ANNIE BESANT'S QUEST FOR TRUTH:

CHRISTIANITY, SECULARISM, AND NEW AGE THOUGHT

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines the intellectual coherence of Annie Besant's life in such a way as to explore the rise of New Age thought in its relation to the Victorian crisis of faith. Scholars typically present Besant's life in terms of a series of commitments to incompatible movements, notably secularism, socialism, and theosophy. They explain her involvement in these movements by reference to her emotional needs, not to beliefs she held for reasons that made sense to her. In contrast, this essay suggests her life was a quest for truth, where the requirements she placed on the truth arose from her early break with Christianity, and where her social situation placed constraints on the sorts of movements through which she might pursue her quest. From this perspective, New Age thought appears as an intelligible response to the same crisis of faith that underlay much Victorian secularism.

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Annie Besant was arguably the most famous, or rather infamous, woman of her age.* For much of the 1870s and 1880s, she promoted the secularist cause with remarkable vigour. She became a vice-president of the National Secular Society, the members of which thought almost as highly of her as they did of Charles Bradlaugh, the president. In 1889, however, she joined the Theosophical Society in a sensational move that shocked even her closest friends. Eventually she became president of the Theosophical Society, the members of which again revered her almost as much as they did its prophet, Madame Blavatsky. Besant moved from the materialist atheism of the secularists to the New Age thought of the theosophists. All of her previous biographers have emphasised the contrast between these two sets of beliefs. They have been unable to recover any coherence in her activities within the secularist, Fabian, and theosophical movements. Indeed, they have spoken of her many lives, as though she wandered aimlessly, if enthusiastically, from cause to cause with no guiding theme whatsoever. When they do look for a pattern in her life, they typically turn not to her reasons for doing what she did, but rather to her hidden needs, such as to follow a dominant man or to exercise her powers.[1] They turn to her emotional make-up to explain her final flight from reason, and they then explain her earlier commitments by reference to the emotions they have uncovered. In contrast, I hope to represent Besant's life as a reasoned quest for truth in the context of the Victorian crisis of faith and the social concerns it helped to raise. Besant, with her secularism, Fabianism, and theosophy, was very much of her time, for whilst the early part of Queen Victoria's reign was shaped by a religious movement to make Britain a truly Christian nation and a political movement to make Britain a democratic nation, the later part of her reign took its shape from the need to find both a faith capable of

surviving the rationalist onslaught and solutions to the social problems an extended franchise had failed to solve.

To reinterpret Besant in this way is not only to rescue her from the condescension of posterity, but also to point to more general arguments about the history of New Age thought. The New Age movement is characterised by things such as a holistic worldview, a fascination with eastern and folk spirituality, an interest in natural magic, including alternative medicine, and a concern to devise new ways of living together. Most scholars correctly see the New Age movement as a modern form of occultism inspired above all by theosophy. The Theosophical Society transformed the occult tradition in a way that has inspired a wide variety of New Age figures and groups.[2] It has inspired Celtic occultists and authors such as W. B. Yeats; through one of its offshoots, the Krishnamurti movement, it has inspired authors and New Age thinkers such as Aldous Huxley; and through another of its offshoots, Rudolph Steiner's Anthroposophical Society, it has inspired New Age thinkers and activists such as Sir George Trevelyan. The Theosophical Society stands behind much of what we now consider to be the New Age movement. Thus, one way of exploring historical questions about the nature of the New Age movement is by looking at theosophy. Certainly I want to use a reinterpretation of Besant to cast light on the rise of the New Age movement in relation to the Victorian crisis of faith. Of course, no intellectual biography can do justice to the way vast social transformations, such as industrialisation and urbanization, affected the changing structure of religious belief in Victorian Britain.[3] Nonetheless, my interest lies in the emergence of New Age thought as a problem in the history of ideas. What reasons did people have for coming to believe in occult forces and eastern spirituality? How do the reasons they had for doing so relate to the reasons they had for turning away from Christian beliefs? To tackle these questions, we have to use intellectual biography; we have to explore the ways in which people came to accept New Age ideas; we have to understand how their reasoning, shaped by their social and cultural contexts, made

New Age ideas seem compelling to them. We can begin to understand the place of New Age thought in history, therefore, by asking why Besant turned from secularism to theosophy, and how her reasons for doing so relate to the reasons she earlier had for turning from Christianity to secularism.

To investigate the place of New Age thought in the history of ideas is to raise important issues about the nature of rationality. Historians often dismiss the whole occult tradition, and especially its recent manifestations, as a flight from reason.[4] Inspired by Enlightenment assumptions, they suggest once modern science arose it constituted the seat of human reason, so forms of thinking clearly opposed to science should be dismissed as flights of fancy. The Enlightenment belief in an objective rationality has led historians to approach modern occultism as if it had to be a product of charlatans, irrational emotions, and the like. Nowadays, however, philosophers and historians alike are increasingly sceptical of the idea of objective rationality. In particular, many scholars now stress that because we can not have pure perceptions, and because the meaning of our terms depend on one another, therefore what we would count as confirmation of any given proposition must vary with our other beliefs.[5] Thus, what it is rational for one to believe must depend on one's intellectual commitments and the problems one sets oneself. There is no body of objectively valid theories everyone must accept at a given historical juncture if they are to be considered rational. Rather, there always are a number of competing bodies of theories each of which can be held rationally, and a decision between which can be made at best only with hindsight in the light of their later development.[6] Nonetheless, to renounce objective rationality as a tool of historical interpretation is not also to renounce a weaker, subjective or contextual rationality. On the contrary, even critics of objective rationality typically argue that a concern with consistency, a concern to organise one's beliefs in accord with one's own notion of best belief, is a necessary feature of all bodies of belief.[7] Thus, historians can begin to explain why people change their beliefs in the ways they do by showing how their doing so made sense in

the context of the other beliefs they held and the particular problems they set themselves. Perhaps, therefore, historians should begin to approach modern occultism not as a flight from an objective reason, but as a reasonable response to a particular social and cultural context. We can begin to do this by presenting Besant's life as a coherent quest for truth in the context of a particular set of problems and commitments.

If we are to study Besant to point to a more general view of the rise of the New Age movement in relation to Christianity and secularism, we must consider how typical she was. On the one hand, the unique nature of her quest for truth is what makes her of such interest. Because she played such a prominent role in not only the National Secular Society but also the Theosophical Society, she provides us with a single life in which we have a clear example of the two historical processes we are concerned with, namely, secularisation and the rise of New Age thought. Her life embodies the relationship between secularism and theosophy. On the other hand, we can use her life to point to more general conclusions only because in many ways she was true to type. The reasons she had for renouncing Christianity for secularism and then for turning to theosophy are fairly typical of contemporary secularists and theosophists. Here I will suggest the basic dilemmas she faced were those at the heart of the Victorian crisis of faith, and, in addition, I will refer throughout to other people who were attracted to the movements she was and for reasons similar to hers.

In what follows, therefore, I want to bring out the continuities in Besant's varied intellectual commitments in a way that casts light on the relationship of secularism and New Age thought as contrasting responses to the Victorian crisis of faith. To begin, I will look at her personal crisis of faith and how it set up the particular body of intellectual commitments and questions that dominated the rest of her life. Next I will consider how her social and cultural location pushed her towards certain types of organisations among those which might have enabled her to respect these commitments and answer these questions. Then I will show her secularism,

Fabianism, and theosophy all constituted ways of coping with the commitments and questions she took out of her crisis of faith. The unity of her life lay, therefore, not in the need for a man or a higher egoism, nor in any other emotional drive, but rather in a stable set of intellectual commitments and questions. Her life suggests we should see the New Age movement not as an emotional abdication of reason, but as a reasonable response to the same crisis of faith that inspired much Victorian secularism.

The Dilemmas Posed

Annie Besant (nee Wood) was born in 1847 to a largely Irish and entirely middle-class family then living in London.[8] Her father remained something of a religious sceptic, while her mother moved from evangelicalism to theological liberalism, slowly rejecting doctrines such as Biblical infallibility, eternal damnation, vicarious atonement, and the equality of the Son with the Father in the Trinity. Annie herself had a rigorous evangelical upbringing under the watchful eye of Miss Marryat, a spinster with whom she lived following the death of her father in 1852. Miss Marryat allowed no books on Sundays other than the Bible and Sunday at Home, and her charges soon learnt the theatre was a devilish thing. Annie absorbed the religious spirit of the house, freely determining never to go to a dance even if someone invited her to do so. Later she recalled how 'the strong and intense Evangelicalism of Miss Marryat coloured the whole of my early religious thought'.[9] Nonetheless, she thoroughly enjoyed the ritualism, incense, and pomp of Roman Catholicism, all of which she witnessed when visiting Paris in 1862. Indeed, soon after leaving Miss Marryat, she turned to Anglo-Catholic ideas and practices, poring over the works of the Church Fathers, having Keble replace Milton as her favourite writer, beginning to fast regularly, and even flagellating herself to see whether or not she could withstand the pain she might have to face if she ever were called upon to be martyred, a fate for which she yearned.

Annie first tasted the forbidden fruit of doubt while passing through her High Church phase. She set out to throw her mind back to the original events of Holy Week in order to relive them for herself. To aid her efforts, she tried to produce a single table of happenings out of the four gospels. Imagine her horror when she discovered, as many had before her, that the gospels contained disparities, that the gospels could not be harmonised. After a brief time of confusion, she quelled her doubts by telling herself God had placed inconsistencies in the gospels as a test of faith. She settled down to her old life of sacrifice to, and service of, Christ. 'To serve Him through His Church became more and more a definite ideal in my life, and my thoughts began to turn towards some kind of "religious life", in which I might prove my love by sacrifice and turn my passionate gratitude into active service.'[10] With these thoughts, she drifted into marriage with Frank Besant, an evangelical clergyman then working as a school teacher. She hardly knew the man, disliked the thought of leaving her mother, and became engaged partly as a result of a confusion. However, she went through with the marriage because she thought priests verged on the divine, and marrying one would enable her to devote herself more fully to Church and poor. Mutual sexual ignorance and her husband's domineering character ensured their marriage was not a success. Besant, however, doted on their two children. Then, in 1871, the younger child fell violently ill and Besant herself collapsed in exhaustion after she had nursed the child back to health. Her collapse was mental as well as physical. An unhappy marriage had set her thinking about suffering in the world, and her daughter's agony had reinforced her puzzlement.[11] How, she wondered, could a merciful God allow such pain? Her struggle with doubt lasted just over three years and nearly cost her her life through both illness and suicide. No other time in her much varied life was of such importance. 'It was a hell to live through,' she later recalled:

> No one who has not felt it knows the fearful anguish inflicted by doubt on the earnestly religious soul. There is in life no other pain so horrible, so keen in

> its torture, so crushing in its weight. It seems to shipwreck everything, to destroy the one steady gleam of happiness 'on the other side' that no earthly storm could obscure; to make all life gloomy with a horror of despair, a darkness that verily may be felt. Nothing but an imperious intellectual and moral necessity can drive into doubt a religious mind, for it is as though an earthquake shook the foundations of the soul, and the very being quivers and sways under the shock. No life in the empty sky; no gleam in the blackness of the night, no voice to break the deadly silence; no hand outstretched to save. Empty-brained triflers who have never tried to think, who take their creed as they take their fashions, speak of Atheism as the outcome of foul life and vicious desires. In their shallow heartlessness and shallower thought they cannot even dimly imagine the anguish of entering the mere penumbra of the Eclipse of Faith, much less the horror of that great darkness in which the orphaned soul cries out into the infinite emptiness: 'Is it a Devil that has made the world? Is the echo, "Children, ye have no Father," true? Is it all blind chance, is all the clash of unconscious forces, or are we the sentient toys of an Almighty Power that sports with our agony, whose peals of awful mockery of laughter ring back answers to the wailings of our despair?'[12]

She would spend the rest of her life looking for answers to the questions raised by her doubts.

Besant discussed her doubts with a liberal cleric, a friend of her husband's, who suggested she read F. D. Maurice and even J. S. Mill while also assuring her that Biblical references to hell-fire were purely symbolic. Soon she determined that never again would she say 'I believe' unless she had proved to herself the truth of what she affirmed. She decided to look at various Christian dogmas to see if they were demonstrably true. The four dogmas upon which she focused embodied the eye of the storm of Victorian doubt. They were the idea of eternal damnation and eternal punishment; the nature of goodness, and whether or not one could reconcile the idea

of a good and loving God with the sin and misery found here on earth; the morality of the atonement and the associated idea of vicarious suffering; and whether or not the holy scriptures were inspired, and if so then in what sense. As she explored these issues, so she left behind even the liberal Christianity of her husband's friend.

We can unpack Besant's doubts in terms of the questions she asked and the sorts of answers she required. Her most basic question concerned the inspiration of the Bible. She recalled her attempt to harmonise the gospels and questioned their historical veracity. She read Renan's study of the historical life of Jesus followed by several more academic works of historical criticism, most of which suggested the Bible did not offer a record of events as seen by eye-witnesses. Furthermore, she took a keen interest in recent scientific discoveries, including the theory of evolution, which clearly contradicted several Biblical doctrines. Later she recalled how 'Darwin had done much towards freeing me from my old bonds.'[13]

Her reasons for questioning the truth of the Bible pointed towards certain requirements for an adequate account of the physical nature of the universe. In general, because she rejected Christianity as untrue, she saw her life as a quest for Truth. The Bible could not act as an authoritative guide to human understanding, so an abstract concept of truth stepped in to fill the breach. We are so used today to judge opinions or theories as right or wrong according to their relationship to various abstract concepts of truth that we might not appreciate the nature and significance of this change. When Besant ceased to judge her beliefs in terms of revealed religion, she elevated truth into an almost religious ideal to be put before all other considerations. Thus, when people later attacked her atheism as negative, she replied that humans should live in accord with truth, not superstition: 'it is an error,' she explained, 'to regard my truth as negative and barren, for all truth is positive and fruitful'.[14] Truth provided an ideal by which to live one's life. She even wanted her tomb to bear the epitaph 'She Tried To Follow Truth.' More particularly, an account of the physical nature of the universe could not be considered true unless it were

compatible with modern science and especially a theory of evolution. She had rejected Christianity because the supernatural revelations of the Bible did not accord with the empirical discoveries of the natural and human sciences. From now on, she would accept only natural accounts of the universe. Supernatural explanations were unacceptable.

Besant did not suffer from scientific doubts alone. Her concerns were also moral. Here she strove to reconcile theological doctrines such as vicarious atonement and eternal punishment with what she took to be the necessary characteristics of a world made by a just and loving God. She believed the dogma of the atonement contained vital moral truths: the life of Christ revealed both an impulse to self-sacrifice and the willingness of the strong to help the weak. Yet the moral core of the dogma was surrounded by rotten, immoral pulp. The very idea that we needed to atone for our sins implied God was sufficiently vengeful and cruel to require us to pay Him off with pain and anguish. Besides, she could think of no moral grounds on which God could hold us to blame for our sins when we were only what He had made us. And anyway, the vicarious nature of Christ's atonement vitiated any moral content in the sacrifice since there was no justice when 'the person sacrificed is not even the guilty party'.[15] The doctrine of eternal punishment was worse still; it lacked even a core of moral truth; it was 'thoroughly and essentially bad'.[16] Besant revolted against the idea that individuals could spend eternity suffering for finite sins with neither a chance to repent nor any prospect of their situation improving no matter how righteous or moral they might become. Once again, God could not be as vengeful and cruel as the Bible suggested. Besant's final moral qualm centred on the old problem of a loving and omnipotent God overlooking an evil world. Together these considerations led her to conclude Christianity was false. One Christian doctrine - the belief in a moral God - contradicted not only other Christian doctrines - the vicarious atonement and eternal damnation - but also observable fact - the existence of evil.

The moral doubts from which Besant suffered established definite criteria for an adequate theory of the moral nature of the universe. In general, she picked up the typical Victorian concern with preserving morality in a secularised society, and the associated humanitarian concern with social duty. As a child, she had looked on the poor as people in need of education and charity but little more. Now her loss of faith changed her attitude. She became more concerned to foster our sense of social duty and more humanitarian in her understanding of our social duty. The 'keynote' of her life became a 'longing for sacrifice to something felt as greater than the self', and this something was defined by an ethical positivism which opened her ears 'to the wailings of the great orphan humanity'.[17] More particularly, she wanted to be able to declare: 'I believe that God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all; I believe that all mankind is safe, cradled in the everlasting arms.'[18] Her denunciation of the atonement indicated a moral universe would be one in which people ultimately got what they deserved. Her rejection of eternal punishment implied that a moral universe would hold out the possibility of vanquishing evil. And her qualms about the compatibility of a loving God and the existence of evil pointed to the need for a natural, not a supernatural, explanation of the moral state of the universe, an explanation demonstrating the natural necessity of evil, rather than portraying evil as something allowed by an omnipotent God.

The experience of doubt set up various themes that then gave continuity to Besant's multifarious activities. With respect to the physical nature of the universe, these themes were, first, a somewhat mystical concern with truth, and, second, an insistence on natural explanations incorporating current scientific knowledge. With respect to the moral nature of the universe, these themes were, first, a concern with social duty within a humanitarian context, and, second, an insistence on a natural account of a just order in which everyone receives what they deserve and from which we can eliminate evil. These themes run through the whole of the rest of her life.

Social and Cultural Pressures

Religious enthusiasm, evangelical leanings, and a concern with duty and sacrifice provided the intellectual diet of many a Victorian childhood. As T. H. Green recognised, his contemporaries' sense of personal identity derived largely from their religious beliefs: 'when the old questions about God, freedom, and immortality are being put by each man to himself in the direct and popular form which they have now assumed, as questions bearing upon his own life, it is idle to deny that he is a different man according to the answer which he gives to them'.[19] Religious issues mattered. The Victorians discussed theological niceties with real passion. What is more, the Christianity of the early Victorian era was dominated by Biblical literalism and atonement theology.[20] Indeed, the most interesting feature of Besant's attempt to harmonise the gospels is not, as she later implied, the anticipation of her future secularism, so much as the indication of her belief in the absolute truth of the Bible. Only someone who assumed the gospels were perfectly historically accurate would expect them to be perfectly compatible. Such Biblical literalism, typical of many Victorians, soon faced an onslaught from geology, historical criticism and evolutionary theory.[21] Similarly, the most interesting feature of Besant's moral revulsion against Christianity is not, as she later implied, the anticipation of her future theosophical ethic, so much as the indication of her commitment to atonement theology. Only someone who stressed the need to atone for sin over the sanctification of life could find Christian morality so bleak. Such an atonement theology, again typical of many Victorians, soon faced an onslaught from a new moral conscience.[22] The whole Victorian crisis of faith resembled Besant's in that it arose not from attacks on all possible forms of Christianity but rather from a series of challenges to Biblical literalism and atonement theology.

So, although Besant's descent into doubt paralleled a transformation in her personal life, her intellectual struggle resembles that of many of her contemporaries. Cultural developments - the rise of modern science, historical scholarship, and a new

moral conscience - put pressure on Victorian religion. Although numerous Victorians experienced much the same crisis of faith as did Besant, they reacted to it in various different ways. Some of them responded by developing new forms of Christianity, less tied to Biblical literalism and the Atonement than had been those that dominated the early part of Victoria's reign. Some, such as the Lux Mundi group, turned to an immanentist theology emphasising the Incarnation; others, particularly Broad Church men, looked to the moral example provided by the life of Jesus the man; others, such as Anna Kingsford and Edward Maitland, preached a form of Christian mysticism, to which they added a belief in reincarnation; and yet others, such as John Kenworthy, accepted the Christian anarchism of Tolstoy.[23] Other people responded by rejecting Christianity as untenable, and turning instead to another form of spirituality, or even to an atheistic materialism. Some, such as Richard Congreve, turned to a full-blown Comtean positivism complete with its own liturgies; others, such as William Jupp, adopted a loose, romantic pantheism inspired by Emerson and by Wordsworth; others, such as Green himself, developed a form of philosophical idealism; others, such as John Trevor, formed the Labour Church movement to bring together religious faith and the working-class; and yet others, such as the members of the Society for the Study of Psychical Research, tried to use scientific experiments to assess the validity of spiritualist phenomena.[24] All sorts of people responded to the Victorian crisis of faith in all sorts of ways.

In order to understand why Besant made the choices she did, why she responded to the general Victorian crisis of faith in some ways and not others, we need to explore the social and cultural pressures working upon her. Her particular situation shaped the choices she made by more or less closing off some options and by opening up others. Arguably the most important influence on her choices was the evangelical temper in which she had been raised. Victorian culture as a whole was dominated by evangelical notions of truth and duty; a meaningful order of things defined one's own purpose and responsibilities. As Besant turned away from

Christianity, so she clung all the more tenaciously to these notions. Her upbringing, and the general culture of her times, committed her to a modernist faith in fixed meanings. There was little likelihood of her seriously contemplating, let alone accepting, the sort of truthless, arguably amoral, universe since made familiar by Nietzsche. More particularly, the evangelical temper continued to influence her adherence to a truth defined as the purpose to which she should sacrifice her life. The meaning of things imposed upon us a rigorous duty, verging on complete self-denial for the sake of others. Here too Besant surely exemplifies the whole Victorian crisis of faith. No matter how people responded to the contemporary challenges to Biblical literalism and atonement theology, they nearly always did so in ways that gave a central place to concepts such as truth and sacrifice. Indeed, the ubiquity and strength among Victorians of a belief in a meaningful order imposing a stringent duty on the individual constitutes a crucial part of what divides them from us. Their commitment to a Truth requiring Sacrifice constitutes a crucial part of what makes them other than us.

It is precisely because a commitment to Truth and Duty characterised almost all of the religious and social movements of Victorian Britain that we can not appeal to it to explain why Besant ended up in the movements she did. To explain this we must look at more specific influences upon her. First, however, I should make it clear I do not think social and cultural influences can explain anyone's decisions fully. They can help us to understand why someone was likely to make a particular decision, but they can not explain every detail of the decision, and not everyone who is subject to them need make that particular decision. Thus, George Eliot had a crisis of faith under similar influences to Besant, and yet she made somewhat different decisions.[25] The fact is social and cultural influences are only influences; they are not determining or decisive causes. That said, one influence more specific to Besant was her social background. On the one hand, she came from the educated and leisured class that provided the theorists and critics of Victorian Society. Her father studied at Trinity

College, Dublin, and worked as a doctor, until the Irish Famine of 1845 saw him leave for London where he became an underwriter. Even after her father's death, her mother made a comfortable living keeping house for boys at Harrow, where the Woods were accepted into the society of the headmaster Dr Vaughan and his wife. Annie's brother went to Cambridge, and the education Annie herself received from Miss Marryat was excellent for the time. She always placed great stress on the intellect - her ideal of a universal brotherhood always gave a special place to an intellectual elite. This made it unlikely she would find anti-theoretical movements congenial. On the other hand, Besant was a woman, and this simple fact debarred her from the traditional centres of intellectual life in Britain.[26] When, in 1878, she began to study in an attempt to enrol on a degree course at London University, it was only a year after the University had become the first to agree to admit women, and by then she already had become a famous agitator.[27] Besant's lack of formal education - she did not sit a public examination until 1879 - effectively excluded her from highly intellectual groups such as the Lux Mundi theologians and the Oxford Idealists. Her niche almost certainly had to be as a populariser and propagandist rather than as a philosopher or scientist. The movements most in accord with Besant's background were, therefore, those that used an accessible theory as a basis for agitation.

Another influence on the choices Besant made was the way she already seemed to be being driven out of conventional society. Her doubts expressed themselves in public gestures of opposition to mainstream Christianity. She wrote sceptical pamphlets with titles such as 'On the Deity of Jesus of Nazareth', and although she published them anonymously so as not to embarrass her husband, they were declared to be by the wife of a 'Beneficed Clergyman'.[28] At home, she reached a compromise with her husband whereby she would participate in services directed towards God himself, but not Holy Communion, which presupposed a belief in both Christ and the doctrine of atonement. Inevitably people noticed such changes in her behaviour, and equally inevitably, their comments, when made public, embarrassed

her husband professionally. Consequently, about a year later, in 1873, he gave her an ultimatum: either she took communion again or she left his household. She left him. The marriage had never been a good one, and her loss of faith effectively destroyed it. The problem here was that Besant had put herself in opposition to the two pillars of Victorian society, namely, religion and the family. The Victorians thought social order, morality itself, depended on good habits defined by the church and enforced through the family. Besant's life challenged everything they believed in. Middle-class women were restricted by and large to the roles of obedient daughter, wife, and mother.[29] In rejecting these roles, Besant lost her position in society. She repudiated her husband, when middle-class women did not do such things. She had to make her own living and appear for herself in public, when middle-class women did not do such things. Already she had embarked on the way of life that would end with the Master of the Rolls saying, 'one cannot expect modest women to associate with her'.[30] Besant almost certainly had to find a place for herself in alternative, even bohemian, religious and social movements. The movements most likely to accept her were those that promoted new ways of living, and especially those that encouraged women to experiment with new social roles.

Secularism

In 1872, Besant attended a meeting of liberal Christians in St. George's Hall presided over by Charles Voysey. Afterwards she bought some tracts that were on sale in the ante-room, and so began to read works by Voysey and prominent Unitarians such as the American preacher William Channing. No doubt she liked what she found; after all, Voysey did not just maintain the Bible could not be a divine revelation, he also condemned the doctrines of original sin, eternal punishment, and vicarious Atonement, as cruel and immoral.[31] He expressed just the qualms she had felt. These liberal Christians even led her to question the divinity of Christ. She had rejected the atonement as incompatible with a moral God, and without this dogma she

could see no reason for continuing to believe in Christ as the son of God. If there was no need for a sinless man to atone for the sins of humanity, there was no need for God to become incarnate. Thus the whole edifice of Christianity collapsed. Besant now began to think of herself as a theist. Soon afterwards, the Voyseys invited her to their home, where she met Thomas Scott, who held court over a number of religious liberals, including Charles Bray, Bishop Colenso, and Sarah Hennell. After she had left her husband, it was one of these religious liberals, Moncure Conway, a theistic preacher at the South Place Ethical Society, who invited her to stay with his family until she could make alternative arrangements.

Besant had entered the world of religious liberals, a world of Unitarians, theists, and members of ethical societies. Her theism met the requirements implicit in her reasons for rejecting Christianity. Like many other late Victorians, Besant had come to believe in an immanent God. She said 'God <u>is</u> slowly revealing Himself by His works, by the course of events, by the progress of Humanity: if He has never spoken from Heaven in human language, He is daily speaking in the world around us.'[32] Her new God revealed himself through nature in a way that did not require reference to either the supernatural or a revealed source of morality. The moral law came from within nature, or to be more precise from the divine within nature: 'the source of all morality in man is the Universal Spirit dwelling in the spirits'.[33] God appeared not in the Bible, but in the natural working of the moral law within each of us. Moreover, her new God neither damned people for eternity nor exulted in suffering. Justice and the possibility of a triumph over evil were assured by the operation of the moral law within the natural order. There was no hint of a transcendental realm where judgement could lead to perpetual torment.

Theism did not satisfy Besant for long. In 1874, she began to question the very existence of God. She re-read Dean Mansell's Bampton Lectures of 1858, and found them painfully apologetic. She read Comte and found him inspiring - the 'greatest' thinker 'of this century'.[34] Like many British positivists, she rejected the

positive polity as anathema to liberty, but she commended Comte's amalgamation of the scientific temper with a religion of humanity as a suitable solution to the growing divide between the material and the spiritual. Earlier Mrs Conway had suggested Besant visit the Hall of Science to hear Bradlaugh speak. Now Besant's positivism led her to the publisher and bookseller Edward Truelove, where she purchased a copy of the National Reformer. She wrote to ask if she could join the National Secular Society (N.S.S.) even though she was not an atheist. The editor replied she could, so she did. Her positivist readings had taught her that the concept of God was an alienation of the potential of man, that her youthful love of Christ was 'the human passion of love transferred to an ideal'.[35] Now she visited Bradlaugh, and showed him a pamphlet she had written on the existence of God. He told her they believed much the same things, and, a couple of days later, offered her a staff job on the National Reformer. She accepted and began to write under the pseudonym 'Ajax'. Her struggle with doubt had led her to secularism.[36]

Besant took to her secularist work with gusto, writing regular columns and pamphlets, and becoming an exceptional public speaker second in popularity only to Bradlaugh himself. Her atheism centred on the idea that the universe consisted of one substance - she rejected dualism, claiming matter and spirit were merely different manifestations of the one substance. Consequently, she argued, if there were a deity, he must be identified with this one substance of nature, but then nature provided no evidence of such a conscious power. Indeed, because we could have knowledge only of phenomena, we could not possibly have any evidence for something beyond phenomena. As an atheist, therefore, she did not say there was no God, but rather she knew nothing of God, she could not conceive what God could be. God had no meaning for her, so she could not say whether or not there was a God. She was without God. Nonetheless, while she argued we could not make sense of the idea of God, she also pointed out that to describe God as unknowable was to make a claim to know something about God. What is more, she claimed all existing attempts to define

God became immersed in contradictions that showed them to be false. She said, 'never yet has a God been defined in terms which were not palpably self-contradictory and absurd'.[37]

Science had killed off the idea of God. We could give sufficient explanations of all events within the universe solely in terms of facts about nature. We did not need to appeal to anything beyond the immediate phenomena available to our inspection. Here Besant rejected the pantheist view that the one substance in the universe was life-matter in favour of the scientific view that it was force-matter. Life arose as a consequence of certain arrangements of force-matter that constituted the animal body. Thus, all knowledge came down to the sciences of biology, chemistry and physics. Although the rejection of the Bible had left scientists without a settled standard by which to judge their conclusions, a settled standard actually would prove inimical to intellectual progress. Scientists should settle for the abstract standard of truth. 'They would have to be content to collect facts patiently, to collate them carefully, to reason from them, to reach conclusions slowly.'[38] After all, was not the motto of the N.S.S. 'We Search for Truth'?

Although Besant fired vicious, caustic missiles at Christianity, her secularism resembled that of Robert Owen, not Thomas Paine. She had little objection to religion as such, but rather detested Christian dogmatism, and regretted the way a concern with God so often detracted from a concern with man.[39] Thus, although she criticised theosophy as vague and superstitious, she wrote a fairly welcoming review of Edwin Arnold's work on the life of the Buddha.[40] Furthermore, unlike Bradlaugh, she forswore a strict individualism for an ethical positivism that gazed sentimentally on abstract humanity. She spoke in terms indebted to a Comtean idea of a religion of humanity, saying 'I do not believe in God' but 'I believe in Man.' She believed 'in man's redeeming power; in man's remoulding energy; in man's approaching triumph, through knowledge, love, and work'.[41]

An ethical positivism underlay Besant's concern to give social morality a sure foothold independent of Christianity. She feared our sense of social duty might go under in the struggle over religious faith, so she argued people should attack the sanctions currently underlying morality only if they had suitable replacements close at hand. 'It is then', she said, 'a very important question whether we, who are endeavouring to take away from the world the authority on which has hitherto been based all its morality, can offer a new and firm ground whereupon may safely be built up the fair edifice of a noble life.'[42] According to Besant, moral behaviour did not consist of conformity to supernatural rules outside of the nature of things so much as living in harmony with the natural world. Just as physical actions in accord with physical nature produced physical vigour, so moral actions were those that followed the moral laws of nature thereby producing moral vigour. Christians were wrong: authority could not provide a proper basis for morality for the sufficient reason that the Bible was not true. Theists too were wrong: intuition could not provide a proper basis for morality since intuition could not give us knowledge of external, natural laws. Besant concluded, therefore, because morality entailed harmony with a natural law, and because we could not discover this law by either revelation or intuition, 'the true basis of morality must necessarily be sought for in the study of law, as manifested in phenomena'.[43]

Besant argued that only utilitarianism founded morality on a scientific basis. Once we recognised happiness as the criterion for right and wrong, we could see moral laws existed just as certainly as did physical ones. She justified this contentious view by reference to her belief that when an action brought pain, the pain told us the action was the wrong one and so immoral. Unhappiness was 'Nature's check to our mistakes'.[44] When we acted immorally so as to cause unhappiness, the natural law asserted itself and we felt unhappy and thereby knew we had acted immorally. Thus, the moral law derived from the very nature of things. Next Besant went on to insist that, because morality exhibited itself as a natural law appearing in

phenomena, we could study the relevant phenomena so as to discover how best to act morally and conquer evil. Only ignorance and vested interests prevented our triumph over evil.

Utilitarianism can be a slippery doctrine. On one level, the identification of the morally good with that which promotes the general happiness appears almost as a necessary but vacuous truth since we can subsume most other moral doctrines under the umbrella concept of happiness. On another level, as soon as anyone gives any positive content to the umbrella concept of happiness, utilitarianism becomes highly contentious. Besant played on the ambiguous nature of utilitarianism. She fended off potential critics by stretching the concept of happiness so as to embrace them. If, for instance, a critic objected that virtue, not happiness, provided the core of human morality, she replied that virtue was happiness since the higher pleasures came from doing good to others by acting virtuously. Likewise, if a critic objected that the moral nature of virtue derived from the will of God, not happiness, she replied that surely people wished to please God precisely because they found happiness in doing so. Yet when Besant gave content to the concept of happiness, she drew on an ethical positivism that distances her somewhat from J. S. Mill and even further from Bentham. She identified the attempt to promote the general happiness with 'the endeavour so to rule our life that we may serve and bless mankind'.[45] She praised utilitarianism for helping to foster the idea of a universal brotherhood in which each aimed for the greater good of the whole. It is a strange utilitarian - hardly a utilitarian at all - who can write, 'little worth liberty and equality with all their promise for mankind, little worth even wider happiness, if that happiness be selfish, if true fraternity, true brotherhood, do not knit man to man, and heart to heart, in loyal service to the common need, and generous self sacrifice to the common good'.[46]

As a secularist and radical, Besant believed in a 'coming reign of Liberty, when men shall dare to think for themselves in theology, and to act for themselves in politics'.[47] Like the Owenites, she moved from her concern for a social morality that

would promote universal brotherhood through the belief that social evils derived from ignorance and vested interests to political radicalism. Greater knowledge and democracy could heal society of the ills currently afflicting it. She attacked the Church for defending superstitions that turned 'men's eyes from earth'.[48] And she attacked the landed elite with their vested interests for preventing progress through their control of parliament. Here she argued that poverty arose from low wages, which, in turn, arose from over-population. Thus, if the poor knew how to control the size of their families, they could raise wages and end poverty. The solution to poverty lay in the removal of ignorance through the dissemination of information on contraceptive methods.[49] Yet the Church opposed the spread of this information on grounds of indecency, and parliament, most of whose members benefited from low wages, backed the church.

Clearly Besant's secularism met the doctrinal requirements implied by her earlier doubt. For a start, she evaluated claims to knowledge by reference to an abstract concept of scientific truth, not religious authorities. Because she equated truth with a materialist interpretation of contemporary science, she found it easy both to incorporate scientific theories such as that of evolution into her understanding of the physical universe, and to exclude all references to the supernatural from her view of the truth. Moreover, her blend of utilitarianism and ethical positivism provided a suitable account of the place of morality in the universe. Because she saw physical pain and pleasure as nature's way of informing us about the morality of our actions, she was able to give a natural account of morality. And because she unpacked the utilitarian concept of happiness in terms of a humanitarian concern with social duty, she was able to guarantee the survival of morality in a secular future.

Socialism

In January 1885, Besant applied to join the Fabian Society, a part of the nascent socialist movement.[50] The N.S.S. provided both a fruitful recruiting ground

for socialists and the locus of vehement opposition to socialism. Many secularists, including Bradlaugh, were strict individualists who denounced socialism as a threat to liberty.[51] To them Besant's conversion was heretical. Nonetheless, there were similarities between socialism and secularism, and they help to explain Besant's conversion. First, the humanitarian appeals made by early socialists appealed to the positivist ethic of some secularists. One can see this not only in people like Edward Aveling and Herbert Burrows who joined the socialism movement with a secularist background, but also in the widespread commitment to ethical positivism within the Fabian Society. Sydney Olivier's crisis of faith produced much family tension and ended with his describing Comte as 'very much the most comprehensive thinker we have had since Aristotle'; Edward Pease and Frank Podmore argued persistently for a socialism embodying ethical positivism; Graham Wallas's first publication considered 'Personal Duty Under the Present System'; and even Sidney Webb approached his socialism by way of positivism.[52] Besant herself first reacted favourably to socialism on 12 January 1883 when she heard Louise Michel, an anarcho-communist, lecture movingly on the need for a greater sense of brotherhood if society were to alleviate the plight of the starving women and children in the slums of Paris.[53] Second, the radicalism of most secularists included commitments to land reform and republican sympathies, commitments that required little modification to become a common form of contemporary socialism in which capitalists became exploiters akin to landlords, and the socialist ideal became a social republic of workers free from idlers. One can see this especially in the way a group of O'Brienites, including Charles Murray, conceived of their Marxism, but also in the arguments of better known figures such as H. M. Hyndman, William Morris, and George Bernard Shaw.[54] Besant's own radicalism already incorporated many of the demands of the early socialists, and she had extensive contacts with the metropolitan clubs on the extreme left of the republican and land reform movements of the 1870s. In June 1884, she spoke to the Cromwell Club at Plaistow on 'Social Reform or Socialism', arguing against the

acquisition of wealth at the expense of labour, and calling for social reforms to relieve the lot of the workers, but stopping short of calling for socialism.[55] Within a month, she had adopted the characteristic demands of the Marxist Social Democratic Federation. She advocated the taxation of interest on capital as well as land rent, and she called for an eight-hour working day with five hours on Saturdays.[56]

At first Besant opposed the S.D.F. because she disapproved of its advocating a violent revolution while free agitation remained possible, not because she was a strict individualist akin to Bradlaugh.[57] Now she found not only that socialist economics explained why so many people remained poor despite mechanisation, not only that socialist ethics paralleled her ideal of a universal brotherhood of individuals sacrificing themselves for the greater good of the whole, but also that Fabian socialism remained committed to parliamentary constitutionalism. She announced her conversion at a dramatic meeting of the Dialectical Society in January 1885. Shaw gave a lecture, with the audience expecting Besant to demolish the socialist case. Instead, she expressed an interest in socialism, and later asked Shaw to propose her for membership of the Fabian Society.[58]

Besant's socialism drew on her secularist response to the doctrinal requirements implied by her earlier doubt. The scientific side of her socialism took over her secularist philosophy, including her concern to incorporate the theory of evolution into her worldview. She proclaimed socialism as 'the new Truth'.[59] Socialism was a science precisely because Besant equated it with the theory of evolution, insisting 'I am a Socialist because I am a believer in Evolution'.[60] The path of universal history exhibited the gradual evolution of social co-operation, integration, and organisation. 'The progress of society has been from individualistic anarchy to associated order; from universal, unrestricted competition to competition regulated and restrained by law'.[61] Socialists alone grasped the nature of the historical process, and advocated measures designed to advance it. Her collectivist ideal - like that of most Fabians - consisted less in a particular system of property ownership than in the

gradual extension of state regulation to ensure a more integrated and efficient society. Besant also appealed to economic arguments for socialism. She said, 'my socialism is based on the recognition of economic facts, on the study of the results which flow inevitably from the present economic system'.[62] Socialism rested on a scientific economic theory. Besant argued that under capitalism the factors of production were divorced from one another, so the workers, lacking land and capital, had to sell their labour or starve. Radicals saw how landlords claimed rent in return for allowing people to use the land. Socialists extended the argument to capitalists. Capitalists controlled the 'wealth made by generations of toilers, the present means of production', and they allowed workers access to the means of production only in return for 'a share of the worker's product'.[63] More generally, Besant argued the evolutionary philosophy of socialism united the diverse demands of the radicals. The need for social integration underlay radical calls for land reform, the eight hour day, free education, and the like.[64] As she explained, 'just as Evolution, taking up the chaos of biological facts, sets them forth as an intelligible and correlated order, so Socialism, dealing with the chaos of sociological facts, brings a unifying principle, which turns Radicalism from a mere empirical system into a reasoned, coherent, and scientific whole'.[65] Socialism was a scientific radicalism.

According to Besant, socialism was not a negative philosophy concerned to end exploitation, but rather a moral ideal, an ethical positivism. Socialism had grown out of 'a profound moral impulse' of 'unselfish brotherhood'.[66] It represented a new religion of man. Socialists aimed to serve the cause of humanity. Thus, the socialist movement was not 'a class movement', but rather 'a movement of men and women of all classes for a common end'; 'the Socialist army is composed of persons of various social ranks, who have renounced for themselves the class distinctions they are banded together to destroy'.[67] Besant saw socialism as a economic movement to eliminate exploitation and also a moral movement to promote universal brotherhood in place of class divisions. These two themes underlay her attitude to the trade union

movement. In the first place, she said Malthusianism showed trade unions could not have a general, lasting impact on wages: 'wages rise and fall irrespective of unions and are not controllable by them'.[68] In the second place, however, trade unions embodied a 'willingness to subordinate the one to the all', 'to use strength for mutual support' in accord with 'the higher social morality'.[69] In particular, the growth of a new unionism among women and the unskilled suggested trade unions soon would embrace all the workers. Where the old unions had stood for exclusivity and so class-feeling, the new unions strove for brotherhood.

Theosophy

The ethical positivism within Besant's socialism came to the fore in February 1888. She announced she and others had talked 'of founding a new brotherhood, in which service of Man should take the place erstwhile given to service of God - a brotherhood in which work should be worship and love should be baptism'. They had talked of a 'Church of the future to lead 'the teaching of social duty, the upholding of social righteousness, the building up of a true commonwealth'.[70] To promote such a Church, Besant began to publish a new journal entitled The Link and subtitled 'A Journal for the Servants of Man'. She had come to believe too many of her fellow socialists overemphasised the economic side of social reform. She wanted to stress the need for a new social morality to inspire people to sacrifice themselves for the good of others. She wanted to promote a moral transformation based on a social ideal.

Besant's increasing emphasis on the need for a moral transformation reflected a deeper shift in her thought. Around 1886, she became interested in certain mental phenomena she found she could not explain in terms of her atheistic materialism. She began to investigate peripheral aspects of consciousness such as dreams, and also psychic phenomena such as mesmerism. She read a report by the Dialectical Society on experiments in psychic research. The report convinced her there was something

there to be explained. Besant's belief in the significance of psychic phenomena was not unusual. Scholars such as Janet Oppenheim and Alex Owen have shown how people from all sorts of backgrounds entered the spiritualist movement within the context of the Victorian crisis of faith.[71] Among those who became interested in spiritualism were a number of people who, like Besant, had backgrounds in the secularist and socialist movements. Secularists such as Seth Ackroyd, Herbert Burrows, E. W. Wallis, and, of course, Alfred Russell Wallace found spiritualism answered the questions that earlier had led them away from the evangelical Protestantism of their childhood.[72] Likewise, socialists such as Pease and Podmore were active members of the Society for Psychical Research, whilst various plebeian radicals and Owenites went on to embrace all of secularism, socialism, and spiritualism.[73] Watching seances, manifestations and the like, numerous Victorians assumed what they saw was for real. Besides, if none of the spiritualist phenomena were genuine, respectable people were lying, and few Victorians questioned the honour of their fellows. To have believed so many gentlefolk capable of falsehood would have been nearly as difficult as to believe some spiritualist phenomena to be genuine. Thus, Besant came to accept the facts before she did the theory. She thought the phenomena 'indubitable, but the spiritualistic explanation of them incredible'.[74] Nor was the explanation all that incredible. The scientific community was still establishing itself as a profession with a definite institutional basis, and even today science tells us little about how we should treat mental events. Thus, Besant initially turned to spiritualism because of the way it helped to make sense of psychological phenomena. Only later did she extend her spiritualistic understanding from the mental to the physical.[75] Before long Besant began to hold seances in her home in St. John's Wood, London. Friends even began to talk of her joining the ranks of the spiritualists.[76] As Besant investigated psychic happenings, so she became convinced of the need for a more spiritual understanding of the world about her, and as she searched for just such an understanding, so she turned towards a more spiritual

form of socialism. In this way, her move to a more ethical form of socialism reflected her growing conviction that 'Pantheism' might solve 'some problems, especially of psychology, which Atheism leaves untouched'.[77]

William Stead, a liberal newspaper man, helped Besant to found The Link. He too had an interest in occult phenomena: he first attended a seance in 1881, and soon afterwards he met Madame Blavatsky. In 1889, he received a review copy of Blavatsky's The Secret Doctrine, and, knowing Besant had an interest in occultism, he sent it to her.[78] Besant reviewed the work sympathetically, saying 'Truth will give scrutiny to any visitant, be the garb of Asia or of Europe.'[79] She did not go so far, however, as to equate theosophical teachings with the truth. After reading The Secret Doctrine, Besant asked Stead to introduce her to Blavatsky, and having done so a couple of times, she inquired about joining the Theosophical Society, eventually doing so on 10 May 1889. When she then reviewed The Secret Doctrine for the National Reformer, she wrote as a new convert to theosophy who believed Blavatsky possessed a superior, eastern knowledge.[80] She argued the western approach to truth grilled nature in a quest for facts whereas the eastern approach exercised the mind to develop faculties unknown in the west. Whereas western facts merely confirmed things long known in the east, occult phenomena pointed to truths recognised in the east but still ignored in the west.

The conviction that the east embodied a spiritual knowledge the west lacked was an increasingly common one within Victorian society. The Empire inspired some remarkable studies of Indian culture, and while the majority of western thinkers were only too happy to dismiss this culture as backward, a significant minority turned to an idealised version of it as an alternative to a materialistic and soulless west. The romantics in particular often tied their belief in the mystical powers of nature to an interpretation of eastern religions as pantheistic and eastern societies as intrinsically spiritual.[81] Blavatsky's theosophy could draw, therefore, on a stock of cultural images of the east already made familiar by the romantics. Although eminent scholars such

as F. Max Muller occasionally complained about the inaccuracy of the view of Indian religions adopted by romantics and theosophists, their popular orientalism continued to thrive.[82] What is more, the romantic view of eastern religions as pantheistic made these religions ideal as forms of faith to which Victorians such as Besant could turn to find the immanentism with which so many of them met the challenge of Darwinism. Pantheistic interpretations of Buddhism and Hinduism made them peculiarly attractive to people struggling to come to terms with the theory of evolution. Indeed, Blavatsky devised theosophy in a self-conscious attempt to provide the spiritualist movement with philosophical foundations taken from a popular orientalism.[83] She said theosophy related to spiritualism 'as the infinite to the finite, as cause to effect, or as unity to multifariousness'.[84] Blavatsky met Henry Olcott, the other leading theosophist, at Chittenden in Vermont where they had gone to explore a spiritualist manifestation.[85] When the British Theosophical Society was formed on 27 June 1878, many of its members, including its leader, Charles Massey, and its later president, Dr George Wyld, were members of the British National Association of Spiritualists.[86] Many of those who later played prominent roles in the Society during the nineteenth century had backgrounds in the spiritualist movement, including A. O. Hume and A. P. Sinnett, the recipients of the infamous Mahatma Letters.[87]

The distance from secularism and socialism to theosophy was not as great as one might suppose. As a theosophist, Besant's beliefs still provided suitable solutions to the dilemmas that had led her away from her childhood faith. The problems remained the same, and, more importantly, the nature of the problems was such that both sets of solutions revolved around the twin themes of scientific truth and ethical positivism. Besant later recalled that as soon as she read The Secret Doctrine, she knew 'the very Truth was found'.[88] Her first contribution to theosophical literature outlined a set of practical measures by which theosophists might promote universal brotherhood.[89] Theosophy may seem a bizarre creed to many of us today, as no doubt it also did to many of Besant's contemporaries. The cosmology and anthropology of

Blavatsky's Secret Doctrine certainly run counter to the beliefs most of us accept as objective. I have suggested, however, that we should try to avoid understanding and evaluating theosophy using our view of what is and is not objectively rational. We should try rather to uncover the contextual rationality of theosophy by exploring the particular commitments and problems with which people such as Besant approached it. We can begin to do this by showing how Besant's theosophy, like her secularism and socialism, was a response to the commitments and problems set up by her crisis of faith.

Besant believed any adequate account of the universe had to steer clear of supernaturalism and also take on board evolutionary theory. Her theosophy did both. No doubt others will think theosophy entails a belief in objects outside the natural order, but they will do so because of their view of the natural order, and here too we should avoid using our assumptions to understand and evaluate others. Taken on its own terms theosophy in general, and Besant's theosophy in particular, do not entail any supernaturalism. Certainly Besant fully accepted Blavatsky's teachings about a brotherhood of adepts based in Tibet who possessed extraordinary occult powers they used to watch over humanity and to preserve the ancient wisdom unimpaired.[90] However, theosophists believe the Mahatmas are not supernatural entities, but rather part of the natural order. They are highly spiritual beings near the end of their evolutionary cycle who have chosen to remain around to help the less advanced. An improbable doctrine perhaps, but not in its own terms a supernatural one. Certainly too Besant believed ancient oriental texts such as the Upanishads taught the ancient wisdom. Unlike the Bible, however, these texts were not supernatural revelations, but rather the works of adepts who were themselves part of the natural order. Theosophy eschewed the supernatural.

As for evolution, Besant's theosophy exemplifies the late Victorian tendency to turn to immanentism as a way of reconciling faith with science. She argued God was immanent within nature, saying 'He is in everything and everything in Him.'[91]

Because my concern lies with the bare bones of her philosophy, with how it met the requirements set up by her crisis of faith, I will not go into the vast array of planes, from physical to nirvanic, of races, from Lemurians to Aryans, or of stages in the occult hierarchy, from chela to chohan, that provide the flesh of theosophical cosmologies and anthropologies.[92] What interests me is Besant's belief that God gradually unfolded Himself through time in an evolutionary process. At first God manifested Himself by limiting Himself, and in manifesting Himself, He became the universe. Next the manifested absolute began to unfold from an initial state of unity towards a duality of life and form, of spirit and spirit-matter, which constituted the world of nature. This duality of positive and negative then unfolded into a trinity with universal mind appeared alongside life and form. The universal mind contained the archetypal forms of all the beings that emerged during later stages of the unfolding of the universe. The later stages started with the rise of the spiritual intelligences that now guide the cosmic order. From then on, the universe continued to unfold away from the pure unity of the undivided absolute, through the seven planes of the universe, until things reached the nadir of an almost totally physical existence, after which the universe began the long trek back through the same seven planes to end once more as the undivided divinity underlying everything. Theosophists argued the late nineteenth-century constituted the nadir of the evolutionary process. It was the end of the Black Age - the Kali Yuga of the Hindus - with humanity being almost entirely material in nature and outlook. The twentieth-century would bring the dawn of the New Age - the Raja-Yuga of the Hindus. The evolutionary cycle would take an upward turn with humanity becoming increasingly spiritual in nature and outlook. Indeed, from evolutionary theory, through spiritualism, to the more obvious interventions of the Mahatmas in human affairs, almost everything then happening provided a first glimmering of the New Age.

Most secularists saw Besant's conversion to theosophy as a betrayal.[93] However, the place of science within theosophical teachings helps to explain why

Besant and a few others, such as Burrows, saw theosophy as a superior alternative to their earlier secularism. More generally, a number of secularists, especially those inspired by Owen and G. J. Holyoake rather than Paine and Bradlaugh, later turned to various forms of mystical immanentism in much the same way as Besant and Burrows did to theosophy, and sometimes they too did so by way of spiritualism. Certainly people such as Richard Bithell, F. J. Gould, Samuel Laing, and C. A. Watts left the secularist movement because they found a suitable response to the crisis of faith in an evolutionary creed and worship of the Unknowable.[94] Besant saw her theosophical cosmology as an evolutionary account of an 'unfolding, self-moved from within'.[95] She recognised some biologists held a purely mechanical theory of evolution that described a simple process of action and reaction between the environment and the organism. She argued, however, a purely mechanical theory of evolution could not explain why the organism should react to the environment in the first place. Besides, Besant's investigations into dreams, mesmerism, and spiritualist phenomena had convinced her a mechanical view of the world could not account for the facts being uncovered by the new science of psychology.[96] Contemporary science, she insisted, was fast coming to recognise everything embodied a spiritual element. Only a spiritual understanding of evolution showed how the divine consciousness found in all matter acted as the mainspring of the movement of the individual organism. According to Besant, therefore, theosophy not only incorporated recent scientific discoveries such as evolution, it also went beyond our everyday scientific understanding to reveal the true, metaphysical explanation of these discoveries.

Besant argued her theosophical cosmology led inexorably to certain ethical theories by way of the doctrine of reincarnation and the law of Karma. Her immanentism postulated an indestructible ego that obviously had to go somewhere after death, and since she had outlawed the supernatural, this somewhere had to be either a return to the physical plane or an ascension to another plane. Moreover, her evolutionary theory implied the indestructible ego had to reappear on the physical

plane simply because each individual needed numerous different lives in order to evolve in the requisite manner. Ultimately, therefore, as she explained, 'the clearest conviction of the truth of reincarnation' lies in 'the obvious necessity for many lives' for the indestructible ego to evolve through all 'the ascending stages of consciousness'.[97] Her defence of reincarnation consisted principally of an extension of the theory of evolution from the physical world to the spiritual world. Just as the evolution of the physical world presupposed the continuation of spirit-matter, so the evolution of mental and moral qualities presupposed the continuation of the indestructible ego; just as spirit matter evolved through interaction with an environment, so the indestructible ego had to evolve through interaction with an environment, to do which it had to become incarnate in an outer shell.

The law of karma followed from acceptance of reincarnation. When an individual passed through physical death, the ego shed the physical, astral, and mental bodies, leaving only the inner person. The inner person then took on a new outer body in order to reappear on the physical plane. Given that this process was natural, and Besant ruled out supernaturalism, there had to be a law of cause and effect to explain why things happened as they did in actual instances of reincarnation. The law of karma provided such an explanation. When the inner person shed its outer bodies, the indestructible ego was left with a record of the past experiences it had had while clothed in these bodies. Moreover, because the inner person retained a record of its past experiences, these experiences necessarily would affect how it then acted and so what future experiences it would have. Past lives influence future lives. Each individual has a karma.

The law of karma met the doctrinal requirements set by Besant's early doubts. For a start, it implied morality and the moral nature of the universe had a natural basis in a law of cause and effect. Current evils were a necessary consequence of the evil in our past actions. Furthermore, a belief in karma implied individuals got what they deserved because their thoughts, desires, and actions influenced what happened to

them in future lives. Although individuals were free to act as they pleased, the law of karma stated every action had certain natural effects on the person who thus acted, so if people acted immorally, their actions just would bring them future pain. The sins of the earlier incarnations would be visited upon the later one. The link between such a view and Besant's early doubt shines out from her comment that 'the religionist who hopes to escape from the consequences of his own misdeeds through some side-door of vicarious atonement, may well shrink from the stern enunciation of the law of karma'.[98] Finally, Besant's belief in the law of karma implied we could perhaps conquer evil - if we acted selflessly, all bad karma would disappear - while her teleological theory of evolution implied we necessarily would conquer evil - as the universe returned to its original undivided state so evil would vanish and everything would enter the blissful, nirvanic plane. Because immorality brought unhappiness, individuals eventually would learn not to desire objects that in the end brought them only sorrow. Eventually individuals would learn to act in accord with the moral law. The link between such a view and Besant's early doubt again shines our from her belief that 'without reincarnation we have no security' but 'with reincarnation man is a dignified immortal being, evolving towards a divinely glorious end'.[99]

Besant also thought her cosmology led inexorably to certain more substantive moral doctrines. In particular, her immanentist metaphysics supported an ethic of universal brotherhood akin to her earlier ethical positivism. As she explained, 'if there be one life, one consciousness, if in every form God be immanent, then all forms are interlinked with one another', 'that is the inevitable corollary of the Immanence of God, and that is Solidarity, that is universal Brotherhood'.[100] Besant argued when life had become embodied in matter, the appearance of separate physical bodies had encouraged people to think of themselves as independent beings, thereby giving rise to selfishness. Now, however, as people increasingly came to recognise they all partook of the one life, so they would recognise 'our work here [on earth] is the work of a duty to common human need'.[101]

Universal brotherhood required individuals to sacrifice themselves for the good of the whole. Indeed, a law of sacrifice lay at the heart of the cosmic order. The evolutionary process consisted of a series of steps, each of which began with an act of sacrifice during which one form of life perished so the life might pour itself out into another form. The universe even originated in an act of sacrifice, with God voluntarily limiting his infinite being in order to become manifest. Contrary to popular opinion, therefore, sacrifice did not involve pain. Sacrifice was a joyful pouring out of one's own life so others could share in life. If only those who sacrificed themselves rightly identified themselves with the life that persisted after the sacrifice rather than with the form that perished in the sacrifice, then they would exult in the outpouring of eternal life instead of mourning the passing of the transient form. If people saw rightly, they would find the sacrifice and service demanded by ethical positivism actually derived from the very structure of the universe.

Most socialists saw Besant's conversion to theosophy as a betrayal.[102] However, the place of an ethical positivism within theosophical teachings helps to explain why not only Besant, but also people such as Herbert Burrows and L. Haden Guest looked upon theosophy as the fulfilment of their socialism. Guest argued theosophy led to calls for social reconstruction along lines exhibiting a Fabian mix of elitism and humanitarianism; Charlotte Despard saw theosophy as the true inspiration behind her socialism and suffragism; and numerous socialists joined the International Fellowship of Workers, an organisation affiliated to the Theosophical Society, with Walter Crane as its president.[103] Similarly, the guild socialist, A. R. Orage organised a Theosophical Group in the 1890s after immersing himself in Blavatsky's writings, and before going on to become the editor of the influential journal, New Age.[104] All sorts of people combined socialism, or a loose progressive humanitarianism, with theosophy, or a vague immanentist mysticism. Certainly Besant herself equated the theosophical ideal of a universal brotherhood with the social morality she had come to see as the true basis of a socialist society. Moreover, her socialism, like that of many

of the Fabians, had an elitist ring to it; the emphasis was on an intellectual elite organising society for the good of all, technocrats doing their duty by the poor. The same attitude appears in her theosophy. She looked to a spiritual elite, led ultimately by the Mahatmas themselves, to work for the advance of humanity. Members of the elite were defined by their mental and moral strength, not their birth, and it was their very strength that placed upon them their special burden. As Besant told her fellow theosophists, 'it is the weak that have rights, the strong have duties'.[105] Theosophy, like socialism, worked for the uplift of all, and a human community based on an ethic of solidarity.

Conclusion

Earlier biographers have failed to find any intellectual continuity or coherence in Besant's life. They have failed to do so, it seems to me, because they have operated, albeit implicitly, with an objective concept of rationality that has required them to see New Age thought as a flight from reason. Because they dismissed Besant's theosophy as irrational, the only continuities left for them to find in her life were emotional ones - the sort of needs that might explain her abdication of reason. In contrast, I have operated with a weaker, contextual concept of rationality that opens up the possibility of our seeing New Age thought as reasonable in the context of certain prior commitments and problems. Thus, I have tried to represent Besant's life as an intelligible quest for truth within the intellectual and social context of Victorian Britain. Her experience of the widespread crisis of faith posed dilemmas she spent the rest of her life attempting to resolve. She sought the truth understood as a scientific account of nature that excluded the supernatural, and she sought a way of sustaining a concern with social duty by showing the moral law to be part of nature. Cultural and social pressures encouraged her to seek these things in certain types of movements. She was pushed by her educational background towards movements that used an accessible theory as a basis for propaganda and agitation, and she was pushed

by the failure of her marriage towards movements that encouraged unconventional ways of living. It was, therefore, Besant's crisis of faith moderated by specific social pressures that led her successively to secularism, socialism, and theosophy. Her departures from secularism to socialism, and later from socialism to theosophy, do not represent complete breaks (betrayals) brought on by the arrival of a new man in her life. They represent successive attempts to answer the same basic questions, with each new answer also being a response to the perceived failings of the earlier one. From her perspective, as opposed to ours, her socialism united the diverse demands of her earlier secular radicalism into a single scientific programme, while her theosophy accounted for the new psychological facts that had been revealed by the spiritualists and that she could not account for from within her secular socialism.

Besant turned to theosophy as part of an intelligible quest for truth, not because a hidden emotional need led her to adopt irrational beliefs. Moreover, I have tried to show her intelligible quest for truth overlaps with that of a number of others whose changing beliefs are known to us. If her prominence, and to a lesser extent the very diversity of her activities, make her a unique figure, the reasons she had for turning to each of the movements she did were shared by many others within those movements. Besant's quest for truth exemplifies many of the key characteristics of the intellectual life of late Victorian Britain. Her crisis of faith resembles that of many of her contemporaries in centring on Biblical literalism and atonement. It was this crisis of faith that in various guises led not only her but others such as Aveling, Burrows, Bradlaugh, and Charles Watts, to secularism. Aveling, Burrows, and also Shaw provide examples of secularists who like her became socialists, whilst Olivier, Pease, Podmore, Wallas, and Web provide examples of socialists inspired by evolutionary theory and ethical positivism. Again, Pease and Podmore like her combined socialism and an interest in spiritualism, whilst Ackroyd, Burrows, and numerous plebeian radicals like her approached spiritualism from an overtly secularist background. Finally, Burrows again, Despard, Guest, and others moved from

socialism to theosophy, whilst numerous people saw theosophy as a natural extension of their spiritualism - Hume, Massey, Olcott, Sinnett, and others.

The example of Besant suggests theosophy attracted people because of the way it enabled them to meet the Victorian crisis of faith, and theosophy is a source of much of the New Age movement. Perhaps, therefore, we should see the New Age movement as a reasonable response to intellectual commitments and problems that arose in the Victorian age. New Age thought is not an irrational alternative to the rational secularism of a post-Christian modernity, but rather an intelligible response to the same intellectual commitments and problems that underlay the rise of Victorian secularism. If most of us prefer secular science to its New Age competitors, this is because our prior theories and concerns lead us to see the world in one way rather than another. However, unless we are to defend the problematic notion of theory-free facts, we should not pretend to ourselves that our way of seeing the world is uniquely rational - rational for all people no matter what their theories and concerns. We should not set up our secular science as a universal, objective form of rationality against which we then can dismiss New Age thought as an emotional flight from reason.

[*] I thank the Nuffield Foundation for awarding me a grant with which to pursue my reasearch.

[1] An interesting study of theosophy as a home for liminal personalities is R. Ellwood, Alternative Altars (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979). The main biography of Besant is far less convincing in its use of psychology. See A. Nethercot, The First Five Lives of Annie Besant (London: R. Hart-Davis, 1961); and A. Nethercot, The Last Four Lives of Annie Besant (London: R. Hart-Davis, 1963). Nethercot suggests Besant's life expresses a need to follow a dominant man. His argument is tautological with the only evidence for the need being the behaviour it supposedly explains, and with any evidence to the contrary being squeezed into the theoretical framework, as when Madame Blavatsky is declared to be an honorary man. That Besant needed to follow a man was first suggested by George Bernard Shaw in The Annie Besant Centenary Book, ed. J. Cousins (Adyar, Madras: Besant Centenary Celebrations, 1947). A better biography is A. Taylor, Annie Besant (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992). Unfortunately, however, although Taylor allows that Besant had to convince herself intellectually of each change, she still describes the unity of Besant's life almost solely in terms of a higher 'egoism', a psychological drive that manifests itself as 'concern for others'; her '"mission" was the expression of an absorbing sense of self, the means of release for the extraordinary force within her' (p. 330). A shorter study is R. Dinnage, Annie Besant (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986).

[2] On theosophy and the occult tradition, see M. Bevir, "The West Turns Eastward: Madame Blavatsky and the Transformation of the Occult

Tradition", Journal of the American Academy of Religion 62 (1994), 747-67; and R. Ellwood, "The American Theosophical Synthesis", in H. Kerr & C. Crow, eds., The Occult in America: New Historical Perspectives (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1983), pp. 111-34. On theosophy and the New Age movement, see B. Campbell, Ancient Wisdom Revived: A History of the Theosophical Movement (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980); Ellwood, Alternative Altars; and P. Washington, Madame Blavatsky's Baboon: Theosophy and the Emergence of the Western Guru (London: Secker & Warburg, 1993).

[3] A classic study of Victorian Christianity is O. Chadwick, The Victorian Church, 2 Vols. (London: A. & C. Black, 1971). There is an excellent discussion of the impact of social changes on religious practises in J. Harris, Private Lives, Public Spirit: A Social History of Britain, 1870-1914 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993). For a sociological study of theosophy, see Campbell, Ancient Wisdom Revived.

[4] R. Brandon, The Spiritualists: The Passion for the Occult in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries (Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1984); M. Harris, Cows, Pigs, Wars, and Witches (New York: Random House, 1974); and J. Webb, The Occult Underground (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1974). Some of the difficulties we face in explaining New Age thought are identified by R. Galbreath, "Explaining Modern Occultism", in Kerr & Crow, eds., Occult in America, pp. 11-37.

[5] For example, T. Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970); and W. Quine, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" in From a Logical Point of View (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1961), pp. 20-46.

[6] Compare I. Lakatos, "Falsification and the Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes", in Philosophical Writings, Vol. 1: The Methodology of Scientific-Research Programmes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), pp. 8-101.

[7] For example, H. Putnam, Reason, Truth, and History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 155-68; and W. Quine, Word and Object (Cambridge, Mass.: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1960), p. 59.

[8] Besant published two versions of her autobiography, one before and one after she became a theosophist. See respectively A. Besant, Autobiographical Sketches (London: Freethought, 1885); and A. Besant, An Autobiography (Adyar, Madras: Theosophical Publishing, 1983). They generally concur, so I usually refer to the latter since it is more readily available.

[9] Besant, Autobiographical Sketches, p. 19.

[10] Besant, Autobiography, p. 42.

[11] There is a parallel here with Darwin's loss of faith due to the suffering and death of his favourite daughter. J. Moore, "Of Love and Death: Why Darwin 'Gave up Christianity'", in J. Moore, ed. History, Humanity and Evolution (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 195-229.

[12] Besant, Autobiography, pp. 71-2.

[13] A. Besant, My Path to Atheism (London: Freethought, 1877), p. VIII. This is a collection of pamphlets Besant wrote during the 1870's mainly while she was a theist. They have titles such as 'On the Atonement' and 'On Inspiration', with each containing her objections to the considered dogma.

[14] A. Besant, The Gospel of Atheism (London: Freethought, 1877), p. 7.

[15] Besant, My Path, p. 38.

[16] Ibid., p. 61.

[17] Besant, Autobiography, pp. 153 & 43.

[18] Besant, My Path, p. 76.

[19] T. H. Green, The Works of Thomas Hill Green, 3 Vols., ed. R. Nettleship (London: Longmans, 1885-1888), Vol. 3: Miscellaneous and Memoir, p. 222.

[20] See, on the general structure of early Victorian Christianity, B. Hilton, The Age of Atonement: The Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought, 1795-1865 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988); on Victorian debates on the Bible, Chadwick, Victorian Church, partic. Vol. 2, chap. 2; and, on Victorian debates on the atonement, G. Rowell, Hell and the Victorians (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974).

[21] Compare J. Moore, The Post-Darwinian Controversies: A Study of the Protestant Struggle to Come to Terms with Darwin in Great Britain and America, 1870-1900 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); F. Turner, Between Science and Religion: The Reaction to Scientific Naturalism in Late Victorian Britain (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1974); and T. Wright, The Religion of Humanity: The Impact of Comtean Positivism on Victorian Britain (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

[22] Compare J. Altholz, "The Warfare of Conscience with Theology", in J. Altholz, ed., The Mind and Art of Victorian England (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1976), pp. 58-77; and Wright, Religion of Humanity. On the relationship of the moral conscience to a

Unitarian stress on the sanctification of life, see Rowell, Hell and the Victorians.

[23] See respectively C. Gore, ed., Lux Mundi (London: J. Murray, 1819); S. Brooke, Christ in Modern Life (London: H. King, 1872); A. Kingsford & E. Maitland, The Perfect Way (London: Field & Tuer, 1887); and J. Kenworthy, Tolstoy: His Life and Works (London: Walter Scott Publishing, 1902).

[24] See respectively W. Simon, "Auguste Comte's English Disciples", Victorian Studies 8 (1964), 161-72; W. Jupp, The Religion of Nature and of Human Experience (London: P. Green, 1906); M. Richter, The Politics of Conscience: T. H. Green and His Age (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1964); J. Trevor, My Quest for God (London: Labour Prophet, 1897); and J. Oppenheim, The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychological Research in England, 1850-1914 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

[25] See B. Willey, Nineteenth Century Studies (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964), pp. 214-60.

[26] Several scholars explain the particular appeal to women of theosophy and New Age ideas in general by equating them with a special female spirituality. See D. Burfield, "Theosophy and Feminism: Some Explorations in Nineteenth Century Biography", in P. Holden, ed., Women's Religious Experience (London: Croom Helm, 1983), pp. 27-56; and M. Bednarowski, "Women in Occult America", in H. Kerr & C. Crow, eds., Occult in America, pp. 177-95. I think much of the effect here attributed to a special female spirituality can be explained by reference to the exclusion of women from a proper education and the gendered discourses used to justify this exclusion. On gender and modern occultism, see, with respect to spiritualism, A.

Owen, The Darkened Room: Women, Power and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England (London: Virago, 1989); and with respect to theosophy, J. Dixon, "Gender, Politics, and Culture in the New Age: Theosophy in England, 1880-1935", Ph.D. Thesis, Rutgers - The State University of New Jersey, 1993.

[27] Recent work stresses the limited impact of contemporary changes in women's education. A useful review is J. Pederson, "The Education of Women in Victorian and Edwardian England", History of European Ideas 8 (1987), 731-36.

[28] A. Besant, "On the Deity of Jesus of Nazareth", in My Path, pp. 1-12.

[29] C. Dyhouse, "Mothers and Daughters in the Middle-Class Home, c. 1870-1914", in J. Lewis, ed., Labour and Love: Women's Experience of Home and Family, 1850-1940 (London: Basil Blackwell, 1986), pp. 27-47. On the evangelical roots of the discourse justifying such roles, see C. Hall, "The Early Formation of Victorian Domestic Ideology", in S. Burman, ed., Fit Work for Women (New York: St. Martin's, 1979), pp. 15-32.

[30] National Reformer, 2 June 1878.

[31] C. Voysey, The "Sling and the Stone": Aimed not Against Men, but Opinions (London, 1865).

[32] Besant, My Path, p. 110.

[33] Ibid. p. 115.

[34] A. Besant, Auguste Comte: His Philosophy, His Religion, and His Sociology (London: Freethought, n.d.), p. 3.

[35] Besant, Autobiography, p. 49.

[36] On Victorian secularism, see S. Budd, Varieties of Unbelief (London: Heinemann, 1977); E. Royle, Victorian Infidels (Manchester:

Manchester University Press, 1974); and E. Royle, Radicals, Secularists, and Republicans (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1980).

[37] A. Besant, Why I Do Not Believe in God (London: Freethought, 1887), p. 4.

[38] A. Besant, The True Basis of Morality (London: Freethought, n.d.), p. 4.

[39] Besant's concern to sustain a religious temper even as she denounced Christian doctrine is clear from the fact that she edited a secularist hymn book. A. Besant, ed. The Secular Song and Hymn Book (London: National Secular Society, 1876).

[40] See respectively National Reformer, 18 June 1882 & 15 August 1879. For Blavatsky's reply to Besant's hostile comments, see Theosophist, August 1882.

[41] Besant, Why I Do Not, p. 22.

[42] Besant, True Basis of Morality, pp. 2-3.

[43] Ibid., p. 3.

[44] Ibid., p. 11.

[45] Ibid., p. 9.

[46] Ibid., p. 16.

[47] National Reformer, 30 August 1874.

[48] A. Besant, The Gospel of Christianity and The Gospel of Freethought (London: Freethought, n.d.), p. 16.

[49] Her attempts to disseminate neo-Malthusian doctrines led to the famous Bradlaugh-Besant trial. For an account of the trial, and for her writings on population, see S. Chandrasekhar, ed., A Dirty, Filthy Book: The Writings of Charles Knowlton and Annie Besant on Reproductive Physiology and Birth Control, and an Account of the

Bradlaugh-Besant Trial (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981). For her economic critique of landlordism, see A. Besant, Landlords, Tenant Farmers, and Labourers (London: Freethought, 1880).

[50] On Victorian socialism, see H. Pelling, The Origins of the Labour Party 1880-1900 (London: Macmillan, 1954); and S. Pierson, Marxism and the Origins of British Socialism (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 1973). On the Fabians in particular, see N. & J. Mackenzie, The First Fabians (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1977); and W. Wolfe, From Radicalism to Socialism (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1975).

[51] Bradlaugh attacked socialism in a debate with the leading British Marxist. C. Bradlaugh & H. Hyndman, Will Socialism Benefit the English People? (London: Truethought, 1884). Later Besant defended socialism in debate with her erstwhile secularist colleagues. See, for example, A. Besant & G. Foote, Is Socialism Sound? (London: Freethought, 1887).

[52] See respectively M. Olivier, ed., Sydney Olivier: Letters and Selected Writings (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1948); E. Pease, "Ethics and Socialism" Practical Socialist 1 (1886), 16-19; G. Wallas, "Personal Duty Under the Present System", Practical Socialist 1 (1886), 118-20 & 124-25; and S. Webb, "The Economics of a Positivist Community", Practical Socialist 1 (1886), 37-9.

[53] For her comments at the time, see National Reformer, 21 January 1883.

[54] See respectively M. Bevir, "The British Social Democratic Federation 1880-1885: From O'Brienism to Marxism", International Review of Social History 37 (1992), 207-29; H. Hyndman, The Text Book of Democracy: England for All (London: E. Allen, 1881); W. Morris,

"Monopoly: Or How Labour is Robbed", in The Collected Works of William Morris, intro. M. Morris (London: Longmans, 1910-15), Vol. 23: Signs of Change; Lectures on Socialism, pp. 238-54; and G. Shaw, "The Economic Basis of Socialism", in G. Shaw, ed., Fabian Essays (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1962), pp. 3-62.

[55] Justice, 21 June 1884.

[56] Justice, 12 July 1884.

[57] National Reformer, February-May 1884.

[58] Justice, 31 January 1885; and G. Shaw, An Autobiography, 1856-98, ed. S. Weintraub (London: M. Reinhardt, 1970), pp. 140-41.

[59] A. Besant, Modern Socialism (London: Freethought, 1890), p. 3.

[60] A. Besant, Why I am a Socialist (London: Freethought, 1886), p. 2.

[61] Ibid., pp. 2-3.

[62] Ibid., p. 8.

[63] Ibid., p. 7.

[64] For Besant's advocacy of co-operation between socialists and radicals, and for Marxist hostility to her proposals, see Justice, 13 April 1889.

[65] A. Besant, Radicalism and Socialism (London: Freethought, 1887), p. 4.

[66] A. Besant, The Socialist Movement (London: Freethought, 1887), p. 21.

[67] Besant, Why I Am, p. 6.

[68] A. Besant, The Trade Union Movement (London: Freethought, 1890), p. 25.

[69] Ibid., p. 3.

[70] Our Corner, February 1888.

[71] Oppenheim, The Other World; Owen, Darkened Room.

[72] Compare Oppenheim, Other World, pp. 85-103. For a detailed study of Alfred Wallace, who went on to adopt socialism, see Turner, Between Science and Religion.

[73] Podmore wrote a study of the spiritualist movement. F. Podmore, Modern Spiritualism, 2 Vols. (London: Methuen, 1902). On the plebeian radicals, see L. Barrow, Independent Spirits: Spiritualism and English Plebians, 1850-1910 (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986); and Oppenheim, Other World, pp. 85-103.

[74] Besant, Autobiography, p. 308.

[75] cf. National Reformer, 30 June 1889.

[76] B. Webb, My Apprenticeship (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1926), p. 187.

[77] National Reformer, 30 June 1889.

[78] On Besant's conversion to theosophy, see, in addition to the autobiographical works already mentioned, A. Besant, A Fragment of Autobiography 1875-1891 (Adyar, Madras: Theosophical Publishing, 1917); A. Besant, Why I Became a Theosophist (Adyar, Madras: Theosophical Office, 1912); and W. Stead, "Annie Besant", Review of Reviews, October 1891.

[79] Pall Mall Gazette, 25 April 1889.

[80] National Reformer, 23 January 1889.

[81] Compare A. Christy, The Orient in American Transcendentalism (New York: Columbia University Press, 1932). For an example from among Besant's British contemporaries, see E. Carpenter, From Adam's Peak to Elephanta (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1916).

[82] F. Max Muller, "Esoteric Buddhism", Nineteenth Century 33 (1893), 767-88.

[83] Bevir, "West Turns Eastward".

[84] H. Blavatsky, Collected Writings, ed. B. de Zirkoff (Wheaton, Ill.: Theosophical Publishing House, 1977), Vol. 1, pp. 101-2.

[85] H. Olcott, People From the Other World (Hartford, Conn.: American Publishing Company, 1875).

[86] C. Massey, Thoughts of a Modern Mystic: A Selection from the Writings of the Late C. C. Massey, ed. W. Barrett (London: Kegan Paul, 1909). G. Wylde, Notes of My Life (London: Kegan Paul, 1903). On the British Theosophical Society, see A. Sinnett, The Early Days of Theosophy in Europe (London: Theosophical Publishing House, 1922). On its relationship to the spiritualists, see Oppenheim, The Other World, pp. 159-97.

[87] A. Sinnett, The Autobiography of Alfred Percy Sinnett (London: Theosophical History Centre, 1986).

[88] Besant, Autobiography, p. 310.

[89] Lucifer, 15 June 1889.

[90] K. Johnson, The Masters Revealed: Madam Blavatsky and the Myth of the Great White Lodge (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York, 1994).

[91] A. Besant, The Ancient Wisdom (Adyar, Madras: Theosophical Publishing, 1939), p. 5.

[92] See Besant, Ancient Wisdom; H. Blavatsky, The Secret Doctrine: The Synthesis of Science, Religion and Philosophy, 2 Vols. (London: Theosophical Publishing House, 1888).

[93] For an attack on theosophy by a leading secularist, see G. Foote, The New Cagliostro: An Open Letter to Madame Blavatsky (London: Progress Publishing, 1889).

[94] B. Lightman, "Ideology, Evolution and Late-Victorian Agnostic Popularisers", in Moore, ed., History, Humanity and Evolution, pp. 285-309.

[95] Besant, Ancient Wisdom, p. 44.

[96] Later she developed a spiritual, occult, and theosophical natural science as an alternative to the materialist one that dominated western culture. A. Besant & C. Leadbeater, Occult Chemistry (Adyar, Madras: Theosophist Office, 1909). An earlier expression of her interest in an occult science is in Lucifer, November 1895.

[97] Besant, Ancient Wisdom, p. 229.

[98] Besant, Why I Became, p. 40.

[99] Besant, Ancient Wisdom, pp. 265-66.

[100] A. Besant, What is Theosophy? (Adyar, Madras: Theosophist Office, 1912), p. 9. One of Besant's earliest theosophical articles considered the relationship between karma and social action. Lucifer, August 1889.

[101] A. Besant, "The Sphinx of Theosophy", in Theosophical Essays (London: Theosophical Publishing, 1895), p. 19.

[102] For an attack by a socialist on her theosophy, see The Editor of Justice, Evolution of Mrs Besant (Madras: Justice Printing Works, 1918).

[103] See respectively L. Guest, Theosophy and Social Reconstruction (London: Theosophical Publishing Society, 1912); C. Despard, Theosophy and the Woman's Movement (London: Theosophical Publishing Society, 1913); and, for the commitments of the International Fellowship, A. Pogosky, Fellowship in Work (London: C. Daniel, n.d.). The strength of a loosely defined socialism within the Theosophical Society is made clear by Dixon, "Gender, Politics, and Culture in the

New Age", chap. 6. Its strength challenges the idea of a link between occultism and totalitarianism, for which see Webb, Occult Underground, pp. 718-57; and J. Webb, The Occult Establishment (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1976).

[104] P. Mairet, A. R. Orage: A Memoir (London: J. Dent, 1936), partic. pp. 11-19.

[105] A. Besant, "Theosophy and Social Reform", in Theosophical Ideals and the Immediate Future (London: Theosophical Publishing Society, 1914), p. 7.