

The two papers by Hartz are followed by two lectures, delivered in January 2009 by

Yours Truly at the Centre of Sri Aurobindo Studies of the Department of Philosophy, Jadavpur University, Kolkata.¹

The following books are review in this issue: *The Devil's Delusion: Atheism and Its Scientific Pretensions* by David Berlinski, *Integral Consciousness and the Future of Evolution: How the Integral Worldview is Transforming Politics, Culture and Spirituality* by Steve McIntosh, and *The Lives of Sri Aurobindo* by Peter Heehs. The last review, by **Marcel Kvassay**, is in two parts, the second of which will appear in our next issue.

Finally we have as usual a number of book excerpts: Chapter 2 of *Yoga, Karma, and Rebirth: A Brief History and Philosophy* by **Stephen Phillips**, Chapter 8 (titled "Subject and Object") of *Nature and Self: Reframing the Human Predicament* by **Mait Edey**, two chapters of *When the Impossible Happens: Adventures in Non-Ordinary Reality* by **Stanislav Grof**, and excerpts from *The Ideal of Human Unity* by **Sri Aurobindo**.

¹ An historical note: In 1906 the British Governor-General of India partitioned Bengal into East Bengal (today's Bangladesh) and West Bengal (which then included Orissa), an extremely unpopular move that was ultimately reversed in 1911. To protest it, a group of Bengali intellectuals including Rabindranath Tagore and Sri Aurobindo (then Aurobindo Ghosh) set up in 1906 the National Council of Education (NCE) to challenge British rule by offering literary, scientific, and technical education to the masses on national lines and under national control. In 1910 a rival institution, the Bengal Technical Institute, became part of the NCE — today's Jadavpur University, a premier educational and research institution in India.