

Three Historical Probes

THE WESTERN ROOTS OF AVATARIC EVOLUTIONISM IN COLONIAL INDIA

by C. Mackenzie Brown

Abstract. British colonialism and Orientalist scholarship on India were key factors affecting the initial Hindu responses to modern science and technology in the nineteenth century. One response was the elaboration of avataric evolutionism—the idea that ancient myths of Vishnu’s ten incarnations anticipated Darwinian evolution. This idea quickly became intertwined with political and nationalist concerns and cannot be fully understood in a purely theological context. These concerns were reflected in scriptural interpretation, especially in what may be termed the scientific exegesis of the Vedas and Puranas. Such scientific exegesis of scripture appealed to Keshub Chunder Sen, the leading figure of the Brahma Samaj in the second half of the nineteenth century. Keshub was apparently the first Indian to develop the notion of avataric evolutionism, in the context of his “New Dispensation,” a synthesis of all religious traditions (in particular Hinduism and Christianity) and modern science. His pronouncement of avataric evolutionism in 1882, however, was not the first proposal of the idea. I conclude with an examination of the Western roots of this idea, specifically in the writings of Helena Petrovna Blavatsky.

Keywords: avatars and Darwinism; avataric evolutionism; Madame Blavatsky; British colonialism; Dayananda Saraswati; Hinduism and Darwinism; Hinduism and evolution; Keshub Chunder Sen; Orientalism; scientific exegesis of Vedas; Theosophy

Numerous Hindu texts advise that all species should be treated as children, because the evolution of life on this planet is symbolized by a series of incarnations (*avatars*) beginning with fish (*matsya*), moving through amphibious forms and mammals, and then on into human incarnations. This view clearly holds that

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[*Zygon*, vol. 42, no. 2 (June 2007)]

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humans did not spring fully formed to dominate the lesser life-forms, but rather evolved out of these forms, and are, therefore, integrally linked to the whole creation. (Kachappilly n.d.)

There is a “theory of evolution” introduced by some theorists including Darwin which tells that from aquatic worms the whole living world evolved: a worm becomes a fish, then a frog, then a reptile, then a mammal, then a dinosaur/shrew, then a monkey and then a human being. The illogicality and the unscientific approach of this theory is discussed [elsewhere¹]. Some Hindu writers try to compare this materialistic and unscientific ideology [of Darwinism] with the Divine descensions [avatars] of God telling that they are the links of evolution. . . . This is all the effect of the western writers on the Hindu minds that collected the intellectual dirt of the followers of the English regime (knowingly or unknowingly) and tried to smear it on the face of Hinduism in their own intellectual style. (Swami Prakashanand Saraswati 1999–2001b)

These quotations refer to a speculative Hindu theory that I call avataric evolutionism. This concept may be defined as the general notion that the traditional series of famous divine incarnations or avatars of the Hindu god Vishnu parallels and foreshadows the modern theory of biological evolution. Specifically, the ten major animal and human forms of Vishnu symbolize, or are manifested in, or respond to, the organic evolution of species from aquatics through amphibians and continuing through reptiles, mammals, higher primates, and humankind, with the final stage of the avataric evolutionary process culminating in some future spiritual state of higher consciousness. This highly imaginative theory arose in the last quarter of the nineteenth century in an attempt to reconcile traditional Hindu myths and values with the latest discoveries of modern science. It continues to spark interest today, especially among English-speaking Hindus of the diaspora. The quotations not only represent two ends of the Hindu spectrum of reactions to Darwinian evolution but also point to significant cultural and political issues in the larger religion-science dialogue in colonial and contemporary Hinduism.

Within the major world religious traditions one finds a diversity of responses to Darwinism ranging from fairly robust assimilations of the theory through various tentative or qualified endorsements to deep-seated antagonism and rejection. The assimilations, qualifications, and rejections exhibit similarities across traditions as well as noteworthy differences according to the particular theological and social-political contexts of the traditions and subtraditions involved. These cultural contexts have profoundly affected Hindu responses to modern science in that the colonial discourse developed in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century British India was affected not only by the challenges any traditional culture faces in encountering modernity but also by the often brutal realities of imperial domination and the humiliating denigration of Hindu religious traditions by Christian missionaries. The colonial discourse continues to ramify in the post-colonial world both within India and in the Hindu diaspora, cre-

ating significant challenges for the development of a meaningful Hinduism-science dialogue. An examination of the history of the Hindu theory of avataric evolutionism illuminates many of the salient issues involved.

We may note at the outset various theological and philosophical factors within the traditional Hindu worldview that created an ambivalent cultural climate regarding perceptions of Darwinian evolution. One especially relevant factor is the emphasis on the spiritual potential of all sentient beings as their souls (*jivas*) evolve spiritually through various animal bodies in the process of karma and reincarnation. This Hindu emphasis on “the unity of life”² denies a sharp disjunction or absolute gap between humankind and the rest of the animate world. This perspective would seem to lessen some of the reasons for hostility toward Darwinism sometimes present in Abrahamic religions in their stress on the radical uniqueness of humankind.³ The openness to the underlying spiritual unity of all life forms has clearly led some Hindus, like Kurian Kachappilly quoted above, to espouse the notion of avataric evolutionism.

The avataric theory also assumes enormous spans of time, as the past incarnations of Vishnu are thought to have occurred in ages hundreds of thousands or even hundreds of millions of years ago—a traditional view consonant with the Darwinian time scale. The vast time scales of Hindu thought also manifest another philosophical orientation inclined to create a favorable atmosphere for the reception of Darwinian ideas: the physical universe itself is the product of evolutionary processes in which an ultimate, undifferentiated unity has gradually transformed itself into the empirical world of the many (Killingley 1995, 186–88). The notions of cosmic, stellar, and even terrestrial development, while at times uncoupled from the idea of organic evolution, could easily extend themselves into the biological realm.⁴

Within the Hindu context, despite the nearly unanimous acceptance of pan-species ensoulment and a grand sense of the cosmic unfolding of our present universe, reasons for hostility to Darwinism remain, as the quotation from Prakashanand Saraswati makes abundantly clear. For instance, traditional Hindu thought often asserts a series of levels of organic beings that assumes the fixity of species, a notion extended to include the four fixed types (classes⁵) of humankind. Unlike its Western counterpart, the Hindu version of this “chain of being” takes for granted that an individual soul traverses the whole chain, from the lowest link to the highest, through the process of rebirth in the animal forms most suited to the soul’s stage of spiritual development.⁶ Nonetheless, this chain in the Hindu perspective usually emphasizes the special position of humankind among animals in its spiritual capacity for salvation and enlightenment.⁷

Further, as Prakashanand Saraswati’s denunciation of Darwinism demonstrates, avataric evolutionism, whatever its theological merits may be, is often entangled with political and cultural as well as spiritual concerns and

cannot be fully understood in a purely theological context. Darwinism for Prakashanand Saraswati is not merely illogical and unscientific, it is part of “the intellectual dirt” bequeathed to Western educated Indians by the British rulers of the colonial period.⁸

Among the critical theological issues with significant social and political ramifications is the question of hermeneutical approach to foundational sacred narratives. Accordingly, in this essay I want first to look briefly at the mediating role that Hindu scriptures—in conjunction with Western Orientalist interpretations of those scriptures—played among the Indian intellectual elites in British India during the nineteenth century. At that time, many educated Hindus, especially those speaking English, were highly impressed by Western technology and scientific achievements and assumed that scientific objectivity was a worthy, if not the only, yardstick for measuring truth. Science and technology were seen by many as the remedy for India’s ills, the key to her future prosperity and freedom. Such concerns were reflected in scriptural readings, especially in what may be termed the scientific exegesis of the Vedas and Puranas,⁹ an enterprise that largely inspired the development of avataric evolutionism.

Following the discussion of the scientized interpretation of scripture, I proceed directly to the history of avataric evolutionary theory in colonial India, focusing on apparently the earliest Indian proponent of the theory, Keshub Chunder Sen (1838–1884). To highlight the colonialist and intercultural dimensions of avataric evolutionism, I then consider the possible origins of Keshub’s theory in the New York City apartment suite of a Russian immigrant in the mid-1870s. The essay should facilitate an understanding of contemporary Hindu attitudes toward this intriguing assimilation of modern biological science and traditional mythological motifs.

VEDIC SCRIPTURES AND MODERN SCIENCE

The notion that the scriptures of a given tradition contain or anticipate the discoveries of modern science is a response to the latter found in Islam and Hinduism as well as in Christianity.¹⁰ In the Islamic and Hindu contexts, such perspectives were at least in part a reaction to the Western colonizing powers who, armed with military technology made possible by science, and often in complicity with missionary agendas, established political, economic, and cultural-religious hegemony over Muslim and Hindu peoples. In such environments, the assertion of indigenous scriptural priority of scientific discovery helped to deflect the sense of cultural inferiority implicit in political and economic domination as well as providing a basis for arousing nationalist sentiments. While the hermeneutical strategies that make such interpretations of scripture possible often cross the line from exegesis into eisegesis, their original and continuing appeal is readily understandable within the social and political context.

The first great Indian champion of Vedic scientific priority was the nineteenth-century founder of the Arya Samaj, Swami Dayananda Saraswati (1824–1883).¹¹ Dayananda was exposed to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European Orientalist constructions of an ancient Vedic or Aryan Golden Age, a concept that resonated with traditional Hindu notions of an ideal Age of Truth and Virtue (Satya Yuga) in the distant past. The zealous French Orientalist Louis Jacolliot, for instance, saw in ancient India the cradle of humanity and the fountainhead of all civilization, including religion, literature, law, and science (Jacolliot 1870, 10, 15, 59, 96–99). More moderate British Orientalists, such as William Jones and the German-English Max Müller, also looked back to a Vedic Golden Age but saw in it only the innocent childhood or infancy of European thought, culture, and religion.¹²

Responding to such infantilizing theories, Dayananda remonstrated that the Vedas contained not only complete spiritual and moral insights but also the fundamentals of all modern sciences.¹³ These latter assertions regarding the completeness of knowledge in the Vedas was also a reaction in part to the Christian missionary presentation of the Bible as a revelation for all time. As J. T. F. Jordens puts it, with reference to the more fundamentalist missionaries with whom Dayananda came into contact: “To them Christianity was *par excellence* the religion of the book, which once and for ever had been handed by God to mankind for its salvation. Dayananda transferred this idea to the four Vedas, making them into a definitive corpus of total revelation, recipe for all mankind’s ills, be they religious, social, political, economic, or scientific” (Jordens 1998, 73).

While agreeing with British reformers that much current (nineteenth-century) practice of Hinduism, based in large part on later Puranic notions, was irrational and degenerate, Dayananda called for a return to the Vedas and restoration of a primordial Vedic Aryan civilization. In his view, this archaic Aryan civilization, going back some two billion years, was a technologically advanced culture in which electricity, steam engines, and airplanes were well known, as were such scientific discoveries as Newton’s theory of gravitation.¹⁴ It was from India, or Aryavarta (Land of the Nobles) that all nations eventually derived their own pure and applied sciences (Jordens 1998, 70). The Vedas were both the primordial and universal revelation of God to humanity (Bhatt 2001, 17).

Dayananda found proof of these scientific and technological developments in the Vedas by interpreting such terms as *vidyut* and *agni* not simply in their literal meaning, as lightning and fire, or merely as personified nature-gods such as the God of Fire (Agni), as Müller and other European Sanskritists would have it, but as electricity. Similarly, what European scholars took as mythological fancies regarding aerial vehicles (*vimanas*) Dayananda took as actual flying machines made of various metals and powered by steam engines with all sorts of cogs and flywheels.

Despite his creative and ingenious Vedic hermeneutical tactics, Dayananda was unable or simply disinclined to find any Vedic anticipation of Darwinism.¹⁵ To be sure, Darwinism was just becoming known in India near the end of Dayananda's lifetime, so the lack of reference to Darwin in his writings is perhaps to be expected.¹⁶ But, according to at least one biographer, Dayananda was aware, and dismissive, of Darwin's theory even while emphasizing the basic harmony of science and religion. Biographer Ganga Ram Garg asserts that during a lecture tour in 1878, Dayananda, after discussing the modern discoveries of science known to the Vedic seers, "also criticized Darwin and said: 'If man descended from monkeys, how is it that process had come to an end and monkeys no longer evolve into men?'" (1984, 70)¹⁷ Incidentally, Dayananda was equally dismissive of the idea that God takes on various animal and human forms, because God is "unborn" ([1908] 1970, 184–85; see also Bhatt 2001, 17; Llewellyn 1993, 93). Avataric evolutionism was thus not an option for Dayananda on two accounts, although his insistence on Vedic scientific priority was to become a key element in later avataric evolutionary theories.

KESHUB CHUNDER SEN: AVATARIC EVOLUTIONISM AND THE NEW DISPENSATION

The earliest Indian proponent of avataric evolutionism, so far as I have been able to determine, was the Bengali reformer Keshub Chunder Sen.¹⁸ Like Dayananda, Keshub was dismissive of many elements of popular Hinduism, including the worshipping of idols that in his view smacked of polytheism and superstition, although he came to appreciate the devotional spirit and symbolism behind such worship (Borthwick 1977, 218). Unlike Dayananda, Keshub accepted the notion of avatars, at least when appropriately interpreted. Also unlike Dayananda, Keshub saw no difficulty in finding within the Indian tradition a foreshadowing of modern biological evolutionary thinking.

Keshub was a controversial figure throughout his life, considered by many Hindus to be Christian but suspect to most Christians for his unorthodox views of Christ as a "divinized man" rather than as God himself and for his criticism of organized Christianity. Keshub received a liberal English education, and under the influence of Protestant Christian teachers he early came to reject Hindu image worship as idolatry. While devoted to Christ—but a Christ disassociated from the church—Keshub retained a deep respect for his family's Vaishnava spirituality with its Caitanya-inspired emotionalism, combined with its yogic mysticism.¹⁹

As a young adult, Keshub began organizing various social and cultural clubs, including the British India Society in 1857 for the study of literature and science. In the same year he joined the Brahmo Samaj, finding its openness to Western ideas and Christian inspiration, its emphasis on rationality and opposition to superstition, and its aim of social improvement

well suited to his own spiritual and intellectual inclinations.²⁰ He saw in Debendranath Tagore, leader of the Samaj at that time, a spiritual teacher, who in turn saw Keshub as a possible successor. Keshub soon held positions of leadership within the Samaj, in large part due to the confidence and support of Tagore and because of Keshub's skill as a public lecturer. Keshub became a Brahmo missionary, traveling throughout the subcontinent establishing branches of the Samaj in southern and western India, thereby signaling that the Brahmo Samaj was for all Indians, regardless of class and region. Keshub thus became, in David Scott's words, "the first all-India figure in modern times" (1979a, 13; cf. Borthwick 1977, 45; Kayal 1998, 38). In the process Keshub made a significant, if unintentional, contribution to the development of Indian nationalism.

Eventually, his strong personality combined with his passionate reformist ideology led to various schisms within the Samaj, and thus he oversaw both the peak and the decline of the institution. The first great schism occurred in 1865, when he broke with his mentor Tagore over an issue of social reform involving the wearing of the sacred thread by Brahmin assistants during a Samaj worship service. This instigated an examination on Keshub's part of his future role in the Indian reform movement. He soon gave an indication of his new thinking in two public lectures, "Jesus Christ: Europe and Asia" (May 1866) and "Great Men" (September 1866). In the first, he emphasized the humanity and moral teachings of Jesus rather than his divinity, as well as the need in India for the self-sacrificial spirit embodied in Christ. This approach provoked controversy among Christian missionaries as well as his fellow Indians. The second lecture, in response to the negative reactions of the first, downplayed Christ's role in the spiritual reform of India while promoting the idea that Great Men through the ages are necessary for religious and social reform—such Great Men possibly including Keshub himself.

Given the rupture with Tagore and the animosity that welled up following the two lectures, Keshub turned for spiritual solace to his Bengali, Chaitanya devotionalism, with its rituals, *kirtans* (chantings), and pilgrimages, resulting in his gradual reabsorption of Vaishnava traditional symbols and stories (Kayal 1998, 30). Such devotional practices were also critical to attracting Hindu followers. At the same time, Keshub formed a new organization, the Brahmo Samaj of India, with God as president and Keshub as secretary. The initial members were largely drawn from the younger, more reform-minded men from the original Brahmo Samaj. The new organization was catholic and eclectic in outlook and dedicated to Keshub's mission of social and spiritual reform through spreading God's message throughout the nation and world (Scott 1979a, 18).

In 1870 Keshub traveled to Britain on a lecture tour, where he saw firsthand the shortcomings of both British civilization and Christian morality as actually practiced. Returning to India with a heightened pride in

his own country, he now was able to assert that the West had much to learn from India, especially in spiritual matters, even if India had much to learn from Britain regarding practical matters. At the same time, he declared in public lectures that England was carrying out a crusade against caste and other social evils in India and that “this was not a mere human work but God’s dispensation” (Kayal 1998, 32).

It was his journey to Britain that confirmed in Keshub the ideas underlying his “New Dispensation,” the dominating ideal of his final years.²¹ As Julius Lipner notes,

Keshab returned [from England] convinced that the Christian vision needed completion by a distinctively Indian contribution, and then implementation by an Indian. The new conception would regenerate the English-speaking world—the most progressive bloc of humankind—of which England, at the centre of her empire, was the symbol. Delusions of grandeur? Perhaps, but Keshab was in earnest. Thus was born the idea that was to develop into the New Dispensation . . . , an amalgam of ideas and practices culled from different religions, especially Hinduism and Christianity, with Keshab, its Great Man, at the head. (1999, 59–60)

It was also in England that Keshub may well have first heard the specific phrase “new dispensation.” During a welcoming speech held for him at the Swedenborg Society 2 June 1870, the secretary proclaimed:

The astonishing revolution in modes of faith and forms of thought which the present age has witnessed—the passing away of the old religious and intellectual heavens and earth—are regarded by the diligent student of these writings [referring to several books of Emmanuel Swedenborg that were presented to Keshub] as so many harbingers of that New Dispensation of light, love, and peace, so frequently foretold, and in sweetest, tenderest imagery, foreshadowed in the sacred Books of the Christians. (Butter [1871] 1980, 239)

For Keshub, the “revolution in modes of faith” was to become linked and correlated with the physical and spiritual evolution of all organic life.

In the years immediately after his return to India, Keshub’s growing appreciation of his Hindu background was further deepened by meetings with both Dayananda Saraswati and Paramahansa Ramakrishna. His lectures now became filled with quotations from the Sanskrit scriptures as well as the Bible, a critical step in his development of the notion of the New Dispensation. By the middle of the decade of the 1870s he had come to feel that he was a tool of Providence, an inspired voice with a new message for the world: the New Dispensation (Nava Vidhan) that had been granted by God to India and would be facilitated with the help of the British.

According to David Scott (1979a, 36–37), the teachings of the New Dispensation were essentially those of the old Brahma Samaj but with an appealing element of novelty thrown in. In the New Dispensation we see the culmination of Keshub’s devotion to Christ as Son of God (not God himself) combined with his Vaishnava mysticism and a growing openness

to orthodox Hinduism, incorporating elements of its rituals and symbolism. Keshub himself stated in 1880,

Never were we so struck with the divinity of the eclectic method [gathering together the broken pieces of the one God found in Hindu idolatry] as when we explored the gloomy regions of mythological India. The sermons now delivered in the Brahma Mandir are solely occupied with the precious truths discovered therein, and our own occupation is merely to gather the jewels as we go on. (Quoted in Damen 1983, 228–29; cf. Lipner 1999, 63)

Although Keshub's reference here is in relation to attributes of God, he readily extended the eclectic method to include the attributes of modern science. Most important for our purposes, the New Dispensation continued Keshub's affirmation of the harmony of religion and science: "We are going to enter into the domain of a new dispensation, that of science and faith harmonized" ([1880b] 1940, 379). Keshub elaborates:

Ye shall respect science above all things, the science of matter above the Vedas and the science of Mind above the Bible. Astronomy and geology, anatomy and physiology, botany and chemistry are the living scriptures of nature's God. Philosophy, logic and ethics, Yoga, inspiration and prayer are scriptures of the soul's God. In the new faith everything is scientific. In all your beliefs and in all your prayers, faith and reason shall be harmonized in true science. ([1880a] 1940, 389)

Keshub's suggestion of a developmental correlation between scriptures and sciences was soon to be assimilated to Darwinian evolutionary stages of life. As early as 1877, he indicated his basic acceptance of the Darwinian perspective on organic evolution, although with an important hesitation: "Let me proceed to take up the great idea of the day—I mean Evolution. I am not going to discuss the details of the philosophy of evolution. Your protoplasm, your natural selection, I leave to be discussed by men like Huxley and Darwin. But whether there is a progressive evolution going on in the individual life of man is a question in which we are all interested" ([1877] 1940, 340–41). After affirming the idea that humans have evolved from lower animals, and these from matter, Keshub refers to a constant struggle as humanity evolved from the animal. But the struggle is an internal one involving the instincts and passions rather than the Darwinian (or Spencerian) survival of the fittest. "The animal lives in us still, and wars with incipient humanity. Now triumphs the animal, and now the man. If the lower passions repeatedly win, and if man wholly succumbs and yields to them, the man sinks in the brute. But if the war goes on, the ultimate result of this protracted series of struggles will be the evolution of pure humanity" (p. 341). And humanity completes its "destined evolution" only when it develops into divinity. Keshub concludes: "There are thus four stages through which man has to pass—the inorganic, carnal, human, and divine" (p. 341).

All of these themes are brought together in one of his last public lectures, "That Marvelous Mystery—The Trinity," delivered in 1882 just two

years before his death. In this speech, Keshub provides a summary of the teachings of the New Dispensation and in the process introduces the theory of avataric evolutionism. Near the beginning of the lecture, Keshub implores his European listeners—who in his view had long monopolized the pulpit and the press—to be silent for a change, to listen to “an humble Asiatic” expound a Hindu interpretation of the Trinity ([1882] 1979, 223–24). Keshub proposes two novel, interrelated correspondences or affinities, one theological and one scientific, between Western thought and traditional Hindu ideas. The theological correspondence concerned not just the identity of Hindu and Christian notions of God but specifically the affinity between the triune notion of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and the three traditional characterizations of Brahman as Sat, Cit, and Ananda—Infinite Being, Consciousness, and Bliss.²²

It is in relation to the first two members of the Trinity, regarding God’s creative activity as Father and the culmination of the creative process in the Son, that Keshub introduces the correspondence between traditional Hindu and modern scientific notions of evolution. Beginning with a brief overview of cosmogony, Keshub equates the “Supreme Brahma of the Veda and Vedanta” with “mighty Jehovah” ([1882] 1979, 224). Then, after quoting from the famous Rig Vedic hymn of creation (10.129) as well as from the opening chapter of Genesis, and with a nod to the New Testament notion of the creative Word, or Logos, Keshub emphasizes the ongoing nature of creation as an evolutionary process: “Creation means not a single act, but a continued process. It began, but has gone on unceasingly through all ages ever since it began. It is nothing but a continued evolution of creative force, a ceaseless emanation of power and wisdom from the Divine Mind” (p. 225). Here the intermingling of and tension between traditional Christian and Hindu cosmogonic ideas is apparent: Hindu notions shape Keshub’s view of the creative activity of the Logos as he stresses the ongoing nature of creation, conceived more in terms of emanation or manifestation than as an abrupt creation out of nothing.

Nonetheless, and seemingly oblivious to the tensions, Keshub at this point proclaims a grand harmony not only between Christian and Hindu belief but also between Hindu intuitions of the development of life and modern science:

The silent Divinity began to speak, and His speech, His word, a continued breathing of force is creation. What a grand metaphor is the Logos! The Hindu, too, like the Christian, believes in the continued evolution of the Logos, and its graduated development through ever-advancing stages of life. The Puranas speak of the different manifestations or incarnations of the Deity in different epochs of the world’s history. Lo! the Hindu Avatar rises from the lowest scale of life through the fish, the tortoise, and the hog up to the perfection of humanity. Indian Avatarism is, indeed, a crude representation of the ascending scale of Divine creation. Such precisely is the modern theory of evolution. (pp. 226–27)²³

Here we have the gist of Keshub's avataric evolutionism. He proceeds to detail the evolution of life from gross matter through the vegetable, animal, and human realms. He on one hand notes the "endless and growing varieties" that underlie the evolutionary developments and on the other assumes and emphasizes the progressive nature of evolution itself (p. 226). Successive kingdoms build on the perfected types of the preceding kingdoms, the organic ascent reaching its completion in humankind.

These stages of evolution, from gross matter to human, constitute the history of the First Dispensation, and their completion closes the book of the Old Testament and also the books of the Vedas (pp. 226, 233). Evolution for Keshub, however, does not stop with the organic. The course of "progressive humanity" begins with "man" as a "creature of God," as per Genesis (p. 226). But then: "Through culture and education he rises in the scale of humanity till he becomes the son of God" (p. 226). At this point, arriving "at the last link in the series of created organisms," the New Testament opens. Keshub comments: "Having exhibited itself in endless varieties of progressive existence, the primary creative Force at last took the form of the Son in Christ Jesus" (p. 226). Here we have the Second Dispensation, going beyond the Old Testament.

Then Keshub immediately asks: "But is the process of evolution really over?" No, he responds to his own question, noting that creation would be meaningless if it stopped at this point. Creation in itself, despite its beauty, harmony, and laws, is merely "wild force run mad, if it has no ultimate objective to achieve," or merely "nature's delirium" (p. 227). But God cannot create without a purpose, yet his purpose was not fully achieved with the Son because there has been as yet no universal redemption—universal salvation being a basic Hindu assumption and goal. The developmental process, now on a spiritual level, must continue until all are saved and all become Christs through the work of the Holy Spirit. Keshub concludes, "The Father continually manifests His wisdom and mercy in creation, till they take the form of pure sonship in Christ, and then out of one little seed—Christ [has] evolved a whole harvest of endless and ever-multiplying Christs. God coming down and going up—this is creation, this is salvation" (p. 228).

One final but critical twist remains. It seems that there must be a third dispensation, beyond the New Testament, that expounds the teachings of the Cit-Christ (Infinite Consciousness that is the Christ principle) but also points forward to the Comforter, providing the joy that is embodied in Ananda (Infinite Bliss). Christ shows the way but has not the power to save or sanctify the world, which belongs to the Holy Spirit alone. Excoriating the missionaries for deluging India with Bibles, Keshub argues that what is needed now is something to convert Christ's message into an inner force in all people, namely, the Holy Spirit. And the scripture of this third dispensation is to be found "in the Church of the New Dispensation, which

is in India" ([1882] 1979, 244). Keshub's devoted biographer P. C. Mozoomdar nicely summarizes this goal: "Keshub's chief aspiration was to perfect the elementary theism of the Brahmo Samaj into a regular religious system which should take its place by the side of the great religious dispensations of the world, and harmonise them all into the faith of the future. He wanted to introduce into it the utmost scientific precision with every possible development of spirituality" (1917, 17).

Six interconnected features of Keshub's assimilation of organic evolution to Hindu avatarism are noteworthy. First, he assumed the progressive nature of the evolutionary process, a view common among many religious moderates in Britain at the time. Such progressivist views were not entirely rejected by Darwin himself, who in the next to last paragraph of his *Origin of Species* concluded: "And as natural selection works solely by and for the good of each being, all corporeal and mental endowments will tend to progress towards perfection" ([1859] 1985, 459).²⁴ Keshub's insistence upon a progressive view of nature was likely imbibed from his English tutors rather than from his Hindu background with its overriding cyclic view of the cosmos. Certainly, a straightforward reading of the detailed avatara stories as they occur in the Puranas, even in the common sequence given by Keshub and forming the basis of all evolutionary avatarism, does not immediately suggest progress in the organic realm so much as repeated cosmic or personal calamities and redemptions in age after age.

Second, and closely intertwined with the first, Keshub largely ignored the notion of natural selection, an approach taken by many scientifically inclined theologians in Britain and later by many Hindu proponents of evolution. Unlike Darwin, who in contemplating the variety and beauty of forms wrought by natural selection was able to find a certain "grandeur in this view of life" ([1859] 1985, 459), these liberal thinkers viewed the often brutal process of such a seemingly random mechanism as denying any sort of providential activity as well as any meaningful purpose in life. Accordingly, while Keshub and many like-minded contemporaries accepted evolution, it was often less in the Darwinian and more in a broad Lamarckian sense—even if unacknowledged—with its alternative mechanism of the inheritance of acquired characteristics aided by inner effort or desire that was able to accommodate religious ideals of progressive purpose.²⁵ In Keshub's case, Darwin's "struggle for life" was transmuted into humankind's internal struggle against the instincts and passions carried over from our less evolved animal states.

Third, Keshub readily extrapolated physical evolution not only into the cultural realm but also into the spiritual. Evolution that stopped with the physical, or even the cultural, was ultimately meaningless for him. Spiritual evolution was able to encompass the notion of struggle as part of a moral purification process that alleviated the need to make sense of the suffering that occurred on the physical level. This conjoining of organic

and spiritual evolution is a hallmark of later Hindu evolutionary theories. In Keshub's avataric evolutionism, this conjoining is elaborated in terms of descent and ascent. God or his divine force or his wisdom emanates down into the successive organic forms of physical evolution, while the physical seeds implanted in matter through the divine descents mature in various processes of spiritual evolution. In Keshub's succinct formulation quoted above, "God coming down and going up—this is creation, this is salvation" ([1882] 1979, 228). For later Hindu evolutionists such as Aurobindo Ghose, the preferred terms become involution and evolution, although they are variously, and often vaguely, applied to the physical and spiritual aspects of the developmental process. Further, the conjoining of descent and ascent, or involution and evolution, frequently is used to symbolize the harmony between religion—or Hinduism in particular—and modern science and also to demarcate the limitations of "Western" science that deals only with physical evolution. The latter is "only one half of a cycle," which thereby sees consciousness only as emergent out of matter rather than as the very foundation and source of the material world (Killingley 1995, 193). Spiritual progress is thus merely the reemergence of the Divine in matter.

Fourth, Keshub's theory is religiously syncretic, assimilating Christ into the avataric evolutionary scheme. Some, but not all, later Hindu evolutionary perspectives are similarly syncretic, although often with more Hindu and fewer Christian elements than Keshub's. Keshub's syncretism is much more informed by his reading of the Christian scriptures than by the Vedas and Upanishads, about which he was comparatively ignorant (Scott 1979a, 34n). Nonetheless, near the end of his life, and as in the lecture on the Trinity of 1882, he began to draw frequently upon Sanskrit scriptural quotations (Scott 1979a, 30).

Fifth, we see in Keshub's overall formulation a nascent pride in the insights of the ancient Hindus, in this case the Puranic sages. He concedes that the popular understanding of the avatars is frequently rife with idolatry and superstition and notes that Indian avatarism is only a crude representation of modern evolutionary theory. At the same time, he insists, the ancient sages had genuine intuitions of the modern theory. Further, India itself has a major and unique role to play in the culmination of (spiritual) evolution. This theme—that India has a special spiritual message for the West, complementing or even rescuing Europe's material progress—is again a common motif in later Hindu evolutionary thinkers.

Sixth, despite Keshub's pride in India's past, his theory is developed in a context largely devoid of nationalistic appeals or political antagonism toward Britain (Borthwick 1977, 163, 165–66). Rather, he views the British and the West as assisting in the spiritual evolution of India that will rebound to the world. He thus affirms the British as representing the helping hand of Providence in bringing the message of Christ to India (Scott

1979b, xii). However, he makes clear that Britain's real conquest of India was not that of her armies but of her missionaries; it is Christ, not the British government, that rules India (Keshub [1879] 1979, 199).

The Church of the New Dispensation disintegrated quickly after Keshub's death, but several of its intellectual and spiritual themes, including his views on harmonizing science and religion and his notions of progressive evolution, were soon picked up by others with more nationalistic interests such as Swami Vivekananda and Narayan Bhavanrao Pavgee. Perhaps, as Scott suggests, the lack of Keshub's own immediate success in communicating his ideals to his fellow Indians was due to his acceptance of, even trust in, British rule in India as a providential force promoting religious harmony (1979b, xii). A more pointed, theological critique is offered by Ram Chandra Bose, an ardent Indian Christian who wished to prove the falseness of the Brahma Samaj teachings and of the New Dispensation in particular. The eclectic doctrines and ritual practices of the New Dispensation, Bose argued in the same year that Keshub died, are intended "to please everybody, but their result is—nobody is pleased" (1884, 137).

Perhaps the most acerbic denunciations of Keshub and his New Dispensation came not from fellow Indians but from the Theosophical Society, founded in New York by Helena Petrovna Blavatsky and Henry Steel Olcott in 1875. For instance, in an article titled "A New Prophet in India," appearing in the first volume of the society's journal, *The Theosophist*, the author—probably Blavatsky herself—notes:

The object of the new Prophet [Keshub] is to deliver his country from dry nationalism and supply a living faith. Whatever the results may be, the movement is of deep interest to the student of religious history, as an illustration of the rise and progress of sects. Keshub Chunder Sen, with his pretence of being a re-incarnation, in the light of the present, is a sham and a farce; removed two thousand years into the past, and a few wonder works would have made good his pretence, and untold millions would have received him as God. (1880, 194)

For his part, Keshub and his followers denounced the Theosophists and in particular the claims of Blavatsky that she had been in contact with mysterious ancient but still living teachers, the infamous "Mahatmas."²⁶ Such mutual condemnations are ironic but understandable given the considerable resemblance of views on religion and science and various spiritual matters between Keshub and the Theosophical Society.²⁷ This similarity deserves our further attention.

ROOTS OF AVATARIC EVOLUTIONISM IN THE WEST

Earlier I mentioned the possible roots of the avataric evolutionary theory in a New York City apartment suite. The year was 1875, late in the autumn, when a moderately successful lawyer-journalist investigating spiritualism and the occult took a suite of rooms at 433 West 34th Street in

New York on the second floor, accompanied by his visionary co-occultist, who took a suite on the first floor. The visionary, compelled by an inner voice, had just begun a writing project to disclose the fundamental truth of the universe lying behind the various religious traditions of the world that supposedly had been obscured or distorted through time and priestly machinations. During the next several months, with the collaboration of her lawyer friend and allegedly inspired by ancient masters revealing primordial secrets directly to her, this mystic visionary completed a monumental work proclaiming both the lost wisdom of ages past and its full compatibility with modern science. In this endeavor, according to the diary of her collaborator, she relied not only on the clairvoyant messages from the ancient ones but also on a personal library of some one hundred books that included such Orientalist works as Louis Jaccoliot's *The Bible in India* (1870), along with various other writings on hermetic, cabalistic, and occult literature (Olcott [1892] 1975, 202–19). The lengthy tome, *Isis Unveiled*, was published in 1877. This was the first major work of Blavatsky (Madame Blavatsky, as she came to be known), who, along with the lawyer-journalist Olcott, had founded the Theosophical Society two years earlier. She is one of the major inspirational founders behind the New Age Movement and also quite possibly the first to proclaim the avataric evolutionary theory, which appears in the pages of *Isis Unveiled*.

Theosophy grew out of an age when Christianity was being increasingly challenged by science and in particular by the evolutionary ideas of Darwin (Campbell 1980, 8). One response to this challenge was the abandonment of traditional Christian creedal formulations and organizations in favor of alternative spiritualist and occultist movements that looked to the perfection of humankind and that proclaimed they were fully in harmony with modern science. Often accompanying these trends was an interest in ancient and Oriental religions, specifically in a secret or esoteric knowledge, largely forgotten in the modern West, that contained a “higher” science transcending the limits of material science. Not infrequently, such esoteric knowledge was believed to be found in the ancient scriptures of India, sometimes identified as the original source of all civilization and knowledge. All of these themes are clearly manifested in *Isis Unveiled*.

The reemergence of this “higher science” was associated with the dawning of a new age of spiritualism. Wouter J. Hanegraaff notes in particular that the rise of spiritualism was regarded by early occultist-spiritualist writers such as Blavatsky “as ‘a great spiritual outpouring’ which heralds a new dispensation” (1998, 451; Godwin 1994, 303–5).²⁸ In *Isis Unveiled*, Blavatsky herself refers to “the modern ‘New Dispensation,’ as Spiritualism is called by its votaries” (1877, Pt. Two, 2).

Regarding the affinity of the higher science as found in *Isis Unveiled* with modern science, Olcott declared that the book's impact was comparable, in its own way, to Darwin's *Origin of Species* in that “both were tidal

waves in modern thought, and each tended to sweep away theological crudities and replace the belief in miracle with the belief in natural law" ([1892] 1975, 202). As for the ancient and Eastern source of modern scientific knowledge, we find in *Isis Unveiled* the following exposition:

Beside the discoverers of geometry and algebra, the constructors of human speech, the parents of philosophy, the primal expounders of religion, the adepts in psychological and physical science, how even the greatest of our biologists and theologians seem dwarfed! Name to us any modern discovery, and we venture to say, that Indian history need not long be searched before the prototype will be found of record. Here we are with the transit of science half accomplished, and all our ideas in process of readjustment to the theories of force-correlation, natural selection, atomic polarity, and evolution. And here, to mock our conceit, our apprehensions, and our despair, we may read what Manu said, perhaps 10,000 years before the birth of Christ. . . . (1877, Pt. One, 620)

The passage, derived in part from Jaccoliot's *Christna et le Christ* (n.d.), goes on to quote several verses from the ancient Hindu sage Manu regarding the evolution of life on Earth, "from the plant up to Brahma."

Although no specific mention of avatars is yet made, the verses quoted from Manu are to become frequently quoted by Indian proponents who argue for the Vedic precedence of evolutionary theory. Later in *Isis Unveiled*, Blavatsky is more specific, providing the hidden meaning of the avatars doctrine that she claims is misunderstood by the Indian masses. Denigrating a literal approach to scripture, whether the Bible or the Vedas, she declares that the ancient Brahmin and Jewish teachers, who were actually scientists as well as philosophers, went beyond literalist interpretations and "speculated on the creation and development of the world quite in a Darwinian way, both anticipating him and his school in the natural selection of species, gradual development, and transformation" (1877, Pt. Two, 260). She challenges skeptics to refer to the translations of *Manu* by William Jones and Jaccoliot, along with other ancient works including the "*Bhagavatta*" (the *Bhagavata Purana*) as well as other non-Hindu texts, to confirm that "we will find enunciated [in those texts] exactly the same principles as those now offered as the latest developments of modern science" (1877, Pt Two, 260).

Several pages later, Blavatsky provides a list of the ten traditional avatars of Vishnu, noting with reference to Rama that his companion, the speech-endowed monkey "Hanouma," a sort of half-man, half-monkey, may represent a "retrogressive evolution" from human to ape (1877, Pt. Two, 274). She then proclaims, without any evidence, that the Vaishnavas do not recognize the avatars as incarnations of Vishnu in literal animal forms but interpret them allegorically, in terms of Darwinian evolution:

. . . we see traced [in this list of avatars] the gradual evolution and transformation of all species out of the ante-Silurian mud of Darwin. . . . Beginning with the Azoic time, corresponding to the *ilus* [primal slime] in which Brahma implants the creative germ, we pass through the Palaeozoic and Mesozoic times, covered by

the first and second incarnations as the fish and tortoise; and the Cenozoic, which is embraced by the incarnations in the animal and semi-human forms of the boar and man-lion; and we come to the fifth and crowning geological period, designated as the “era of mind, or age of man,” whose symbol in the Hindu mythology is the dwarf—the first attempt of nature at the creation of man. (1877, Pt. Two, 275)

In this perhaps earliest sketch of avataric evolutionism, we find the same geologic enthusiasm that later inspired Pavgée in his *Vedic Fathers of Geology* ([1912] 2001). The ancient truth is claimed to be fully scientific, and thereby the theory of avataric evolutionism is thought to be indisputably established. But the geologic-scientific aspect is only part of Blavatsky’s story of evolution.

We also see in the above passage that Blavatsky has neatly conjoined the creative role of Brahma implanting the initial seed of life as described in *Manu* with the later Puranic accounts of the Avatars. This germ, or world egg, loosely identified with Pouroucha (Purusha, the Cosmic Man), further affiliated with the son and Logos of the Para-Brahma (Supreme Brahman), is the source from which “proceed all the great saviours of the universe—the avatars of the invisible Deity” (1877, Pt. Two, 270). The implanting of the germ is the descent or involution of the Eternal Supreme Cause into matter, and the developed seed eventually will return to be reabsorbed into the Divine Spirit. This double movement also accounts for the dual nature of the process of evolution or ascent, which is simultaneously physical and spiritual:

From a fish the progress of this dual transformation carries on the physical form through the shape of a tortoise, a boar, and a man-lion; and then, appearing in the dwarf of humanity, it shows Parasu Rama physically, a perfect, spiritually, an undeveloped entity, until it carries mankind personified by one god-like man, to the apex of physical and spiritual perfection—a god on earth. (1877, Pt. Two, 276)

For Blavatsky, the higher avatars such as Krishna and other “saviors” of the world are not only gods on earth but also the foundation as well as the crown of creation, the Alpha and Omega, an idea that reverberates in later Hindu evolutionary thinkers such as Aurobindo.

CONCLUSION

The similarities between Keshub’s and Blavatsky’s avataric evolutionism are striking, going well beyond the basic conception that the ancient Hindu avataric doctrine is an anticipation of Darwinian evolution. These similarities include the notion that spiritual evolution, beginning with the descent of the spirit or Logos, develops with the aid of physical forms and culminates in a completion of organic evolution. This complex of ideas is used by both to critique material science as practiced in the West. At the same time, Blavatsky and Keshub in their own ways claimed that their teachings were scientific, and both rejected—in their own minds—the miraculous and supernatural.²⁹ In addition, both shared a confidence in the

scientific wisdom of the ancient Indian seers and a distrust of literalist interpretations of scripture. Both saw the present time as a critical turning point in the spiritual history of the world, although the nature of that turning point was variously conceived, particularly in terms of whether the present age would see a New Dispensation brought on by a new “Great Man” or would instead be a restoration of the ancient wisdom recovered from the encrustations of millennia of religious and priestly dogmatism.

Although I have found no direct confirmation of Blavatsky’s having been the immediate inspiration for Keshub’s theory, he likely was cognizant of her avataric evolutionism, which appeared in *Isis Unveiled* five years before his own proclamation of the idea in 1882. And at least one early twentieth-century Hindu proponent of avataric evolutionism acknowledged Blavatsky’s contribution: K. Narayanswami Aiyar, in *The Puranas in the Light of Modern Science*, confessed that he had first dismissed the Puranas as “unworthy of serious study” until he read the works of Madame Blavatsky, mentioning specifically her *The Secret Doctrine* (an elaboration of themes in *Isis Unveiled*) (Aiyar [1916] 1996, 279–80). There he discovered various keys—cosmic, astronomical, physical, psychological, historical, and metaphysical—by which to interpret Puranic stories, including those of the avatars (p. 210). He thus came to understand that the ten avatars “represent . . . the different stages of evolution in the different departments of nature” (p. 208). The stories, he assures us, will “unlock the mysteries of nature” (p. 209), and not only of organic but also of cosmic evolution, as in the case of the churning of the Milk Ocean by the Tortoise avatara, which will reveal the secrets of the nebular process by which the Milky Way condensed to form gross atomic matter (pp. 219–20).

Returning to Keshub and Blavatsky, we can see that her syncretistic religious approach and her emphasis on the underlying harmony of modern science with ancient wisdom would undoubtedly have appealed to him. Given the general tensions and outright animosities between Blavatsky and the Theosophists on one hand and Keshub and his fellow Brahmos on the other, it is perhaps not surprising that the latter would make no acknowledgment of the Theosophical roots of avataric evolutionism, if that had indeed been the source of Keshub’s inspiration. Keshub himself offers no explanation for the genesis of his own version of the theory. It is possible, of course, that Blavatsky herself picked up the idea of avataric evolutionism from others, perhaps from some Orientalist, but her immediate and obvious sources, such as Müller and Jaccoliot, reveal no such origin for her theory.

The Orientalist glorification of India’s past by such scholars as Müller and Jaccoliot, combined with the need of Western-educated Hindus for a moral boost to their self-image in the face of constant denigration at the hands of many European missionaries and writers, made the intellectual elite in Bengal exceptionally open to Theosophical exaltations of Indian

civilization. As Tapan Raychaudhuri points out, with specific reference to Olcott and Annie Besant (leader of the majority faction of the Theosophical Society after Blavatsky's death in 1891, and its eventual president), "Now men and women, famous in the West, had declared Hinduism superior to western civilization itself. To the wounded ego of the colonial elite, who more than half-shared their rulers' contempt for themselves, the message was irresistible" (1988, 33; cf. p. 236). Thomas R. Trautmann, summarizing Raychaudhuri, emphasizes that "the outstanding representatives of European Orientalism for Bengalis of the nineteenth century were, above all, Müller, and somewhat surprisingly, Colonel Alcott and Annie Besant of the Theosophical Society" (1997, 219). Keshub very likely was already deeply moved by the Theosophical message of India's greatness in the earliest years of the Society's career in India, under the direction of Olcott and Blavatsky. The elaboration of his avataric evolutionism was an easy fusion of the idea of India's ancient Golden Age with India's special role in the future spiritual development of humankind based on the assumed foundation that India's spiritual ideals were in full harmony with modern science.

Needless to say, there were some Hindus who expressed considerable skepticism toward this sort of scientific exegesis of the ten avatars. One early critique comes from Bankimchandra Chattopadhyaya (1838–1894), the renowned Bengali poet whose celebrated song *Vande Mataram* inspired generations of freedom fighters and eventually became India's national song. In his "Letters on Hinduism," written in the years shortly after Keshub's death, Bankimchandra offers various historical, nonsupernaturalistic interpretations of traditional Puranic mythology, including specifically the ten avatars of Vishnu. He notes: "Rationalizers are not wanting who see in this a foreshadowing of the modern doctrine of the evolution of the most perfect form of life from the lowest in the manifestations of Him who, on the Pantheistic side of Hinduism, is himself the Universe" (Chattopadhyaya [c. 1890] 1969, 249). After running through the usual evolutionary parallels, noting in particular the role given to the man-lion as the missing link between the "lower mammalian and man," Bankimchandra concludes: "All this is ingenious, no doubt, but unfortunately evidence is wanting to show that such an illustration of the doctrine of Evolution—so little likely to be dreamt of by the ancient Brahmans, was the real object of the legend of the Ten Avatars" (p. 250).

The subsequent history of avataric evolutionism is worthy of further study. In the early twentieth century we find a number of intriguing reformulations of the theory. In the political arena, for instance, it was espoused by the Marathi nationalist Pavgee, who, in the interest of advocating for Indian self-rule, extended many of Blavatsky's conceptions of India's glorious scientific past while ignoring the spiritual message that reverberates throughout her and Keshub's avataric evolutionism. In the theological

arena, the Bengali “scientific sadhu”³⁰ Aurobindo transcended the political-nationalist discourse of writers such as Pavgee, developing instead the more mystical interpretation of avataric evolutionism as expounded by Keshub while yet questioning its underlying Darwinian basis.

At the beginning of this essay I quoted two passages from contemporary insiders that illustrate the ambivalent Hindu attitude toward evolution in general and avataric evolutionism in particular. And while the pro-evolutionary Kachappilly and the anti-Darwinian Prakashanand Saraswati differ radically regarding the truth of organic transformation of species, they both accept or defer to “science” as warranting the truth underlying their views. This is explicit in the quotation from Prakashanand Saraswati, where he explicitly rejects Darwinism because it is “unscientific.” Both men also critique the Western religious imperialist perspective. If my suggestion about the origins of avataric evolutionism being rooted in the Theosophical writings of Blavatsky is correct, Prakashanand Saraswati’s conclusion is not entirely implausible in insisting that the theory “is all the effect of the western writers on the Hindu minds that collected the intellectual dirt of the followers of the English regime.” Whether the Western views amount only to “intellectual dirt” is a philosophical, not an historical, judgment and suggests a bit simplistically that thinkers like Keshub were largely passive recipients lacking in any original or creative insights. Kachappilly does not go so far as to call the Western views intellectual dirt, but he, too, is reacting to the Western intellectual, specifically theological, heritage. He obliquely dismisses the idea based in Genesis that humans were created all at once to have dominion over the nonhuman realms of life.

The Indian traditions—whether vedic or religious, upanisadic or philosophical—recognise the truth that it is the same principle which exists in all “life-forms.” The life-forms, therefore, do not differ in *kind* but only in the *degree* of evolution. Because of the “unity of life” doctrine, it is believed, God does not either show favouritism or neglect to any form of life. Humans alone are not God’s chosen creatures. To the western religious precept, “Love thy neighbour,” Indian traditions add, “and every living creature is thy neighbour.” (Kachappilly n.d.)

Avataric evolutionism, whether in the form of Kachappilly’s ecologically inspired unity of life perspective or in Keshub’s syncretic spiritual viewpoint, represents a unique Hindu attempt to integrate the insights and symbols of the tradition with modern science. In both cases, a major challenge is offered to traditional Christian theology with its insistence upon the uniqueness of human beings. In the Indian context, the challenge will be whether it is possible to maintain such a hierarchical integration of religion and science—or the “higher” and “lower” sciences—without succumbing to or fostering conflict between the two. The potential for conflict in this hierarchical integrationist view is high, both in the theological and political-cultural realms.

NOTES

1. See Prakashanand Saraswati, 1999–2001b.
2. I borrow this phrase from Kurian Kachappilly, n.d.
3. Dermot H. Killingley points out the special place of humankind in much of Hindu thought, given the general notion that liberation is attainable from the human realm alone (1990, 153). David Gosling, however, notes that in contrast to the British response to Darwinism, educated Indians had little problem with the idea of a common ancestry for humans and other animals, inasmuch as “the theory of reincarnation pre-supposed such a belief” (1976, 15). I deal with Killingley’s point later.
4. Swami Prakashanand Saraswati is one contemporary Hindu who uncouples cosmic from organic evolution, accepting the ancient scriptural passages dealing with the former as evidence for ancient Hindu knowledge of the discoveries of modern science while adamantly rejecting the latter as unscientific (Prakashanand Saraswati 1999–2001a, c).
5. These are the Brahmins (priests), Kshatriyas (administrators), Vaishyas (merchants/farmers), and Shudras (servants).
6. A classical Sanskrit text offering an early version of the Hindu chain of being is found in *Bṛihadaranyaka Upanishad* 1.4.
7. Regarding the Hindu chain of being, Meera Nanda notes: “All [beings] are permeated with the same life-force, *but not in equal measure*. They all partake of the Brahman in proportion with their karma . . . , forming a chain of being that ‘extends from (the highest individual god) Brahma to the tufts of grass,’ as the standard explanation goes” (2003, 86). Nanda goes on to note the different levels that the various classes of human beings occupy in the chain, according to their karmically derived inherent natures. (See also Killingley 1990, 153.)
8. For Prakashanand Saraswati’s more detailed treatment of Darwinism, see his article “A review of the most popular scientific theories of the world” (1999–2001c).
9. The term *Puranas* refers to the vast post-Vedic Sanskrit literature consisting traditionally of eighteen major Puranas composed between the first centuries C.E. and the middle of the second millennium C.E. The Puranas are compendia of ritual, devotional, mythical, and popular philosophical and theological ideas. A very few of these, such as the *Bhagavata Purana*, are considered by later devotional movements to have the same sacred authority as the Vedas.
10. For the parallel development in Islam regarding the scientific exegesis of the Qur’an, see Iqbal 2002, 269–72, 279–92. Iqbal contextualizes such interpretations as part of the “colonized discourse” in the Islam-and-science encounter. He rejects the scientific exegesis of scripture in such terms as “unsound” (p. 292), “irrational, bordering on the ridiculous” (p. 271), “a gross profanation of the text of the Qur’an” (p. 272), and “a great injustice to the scientific data” (p. 272).
11. The Indian affirmation of the scientific priority of ancient Hindu civilization can be traced back at least to Rammohan Roy (1772–1833), founder of the Brahma Samaj. As early as 1823, Roy proclaimed that although the English might be superior in “mechanical arts,” when it came to “*science, literature, or religion*,” history made clear that “the world was indebted to *our* [Indian] *ancestors* for the first dawn of knowledge” (quoted in Gosling 1976, 9–10). Roy and the Brahma Samaj in general tended to reject revelation in favor of reason and intuition and thus were not highly motivated to study the Vedic scriptures with an eye to finding antecedents of modern science, unlike Dayananda.
12. With specific reference to science, Jones admired the ancient accomplishments of the Indians, but those achievements belonged to the past. Compared to the European scientists of his day, Jones considered the Indians to be “mere children” (quoted in Trautmann 1997, 60). Compare Sharada Sugirtharaja 2003, especially her discussion of the trope of the child in Jones’s works (pp. 31–36); see also her discussion of Müller and his views of the innocent and infant-like state of Vedic thought (pp. 41–43).
13. For a discussion of Dayananda’s evolving ideas about Hindu superiority and the notion that the Vedas contain all knowledge, including science, see Jordens 1998, 16–23. For Dayananda’s ideas on a Vedic Golden Age, see Jordens 1998, 64–75.
14. In Dayananda’s commentary on the four Vedas (1981), see the sections on “Gravitation and Attraction” (pp. 192–97) and “The Art of Building Ships and Aerial Cars” (pp. 254–64). Müller wholly rejected such claims, arguing for the ancient and simple-minded character of the Vedic corpus and protesting that to discover “steam engines and electricity” in it is to “destroy

its real value" as an historical document providing insights into the culture of the ancient Aryans. Quotations of Müller are from Sugirtharajah 2003, 45.

15. For a listing of the scientific discoveries that recent Hindu nationalist writers have attributed to the Vedas see Nanda 2003, 73–74. Along with those already mentioned pertaining to Dayananda, Nanda notes atomic theory, relativity of space and time, the speed of light, and "[n]early all important discoveries of biological sciences" such as photosynthesis and test-tube babies. It is noteworthy that the particular discoveries are not listed by the proponents of "Vedic science" until after modern science has made the discovery, just as Dayananda's airplanes were powered by steam engines, well known in Dayananda's India of the late nineteenth century, rather than internal-combustion, let alone jet, engines. Darwinian evolution is not in the lists that Nanda provides.

16. J. E. Llewellyn (1993, 113) views Dayananda as emphasizing degeneration rather than development. At the same time, as Jordens notes (1998, 68–71), Dayananda, taking a cue from the Mahabharata, saw the possibility of short-term progress and thus regarded the restoration or regeneration of the Golden Age as something that humans could bring about, even in the face of the overarching natural cycle of the successive degeneration of the traditional four yugas. Such notions of restoration, however, rested on assumptions completely different from that of Darwinian evolution.

17. The same quotation appears in Ved Prakash Garg 1984, 501.

18. Killingley (1990, 175n.) refers both to Keshub and Aurobindo Ghose as early expounders of avataric evolutionary theory but notes that neither cites any prior thinker for the idea. Killingley, citing Ramakanta Chakravarti, mentions that the idea also has been attributed to Kedarnath Datta, a.k.a. Bhaktivinoda Thakura (1838–1914). Chakravarti affirms: "Dutta [Datta] was . . . a Darwinian. According to him, for each of the ten stages of evolution Vishnu appeared as an *Avatara* who was particularly relevant to that stage of evolution. This interpretation of the *Avatara* was widely accepted" (1985, 397). The source for Chakravarti's citation of Datta is unclear and in any case provides no date for when Datta may have first propounded this notion. (See also Chakravarti 1985, 102n., where, in connection with Datta's evolutionary theory of the "*jiva*-entity" or soul, again asserts that Datta "was deeply influenced by Darwin.") I have been able to obtain only one work of Datta/Bhaktivinoda, his *Sri Kṛṣṇa-sambhita*. In a description of Vishnu's incarnations, Bhaktivinoda explains that the Lord takes on the animal form that a soul already has assumed, proceeding from the fish onward. The evolution of the soul as manifested in physical forms thus apparently provokes a parallel response on the part of the Lord: "In the course of the gradual development of the living entities' hearts, the Lord incarnates in a form corresponding to the mood of the devotees" (Bhaktivinoda [1888] 1998, 89). It does not seem to me that this notion of evolution goes much beyond the standard Hindu notion of the spiritual evolution of the soul through reincarnation, with little reference to the organic evolution of Darwinism. However, Bhaktivinoda's evolutionary ideas in relation to Darwinism do seem to be deserving of further attention.

19. For an excellent and brief summary of Keshub's life, see Scott 1979a.

20. The social reform ideals of the Brahma Samaj appealed immensely to Keshub, in contrast to the rather theoretical and more skeptical ideas of the movement known as Young Bengal (Mukherjee 1992, 77–78).

21. There is some controversy as to when and how Keshub came up with the idea of the New Dispensation. Followers of Ramakrishna at times attribute the idea to their own master. But as G. C. Banerji, an opponent of the pro-Ramakrishna party, points out, the basic doctrines of the New Dispensation can be discovered in Keshub's writings and lectures of the 1860s, and the explicit statement of the New Dispensation goes back at least to 1874 (when Keshub referred to it as the Nutan [new] Vidhan). In his essay "Behold the Light of Heaven in India," delivered in 1875 two months before meeting Ramakrishna, Keshub wrote, "Behold that heavenly light in the midst of India; how bright, how beautiful. . . . It is the light of a New Dispensation vouchsafed by Providence for India's salvation" (quoted in Banerji 1931, 263). It was five years later that Keshub formally announced the New Dispensation at the Brahma Mandir (The Brahma Temple in Bengal, where Keshub delivered many of his public lectures). For brief discussion of the controversy, see Kayal 1998, 105–8.

22. Keshub was apparently the first to make this correlation. See Scott 1979b, xiii. For a Christian response to Keshub, see Ram Chandra Bose 1884, 138–39.

23. Gosling, in commenting on this passage, appropriately notes that in reality Keshub's notion of Indian Avatarism "is quite a long way removed from Darwin's theory, but the parallel is none the less [sic] quite imaginative" (1976, 43). Killingley notes in Keshub's passage "a revealing use of licence in the word 'precisely'" (1995, 190).

24. Peter Bowler notes that the "branching scheme" of Darwinian evolution was opposed to the hierarchical and teleological perspective embodied in the concept of the great chain of being. He goes on to observe that Darwin was, however, able to hold onto some form of progressive evolution with the idea that the transformations usually resulted in better-adapted and more highly organized forms, "allowing him to retain his old faith in an overall purpose for natural selection, a comfort in his effort to retain a link with the argument from design" (1983, 180–81).

25. For a discussion of Vivekananda's rejection of natural selection, see Killingley 1995, 191–92. For an example of this same sort of response to evolution among the Quakers in late nineteenth-century Britain, see Cantor 2005, 257. The liberal Quakers adopted a view of evolution not that dissimilar to Keshub's, with his emphasis on social and religious reform. As Cantor notes, "when taken to mean progress and development in the organic realm, evolution cohered well with Quaker notions of social, moral, and spiritual progress. Like many contemporaries, these Quakers largely ignored the mechanism of natural selection but instead articulated a teleological and progressive notion of evolution" (2005, 257).

26. Blavatsky notes in *The Theosophist* in a May 1883 article titled "The Chosen 'Vessels of Election'": "our articles against the Calcutta Apostle [Keshub] were the legitimate results of the most unprovoked and unmerited attacks upon ourselves and our Society—in the *Liberal* and the still earlier defunct *Sunday Mirror* [publications of Keshub's Brahma organization]. The Babu [Keshub] was never called in our journal 'an impostor' or an 'adventurer,' not even a 'pretender;' and this man [Keshub] . . . has not scrupled in the least to daub us with such and even worse appellations in his *Liberal* organ" (1883b, 188). See also her summary of Keshub's attacks in an earlier article, "The Gospel of the Future: Or the 'Revelation' of (St.) Keshub" (1883a, 148–49).

27. The irony is made clear by comparing the acid tone of the several articles on Keshub and the New Dispensation occurring in the very first volumes of *The Theosophist* (in the early 1880s) with a laudatory article appearing over half a century later (1939) by B. B. Dey titled "Keshub Chunder Sen: A Great Indian Reformer." One may also note the eulogy of Keshub just after his death by Henry Olcott himself in a brief article in the February 1884 issue (Keshub had died in January). Olcott refers to Keshub, along with Dayananda Saraswati, as "the two brightest" among "the galaxy of intellectual stars in the modern Indian sky of thought" (1884, 119). Clearly, much of the animosity from Blavatsky stemmed from her perception of Keshub as a self-promoting egotist and self-proclaimed avatar, although she had great respect for the original founder of the Brahma Samaj, Rammohan Roy (see Godwin 1994, 319). Blavatsky, of course, was not alone in perceiving Keshub as highly egotistical, as this was an issue that had dogged him for many years (Lavan 1979).

28. Hanegraaff notes Blavatsky's somewhat ambiguous view of spiritualism: "Blavatsky did not repudiate spiritualism, but reinterpreted it as a subordinate element within a larger occultist framework" (1998, 450).

29. On Blavatsky's rejection of the supernatural, see, for instance, her rejection of Keshub's accusation that the Theosophical Society professed belief in the miraculous and supernatural (Blavatsky 1881). On Keshub's rejection, see Banerji 1931, 47.

30. I borrow the term from Agehananda Bharati, who uses it to describe the many itinerant or ashram-bound gurus of the Hindu Renaissance who are "full-time religious specialists, expert in salvation-giving meditation, as opposed to the ritualistic specialist, the hereditary Brahman" (1970, 277–78). Such sadhus frequently employ scientific or scientific-sounding language in expounding their spiritual messages, in an attempt to appear modern and objective.

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