It Is (Not) All Theosophy: “Hybridity” and “Hybridization” in Robert T. Browne’s The Mystery of Space

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Abstract

The theoretical framework presented in this article makes it possible to understand religions as constantly changing networks of actors and infrastructures that incorporate, modify, discard, and reformulate numerous “elements” in terms of specific conceptualizations often rooted in concrete contexts of application, and “structures,” i.e., larger conceptual contexts such as evolution, cosmogonies, or anthropological views of humanity, in a necessary ongoing creative process.

Such a process, and the usefulness of the tool, will be illustrated in this article through discussion of the work of Robert T. Browne, particularly his book The Mystery of Space. To date, research has assumed that Browne derives all of his theory from Theosophy. By applying the above theoretical framework and situating Browne’s work within a broader network of discourses, the article challenges this conclusion and is able to paint a more complete picture. This illustrates the usefulness of the analytical tool presented.

Keywords

hybridization – Harlem Renaissance – Robert T. Browne – Theosophy – esotericism

The theoretical framework presented in this paper makes it possible to understand religions as constantly changing networks of actors and infrastructures that incorporate, change, discard, and reformulate numerous “elements” in the sense of specific conceptualizations often rooted in concrete contexts of
application, and “structures,” i.e., larger conceptual contexts such as “evolution,” “cosmogonies,” or anthropological conceptions of man, in a necessary ongoing creative process. This is a contribution to discussions of “syncretism,” “métissage,” and “hybridization,” etc. In contrast to older attempts, it focuses on multiple interlocking processes that connect different discursive fields across time and place. Approaches that seek to describe these processes in terms of “coating,” “appropriation,” “exchange,” etc. often fail to recognize that “elements” and “structures” are not only changed in the target system, but also change the source system by establishing new and altered relations. This is illustrated in this article by a discussion of the work of Robert T. Browne, particularly his book *The Mystery of Space*. Browne’s work has received little scholarly attention, despite the fact that his work and impact is an important part of the history of African derived religions in general and the Harlem Renaissance in particular. Matt Marbel, who wrote one of the few articles on Browne, concluded that Browne derived his entire theory from Theosophy. This line of interpretation became fundamental to research on Browne’s work. By applying the theoretical framework mentioned above and by situating Browne’s work within a broader network of discourses, the article challenges Marbel’s conclusion.

The question of “coating,” “syncretizing,” etc. was and is important for the study of African derived religions. Young argues for the inclusion of Islam and other religions in the study of Africana as a backlash against traditional studies of religions originating in Africa from a Christian perspective.¹ Similarly, Finley, Guillory, and Page argue that an interdisciplinary perspective is needed that does not exclude esoteric traditions.² Both are certainly warranted and should absolutely be done, but I think the important question is not whether we discuss possible influences, but how we conceptualize them. The approach taken here differs significantly from the notion of “coating” African religious beliefs with a thin layer of “Christianity,” as Young asserts.³ This is not because Browne makes little reference to “African religions” in his work (see below) or deals only loosely with Christianity, but because I argue that the metaphor of coating suggests a process of combination that changes neither the “coat” nor what is “overcoated.” In contrast, the concept presented here assumes that new and altered knowledge emerges with each incorporation of ideas and/or terminologies. I will present a theoretical and methodological approach that attempts to describe and analyze transformations and mutual influences of the

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¹ Young, *African and African American Religions*.
² Finley/Guillory/Page, *Africana Esoteric Studies*.
³ Young, *African and African American Religions*, p. 344.
multiple currents by tracing “hybridization.” Discussing Robert T. Browne’s *The Mystery of Space* will illustrate how the abovementioned tool might be especially useful for analyzing traditions that are “in between” hegemonic categories. Marble claims that “Browne's occult philosophy was almost entirely derived from his study of Theosophy.” Browne refers to Theosophy in his use of certain terms, but I will argue that Browne’s work is not simply derived from Theosophy, but that he presents an original work that develops a unique conception of consciousness.

In the first part, I introduce the analytical tool that forms the core of this article. The following tool was developed based on Homi Bhabha’s notion of “hybridity,” ideas from the global history approach, and Ulrich Berner’s systematization of a neighboring concept, syncretism. In the second part, I give an overview of the life and work of Robert T. Browne. The third part discusses the question: What is Theosophy? The fourth part provides a summary of Browne’s *The Mystery of Space* and the fifth part analyzes “consciousness” in regards to “evolution” as expounded by Browne in more detail by using the instrument presented in the first part. I then conclude with a consideration of the opportunities of my “analytical tool.”

1 The Analytical Tool

In the sense of a “catch-all” term we run the risk of introducing essentializing tendencies into our research when we use “hybridity,” as Shohat already argued in her seminal 1992 article. This is one of the main problems in Bhabha's notion of “hybridity.” The language of “hybridity” and “hybridization” rooted in biology lacks the ability to differentiate, because Bhabha understands “hybridity” as both the starting point and the end point of “hybridization processes” that are part of an ongoing “hybridization.” Because of this deficiency, a lan-

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4 This idea was first put forward by me in my Ph.D. thesis. The theory and methodology discussed here follows closely what I wrote in my dissertation. It is however an adoption to African derived religions and as it tries to put forward an approach “beyond” syncretism and “hybridization” it adds to the theoretical background of this journal. Mühlematter, *Accelerating Human Evolution*.

5 Marble, *Hermes of Harlem*, p. 60.

6 Shohat, *Notes on the ‘Post-Colonial’*.

7 The language of “hybridity” has a yet an even larger problem, which is derived from its roots in the racist discussions about whether Africans are humans. See Young, *Colonial Desire*, pp. 1–28 for a thorough consideration of these connotations. See, Mühlematter, *Accelerating Human Evolution*.

guage that allows one to identify different types of “hybridization” is needed if one is to use “hybridization” as a meaningful analytical tool. However, one should be wary of hierarchizing these modes and using a language of “more” or “less” hybrid, for this would undermine the fundamental idea of “original mixedness”9 or, as Bhabha puts it, “hybridity” as a “historical necessity.”10 I argue that “hybridization” should be understood as a metaprocess that can be more accurately described by considering and conceptualizing its parts.

In what follows, I will propose to divide this metaprocess into at least five different parts at different levels.11 The main advantage of the approach discussed here – in contrast to other proposals that suggest using hybridity as a methodology and not just as a figure of thought12 – is that it distinguishes between the discourse level and the textual level. In doing so, it is sensitive to “traces of hybridization” that can be identified at the textual level. Since the level of discourse where “hybridization” can be located is not accessible per se, the traces on the text level are the only access to identify “hybridization” and to distinguish different forms of “hybridization.”

The first part I call “processes of hybridization” (see figure 1). I understand “processes of hybridization” – in the plural – as parts of the “metaprocess of hybridization” – in the singular – that establish new and/or altered relations between “elements” and/or “structures” (see figure 3 below). Here, my approach complements Bhabha’s concepts and improves them in the sense that it provides a more finely graded view of heterogeneity. One of the main concerns of Bhabha himself. In his theory of “hybridization,” the term itself often remains vague, and the “metaprocess of hybridization” as an ongoing feature of all discourses remains undifferentiated from the actual historical and text-level identifiable “processes of hybridization.” Therefore, his notion of “hybridization” can be read – at least partially – as essentializing.

The distinction between different “processes of hybridization” makes it possible to understand that “hybridization” is not homogeneous but multi-layered and can take place in numerous different interactions triggered by “encounters” between “actors,” which can take place in reality or be mediated through different media, especially texts. In these interactions, new and changed relations are established, from which new knowledge emerges. For example, when

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9  Huddart, Homi K. Bhabha, p. 6 et seq.
10  Bhabha, Commitment to Theory, p. 41.
11  This has been discussed by me in more detail and I developed other parts which seem less relevant here, cf. Mühlematter, Accelerating Human Evolution.
12  E.g. Yao, Taxonomizing Hybridity.
a text is translated, the source text is established as “the original” while the target text is established as “the copy.” The two are then inextricably linked.\textsuperscript{13} As Bhabha puts it, translation imparts the “self” with the “other” and the “other” is brought to the very center of the “self.”\textsuperscript{14} On this view translation can be understood as a “process of hybridization” because it establishes new and/or altered relations that can be understood as the “result” of “hybridization processes.”\textsuperscript{15} These “results” will not be theorized further here because they are to be located at the discourse level, which is not directly accessible; instead, I will focus on the “traces of hybridization” that can be identified at the textual level.\textsuperscript{16}

The second part of “hybridization” is best captured by using a series of verbs of “movement” (see Figure 2). These verbs provide a language to describe the “processes of hybridization.” For example, when we speak of “repetition,” we can say that x or y is “repeated” in different synchronous or asynchronous contexts, implying that the repetition embeds x and y in new and/or altered relations.\textsuperscript{17} “To repeat” is closely but not exclusively related to the “process of hybridization” called “tradition,” just as “to translate” and “to de – and recontextualize” are closely but not exclusively related to “translation” and “de – and recontextualization,” while “to transfer” is the most general term and not directly related to any particular “process of hybridization.”\textsuperscript{18}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{processes_of_hybridization}
\caption{Processes of “hybridization”}
\end{figure}

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{13} Niranjana, \textit{Siting Translation}, p. 3.
\bibitem{14} Bhabha, \textit{Introduction: Narrating the Nation}, p. 4.
\bibitem{15} Bhabha, \textit{Introduction: Locations of Culture}, p. 5.
\bibitem{16} Mühlematter, \textit{Accelerating Human Evolution}.
\bibitem{17} Bhabha, \textit{Signs Taken for Wonders}, p. 153; Huddart, \textit{Homi K. Bhabha}, p. 16; Derrida, \textit{Signatur Ereignis Kontext}, p. 298.
\bibitem{18} Mühlematter, \textit{Accelerating Human Evolution}.
\end{thebibliography}
The next category, titled “already hybrids” (see Figure 3), includes the terms “element” and “structure,” which are used to talk about what is “transferred,” “translated,” and so on. The term “already hybrids”\textsuperscript{19} emphasizes that we are not talking about “originals” or “pure entities” that then become “hybrid,” but that they are “already hybrid” because they are always involved in the ongoing “metaprocess of hybridization” that necessarily takes place in every interaction.\textsuperscript{20}

The fourth category aims at an analysis on the textual level (see figure 4). I argue that “hybridization” is not tangible as such, but that it leaves “traces” that can be identified in texts. Texts here are to be understood in the broadest sense, i.e., any kind of linguistic utterance.\textsuperscript{21} These traces may be relatively simple such as “references” to other texts or “transliterated and/or translated words.” In numerous cases, the traces are part of appropriation processes associated with power asymmetries. Ulrich Berner has discussed such “relationizings” in detail in his work on “syncretism.” In it, he develops a typology of “syncretism” based on a continuous historicization and a systematizing literature review on the theory of syncretism.\textsuperscript{22} However, his categorization is based on numerous value judgments and teleological narratives of progression, so that his terminology is often tinged with essentialism and Eurocentrism.\textsuperscript{23}

\textsuperscript{19} Mühlematter, Accelerating Human Evolution, p. 76 et seq.
\textsuperscript{20} Hall, Wann gab es «das Postkoloniale»?, p. 215.
\textsuperscript{21} Mühlematter, Accelerating Human Evolution, pp. 78, 121 et seq., 170.
\textsuperscript{22} C.f. Berner, Verwendung des Synkretismus-Begriffs.
\textsuperscript{23} For a thorough discussion of Berner’s categories and a more detailed critique on his work, see Mühlematter, Accelerating Human Evolution.
hybridization,” especially those understood as explicit results of intentional hegemonic appropriations. These I call “relationizings.”

The tool described here allows us to identify “processes of hybridization” at the textual level and thus to conceptualize “hybridization.” Through the “encounters” that set in motion the “processes of hybridization,” “connections” are made between different discursive fields. In the following, I will show how this tool can be applied to the example of Robert T. Browne’s *The Mystery of Space*.

2 The Life of Robert T. Browne

The life and work of Robert Tecumtha Browne (1882–1978) has received little scholarly attention. Browne was born in LaGrange, Texas, the son of former slaves who were members of the black Methodist Church. He grew up in a poor

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24 The terminology was developed based on Berner’s consideration about “syncretism.” Therein he uses the German term “Relationierung” which is the blueprint for the term “relationizing” used here. See, Berner, *Verwendung des Synkretismus-Begriffs*. The actual usage differs however from Berner’s term “Relationierung”, I elaborated on this elsewhere. See, Mühlmattern, *Accelerating Human Evolution*, pp. 61–63.


26 Professor Stephen C. Finley gave me some of the information on Browne and I am very thankful for his help with the current article.
family, and his parents were most likely illiterate. He was a gifted student and graduated in 1903 from Samuel Huston College, one of the first all-black private colleges in Texas. He subsequently married Mylie De Pre Adams. After her death, Browne moved to New York City, where he lived in Harlem and worked for the Quartermaster Corps of the U.S. War Department. Throughout his life, he read and studied widely and worked with Arthur Schomburg, Marcus Garvey, and many others in the emerging black nationalist movements and the Harlem Renaissance. His collaboration with Garvey led Browne to become the editor of Garvey’s magazine, *The Negro World*.

In 1919, Browne published the book *The Mystery of Space*, which made it clear that his social commitment was borne of a deeper spiritual conviction. This publication was initially well received, but when it became known that Browne was a black man, public interest in the book waned. Browne settled in Brooklyn, where he began wearing a turban and calling himself Mulla Hanaranda. Marble argues that Browne left Harlem because of this racial discrimination. He established a lively correspondence with Arvid Reuterdahl, who was himself a Freemason and Theosophist. Reuterdahl was also an engineer. Together, Browne and Reuterdahl founded the Acedemy of Nations (AON). Their goal was to develop a science that would provide access to the transcendental secrets. Although the AON was initially successful and even opened a branch in Germany, it was discontinued due to lack of funding.

In Browne’s larger plan, the AON was the middle of three institutions that would advance humanity. In his later work, particularly *The Pantelicon*, his second major work, he advocated the idea of establishing a “telistic civilization” that would lead humanity to the realization of its true potential. The three institutions mentioned above were intended to further this goal. As Marble points out, the idea of a “telistic civilization” was part of contemporary discourse around 1920. The “telistic civilization” can be briefly described as an avant-garde society based on mutual love and acceptance. This idea is not unlike the Theosophical views on the “brotherhood of man” and the ideas about the Theosophical Masters.

Browne, who had already joined the Army in 1903, was called to duty to the Philippines in 1933 as a purchasing officer. During World War II, he was captured by the Japanese in 1942 and taken to the Santo Tomas Internment Camp in Manila. Already in the Manila camp, prison conditions were poor, but

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29 Marble, *Hermes of Harlem*, p. 60 et seq.
30 For a discussion of the Masters in Theosophy and in the wider context of Master disciple relations, See Mühlematter, *Accelerating Human Evolution*. 
they became much worse when Browne and many others were transferred to the notorious Los Baños internment camp. During this time, Browne lectured to the other inmates on Theosophy and spirituality and expounded his own occult philosophy. He also helped his fellow prisoners overcome their hunger by teaching them visualization techniques. The ordeal came to an end in 1945 when American soldiers freed the prisoners. Upon his return to the United States, Browne remarried and adopted a Philippian daughter. He refined and expanded his ideas in the years that followed, and in 1947 founded his Hermetic Society, for which he published a revised edition of *The Pantelicon* that became the Society’s foundational text. Browne died in 1978, and his Hermetic Society is still active, although little can be found on the Internet about its activities.

### 3 What is “Theosophy”?

Marble claims that “Browne’s occult philosophy was almost entirely derived from his study of Theosophy.” There are several difficulties with this argument. First, one would need to know what “Theosophy” is (see below). Second, this view marginalizes numerous other contexts, and also Browne’s own agency. Browne’s oeuvre is complex and full of ramifications that include Theosophy, Christianity, physics, mathematics, and philosophy. It would require a monograph of its own to give his work the attention it deserves. However, even a cursory glance at Browne’s *The Mystery of Space* shows that while Theosophy was the inspiration for some of Browne’s concepts, these are to be understood as structurally related rather than coherent in content, and no direct connection to the Theosophical Society can be demonstrated at present, either biographically or in terms of content. I argue – using the language of the tool introduced above – that while Browne’s ideas, which he develops in *The Mystery of Space*, have a “structure” that can be called “Theosophical,” it is at the same time interspersed with numerous “elements” that have been “recontextualized” within that “structure.” From this “process of hybridization,” new knowledge emerged through the establishment of new and altered relations. Given the scope of this article, I only summarize the main points of *The Mystery of Space* and then discuss in more detail one brief excerpt in which Browne discusses “consciousness” in the context of “evolution,” both of which are also important concepts of Theosophy.

32 Marble, *Hermes of Harlem*, p. 60 et seq.
33 Marble, *Hermes of Harlem*, p. 60.
As I have argued above, the notion that Browne derived his ideas almost entirely from Theosophy is difficult to sustain in at least two respects: 1) on which authors should we base our concepts of “Theosophy” and 2) how can we discuss the differences with this “Theosophy” without considering other encounters that took place in the development of Browne’s ideas. To 1): The Theosophical Society was the most influential institution in the field of occult currents around 1900. It was founded by Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891) and Henry Steel Olcott (1832–1907) in 1875 in New York. Olcott became the Society’s president and Blavatsky its “corresponding secretary.” Although she was accused of fraud and plagiarism in several cases, she remained the spiritual leader of the Theosophical Society until her death in 1891. In her two most important publications, *Isis Unveiled* (1877) and *The Secret Doctrine* (1888), she set forth the foundational texts of the Theosophical Society. However, the situation is much more complicated. *Isis Unveiled* had almost no significance in the Theosophical Society after its relocation to India in 1878 (only three years after its founding) and the beginning of the publication of *The Theosophist* in 1879. Moreover, the Theosophical Society never formulated a coherent set of teachings; at the same time, the inner-Theosophical narrative holds to this day that it is a heterodox institution that accepts any creed and is open to discussion. In the period between the first publication of *The Theosophist* and Blavatsky’s *The Secret Doctrine*, several authors, including Alfred Percy Sinnett (1840–1921), Tallapragada Subba Row (1856–1890), and Anna Bonus Kingsford (1846–1888), actively negotiated numerous issues pertaining to the Theosophical worldview. These discussions continued after the publication of *The Secret Doctrine*, and Blavatsky’s work gradually became less important to the Theosophical teachings in the post-Blavatsky period, in which Annie Besant, who joined the Theosophical Society in 1889, played one of the most important roles. Shortly before her death in 1891, Blavatsky appointed Annie Besant as her successor. When Olcott died in 1907, Besant was elected president of the Theosophical Society. As successor to H. P. Blavatsky and president of the Theosophical Society from 1907 until her death in 1933, Besant had a major impact on the history of the Theosophical Society.

34 For a full list of the elected officers, see Campbell, *Ancient Wisdom Revived*, p. 28; Godwin, *Theosophical Enlightenment*, p. 281.
35 Ransom, *History of the Theosophical Society*, p. 82.
36 Mühlematter, *Accelerating Human Evolution*.
39 There are several biographies on Besant. The most comprehensive, which is rather faction than scholarly, is the one by Arthur Nethercot, two volumes: Nethercot, *The First Five Lives of Annie Besant*; Nethercot, *The Last Four Lives of Annie Besant*. A later biography by Anne
her wake the other leading Theosophists, based their claims to authority on a narrative that portrayed Blavatsky as an initiate of the “Universal Brotherhood.” This Brotherhood was supposedly a circle of masters who were the keepers of the perennial ancient wisdom. The Theosophical masters were conceptualized as evolutionarily highly developed human beings: According to the Theosophical account, on the usual evolutionary path, it would take almost countless reincarnations to reach the level of a master. At the same time, the masters were understood as teachers who conveyed their wisdom to others through education. In Theosophy, the idea of evolutionary progress was linked to a conception of evolution as self-development, leading to initiation into the Ancient Wisdom at the higher stages of that evolution. In Besant’s concept of the “Quickening of Evolution,” this path of self-development was elaborated, which would accelerate individual evolution.

Given her relevance for Theosophy, in the following I will deliberately focus on the work of Annie Besant. I am aware that this may not be entirely accurate in the American context, since the American branch of the Theosophical Society split from the Theosophical Society (Adyar) in 1891, long before Browne wrote The Mystery of Space. But given Besant’s importance to Theosophy in general and the development of ideas about “evolution” and the “expansion of consciousness” in particular, the focus on Besant’s work seems justified.

4 Browne’s The Mystery of Space

The Mystery of Space was first published in 1919. In it, Browne discusses the possibility of a fourth dimension and the possible n-dimensionality of space. The book is divided into two parts, each consisting of five chapters. In the first part, Browne discusses what he calls “the Hyperspace Movement” derived from non-Euclidean geometry. The second part, called “an inquiry into the essential nature of space as distinguished from the mathematical interpretation,” is mainly about “consciousness” and “evolution.”

Browne argues that “mental evolution” can be divided into three parts: the “formative stage,” the “determinative stage,” and the “stage of freedom or the elaborative stage.” In the formative stage, the mind as such was developed;
in the determinative stage that followed, the mind solved the problems of human existence and developed religion, science, and art. Browne argues that the world is now entering the final stage of this development. His main argument is that for all these stages certain actions, skills, and specific kinds of knowledge were constitutive. Especially between the last two stages, there is a shift from mere thought to real knowledge. One of the signs that this last stage has been reached, according to Browne, is that the ideas of the fourth or n-dimensions and hyperspace liberate the mind and point to the "upward strivings of the Thinker for that sublime perpetuity which is always the property of immediate knowledge."46

For Browne, however, the ideas about hyperspace as well as the ideas about three-dimensionality are not opposites, nor are they absolutely "true" or absolutely "right," but they are relative. As he puts it, "all knowledge gained in a condition short of divinity itself is sadly relative."47 Rather, he compares mathematics and reasoning about hyperspace to "those religious and occult exercises known as 'meditations.'"48 In his view, these are exercises that can help the "Thinker" take the next step in his development. Nevertheless, he believes that the higher levels of existence, and of consciousness, are organized in three dimensions rather than otherwise.49 For Browne, one should gradually turn away from intellectual analysis to explore the basis of that intellect, in his words its "origin." This should be done through "intuition." "This can result in nothing less than the complete spiritualization of man's mental outlook and the consequent inevitable recognition of the underlying and ever-sustaining one-ness of all vital manifestations."50 "One-ness" is the central concept in this quotation. For oneness is the keynote not only of Ernst Haeckel's monism, but also of Besant's Theosophy and of Paul Carus' reception of Buddhism. All these are included in the "already hybrids" on which Browne builds his ideas.51

Ernst Heinrich Philipp August Haeckel (1834–1919) was the most influential proponent of Darwinism in Germany, and his publications on the theory of evolution were widely disseminated in German and in numerous translations. He held two doctorates, one in medicine and one in zoology. In 1865 he was appointed full professor in zoology at the University of Jena.52 His theory

44 Browne, Mystery, p. 31 et seq.
45 Browne, Mystery, p. 28.
46 Browne, Mystery, p. 33.
47 Browne, Mystery, p. 36.
48 Browne, Mystery, p. 33.
49 Browne, Mystery, p.172 et seq.
50 Browne, Mystery, p. 40.
51 Browne, Mystery, p. 41.
52 Levit/Hossfeld, Ernst Haeckel.
of monism, which states that spirit and matter are two aspects of the same essence, was extremely influential in the reception of evolutionism-Darwinism among the general public, but especially in “esotericism,” as was his idea that evolution is recapitulated in the growth of each embryo.53

One of those who received Haeckel’s concepts was Paul Carus (1852–1919). He was instrumental in spreading Buddhist ideas in 19th century Europe and especially in North America. In his 1885 book on monism, he took up Haeckel’s theory and discussed it in light of Kant’s notion of *a priori* and *a posteriori*. He stated that monism was the idea that everything in the world could be traced back to a single source. This was a direct rejection of dualism. Carus held that science and religion were merely perspectives on the same subject and that both would ultimately understand and merge into the idea of monism. Based on his idea that everything was one and that man was part of a single reality, he maintained that there was no first cause – a God who would create something – and instead introduced the term “finis,” by which he identified a purpose in the universe that could be known through reason. The understanding of this purpose through reason would lead to a striving for a higher existence. In his scheme of this striving, the idea of striving for “the ideal” was essential. The realization of this ideal would lead people to live a virtuous life aimed at establishing unity. After his participation in the World Parliament of Religions in 1893, where Carus came into contact with numerous representatives of Buddhism and “Hinduism,” he refined his idea of the “religion of science” with regard to Asian religions. The journal he edited, *The Open Court*, began to deal extensively with Buddhism after 1893 and became one of the most important sources for the spread of Buddhism in North America.54 His ideas on the progress of humanity and the pursuit of “an ideal” are not unlike Annie Besant’s ideas on the “Quickening of Evolution.” Paul Carus’ teaching would be another paradigmatic example of a bundle of interlocking hybridization processes. Now, however, we turn back to Browne’s work.

An important distinction in Browne’s thought is that between *a priori* and *a posteriori*, for him “all thought [be it abstract or concrete] is a posterioristic.”55 This statement is directly related to a critique of Carus’ notion of *a priori*. Which, in Browne’s reading of Carus, is equated with “abstract thought.”56 For Browne, then, it is not “thinking” that can be *a priori*, but rather the basic functionality of the mind that is *a priori*. In Browne’s words, “The a priori is

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54 Haller, *Buddha’s midwife*.
56 Browne, *Mystery*, p. 110 et seq.
what the mind is by nature: the a posteriori is what the mind becomes. It is the mind-content."57

The difference between the prior and final stages of evolution makes “intuition.”58 Based on his distinction of a priori and a posteriori, Browne claims that “thinking” belongs to the a posteriori and “intuition” to the a priori. Only through “intuition” can the “Thinker” gain deeper access to the “be-ness” of things. In Browne’s words: When the “space-mind” is better developed and the “Thinker” gains insight through “intuition” instead of “thinking” with the “brain-mind,” he will perceive more clearly.59 According to Browne, the “space-mind” is that which is unchanging and “one with the divine mind of the kosmos [sic!].”60 This “fact” will be recognized by him through the “expansion of consciousness,” which is a result of evolution. This expansion will eventually lead the “Thinker” to recognize the unity of everything.61

Even a cursory examination reveals numerous “traces of hybridization” in Browne’s work. First, his terminology, not least his use of “space” and the word “kosmogenesis [sic!],” indicates a reception of Blavatsky’s The Secret Doctrine.62 These “elements” were “recontextualized” in his evolutionary structure of the realization of “unity” by the “thinker” through “intuition.” However, the details of his account also differ in significant ways from Blavatsky’s, notably his ideas about the “pyknon” and how it governs in- and evolution as well as his notion of the “brain-mind” and the “space-mind” are absent from Blavatsky’s cosmogenesis. Second, there are several “references” directly to Paul Carus. “References” were introduced above as “traces of hybridization.” Browne came across his conception of “monism” in Carus’ texts and adopted some of it in his work. Similarly, “evolution” and “unity” are “de- and recontextualization” by Browne. All this can be read as “traces of hybridization.” The same is true of a priori and a posteriori, terms closely associated with Kantian philosophy but, as we have seen above, also adopted by Carus. “Monism” can here be called a “structure,” while the terms a priori and a posteriori can be identified as “elements.” Their occurrence in various authors from Kant to Haeckel and Carus to Browne paradigmatically illustrates the idea of “already hybrids.” It is important to note that neither the “structures” nor the “elements” have the same meaning in the works by different authors, but that they are part of the ongoing metaprocess of hybridization.” This metaprocess creates new and altered

57 Browne, Mystery, p. 112.
58 Browne, Mystery, p. 115.
60 Browne, Mystery, p. 200.
61 Browne, Mystery, p. 207.
relations, affecting both chronologically earlier and chronologically later authors and their concepts.

5 “Evolution” and “Consciousness”

When we turn to Browne’s conception of “evolution” in general and his conception of “consciousness” in particular, it becomes clear that his work should be understood as the result of multiple, interlocking “processes of hybridization” rather than a unilateral dependence on Theosophy. Browne understands evolution as a process in which “faculties” are developed. This evolution, in his view, increases in speed because people actively work on the development of their “faculties.” The idea of developing “faculties” is also found in Annie Besant’s work. However, it is closely related to her concept of karma, which is not found in Browne’s work. The development of these “faculties” corresponds in The Mystery of Space with the “expansion of consciousness” and the ability of the “Thinker” to perceive “reality.” The “expansion of consciousness” is the basic idea of Besant’s idea of initiation (see below), which is at the heart of her Quickening of Evolution. Browne prominently discusses two “faculties” which he calls “egotopsyche” and “omnopsyche.” Both “elements” are absent in Besant’s Theosophy. The former belongs to the idea of “separateness” and the latter to “unity.”

The egopsyche is the I-making faculty, [...] The omnopsyche is the organism of kosmic consciousness, the space-mind, or man’s higher self and that which connects with or allies him to all life; [...] In it are stored up the memories of the Thinker’s past, the secrets of life, mind, being, reality, and the history of life from the beginning; [...] it passes from plane to plane, from stage to stage, and from form to form.

Interestingly, this is one of the rare occasions when Browne expresses an idea of “reincarnation” or “transmigration” – one of the corner stones of Theosophical evolutionism. He uses neither of those terms explicitly. It also remains rather unclear how he envisions the process of transmigration of the soul “from form to form.” The connection between the “Thinker” and the “omnopsyche” also remains vague. Sometimes they seem to be used synonymously and sometimes, as in the quote above, they seem to be understood as separable.

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63 Browne, Mystery, p. 251 et seq.
64 C.f. e.g. Besant, Karma, p. 43.
65 Browne, Mystery, p. 258.
In *The Mystery of Space*, “evolution” is closely related to “consciousness” whereas bodily existence is not discussed in detail. He mentions only the “septenary enveilment of consciousness” (see figure 5). As a result, topics such as “different bodies” or “what happens to these bodies after death” and (re)incarnation – which feature commonly in Theosophy – are not prominently mentioned in his work.

The process of expanding consciousness is illustrated with a diagram (see figure 6) that symbolizes the connection between growing consciousness and the increasing perception of “oneness” as the ultimate “reality.” Browne presents seven different forms of consciousness, each corresponding to a particular stage of evolutionary development. As the expansion of consciousness increases, one will perceive less and less differentiation. This process will lead to the realization that everything is one and that there is no differentiation at all. If one follows intuition, the rate at which consciousness expands increases. Thus, Browne develops an idea of “evolution” as a process that can be directly influenced by human effort. Following this idea, he asserts that soon “the intuitional will make for union, for the brotherhood of man, for co-operation and for the common weal.”

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**Figure 5** Septenary Enveilment of Consciousness

BROWNE, *MYSTERY*, P. 274

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In Theosophy the question of bodily existence is of great importance. The idea of the sevenfold constitution of man as one of the key themes of Theosophy has led to numerous discussions and disputes within the Theosophical Society around 1900. It is therefore striking that Browne does not discuss this idea in detail. Consequently, it stands to reason that he was not aware of these debates or that he did not consider them relevant. One has to consider that these debates happened about thirty years before Browne wrote *The Mystery of Space*. However, it can be stated that Browne “transferred” the number seven and the idea that there are seven “enveilments” into his idea of “expansion of consciousness.” The language of the “veil” is also widely used in Theosophy, just think of *Isis Unveiled*, one of Blavatsky’s most important publications. But in these cases, this language is usually connected with the idea of “unveiling”

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68 For a general discussion of the seven-fold constitution, see Chajes, *Saptaparna*.
69 In Besant’s work e.g. in Besant, *Karma*, p. 31.
the “truth.” In Besant’s work, it is primarily associated with her concept of māyā.⁷⁰ Thus, the language of “veiling” in Browne’s work is used in an altered context which is indicative of a “process of hybridization” (recontextualization). This is part and parcel of the “metaprocess of hybridization” – in the singular – and is accompanied by numerous other “processes of hybridization” – in the plural – such as translation and relationalization (see Chapter 1). He adopted some “elements,” including the number seven and the idea of “enveilment,” and recontextualized them in his notion of evolution, which can be described as “structure.” On the same complex of the idea of “bodies” and “enveilment”: it is noticeable that Browne almost never speaks of reincarnation. A concept that is central to Theosophy,⁷¹ especially with regard to human self-development and “evolution” in Annie Besant’s Theosophy.⁷²

The “expansion of consciousness” in Besant’s Theosophy is equated with “initiation” into “higher knowledge.” This is closely associated with the Theosophical masters in her “Quickening of Evolution.”⁷³ Although “higher knowledge” and the “expansion of consciousness” are linked in Browne’s work, a direct link to initiation and the Theosophical masters is missing. Only the mention of the “brotherhood of man” suggests a closer connection, but this is not elaborated in The Mystery of Space. Browne’s evolutionism thus comes without two of the cornerstones, the Theosophical masters and reincarnation, of Theosophical evolutionism. In this respect he is closer to Carus’ idea of self-improvement, which he calls meliorism.⁷⁴

It can be seen that Browne’s structures (evolution, expansion of consciousness) are “transferred” from Theosophy to his The Mystery of Space and also several “elements” including “unity” and the “Thinker” are “decontextualized” from Theosophy and “recontextualized” in his work. These “elements” and “structures” are brought into new and altered relations with various other “structures” and “elements,” creating new knowledge. We can see that Browne establishes certain “hierarchical relationizings” of his theory to “non-euclidian” mathematics, to Carus’ monism, and to evolutionism in general. By doing so he claims a superior position for his system of thought. All of these can be understood as “traces of hybridization” which point towards numerous “encounters” and “connections” of several “discursive fields” in Browne’s work.⁷⁵

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⁷⁰ C.f. e.g. Besant, Ancient Wisdom, p. 53.
⁷¹ For its importance in Blavatsky’s oeuvre, see Chajes, Recycled Lives.
⁷² E.g. Besant, Reincarnation; Besant, Seven Principles of Man, p. 69; Besant, Ancient Wisdom, p. 167.
⁷³ Mühlematter, Accelerating Human Evolution, pp. 141–170.
⁷⁴ For the simplest definition of meliorism, see Carus, Monism and Meliorism, p. 5.
⁷⁵ The notions of “encounters” and “discursive fields” are additional parts of “hybridization” which I elaborated elsewhere. See, Mühlematter, Accelerating Human Evolution.
6 Conclusion

A close look at Browne’s *The Mystery of Space* shows that he was familiar with Theosophy, but that he developed his own theory in *The Mystery of Space* at the latest. Theosophy was certainly of great importance to Browne, but the idea that his theory “was almost entirely derived from his study of Theosophy”\(^{76}\) must be put into perspective. It is evident that he also received the work of Paul Carus and that his ideas on *a priori* and *a posteriori* as well as his concept of monism are part of a multilayered line of reception from Darwin to Haeckel to Carus. *The Mystery of Space* should therefore be read as a textual manifestation of manifold interlocking hybridization processes.

As I have tried to show, “Theosophy” is not monolithic, but – like any “religion” – embedded in interlocking, ongoing “processes of hybridization.” I propose to understand “hybridization” – in the sense of a metaprocess and integral part of all discourses – as the totality of these ongoing “processes of hybridization.” Such a perspective allows us to focus on change and discontinuity rather than stability and fixity. At the same time, the advantage of the present analytical tool is that it is able to focus on both, identifying “structures” and “elements” (continuity) that are brought into new and changed relationships (discontinuity). It also allows us to understand non-hegemonic works such as Browne’s *The Mystery of Space* as unique textual manifestations due to numerous encounters influenced by the agency of the actors involved in them and realized connections of different discursive fields.

The central merit of the analysis tool and the language it offers over other attempts to make “hybridity” methodologically visible is that it helps us to accurately identify “already hybrids” at the textual level and describe their “movement.” This saves us from making general statements – such as that Browne derived his ideas entirely from Theosophy – that might crumble when examined at the micro level. The tool helps deconstruct such statements and reveal their inadequacy. It can also help to show individual agency, e.g., in Browne’s case, how he hierarchically “relates” his theory to other systems of thought.

Bio

Yves Mühlmatter holds a PhD in religious studies. He is an expert on hybridization processes in the nineteenth-century British Empire. He is strongly interested in postcolonial studies, translation studies, and global historical approaches. His main focus is on the construction of “Hinduism” in exchange

\(^{76}\) Marble, *Hermes of Harlem*, p. 60.
with non-hegemonic currents such as the Theosophical Society. He is an expert on Annie Besant and her educational endeavors in India. He is also an educationalist and works on education for sustainable development. His current project deals with (utopian and dystopian) conceptions of the future and their influence on conceptions of education.

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