

The Next Stages in Human Spiritual Evolution

By Robert Ellwood

We are now entering the twenty-first century and the third millennium. A perceptible feeling hangs in the air that the world is rapidly approaching one of history's decisive seismic shifts. Changes are looming ahead of us that will tremendously affect the total context of human life from here on out. They will profoundly change our political, economic, social, cultural, religious, and spiritual lives.

We sense that things somehow cannot and will not go on much longer just as they are not with what is just over the horizon in cosmology, physics, the technology of the computer age, biological engineering, and above all shifts in our inner spiritual attitudes toward ourselves and the universe. We don't know just what those changes will be, so we look at them with a combination of hopefulness and dread. But we sense they will not be just another turning in human history; what is coming now may change not only human history but the nature of human history.

What waits just over the horizon will be something more than just the fall of one empire and the rise of another. The impending hinge in time may well swing far more widely than even such turnings as the French and American revolutions or the Protestant Reformation, for though they deeply affected the shape of politics and religion in their spheres, and indeed in the world, the basic structures, the nation state and the organized church, went on though with internal modification.

Even the European discovery of the New World, the Industrial Revolution, and European imperialism, at first and almost up to the present, simply continued the old order of nations, money, and work in new forms, in new expansion franchises, one might say. What is approaching, what is now just beginning to light the sky, may change even such basic institutions as these beyond recognition. They may go so far as to modify beyond recognition the ways we think, communicate, and live in our bodies.

What will come in the course of the next millennium, and probably starting very early in it, is of an order that can be compared only to the emergence of humanity as we now know it from proto-human primates. The third millennium will recall humanity's rather sudden evolution to its present brain size and upright stance, complete with tool-making and sophisticated communications capability in the form of speech and symbol. That breakthrough is now dated to about two million years ago; the new era will bring changes in mind and communication of comparable scale.

As far as religious, political, and cultural shifts are concerned, the coming change could also be compared to the discovery of agriculture about 12,000 years ago and to what has been called the axial age, the time around the fifth century BCE of the great religious and intellectual leap reflected in the work of the Buddha, Confucius, Lao-tzu, Zoroaster, the great Hebrew prophets, and the early Greek philosophers. (The axial-age transition to a more individual-centered religion and in some places to a more systematic, protoscientific view of the universe was only the beginning of a process later continued in

the labors of Jesus and Muhammad and the universal faiths of which they were founders, between 2000 and 1500 years ago.)

Three Human Eras

According to commonly accepted norms of anthropology and the history of religion, these three eras humanity before agriculture, humanity after agriculture but before the axial age, and post-axial humanity are the most fundamental stages of human material and spiritual development thus far, since the evolutionary breakthrough two million years ago. As always, material and spiritual development interacted with each other.

The first stage was the Paleolithic or Old Stone Age culture, based on hunting and gathering, tribal in nature. After the discovery of agriculture, it was followed by the Neolithic or New Stone Age, comprised of archaic farmers in sedentary communities and all that implies: rapid population growth, towns, division of labor, commerce, political organization and kingship, some surplus wealth to support professional artists, priests, and even philosophers. The ancient agricultural empires, like those of ancient Egypt, Babylon, or China, though post-Neolithic were really but the last phase of the archaic agricultural world. That world had ended not only in empires on the banks of rivers like the Nile, but also with writing, and a sophisticated awareness of history and literature.

That ending in empires and writing produced the conditions that gave rise to the axial age of the great individual religious founders and their religions, with their written scriptures and their institutions. How could we have modern religion without writing, temple or cathedral cities, and priestly bureaucracies? It was essentially out of the womb of those ancient empires, in India, China, the Middle East and the Mediterranean that the axial age was born, and the great religions of today emerged.

According to a revisionist view of the Theosophical concept of root races proposed by one of the students at the School of the Wisdom I recently taught at Adyar, which many of us felt made sense, the anthropological stages can fit very neatly into the Theosophical. The Paleolithics would then be the Lemurians, who according to The Secret Doctrine were quite primitive, yet were ruled by kings and able to build vast but crude cities, and who religiously combined a simple primal monotheism with remarkable psychic powers, later largely repressed.

Of particular interest is a very recent analysis by scientists at the University of Massachusetts which produced the date of two million years ago for the emergence of humanity. These researchers propose that, somewhere in Africa, a small group of individuals became separated from other Australopithecines. This population bottleneck led to a series of sudden, interrelated changes in brain size, skeletal proportions, and behavior that jump-started the evolution of our species, setting it directly on the course to Homo sapiens. The study pinpoints this breakthrough just before the first tool-making by Homo habilis, suggesting relatively sudden new patterns of hunting and social organization. Based on a full spectrum of paleontological and genetic evidence, the report powerfully brings to mind the assertion of The Secret Doctrine that in the middle of the Lemurian era, the Lords of the Flame arrived on earth to serve as a catalyst for the evolutionary jump between proto-human animals and true humans.

Nature unaided fails, The Secret Doctrine avers. Biological evolution alone can prepare the vessels for humanity, but the awakening of the full capability of the human manas, as well as the first dim awareness of the higher spiritual self, requires an outside push. Perhaps it was actually in Africa, to a small isolated population able to become prototypes of the new humanity, that the push came, and from this incentive came ultimately Homo erectus, the Neanderthal, Homo sapiens, and finally air-conditioning and spaceships.

In Theosophical technical terms, it seems that the push was the joining of physical bodies prepared by biological evolution to etheric bodies from the lunar stream of evolution, and the awakening of their higher nature, atma-buddhi-manas. No doubt it was then that these Paleolithic or Lemurian peoples began to conceptualize the characteristics of Old Stone Age religion: the Sky God, initiation, shamanism, and the Sacred in the animal so well epitomized in the famous cave paintings.

The next great stage, Neolithic or archaic agriculture, compares well to the fourth or Atlantean root race, with its emphasis on sorcery and a profoundly cosmic view of the human situation, essentially what Mircea Eliade meant by cosmic religion, in contrast to the later religions of historical consciousness. The Atlanteans, we are told by Theosophical sources, achieved some remarkable technological advances, but above all embraced a magical worldview, though they were divided into light and dark factions, peaceful and violent. (This matches with what anthropology tells us of archaic agricultural societies, which can and do go to marked extremes of both tendencies.)

Archaic agriculture is, moreover, the world of what Mircea Eliade has called the myth of the eternal return, a world without much sense of history but in which every New Year is a recapitulation of the creation, and every year therefore a chance to start over. This is also the world of the labyrinth, the megalith, the way to the gods in sacred caves and mountains, and in the turn of the seasons. Holidays such as May Day and Halloween, and even Christmas and Easter as seasonal festivals of midwinter and spring, are remnants in our culture of those times. The Theosophical classics especially identify Atlanteans with the Chinese. Certainly traditional Chinese spiritual cosmology, with its five elements and their cycles of dominance, and the eternal interplay of yin and yang, suggests a highly sophisticated, civilized version of cosmic religion.

Then enters the next great stage, the axial age with its great religious and cultural changes. This epoch, in whose aftermath we are still living, sounds like the fifth root race. Its deepest vocation is to explore physical, material nature fully, hence the emphasis on science and technology and its concomitant: the rational, scientific model of reality and how it is known. The centuries around the axial age and following it have therefore been a time of material as well as spiritual invention.

Perhaps the most decisive of all inventions in the ancient world was writing, which came before the axial age and clearly was a prime stimulus for it. The pen and the scroll, or the stylus and the clay tablet, facilitated not only commerce and the exchange of ideas, but also new kinds of religion with scriptures and abstract philosophies. Above all, writing made possible the keeping of historical records that showed we live not in eternal-return time, but in irreversible linear or one-thing-after-another time. In it, things change and do

not change back. In due course writing made possible scientific and mathematical thinking as well.

The new axial-age religions dealt with what Eliade called the terror of history, and so they talked of God or the gods acting in history. The religious narratives of the Hebrew scriptures depict a moment of creation followed by wars and other events in which God intervenes and look forward to a culminating event at the end of history. All axial-age and post-axial-age religions posit a decisive moment within history the time of Moses, the Buddha, Confucius, Zoroaster, Jesus, or Muhammad when the deep structures of history shifted, and time with all its terrors was ultimately redeemed. In the words of the Christmas hymn of such a historical moment, The hopes and fears of all the years / are met in thee tonight.

The new religions Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, as well as new updated forms of Judaism, Hinduism, and Chinese religion saw themselves as having a world destiny in history, one spelled out in sacred written texts and personal identities. They had their bibles, and they emphasized individual sin, karma, faith, and salvation, more than that of the family or the tribe. Above all, the new kind of religion led to a religious consciousness in which rational, propositional models of truth were important.

Doctrines about spiritual things were defined as true or false, as though they were heavenly parallels to the laws of nature of emergent science from Aristotle to Newton, and were structured with as much logical detail. God's existence was as rigorously proved as atoms, and karma or grace was like a spiritual version of gravitation. All this is what we would label, in an expression Theosophists have used, a very fifth-root-race way of thinking.

What I am proposing is that now we are about to move beyond the fifth root race and the axial-age way of religion and thought, and that is why I say what is coming is comparable to the origins of Paleolithic humanity, the discovery of agriculture, or the invention of writing and axial-age religion. It is really a new step in human spiritual evolution, which Theosophists have particularly useful tools for understanding.
The Future of Communication

First, what future changes are likely in the world of communications? As we have seen, the last great change, the one that prompted the vast axial-age, fifth-root-race shift in religion, was writing a fundamental change in the nature of communication that in turn led to awesomely immense changes in ways of thought and in religion. And the beginning of humanity itself some two million years ago was as much as anything a change in the nature of communication: nothing about the primal human experience was more important than the emergence of human words and language. If we were now to move on to a stage beyond writing or even beyond words and language that would be something. At the least it would mean a new root race; at the most . . . what?

To start where we are on a dizzying voyage into the future, it is widely predicted that we will move to electronic instead of paper books as the main vehicle of reading within two or three decades. But that may only presage more significant changes that could mean profound shifts in consciousness: the replacement of words in linear order the basis of

writing, of formal speech, and even of human thought as we now know it with wordless moving images as the fundamental visual medium of communication. They would allow communication to present itself the way the world presents itself to us before we sort it out in word order, as images on the screen, or in holographs, that can be layered and put in synchronicity with other moving images.

All this is possible now on the computer monitor. To change from words and letters to moving images and symbols does not require any major change in technology, but only in the psychology of what we mean by reading. It would mean using other triggers than words in the process of visually absorbing programmed knowledge or ideas, or vicariously entertaining emotional experiences, or indulging suggested poetic fancies.

In fact, television has already begun this change in thinking, together of course with cinema, videos, and the Internet screen. As an example, consider how television has midwived a transition from baseball to football as our most popular national game. Baseball is supremely a linear sport, in which only one thing happens at a time, and so it lends itself very well to narrative description and radio broadcasting. But football is a game in which many things can happen at once, like multiple synchronous moving images the quarterback setting up the pass, the running receiver going deep, the line trying to do interference and so the game is ideally suited to television, with instant replay in case you didn't get it all the first time.

These new media are more and more making the reading of linear words not the sovereign vehicle of communication among people and down the ages, but only one among several options, and for some not the most inviting. Recent generations are abandoning the idea that the only way to read seriously is to read hardcopy paper-based books. When I was in college in the 1950s, movies and even television were available, but they were just entertainment the great books were still the great tradition, the serious vehicles of knowledge. It was universally assumed that if you really wanted to learn a field, you read the best books about it. Now books are still there, and professors still talk, and rightly so, about the importance of the great books of Western and Eastern civilization, but students wanting to know about something even about those books are as likely as not to check out a video or get up a website. And the fact that the website is still mainly linear words is no doubt only transitional before long they will more and more embrace wholly new ways of communication truly suitable to the medium, moving images and wordless symbols.

The present transitional state is leading up to a critical point at which, to reverse the gospel image, the new wineskins of technology will no longer contain the old wine of words. The novel potentials of the emerging communication technologies will take over, and we will behold new languages with new minds to go with them. A change of consciousness may be on the way in which words in linear order, even words themselves, come to seem inadequate compared to the knowledge and experience transmitted by moving synchronous images and symbols though that experience is of a nature almost unimaginable to us. The transition might require practice of the order of a blind person learning to read Braille or of a deaf person learning to read lips.

When we make a change that drastic in the way we communicate, we will find ourselves not only reading in new ways but thinking in new ways. Consider that a function of language, equally as important as communicating with others, is serving as a tool for silent thinking. Try thinking through some halfway complicated idea or problem in your mind without silently using words. But when we read wordless moving images and symbols rather than words, we will begin to think more and more without words. Who knows what trans-human species we shall then become?

Consider the implications of changing from linear word-based communication to synchronous moving-imaging thinking, like going from a storybook to a movie, or from an abstract book of economics or philosophy to a video with moving charts and symbols. At least that is the best I can conceptualize it, though I am sure it will become more than that. Communicating with wordless moving images and symbols is this a reversion to animal or preverbal infantile modes of thought, and so a regression? I don't think so, although it will certainly be different. The human need and capacity for language will still exist, but it will be for languages of unimaginable new kinds.

Of course spoken language, and the need to transcribe spoken communications, will still persist even as book-equivalent writing assumes new and different shapes. Possibly on some (not all) levels it will be like a reversion to the shaman bard reciting epics before the invention of writing, as she or he acted it out and created an atmosphere to go with the story, very different from the mood of analyzing words that are black and white on the page and create emotion and atmosphere only in one's imagination.

The new media might do the work of imagination for us in holographic 3-D. They might even lead to a postmodern realization there is something illusory about the ideas of history and chronological progress that have been so much a part of the modern way of thinking. Our sense of history is based on narrative word-records and on a linear model of how things happen rather than on a synchronous one. And moving-image writing is only one phase of the future, the sixth-root-race stage. Ultimately, as we shall see in the second part of this article, words and speech may be altogether transcended in other, more direct modes of communication appropriate to the seventh root race.

What about Theosophy? Theosophy as we know it is very much dependent, indeed over-dependent, on books. That's about all Theosophists do, it sometimes seems, at least in formal meetings read books and talk about them. But can Theosophy make the transition? It seems to me that The Secret Doctrine would lend itself incredibly well to the new moving-image and symbol-based communication, almost as though that massive text was itself actually a verbal portent of the coming trans-book age.

Indeed, I wonder if The Secret Doctrine will not even begin to be fully understood until it is translated into the wordless language of the future. I see its cosmogenesis unfolding silently on a screen, telling its story in its own symbolic rather than verbal way, as silently and wordlessly as space itself gave birth to energy and mass and to pure preverbal consciousness. And then I see images of all the ancient races and civilization and their symbols, moving synchronously.

It may take those who know how to read in this new way to start understanding aright what Blavatsky gave the world, though I suspect we will never more than start understanding that book. Perhaps *The Secret Doctrine* is not just a musty tome from the past, as we may sometimes fear, but a book for the future, which only the far future will truly know how to translate and read.

This transition in communication could mark the end of the axial age, fifth-root-race religions as we now know them, because they are based on historical time, sacred texts, individual sin and salvation all those things associated with fifth-root-race ways of thinking and reading. Following the great law of evolution, they must change or die.

And even more dramatic and radical changes, with their challenges to Theosophical understandings of humanity, are on the way in the new worlds, new races, and new minds that will be made by genetic engineering, neurotechnology, and radiotelepathy. To those astounding evolutions we will turn next.

What will the religion of the sixth and seventh root races be? The seventh's will no doubt be whatever the religion of a single human megabrain is like, but that gets ahead of the story-one thing at a time. The contours of faith in the sixth root race are now beginning to emerge. Signs abound; the transition appears to be already underway. The twentieth century was a time of great religious change, much of it beneath the surface of exoteric religious institutions.

Although regrettably plenty of iron-hard attitudes remain in the world around religious nationalism and dogmatism, it must be acknowledged that at least the religious "playing field" has changed dramatically since about 1900. Virtually everyone must now recognize that the arguments about religious truth take place in a pluralistic world, and this realization changes our concept of the very nature of belief. A worldview, even a conservative, traditionalist one, must now be seen as a choice made in the face of the possibility of other choices, rather than simply imposed by tradition or authority.

In such an age, an independent organization like the Theosophical Society can have an important role: first, as a paradigm or model of a movement based on the free choice and affiliation of mature members, each in his or her own way; second, as an organization whose teaching affirms the intrinsic value of pluralism as such, recognizing that the knowledge of the Ancient Wisdom each of us has individually is imperfect.

An attitude of respectful pluralism is, in fact, a growing reality at the end of the twentieth century. Even though many people are not yet ready to acknowledge the new reality openly, one can see widespread evidence that religions are actually increasingly regarded as subjective structures that we ourselves construct to negotiate our relation to absolute reality, rather than as objective truths. People change religions freely; they "blend" religions in the increasing number of interreligious marriages and families; they accept that most of the societies of the world are pluralistic ones in which people need to get along with each other. I know of Christian-Jewish families who observe both Christmas and Passover, and Christian-Buddhist families who display both the cross and the image of the Enlightened One in their home.

There are exceptions, but throughout present-day culture, religions are often no longer seen as matters for doctrinal or logical consistency, or for institutional loyalty, as admirable as those virtues may be in some contexts. Instead, they are perceived as invaluable but flexible symbol-systems that may be employed by individuals in a variety of ways: as instruments of family or community cohesion, as channels for one's aspirations toward the highest realities, as cultural heritages, as inspirations for good living and spirituality, with a dimension of depth.

All the ideas outlined here are very much in line with the Theosophical expectation that we are now moving into the era of the sixth root race, or perhaps more technically, the sixth subrace of the fifth root race, which will prepare for the sixth. We need first to remind ourselves again that the present fifth root race was intended especially to explore and experience the meaning of the material plane. That is its particular role in the course of our long pilgrimage from out of the Halls of Light, which are our true home, for the sake of experience in this and other worlds before our return, enriched and ennobled, to the Source.

For the most part we have done well what we were supposed to do: explore and understand the material composition of the universe. Our science and technology have brought us incomparable knowledge of the laws of nature, of the atom and the galaxy, and of the application of these laws in the making of tools from the flint blade to the computer. There have, of course, been downsides, beginning with the terrible misuse of technology for human exploitation and war, owing to the dismal fact that our moral evolution has hardly kept pace with our scientific progress.

A no less grievous consequence is that the very success of the scientific way of thinking has suggested it as a model of philosophizing in other spheres where its application is more dubious, such as the religious. A master in *The Mahatma Letters* speaks of our civilization as one which "rests so exclusively upon intellect." Insofar as this applies to religion, it points to the way religion has been seen so much as a matter of dogmas, like scientific axioms or laws, which entail other doctrines with virtually mathematical logic, all of which need to be imposed with the harsh rigor of nature itself.

But this is a very fifth-race way of looking at religion, and not at all the only way possible. The great religions themselves, for all their doctrines, gesture in another direction by holding up conscience, and above all love, as the final court of appeal in the mind and in ethics. If supremacy of conscience means anything, it means that the inner integrity of the individual is more important than any mental construct. If love means anything, it means accepting others in their differences from oneself as well as in their similarities. It says that we want to grow mutually by exploring those differences with appreciation and that this experience of mutuality is deeper and better than just preaching one's dogma at others, take it or leave it.

Increasingly in our world we are coming to see this interactive loving kind of understanding as the way the world ought to be, across religions, castes, races, nationalities, personal differences all areas in which we have laid down many rigid rules as the shadow side of fifth-root-race thinking, with its scientific or pseudoscientific logic. In the sixth root race our calling will not be to pursue some one way with exclusive

consistency, but to expand our capacity for love by embracing persons of all kinds and to explore their inwardness with sensitivity and appreciation. Along with this, will come an appropriate recovery of psychic and mystical capacities, the necessary tools for truly profound understanding of ourselves and of that which is beyond ourselves.

There will still be problems, of course, for the sixth root race is not the end of the journey, and some issues, perhaps unimaginable to us now, will remain to be resolved in the seventh or on other worlds. One is fairly familiar: how does one respond in love to another whose way of life one honestly believes to contain evil? Other issues may be a little further down the road: do the coming biological engineering and neurotechnological techniques mean enhanced human freedom, or do they only invite totalitarian control of whatever is left of the individual? It seems clear that the world is now making the transition to new kinds of thinking that spell a new stage in evolution, and before long the remaining moral and ethical issues will be dealt with in fresh ways.

This is how I see the coming sixth root race: a people of pluralism, individuality, new ways of image-based reading and thinking, leading up to an amalgamation of all those relatively enlightened individual humans into what is really a transhuman stage, the neurotechnological linkage of all minds into a grand array of consciousness. That united supermind will be the seventh root race, the last which will have need at all for this physical world and which we hope will live on a spiritual level appropriate to its tremendous leap into cosmic consciousness.

What signs are pointing to that unimaginable future, and what is the shape of that which comes? First let us consider future scenarios from the scientific sphere. The distinguished physicist and master of scientific speculation Freeman Dyson has suggested, in *Imagined Worlds*, an awesome list of awaiting technological revolutions. From our point of view, these will be material concomitants and expressions of the changing consciousness and spirituality of the sixth root race. First, genetic engineering, already commenced but still at a very crude level, within two or three centuries will produce biological entities virtually on demand, including Jurassic Park animals, plus new and improved human bodies, to reflect the undogmatic plasticity of sixth-root-race consciousness.

One of the most dramatic prospects awaiting us in biological engineering will call for new thought patterns and new religious concepts. Sooner than we now think, it may be possible to reverse the aging process through cellular modification or transplants and so create immunity to most of the ailments from which we die. This would result in very long life spans of hundreds or even thousands of years, indeed perhaps virtual immortality.

One can only begin to conjecture what kind of effect this development would have on the world's religions, since they now exist in large part as guides for how to live within a very limited span of years and in the face of mortality, and include strong elements of hope and fear regarding the afterlife. Remove the specter of the man with the scythe more or less indefinitely and, if religion as we know it does not simply wither away, other features of faith than those centering around death will no doubt gain prominence, ones that some of us might consider healthier concerns: community, ethics, and the spiritual quality of life.

But even virtual immortality is as nothing compared to the prospects lurking within the emerging science of neurotechnology. The premier art of that field, splicing biological beings with computerized intelligence (miniaturized and flexible far beyond present capability), will then be ready to equip the new man and woman with remarkable combinations of human mind and artificial intelligence. Dyson among others has suggested that before long we may be able to download data and ideas directly from computers to our brains, and from brains to databases. Perhaps the computers themselves would be organic and, as it were, grafted-on brain-enhancing body parts.

Then as the third radical development after virtual immortality and neuro-computer linkages, it will be possible to transmit data by what Dyson calls radiotelepathy, "brain waves" or neuron charges translated by a small implanted sender into radio waves that could be picked up by a computer receiver or by another brain. Radiotelepathy will allow all these enhanced minds to be directly linked like computer arrays on the level of memory, thought, and will. This vast human computer array could be moving into place by the end of the next millennium, in a thousand years or less.

Radiotelepathy could be achieved either through tiny transmitters placed in the brain or through the genetic engineering of cerebral biology to electrify, computerize, and "radioize" the human brain, on the model of the electric organs that already exist in electric eels and electric catfish. It would then permit the direct communication of signals and information from one brain to another, and no doubt also from associated computerized databases. Books, videos, spoken language, and other primitive means of transmitting information through verbal symbols encoded on paper or film or in combinations of sound waves, and received by means of the senses, will then be as outdated as those bards who, before the invention of writing, had to commit vast amounts of tribal lore to memory.

Radiotelepathy, whether from data bases to brain or from brain to brain, would certainly be as revolutionary an advance in communication, and even in the human meaning of knowledge, as was the invention of writing, which those powerful new information engines will displace. It would deliver to us a world as different from the age of literacy as that age was from the preliterate stone-age world that went before. At best, reading, writing, and speaking would now be used only for historical, recreational, or aesthetic purposes. Another thought: it might also be possible by this means, Dyson suggests, to connect with the minds of other species and for the first time to know directly the subjective world of a cat, a dog, an eagle, or a dolphin.

From here only a small step will carry us to the most revolutionary development of all, one that we might wish to term the seventh root race. The next stage, though dramatic and irreversible, would be comparatively easy after radiotelepathy, and probably would not be long resisted, though it would mean nothing less than changing human beings as we know ourselves into something that is not merely another species, or another genera, but virtually a whole new order of life.

For a thousand years from now or perhaps sooner, undoubtedly it will be possible to unite those radiotelepathically implanted brains into great arrays of tens, hundreds, even thousands of units capable of problem-solving and achievement not to mention pleasure

on an unimaginable scale. But within a collective like this, one imagines the individual, and with it individual consciousness, fading and failing in the face of the vastly larger collective mind's power.

One can project vast disquietude by humans in the immediate face of this prospect, but it would not be resisted long. The newest and most powerful technology never is, and the competitive edge going to those accessing large-array brains would make this neurological leap imperative for the rest. Nonetheless this awesome change in human nature would clearly overturn all existing institutions. The profoundest challenge of this eventuality, as in the case of biological individual immortality, would be to religion, whatever form it has taken a millennium from now. For religion as we know it depends fundamentally on the idea of the responsible individual self, and the self would now be shown to be outdated, a puny instrument in the eyes of something immensely greater.

Death would indeed no longer have its sting nor the grave its victory, at least not to the collective consciousness, which will increasingly simply *be* the consciousness of each entity within its hold. The whole would undoubtedly soon, and irreversibly, supplant individual human consciousness like a far more powerful radio signal drowning out lesser stations. Its mental energies, its brilliance of intellect, its determined will and purpose, its breadth of information and awareness, its inconceivable joys and raptures, will dwarf anything we, or rather our distant progeny, could possibly sustain on our own, and we, or they, would become *it*. So it is that the entire part of religion that deals with individual preparation for death, the trauma of dying, final judgment, and immortality or resurrection will retain little meaning.

And what is the spiritual status of a radiotelepathically-linked collective mind? Is it itself a person in the religious sense, a soul, capable of sin and salvation, or of karma and enlightenment the great idea of axial-age, fifth-root-race religion? Or is the new human megabrain a demonic entity that has swallowed up the greatest of God's creations, the individual soul? Or can souls somehow still be found within it? At our present level of consciousness, these questions are simply unanswerable.

Nor is that all. For the collective, for all intents and purposes, would be immortal, at least until the collapse and death of this particular universe eighty billion years hence and by then the array, perhaps by now united into one vast universal consciousness of billions of parts, could be a mind invincible enough to prevail even against that ultimate termination. Life and death will be as insignificant to the collective as the individual. Any one unit within it, upon failing, would easily be replaced by another, no doubt quickly constructed for the purpose by biological engineering.

It can be argued, of course, and probably will be at the time, that religion has other foci than the separate individual, indeed that it insists the separate individual is not the ultimate focus of meaning. In Christianity, individuals are supposed to be parts of the body of Christ, like cells or organs in a physical body, almost like a spiritual anticipation of the collective. The Hindu social order, with its castes and roles, is based on an organic more than an individualistic model of society. Priests and preachers will endeavor to spiritualize the collective in some such manner as this. Yet to see the spiritual ideal become everyday physical and biological reality will be no small challenge to

conventional religion. How can Theosophy respond to this and the other challenges of the occult future?

We have a couple of hints about Theosophy and this "science fiction" future in a classic Theosophical text. *The Mahatma Letters to A. P. Sinnett* (letter 66 in the chronological edition, 14 in the third edition, part 7b) tell us: "The principle of acceleration and retardation applies itself in such a way, as to . . . leave but a single superior one [stock] to make the last ring." As the text makes clear, this final superior entity is also the culmination of the seventh root race. And (letter 93B, 23B): "The last seventh race will have its Buddha as every one of the predecessors had; but its adepts will be far higher than any of the present race, for among them will abide the future Planetary, the Dhyan Chohan" or meditation buddha, whose contemplative aura can embrace a planet and who will instruct the next still higher level of development that will pass beyond our world altogether.

One can easily imagine that, at this level, those other adepts and that superior stock would harmoniously and without coercion be embraced within the Dhyan Chohan's single incomparable mind. These no doubt partial and tentative glimpses into the distant spiritual future, couched in traditional language and concepts, hint at one important idea: that the separate individual human self as we now know it is far from the final stage of spiritual evolution. At higher and higher levels, both selection and increasing harmony in freedom will move us together toward a single transcendent consciousness capable of almost unimaginable wisdom, power, and bliss. In that buddhic mind, consciousness and all experience will be united and fulfilled in a way that is now only potential and barely felt by most.

If these developments include the use of technological, or neurotechnological, innovations as well as purely "spiritual" means of evolution, that should not surprise us nor discredit the advance. Theosophy has never imposed a rigid dualism between the spirit and the flesh, or the spiritual and the technological, but rather accepts, with the Mahatmas of the *Letters*, that manifest reality is in fact all material as well as spiritual. Matter, however, is capable of higher and subtler refinements than most of us can conceive and is susceptible to scientific and technological as well as subjective means of evolution.

Matter and spirit express each other, and to set them in opposition is a false dualism. We are material and are meant to use matter as we continue our evolution, letting its deep interplay with consciousness direct us toward the spiritual values of oneness and love. But we are also creatures of free will, and so able to abuse anything. The sixth-root-race values of tolerance and the seventh of oneness of consciousness could of course lead to subtle kinds of evil magic. But they need not.

From the point of view of the tremendous overall Theosophical model of spiritual evolution, we can be optimistic about the future. We can and must believe that the new spiritual energies which are released into the world with each upward movement, and which are being powerfully released now despite often discouraging appearances, have the power to overcome the negatives and bring us closer to the Halls of Light. Ultimately, they will. If we work with them with selflessness and wisdom, they will raise us quickly and easily. If not, the job will take longer and will be much harder.

For us as Theosophists, then, I offer two reflections. First, we must not think that we are outdated or irrelevant in this rapidly changing world, as I am sure we are sometimes tempted to think. I am convinced that the deepest relevance of the Theosophical message is only beginning to be apparent, that we are among those who really know what is going on, both historically and spiritually, and we are desperately needed to put it in the largest possible perspective.

Second, the task does not call for arrogance, but more love and service, our great ideal virtues, with a bit of *upaya*, skill-in-means, thrown in. As new languages, new thoughts, new worlds arrive, we must be there at the cutting edge of change, expressing Theosophy in fresh media, showing that any emergent era is ours in the sense that we have equipment for understanding it and shaping it to the right ends of human freedom and brotherhood, rather than giving over to those dark forces that would make new developments only novel means of enslavement.

How this is done will be up to the now-young generation of Theosophists. But the next stage of human evolution may not wait much longer than that before commencing radically to remake our human world. We must all be, in the familiar title from the Adyar *Theosophist*, "on the watchtower."

Copyright © 2001 By Robert Ellwood. All Rights Reserved.