

6 Theosophical Evolutionism, or the Narrative of Progress

This chapter will discuss the ideas of “evolution” and “progress,” providing a part of the necessary context for the consideration in Chapter 8 of Annie Besant’s ideas about the “Quickening of Evolution.” This chapter will illustrate that, as is the case with all other topics, there are no closed discursive fields in the discourse on evolutionism. Rather, these fields were connected to each other at a global level, as is illustrated by the uptake of evolutionism in India that will be discussed in sections 1.8 and, especially, 1.9, below.

6.1 Historicism, Evolution, and the Idea of Progression in-between Darwin and Theosophy

Long before Charles Darwin (1809–1882) first set out his theory of evolution, geologists had discovered that the earth was much older than any timeline based on the Bible might lead one to think.⁷⁶ This development led to a fundamental change in the European perception of time and called into question the longstanding traditional interpretations of the Christian Bible. So too did the translation into European languages of Sanskrit and Pali scriptures in which were described vast spans of time, the *kalpas* (comprising a day and a night of *brahma*, which added up to 8,649 million years⁷⁷) and the *mahākalpas* (which were several times longer than a kalpa; the idea appears in the *Mahābhārata*, and, while it is not clear exactly how many kalpas it refers to, the period at issue certainly runs into the billions of years).⁷⁸ These structurally similar developments in science and the humanities were taken up and augmented in the

⁷⁶ Bowler, *Evolution*, 1–2.

⁷⁷ Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism*, 113.

⁷⁸ Numerous complex systems of time spans were elaborated in the South Asian religious and philosophical traditions. For an overview, see Luis González-Reimann, “Cosmic Cycles, Cosmology, and Cosmography,” in Jacobsen et al., *Brill’s Encyclopedia of Hinduism Online*. These views of time were often connected to cycles of reincarnation and to views about liberation. For example, in Ājīvikism, a religion which emerged around the same time as Jainism but is now extinct, time spans were counted in terms of mahakalpas, each of which would amount to 35 quadrillion years. Johannes Bronkhorst, “Ājīvika,” in Jacobsen et al., *Brill’s Encyclopedia of Hinduism Online*. These numbers illustrate how different the perception of time was in South Asian scriptures in comparison to Christian ideas of time.

Theosophical Society. The former development made it possible for scientists to imagine a process of biological development spanning millions of years, which came to be termed “evolution.”⁷⁹ The latter, meanwhile, made it possible to imagine a spiritual development taking place over millions of years, a view which became the centerpiece of Theosophical evolutionism.⁸⁰ In Besant’s writings, the ideas of spiritual growth and initiation as together providing an evolutionary scheme were translated into a pedagogical program. In the following, an overview of the multifaceted interpretations of evolutionism current in the 19th century will be given. Evolutionism was not, even in the sciences, a single theory, but rather a strain of thinking which included many, sometimes opposing, theories of how life on earth developed. These theories were often debated in nonscientific circles, sometimes adopted, sometimes rejected. But regardless of particular outcomes, their overall influence was enormous. In science, the Darwinist understanding of evolution in terms of natural selection became dominant, but it was simultaneously criticized and repeatedly reformulated. In Darwin’s view, evolution – a term which he used but rarely – was not progressive. Nonetheless, the concept that evolution strives towards increasing complexity and moves in the direction of an ultimate goal was a common idea, found in both academic and non-academic milieus. This view was perpetuated by the metaphors and pictures used to communicate evolutionist theories. Evolution was often illustrated in terms of ladders or trees with trunks, thus suggesting a progressive development. The Theosophical Society pioneered and maintained this idea of progressive evolution as one of its key teachings.⁸¹

The idea of progress is rooted in the assumptions of Christian epistemology, which is predicated on the notion that there was an original starting point – the moment of creation – from which everything developed and continues to do so.⁸² Alternative views concerning cyclical conceptions of times, such as the Indian ideas of the *yugas* and *kalpas*, resurfaced in the “West” in the wake of the import and translation of non-European thought, discussed above. Ideas about the cyclical development of the universe were not unique to South Asian concepts of

⁷⁹ Bowler, *Evolution*, 3.

⁸⁰ Zander discusses this “change in the perception of time” under the German idea of “Historismus,” which describes the revelation of Biblical concepts through the large-scale import of ideas from Indian religions, including “Hinduism,” Buddhism, and Jainism. He describes Theosophy as an attempt to mediate pluralism by claiming universalism in a syncretic concept of Theosophy. See Zander, *Anthroposophie in Deutschland*, 741–44.

⁸¹ Bowler, *Evolution*, 6–7.

⁸² Bowler, *Evolution*, 8–12.

cosmology, and were also known in the Greek world and in several other traditions,⁸³ but they were rediscovered in the 19th century primarily through the translation of South Asian scriptures. In the Theosophical Society, an idea of evolution which combined a cyclical model with progressive spiritual self-development was elaborated. I will describe this idea as it appears in Besant's thought as the "Quickening of Evolution."⁸⁴ One well-known proponent of the progressive idea who was also important for the uptake of evolutionism in the Theosophical Society was Herbert Spencer.⁸⁵ However, there has not yet been any substantial research analyzing the interconnections between Theosophy and Spencerian Evolutionism.⁸⁶

The following overview is necessarily incomplete; the field of evolutionist theories in the 18th and 19th centuries is far too vast to cover in a comprehensive manner and I do not attempt to do so. It nonetheless provides valuable context against the background of which some of the ideas proposed by the Theosophical Society can be understood, illuminating them as historical products and answers to contemporary debates.

83 For an informative overview of ideas of cosmology, including non-South Asian ideas about cyclic cosmology, see Helge Kragh, *Conceptions of Cosmos: From Myths to the Accelerating Universe; a History of Cosmology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 6–66. Note that the author of the present book strongly disagrees with Kragh's view of a progressive development from "myths" to "modern" understandings of cosmology. To give a specific example, Stoicism promoted cyclic ideas of cosmology. For a discussion of cosmological ideas in the Stoa, see Ricardo Salles, *God and Cosmos in Stoicism* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

84 This idea is only mentioned once in terms of a "quickening of the evolution" in Besant's writings (Annie Besant, *The Ancient Wisdom: An Outline of Theosophical Teachings* (London, New York, Chicago, San Francisco, Benares, Madras: Theological Publishing Society; The Theosophical Book Concern; "Mercury" Office; The Theosophical Publishing Society; "The Theosophist" Office, 1897), 409). For a discussion of the concept and an explanation for why I call it the "Quickening of Evolution," see Chapter 8, especially 8.2.

85 Bowler, *Evolution*, 8.

86 Chajes, for example, mentions Spencer in several passages but neither provides an analysis of the quotations about Spencerian evolution in Blavatsky nor discusses Spencer's theories in more depth. See, e.g., Chajes (née Hall), *Recycled Lives*, 179. It will be seen below that Spencer was also important for Dvivedi's ideas on consciousness and for his conception of *brahman* as the absolute consciousness (see Chapter 11).

6.2 Herbert Spencer's Progressive Evolution

Herbert Spencer (1820–1903) is often associated with the notion of “social Darwinism,” an adaptation of evolutionist ideas to sociology.⁸⁷ Spencer was a philosopher and although he was well trained in several academic disciplines, he was, in contrast to Darwin, interested in the universal principles of the universe rather than in specialized academic questions. His work focused on the principles of life, consciousness, and the structures of society, and was well-received in Victorian society and beyond. Spencer was instrumental in the popularization of evolutionist ideas and in the introduction of the word “evolution” as a general term in theories about progression, development, and change. In his momentous work, *System of Synthetic Philosophy*, Spencer used “evolution” as a term which could refer to a variety of ideas about progress and development in fields ranging from biology to history and culture.⁸⁸ Spencer defined evolution as processes in which interconnected heterogeneous structures emerge from homogeneous states, with this differentiation implying a corresponding increase in complexity. Similarly, he conceptualized “dissolution”⁸⁹ as the opposite of evolution, suggesting that after a process of development towards increasing heterogeneity, evolution would then turn backwards towards complete homogeneity. Spencer tried to understand how the increased complexity implied by evolution came about and the role co-evolution played in this process. What he meant by co-evolution in this context was that the increase of complexity and the development of each part of a complex system went hand in hand with the increase and development in other parts. The idea of increasing complexity through co-evolution was not new, but Spencer integrated it into a scheme which started with a “big bang” – not in the later sense of discussions about the Hubble-Lemaître law,⁹⁰ which led to the introduction of the term in 1949 by Fred Hoyle⁹¹ – a sudden unprecedented starting point from which evolution progressed through stages of physical, chemical, biological, and, finally, cultural evolution. Spencer was widely read during his lifetime, often in popularizing paraphrases of his work that were accessible to

87 Michael Beetz, “Herbert Spencer und dessen Rezeption als Sozialdarwinist,” in *Streitfall Evolution: Eine Kulturgeschichte*, ed. Angela Schwarz (Köln, Weimar, Wien: Böhlau Verlag, 2017), 336.

88 Beetz, “Herbert Spencer und dessen Rezeption als Sozialdarwinist,” 336–38.

89 Beetz, “Herbert Spencer und dessen Rezeption als Sozialdarwinist,” 341.

90 For a discussion of the scientific basis for the idea of the “big bang,” and of the experiments conducted to “prove” this basis, see Wilfried Kuhn, *Ideengeschichte der Physik: Eine Analyse der Entwicklung der Physik im historischen Kontext*, with the assistance of Oliver Schwarz, 2nd ed. (Berlin, Heidelberg: Springer Spektrum, 2016), 469–77.

91 Helge Kragh, “Big Bang: The Etymology of a Name,” *Astronomy & Geophysics* 54, no. 2 (2013).

non-specialists, and his ideas were adopted by several other thinkers, although after his death his views were increasingly discredited.⁹² What is important for our present purposes is that Spencer's ideas about evolution seem to have influenced the reception of evolutionist theories in the Theosophical Society. A number of possible sources for this influence will be discussed below, but the current state of research does not allow us to determine securely through precisely what channels or to what exact degree Spencer's work was taken up in the Theosophical Society.

6.3 Darwin, Orthogenesis, and Lamarckism

Darwin proposed a theory according to which evolution was understood as being steered entirely by the demands of the environment. Evolution involved the random production of characteristics in species, which would then be passed on to new generations only if they proved to be sufficiently useful in the specific environment in which the species lived. The environmental circumstances thus determined which species successfully reproduced and which died out. According to this view, evolution has no goal and can, potentially, continue indefinitely.⁹³ In opposition to this view, the theory of orthogenesis claimed that there are internal faculties at work which determine evolutionary changes and drive them along predetermined lines of development. Darwin proposed a rigid heredity through which only those characteristics that are included in the genome can be passed on to subsequent generations. As a consequence, capacities accumulated in the lifetime of a given member of a species could not be transferred to the next generation. A competing theory, often associated with French biologist Jean-Baptist Lamarck (1744–1829), argued that individual characteristics acquired during the life span *could* be transmitted. Despite its association with Lamarck in particular, “Lamarckism” was rather a whole research branch which positioned itself in the discourse on evolution in opposition to the Darwinist school. It was by no means a marginal current. The retrospective narrative of the “Darwin revolution” simplifies a complex process of negotiation in which Darwin's theory gradually became the hegemonic approach. This change of paradigm was non-linear and took more than a century. Indeed, at first even many adherents of Darwinism would not accept the centerpiece of Darwin's theory; the idea of Natural Selection was often rejected while

⁹² Beetz, “Herbert Spencer und dessen Rezeption als Sozialdarwinist,” 342–45.

⁹³ Bowler, *Evolution*, 10.

the general idea of an evolutionary process was hailed.⁹⁴ This ambivalence illustrates well that there are no defined points in history at which new ideas instantly change the way in which the world is perceived, and nor is there any gradual unveiling of the “truth.” Rather, ideas are set aside and adopted in a constant process of negotiation between different positions in a necessarily ongoing discourse.

6.4 Evolutionist Ideas of Race

In the case of evolutionism, the impact nonetheless had an incredible scope, eventually leading to a radically altered perception of human beings and their place in nature. This was and still is one of the reasons for the public interest in evolutionism.⁹⁵ Evolutionism challenged the “identity of humanity” in the “West,” making it necessary to redefine that “identity” with respect to “others.” Europeans increasingly identified themselves as in a more advanced evolutionary state than the “apelike” non-Europeans. European scholars such as Camper, Buffon, Blumenbach, and Linnaeus classified humans into several races from the highest – Caucasian, white – race, to the lowest and most degenerate, the Ethiopian race.⁹⁶ The idea that the “white race” originated somewhere in central Asia near the Caucasus – thus the term “Caucasian” – fit well with “Aryan Myth”⁹⁷ which was developed about around the immigration of the Aryas to India. The “Aryas” were nomadic tribes who migrated to India between 1500 and 1000 B.C., with “Aryas” being a self-description meaning “noble.”⁹⁸ In the wake of the emerging field of Indology and the description of the close connections between Indo-European languages, starting with the work of William Jones in England and Friedrich Schlegel and Franz Bopp in Germany,⁹⁹ the Aryan narrative became increasingly charged with racist interpretations that crystallized in the German word “*arisch*,” which

⁹⁴ Bowler, *Evolution*, 11–26.

⁹⁵ Beetz, “Herbert Spencer und dessen Rezeption als Sozialdarwinist,” 334.

⁹⁶ Bowler, *Evolution*, 52–53.

⁹⁷ Dunlop was one of the first authors to discuss the problematic development of the “Aryan Myth” as an idea with Euro-Indian racial connotations. See Knight Dunlop, “The Great Aryan Myth,” *The Scientific Monthly* 59, no. 4 (1944).

⁹⁸ For a description of this immigration and a discussion of the etymology of the term “arya,” see Kulke and Rothermund, *Geschichte Indiens*, 44–65.

⁹⁹ Ernst Windisch, *Geschichte der Sanskrit-Philologie und indischen Altertumskunde*, Grundriss der Indo-Arischen Philologie und Altertumskunde 1. Band, 1. Heft (Strassburg: Karl J. Trübner, 1917), Erster Teil, 57, 71–72.

was ultimately taken up by Nazi Germany as a description of genuine whiteness.¹⁰⁰ This sort of racial evolutionism was connected to concepts of progress which had their forerunners in the 18th century.

6.5 Ideas of Progressive Development

From the late 17th century to the end of the 19th century, thinkers as varied as J. J. Rousseau, the Marquis de Condorcet, Adam Smith, Adam Ferguson, and, again, Buffon expended considerable efforts in developing ideas of progress. However, the idea of the progress of civilization was not necessarily seen as a positive development, with Rousseau in particular holding up the “noble savage” as the ideal human. Other thinkers developed progressive models which included ideas of advancement to higher and better forms of living.¹⁰¹ The idea of the “chain of being,” which had its roots in antiquity and was later rediscovered in the middle ages and in Renaissance Neoplatonism,¹⁰² was prominent in the 18th century. This notion was based on observations of the physiological resemblances between species. In the form in which it was propounded in the 19th century, the theory claimed that there was a “chain of being” along which development progressed first from elements and ether to higher forms of life, and then from plants to animals and, ultimately, to humans. Exponents of this theory, such as Charles Bonnet and Jean-Baptiste Robinet, claimed that each of these stages of progression developed from seeds or “germs” which were designed by God.¹⁰³ The idea of the “chain of being” resembles Theosophical ideas about the development of the “monad” through the “three kingdoms.”¹⁰⁴ In Besant’s writings, the idea

100 Kulke and Rothermund, *Geschichte Indiens*, 13, 45. For a general discussion of the links between esotericism and Nazism see Julian Strube, “Esoterik und Rechtsextremismus,” in *Handbuch der Religionen: Kirchen und andere Glaubensgemeinschaften in Deutschland*, ed. Michael Klöcker and Udo Tworuschka (Landsberg am Lech: Günter Olzog, 2018).

101 Bowler, *Evolution*, 54–57.

102 Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea*, The William James Lectures Delivered at Harvard University 1933 (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1970).

103 Bowler, *Evolution*, 63–66.

104 See, e.g., Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled: A Master-Key to the Mysteries of the Ancient and Modern Science and Theology* Vol. I – Science (New York, London: J.W. Bouton; Bernard Quaritch, 1877), 17, 329; Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, *The Key to Theosophy: Being a Clear Exposition, in the Form of Question and Answer, of the Ethics, Science, and Philosophy for the Study of Which the Theosophical Society Has Been Founded* (London, New York: The Theosophical Publishing Company; W. Q. Judge, 1889), 183–84; Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine: The*

of “germs” as driving forces of evolution is also prominent.¹⁰⁵ However, despite the striking terminological similarities, we should not suppose any straightforward linear dependencies. In the Theosophical writings, the kingdoms are expanded into higher spheres of being and are discussed alongside karmic necessities, human anthropology, and spiritual evolution. I argue these ideas were formulated, negotiated, and reformulated in a global colonial discursive continuum and were products of multifaceted hybridization processes, as illustrated below with regard to their ideas about the stages of initiation and “Hinduism.”

6.6 Science, the Colonial Setting, Learned Societies, and Popular Reception

In the 19th century, the number and membership of learned societies and institutions of higher education grew dramatically. These organizations were frequented by a wide range of people, from professional scholars and scientists to lay and gentlemen pursuers of the same goals, from Occultists and Religionists to Agnostics and Atheists.¹⁰⁶ The transition to a recognition of science as a profession progressed slowly. Darwin, for example, was financed by his wealthy father and was taught science outside the regular curriculum at Cambridge, as England’s oldest

Synthesis of Science, Religion, and Philosophy, 3rd ed., rev., 2 vols. 1 (London, New York, Madras: The Theosophical Publishing Society; The Path Office; The Theosophist Office, 1893), Cosmogogenesis, 193–213; Annie Besant, “Death – and After? The Fate of the Body,” *Lucifer* Vol. XI, no. 62 (1892): 153; Continued from p. 61; Annie Besant, *Karma*, Theosophical Manuals 4 (London, Benares, Madras: The Theosophical Publishing Society; The Theosophist Office, 1895), 25; Besant, *The Ancient Wisdom*, 49; Besant, *The Path of Discipleship*, 116–17.

105 See, e.g., Annie Besant, *Man and His Bodies*, Theosophical Manuals VIII (London, New York, Benares, Adyar: The Theosophical Publishing Society, 1896), 59; Annie Besant, *Reincarnation*, Theosophical Manuals 2 (London, New York, Madras: The Theosophical Publishing Society; The Path; Theosophical Society, 1892), 14; Annie Besant, *The Birth and Evolution of the Soul: Two Lectures* (London, Adyar, Benares: The Theosophical Publishing Society, 1895), 10.

106 Frenschkowski has recently shown how diversified this field was. For the example of “religious studies,” he discusses the extent to which “occultists” were involved in the formation of the field as an academic discipline (Marco Frenschkowski, “The Science of Religion, Folklore Studies, and the Occult Field in Great Britain (1870–1914): Some Observations on Competition and Cain-Abel Conflicts,” in Mühlematter; Zander, *Occult Roots of Religious Studies*). Several of the other articles in the same anthology point towards similar developments outside Britain and to structurally analogous processes in other disciplines. See Yves Mühlematter and Helmut Zander, eds., *Occult Roots of Religious Studies: On the Influence of Non-hegemonic Currents on Academia around 1900*, *Okkulte Moderne* 4 (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2021).

and most renowned universities were initially reluctant to introduce the sciences into their core curriculum. In contrast to Darwin, a generation later, although Thomas Henry Huxley (1825–1895) still had to finance his research by working on a navy vessel he was able to study medicine at university. In the cases of both Darwin and Huxley, European expansion and the pursuit of science were closely interconnected. Indeed, both men carried out research while traveling the world on ships belonging to the Royal Navy.¹⁰⁷ However, the stories of European expansion and the emergence of “science” are not exclusive to the narrative of *European* history, but also feature in the histories of many other parts of the world. As such, rather than querying why the sciences “only” emerged in Europe, we should ask why “the sciences” were Europeanized and how the emergence of *Wissenschaft* became so closely connected to the narrative of the European *Sonderweg*. These questions fall beyond the scope of the present book but they nevertheless touch on the questions of hegemony and discursive dynamics that are important elements in the theoretical framing of the discussion here.

Several – often opposing – theories were discussed in evolutionist circles in Europe’s learned societies and institutions of higher education. These ideas were communicated in a multitude of journals, popular editions of scientific books, newspaper articles, and lectures that were open to the wider public.¹⁰⁸ They form part of the “structures” that connect discursive fields to one another. The popular discourse about evolutionism was typically dominated by mass-market editions, newspaper articles, and articles in periodicals, rather than by scholarly publications on the subject. New ideas and inventions were also received with a certain time lapse because of the means of communication.¹⁰⁹ It is likely that many Theosophists read popular editions of Darwin, Spencer, and the other evolutionists, rather than their original publications. At the same time, the Theosophical Society was an active player in this network of knowledge and simultaneously replicated a parallel structure in their own publications and lectures. In many respects – this is well documented for the Theosophical Society and is illustrated in this book by a number of examples – these “occult movements” were *parts* of a multitude of discursive fields that connected them to what is generally conceived of as “regular society,” rather than being straightforwardly “outside” it. I argue that the Theosophical Society – employing the word field discussed above – translated the “scientific” media structure into their society and repeated it. In addition, the “quasi-scientific” is an a posteriori label that seeks to marginalize the claims

¹⁰⁷ Bowler, *Evolution*, 107–8.

¹⁰⁸ Bowler, *Evolution*, 98–108.

¹⁰⁹ Wenzlhuemer’s description of the Great Moon Hoax is instructive in this respect. Wenzlhuemer, *Globalgeschichte schreiben*, 39–78.

made in the Theosophical journals. As the articles collected in Mühlematter and Zander's *Occult Roots of Religious Studies* show, the boundaries between academia and "occultism" were by no means fixed at the turn of the 20th century.

6.7 The Problem of Human Intelligence and Morality: The Uptake of Evolutionism in Annie Besant's Theosophy

In opposition to many of his contemporaries, Darwin reflected critically on the questions of why and how humans had developed intelligence and why apes had not. According to his biological evolutionism, intelligence must have provided a reproductive advantage, but if it was an advantage per se, why had no other species evolved to have it. The gulf between animals and humans was conceived of as enormous, but this vast gap had to be explained in Darwin's theory in terms of a difference in degree rather than quality – humans were not to be understood as outside the natural evolutionary process but as representing its most advanced outcome. If this gap could not be explained, then the whole theory was in danger of falling. In attempting to resolve this difficulty, Darwin argued that intelligence was a by-product of the change from walking on four legs to walking upright. This change permitted the early humans to use their hands and it was in this usage that intelligence proved to be an advantage.

The other big issue facing Darwin was the need to explain human moral faculties. These, he claimed, developed gradually from social needs, with care for one's own offspring, tribe and then the wider society transforming over time into "universal moral values."¹¹⁰ Several passages in Besant's writings suggest that she was well aware of these debates. In many of her writings she developed ideas concerning the manner in which the transition from animal to human came about. Besant, in contrast to Darwin, held that there is a difference in both degree *and* quality between human beings and animals. She writes, "In man, and in man only, among all the races that people earth, do we find such great physical unity and such vast intellectual and moral divergency. I admit physical heredity as explanation of the one, but I need some new factor, not present in the brute, as an explanation of the other."¹¹¹ These lines show quite clearly that the problem of mental and moral faculties was an issue in Besant's writings. Despite this view of the difference between humans and animals, Besant still thought that animals were nevertheless potentially able to

¹¹⁰ Bowler, *Evolution*, 212–14.

¹¹¹ Besant, *Reincarnation*, 61–62.

cross over this gulf at some point in their evolutionary future. Because Besant takes animals to be younger than humans, and therefore not as evolved, there is no reason to think it impossible that they might develop in the same way as humans in the future.¹¹² But this evolution is very slow and takes extremely long periods of time.¹¹³

One element in the Theosophical view that is not fully consistent with this line of argument is the idea of the *manasaputras*, which Besant explains means “the sons of Mind.”¹¹⁴ According to the Theosophical view, the *manasaputras* descended into human bodies as soon as humans were evolved enough. These beings were the products of earlier rounds of evolution and were thus able to bring their higher mental powers with them and pass them on to humans.¹¹⁵ That is to say, they descended in order to “quicken” the general evolution of humanity.¹¹⁶ Besant explains that all these changes could have and would have happened in the general course of evolution in any case, but that “such has not been the course of Nature.”¹¹⁷ Although Besant’s writings are rooted in the Blavatskyian era of the Theosophical Society, her oeuvre is replete with developments from and augmentations of that source material. Whereas in her earlier writings she drew more frequently on the *manasaputras* in her argumentation, in her later work she developed ideas of evolving germs¹¹⁸ and of vibrations that evolve matter, bodies, and germs.¹¹⁹ As time passes, a movement towards emancipating herself from Blavatsky’s writings can be detected. In *The Seven Principles of Man* (1892), she explicitly quotes Blavatsky’s *The Secret Doctrine*, Vol. II, whereas in *The Ancient Wisdom* (1897), by contrast, the idea of the *manasaputras* is linked much more closely to her idea of the “Quickening of Evolution.”

Besant also developed a system of moral progression that was similar to the ideas advanced by Darwin, using similar language to depict a process of

112 Annie Besant, *Dharma: Three Lectures by Annie Besant, F.T.S., Delivered at the Eight Annual Convention of the Indian Section Held at Benares on October 25th, 26th., and 27th., 1898* (Benares, London, Adyar: Theosophical Publishing Society; Theosophist Office, 1899), 15.

113 Besant, *The Birth and Evolution of the Soul*, 8.

114 Annie Besant, *The Seven Principles of Man*, Theosophical Manuals 1 (New York, Adyar: The Theosophical Publishing Society, 1892), 26.

115 Besant, *Reincarnation*, 15–16.

116 Besant, *The Path of Discipleship*, 119–20.

117 Besant, *The Ancient Wisdom*, 252–53.

118 See Besant, *Dharma*. This work is particularly interesting because it documents how Besant started to learn about Hindu concepts and combines ideas of the *guṇas* with her ideas about germs. On this view, *dharma* then ensures that the germs are developed in the best way.

119 The vibrations are most prominently discussed by Besant in Besant, *Man and His Bodies*.

development from care for one's own offspring, to concern for the well-being of society more broadly, and, finally, to the establishment of universal moral values.¹²⁰ In Besant's conception of this development, morality is always relative to the stage of evolution. She understands "Hinduism," especially the *āśrama* system, as a recognition of this relativity of morals, since every stage has its own *dharma* which fits best with the respective stage of morality.¹²¹ Her work also contains the idea of a universal morality that is based on the recognition of the absolute unity of everything with God.¹²²

Ideas of progression were also promoted by Darwin, who claimed in his 1871 work, *The Descent of Man*, that non-white people are inferior to and have smaller brains than white people.¹²³ It is no coincidence that, in *The Ancient Wisdom*, Besant discusses "Man's Ascent." At least some readers, if not all, will have understood the reference to Darwin's title and would thus have viewed Besant's position in a racial light. Indeed, so too would those who were familiar with broader Theosophical thought on evolutionism. In her chapter, Besant discusses "the final stages of man's evolution,"¹²⁴ and this should be understood in term of the Theosophical idea of evolution through seven root races and their subraces, a version of evolutionism that has a strong racial undertone. The Theosophical view is based on the idea of spiritual progression from the lowest first race to the highest God-like seventh race, a view that implies the parallel existence of "lower" and "higher" races, with the "higher" having a duty to guide the "lower" in their evolution.¹²⁵ The Theosophists – and Darwin – were not alone in holding such racist views in connection to ideas of cultural and mental evolution. Similar racist notions of progress were in fact promoted by the majority of Evolutionists at the time.

Once again, these views show that Theosophical ideas concerning evolution, in general, and Annie Besant's writings on the subject, in particular, were shaped within a diversified global colonial discursive field in which multifaceted hybridization processes took place. The extent to which Besant engaged directly with Darwin's writings is currently unclear, but it is not plausible to

120 Besant, *The Ancient Wisdom*, 284.

121 Besant, *Dharma*, 49.

122 Annie Besant, "Theosophy and Ethics," in, *The Theosophical Congress Held by the Theosophical Society at the Parliament of Religions, World's Fair of 1893, at Chicago, Ill., September 15, 16, 17*, 133.

123 Bowler, *Evolution*, 211–17.

124 Besant, *The Ancient Wisdom*, XIV.

125 For a discussion of the racial implications of Theosophical evolutionism and their embeddedness in several other discourses, from Hermeticism to kabbalah and other "esoteric" currents, see Isaac Lubelsky, "Mythological and Real Race Issues in Theosophy," in Hammer; Rothstein, *Handbook of the Theosophical Current*.

suppose that she was unaware of the debates discussed above. As such, we should not be surprised to find similar subjects surfacing in Besant's work to those dealt with by Darwin. These subjects were certainly familiar to the wider Theosophical and non-Theosophical audience, both Indian and non-Indian, of Besant and her fellow Theosophists.

6.8 Evolution, a Universal Principle?: The Problem of Translation and Hybridization

The concepts of evolution as propounded in the Theosophical Society emerged as part of the global colonial discursive continuum in which European Evolutionism and South Asian conceptions about cosmology, its provenance, and the development of animals and human beings became entangled through the realization of numerous connections (see Chapter 4.5). As argued above, the Theosophical Society was part of the (uppercase) "Indian Middle Class." Theosophical ideas on evolution should thus also be read in the context of the reception of evolutionist ideas in India. There is a huge gap in the academic understanding of the reception of evolutionist concepts both in India in general and in connection to the Theosophical Society in particular, and it is not feasible to exhaustively till this fallow field in the present book. Nevertheless, I will attempt to irrigate it to some extent in the hope that it will prove more fertile to future researchers working in this area.

In his *Hindu Perspectives on Evolution*, Brown lays out a view that is paradigmatic of the longstanding ignorance concerning processes of hybridization in entangled histories, especially when it comes to Theosophy and to the Indian Theosophists in particular. Brown writes:

Another distinctive element in the Hindu and Buddhist discourses with modern science that sets them apart from both the Islamic and Christian is their assimilation and adaptation of various Theosophical motifs and its fundamental ideal of a scientific and scientized religion. This ideal, born in part as a reaction against traditional Christian dogmas that seemed to be crumbling with the onslaught of modern science, drew much of its own inspiration from the 'wisdom traditions' of the 'East,' especially Buddhism and Advaita Vedanta. The Theosophist proclamation of complete harmony between the eastern wisdom traditions and the findings of modern science was a siren song to those of the East who sorely felt the oppression of Western imperialism and Christian evangelization.¹²⁶

126 C. Mackenzie Brown, *Hindu Perspectives on Evolution: Darwin, Dharma, and Design*, Routledge Hindu Studies Series (London: Routledge, 2012), 9–10.

The most problematic feature here is that Brown does not elaborate on the “theosophical motifs” at issue. This lack of precision reflects one of the primary problems with scholarship on Theosophy. “Theosophy” is often used as an umbrella term for several opposing positions in the Theosophical Society. Or worse, Theosophy is often presented as a fixed worldview dominated by the writings of H. P. Blavatsky.

Another major difficulty faced by researchers is the lack of critical studies investigating the interdependencies between Theosophy and the translations of the early orientalist, such as George Thibaut. The issue here is that Brown bases his account in part on Thibaut’s translation of Śaṅkara’s *Brahmasūtra Bhāṣya*. As discussed in Chapter 10.6, Thibaut was well acquainted with Blavatsky and Olcott and it is likely that at least some of his translations were influenced by Theosophy. It is highly problematic to seek to determine what Śaṅkara “really” wanted to say based on translations. Indeed, it is not possible to retrieve *any* original “meaning,” even if communicated in Sanskrit. On the other hand, without translation there is no communication. As Bhabha sees it, translation is hybridization and I strongly agree on this point. There is no solution for this difficulty, but one must keep it in mind. If the process of the translation of Śaṅkara’s *Brahmasūtra Bhāṣya* by Thibaut is understood in terms of hybridization, then it is possible that “Theosophy” is read into it when the term “consciousness” is used to translate Śaṅkara’s thought. The use of the term “evolution” is structurally analogous. Therefore, the concept of the hybridization of an already hybrid knowledge is fruitful for describing this diversified global colonial discursive field.

Brown uses the term “consciousness” to describe the highest stage of being of *brahman*, which is to say that the highest reality is the consciousness of *brahman*.¹²⁷ In Chapter 11 I will discuss how this concept was elaborated by Manilal Dvivedi in negotiation with Spencer’s writings and Theosophical concepts of higher knowledge and spiritual progression. The difficulties involved in translation discussed above suggest that we should be cautious about accepting claims that there were ideas of “evolution” in ancient India that could be equated with nineteenth-century European evolutionism. Such a parallelism was nonetheless retrospectively claimed by Neo-Hinduists in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, in what can be read as a movement of translation and repetition. Brown’s interpretation of Śaṅkara’s “evolutionism” is thus an interesting instance of how ancient Indian thought can be interpreted in accordance with “Western” ideas of evolutionism.

127 Brown, *Hindu Perspectives on Evolution*, 29.

This is also true for the reception of evolutionism in India in connection to the Theosophical Society, the Arya Samaj, Rammohun Roy and several other Indian and non-Indian actors. In the following, I will point out a number of possible entanglements. These will show that the Theosophical Society in India and its Indian members did not only draw their concept of evolution from the “West” but also negotiated their ideas within a discursive field in which “Hindu” concepts were just as prominent as “Western” ideas of evolution. Again, there is no solution to this problem.

6.9 The Reception of Evolutionist Concepts in India

Beginning in the 1860s, the Darwinist idea of the progressive development of nature was widely debated by members of the Indian middle class, especially in Calcutta. From the 1870s onwards, the theory was familiar to all and several well-known Indian scholars put forward their own interpretations of evolutionism. An important motif in this discourse was the idea that Indian spirituality and “Western” science could be merged to form a great alliance in which both would come to blossom. Brown argues that the reception of Darwinism in India was influenced by a number of factors, of which he identifies three. First, he explains that Darwinism had some points of connection with ancient Indian ideas of “evolution,” but stood in opposition to certain other points. In particular, the idea that there was an underlying “consciousness” that was not the result of evolution was positioned as a key argument against “materialistic” Darwinism. Secondly, “evolutionism” introduced into the Indian discourse the idea of investigating nature in terms of discovering the workings of God. This notion was certainly not unique to the reception of “evolutionism,” but recurs in engagements with “science” in general because it draws on the empirical method of the natural sciences. Thirdly, the reception oscillated between appreciation and rejection because science and technology were also received ambiguously, on the one hand being seen as means for advancing India while on the other being treated as tools of oppression. These factors were then negotiated in a colonial discursive field between “Western” and South Asian imaginary versions of the “other,” which often determined the reception of the “other’s” religion and science.¹²⁸

128 Brown, *Hindu Perspectives on Evolution*, 63–75.

Brown identifies five motifs that were persistent features of the discourse in which the reception of evolutionism in India took place from about 1860 to the early 20th century:

(1) a Vedic Golden Age encompassing spiritual insights *and* scientific discoveries; (2) a subsequent period of degeneration; (3) the possibility of social, cultural, and scientific revitalization and progress; (4) the comparative study of Indian and Western civilizations with respect to their particular roles and responsibilities towards each other; and (5) epistemological considerations regarding the role of scripture, perception, reason, intuition, and suprarational consciousness in ascertaining truth, both empirical and spiritual.¹²⁹

According to Brown, the reception of Darwinism in India can be sequenced into three periods in which one or the other of the aforementioned motifs were more important than the others.

Two major figures of the first phase were Rammohun Roy (1772–1833) and Debendranath Tagore (1817–1905). The former was the founder of the Brahmo Saba and the second reorganized the Saba into the famous Brahmo Samaj. The different positions of the three phases of evolutionist reception in India will be described briefly in the following.

Roy expounded an idea of Hindu monotheism based on a design argument connected to a concept of the universality of religion. The idea of universalism was wedded to a claim of “Hindu” tolerance towards all religions. Roy’s writings and vita are paradigmatic of the colonial discursive continuum at the beginning of the 19th century. He first published his works in Persian and Arabic, the languages of the fading Mughal empire, then learned English and read various European thinkers. He later published in English. He translated and repeated what he had read in the context of Śaṅkara’s work and developed his own monotheistic non-idolatry ideas of religion. Crucial to his ideas of progress was his understanding of idolatry as a lower form of worship directed towards a defined deity, whereas the higher, more advanced, form was worship directed towards an abstract idea.¹³⁰

Tagore developed an idea of divine creation according to which the whole universe was produced by the supreme being. On his view, this creating God is the cause of everything and provides all that humans need. Religion was seen by Tagore as God’s gift to humanity in order to free them from their sensual restraints. In opposition to Roy, Tagore formulated an idea according to which one investigates the true being of God, and hence the world, through intuition. According to this view, intuition, combined with meditation, prayer, and the

¹²⁹ Brown, *Hindu Perspectives on Evolution*, 75.

¹³⁰ Brown, *Hindu Perspectives on Evolution*, 75–90.

study of the scriptures, would lead to a complete understanding of God's creation and would ultimately elevate human beings to a knowledge of higher truths.¹³¹

As influential representatives of the second phase, it will now be useful to consider Dayanada Saraswati's ideas about what Brown calls "vedantic creationism" as well as Gurudatta Vidyarthi's development of that creationism. In Saraswati's view, God created the world from the primordial matter (*prakṛti*). However, this matter is not the cause of anything, as the causative role is reserved solely for the creator who designs. By his creative power, God produces a perfect environment for all sentient beings. This idea was then taken up and developed further by Gurudatta. Gurudatta explained that the plan in the mind of God is the prerequisite for the manifestation of the universe. This manifestation is mirrored in the bodies of humans, Gurudatta claimed, with the limbs and organs corresponding to certain parts of the cosmos. On this view, God created the human bodies to be inhabited by a divine life-principle, the *ātman*. Gurudatta and other Arya Samajists maintained that these *ātmas*, as well as the nations to which they belong, depended on the Supreme teacher to teach them all of the elements from which cultures are formed, such as language, the arts, etc. Brown groups the ideas expounded by the Arya Samajists under the heading of "modern Vedic Creationism" because these thinkers constantly refer to the scriptures while at the same time illustrating their claims using scientific and technological analogies.¹³²

Several of the motifs described above can be found in Theosophical writings. The idea of consciousness was discussed not only by Dvivedi but was also taken up by Besant (see Chapter 8.2). The idea of a creative supreme being who creates the world by a mental design can be found in Besant's view of evolution, as can the idea of the divine teacher.¹³³ The extent to which Besant and other

131 Brown, *Hindu Perspectives on Evolution*, 91–98.

132 Brown, *Hindu Perspectives on Evolution*, 99–130.

133 For what Besant terms "divine ideation," see Besant, *Reincarnation*, 30–31; Annie Besant, "Karma the Law of Causation, of Justice and the Adjustment of Effects," in *The Theosophical Congress Held by the Theosophical Society at the Parliament of Religions, World's Fair of 1893, at Chicago, Ill., September 15, 16, 17, 76*. The term "divine ideation" can also be found in Dvivedi's and Row's writings; see Manilal N. Dvivedi, "The Purāṇas: Philology Versus Symbology," *Lucifer* VIII, no. 45 (1891): 196; Continued; Tallapragada S. Row, "A Personal and an Impersonal God," *The Theosophist* 4, no. 6 (1883): 138. For the idea of the divine teachers who were at times identified as the Ancient Rishis, the Manasaputras, God, or Members of the Brotherhood, see, e.g., Annie Besant, "General Presentation of Theosophy to the Parliament: [On the Evolution of Man]," in *The Theosophical Congress Held by the Theosophical Society at the Parliament of Religions, World's Fair of 1893, at Chicago, Ill., September 15, 16, 17, 158*; Besant,

Theosophists knew and read the above-mentioned Indian writers is currently unclear, but it is plain that Śaṅkara was often cited, and in many cases these references were in connection with evolution. The writings of the Arya Samajists were also unquestionably well known in the Theosophical Society. Blavatsky and Olcott moved to India as the result of an alliance with Dayananda Saraswati, and the Theosophical Society was temporarily renamed the Theosophical Society of the Arya Samaj. However, this alliance was soon terminated following an ideological clash between the Theosophical founders and Saraswati.¹³⁴ Several similar motifs appear in the discourse on evolutionism in India, both within and beyond the Theosophical Society. It seems likely that these discourses on evolutionism were interwoven with others not only in India but also globally, in what I have called the global colonial discursive continuum. In this context the Theosophical concepts of evolution should be understood as hybrid knowledge of already hybrid knowledge which was constantly de- and recontextualized in manifold encounters which connected multifaceted discursive fields. These processes will be illustrated in more depth with reference to the example of the concept of “initiation” and ideas about “Hinduism” in the Theosophical Society. Before these processes can be discussed meaningfully I will take up the ideas of the Theosophical masters as another piece of Theosophical evolutionism in the next chapter.

Karma, 60; Besant, *The Birth and Evolution of the Soul*, 17; Besant, *The Ancient Wisdom*, 277; Besant, *The Path of Discipleship*, 8.

134 For the connection between the Arya Samaj and the Theosophical Society, see Karl Baier, *Meditation und Moderne: Zur Genese eines Kernbereichs moderner Spiritualität in der Wechselwirkung zwischen Westeuropa, Nordamerika und Asien*, 2 vols. 1 (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 2009), 303; Joscelyn Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment*, SUNY Series in Western Esoteric Traditions (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 319–20; Goodrick-Clarke, “The Theosophical Society, Orientalism, and the ‘Mystic East’,” 22; Patridge, “Lost Horizon,” 315; Prothero, *The White Buddhist*, 106–7; David Gordon White, *The Yoga Sutra of Patanjali: A Biography*, Lives of Great Religious Books (Princeton, Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2014), 112.