

Annie Besant as an Early Theosophist

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ANNIE Besant joined the Theosophical Society in 1889, when she was a leader of Fabian Socialism. Earlier, after having seen that orthodox religion provided neither help nor opportunity for mankind's advancement, she had become an atheist, embracing materialism and science as the gospel of truth. Although under an erroneous philosophical assumption, her wonderful work for the oppressed and her struggle against social prejudices attracted Mme H. P. Blavatsky's attention as early as 1882. HPB wrote in *The Theosophist*:

The good Annie Besant, without believing in . . . her own spirit, yet speaks and writes such sensible and wise things, that we might almost say that one of her speeches or chapters contains more matter to benefit humanity than would equip a modern trance-speaker for an entire oratorical career.¹

And not only HPB, but also the Mahatma KH made reference to Mrs Besant some years before she would learn about the Theosophical Society. There is an undated letter, probably received in 1884, where the Master advises Sinnett to meet her, perhaps foreseeing her future role in the TS:

Meanwhile use every effort to develop such relations with A. Besant that your work may run on parallel lines and in full sympathy . . . You may, if you see fit, show this note to her, *only*.²

It is known that her Master watched Annie Besant from early life. She heard his Voice twice before meeting HPB. The second of these instances occurred in 1889, when Mrs Besant was in her office. She was in despair because Truth seemed unattainable, since neither did materialism give her answers nor did science offer a solution for human suffering. And then she heard the known Voice speaking: 'Are you willing to sacrifice everything to find Truth?', and she replied, 'Yes, Lord.' Then the Voice continued: 'You will find it soon.' A fortnight passed and her friend, Mr William Stead, the famous Editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette*, sent her the volumes of *The Secret Doctrine* to review. After feeling illuminated by the book, Annie Besant saw the Truth in it, and sent a note asking for an introduction to the writer. HPB replied to her in a letter:

I too have long been wishing to make your acquaintance, as there is nothing in the world that I admire more than pluck and

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the rare courage to come out and state one's opinions boldly in the face of all the world.³

When Annie Besant met HPB, she immediately recognized that Theosophy was what she had been looking for. But now she was facing a very difficult step, as she wrote in her autobiography:

I went, and asked about the Theosophical Society, wishful to join, but fighting against it. For I saw . . . what that joining would mean. I had largely conquered public prejudice against me by my work on the London School Board, and a smoother road stretched before me, whereon effort to help should be praised, not blamed. Was I to plunge into a new vortex of strife, and make myself a mark for ridicule . . . and fight again the weary fight for an unpopular truth? Must I turn against Materialism, and face the shame of publicly confessing that I had been wrong, misled by intellect to ignore the Soul? Must I leave the army that had battled for me so bravely, the friends who through all brutality of social ostracism had held me dear and true? And he [Charles Bradlaugh], the strongest and truest friend of all . . . must he suffer the pang of seeing his co-worker, his co-fighter, of whom he had been so proud, to whom he had been so generous, go over to the opposing hosts, and leave the ranks of Materialism?⁴

A very difficult step, indeed. Notwithstanding everything, Annie Besant joined the TS and her decision met such a storm

of criticism that it became necessary for her to give an explanation for her change of views. She delivered a lecture entitled: 'Why I Became a Theosophist', which closed as follows:

It has cost me pain enough and to spare to admit that the Materialism from which I hoped all has failed me, and by such admission to bring on myself the disapproval of some of my nearest friends. But here, as at other times in my life, I dare not purchase peace with a lie. An imperious necessity forces me to speak the truth, as I see it, whether the speech please or displease, whether it bring praise or blame. That one loyalty to Truth I must keep stainless, whatever friendships fail me or human ties be broken. She may lead me into the wilderness, yet I must follow her; she may strip me of all love, yet I must pursue her; though she slay me, yet will I trust in her; and I ask no other epitaph on my tomb but 'SHE TRIED TO FOLLOW TRUTH'.⁵

Annie Besant's character was evidently consistent with her eager search for Truth, since HPB wrote in a letter to her: 'YOU, honest like day, sincere and true . . .'; and in a letter to W. Q. Judge HPB spoke of her as: 'The soul of honour and uncompromisingly truthful . . . Unselfishness and Altruism is Annie Besant's name.'⁶

In a short time, a close affection was born between HPB and Mrs Besant. This is evident when we examine Mme Blavatsky's letters to her. They begin with phrases such as: 'DEARLY BELOVED ONE', or 'MY DEAREST ALTER EGO', or 'Annie

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Besant: The One and *the only one*'. According to Countess Wachtmeister, HPB was very happy to meet Besant because, after previous disappointments, she had found at last the successor that the Master had promised some years before.⁷ Mrs Besant developed extraordinarily rapidly all her potential spiritual qualities, and increasingly revealed her own value. Five months after they had met, HPB wrote to her: '*I am proud of you, I love you, I honour you. You are and will be yet before all men — the star of salvation.*' And in another letter: 'Ever yours whom I respect with every day more — HPB.'

Col. Olcott also immediately recognized in Annie Besant a great Soul. He met her in HPB's house, when various Theosophists were against this recently-joined Socialist Militant. About this meeting he wrote in *Old Diary Leaves*: 'At the time of my [first] visit I had the chance to see of what infinite tenderness and unselfish compassion Mrs Besant was capable',⁸ and 'She is the most important gain to us since Sinnett.'⁹

Just three years after Besant joined the TS, a heavy responsibility came upon her. Mme Blavatsky died and, according to the Master's wishes, conferred on her the great duty of being HPB's successor. The Masters also instructed Col. Olcott about it in an episode described by him in his *Diary*:

On the 10th of February, 1892, I received clairaudiently a very important message

from my Guru telling me, among other things, that a messenger from him would be coming and I must hold myself in readiness to go and meet him. Nothing more than this was said, neither the name of the person nor the time of his or her arrival being indicated.¹⁰

Col. Olcott did not have any other suggestion for one year and a half. Then, being with Besant on her first tour giving lectures throughout India, he heard again the familiar voice saying: 'This is the messenger whom I told you to be ready to go and meet: now do your duty.' And Olcott added in his *Diary*:

The development of Mrs Besant's relations with our work in India have been, moreover, what to me is the best possible evidence that she is, indeed, the agent selected to fructify the seeds which had been planted by HPB and myself during the previous fifteen years. She has swept away all vestiges of the mistrust as to our mission in India, such as was entertained by the great body of orthodox Brahmins, who looked on my colleague and myself as in fact secret agents for a Buddhist propaganda and the would-be destroyers of Hinduism.¹¹

Annie Besant worked vigorously for the TS, showing great devotion and capacity. Col. Olcott did not have the opportunity to appreciate the amazing work she would perform in the future as President of the TS, but what he saw in these early days was enough for him to draw a parallel between Annie

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Besant and HPB. He wrote in his diary:

Nobody was ever likely to be born just like [HPB], and so fill her place. [But] at the same time the case of Mrs Besant has proved that it is possible for another to create as commanding a place as hers was, and to do as much as she to spread Theosophy throughout the world.

We can say there were two aspects that marked Annie Besant's life: The first is her uncompromising search for Truth, from the Christian days to the agnostic period, passing through the Freethinking Movement and Socialism, until she found the TS, continuing as a Theosophist

her incessant search for Truth. And the second, the never-ending energy she spent for the welfare of humanity, since compassion filled her heart from her early days of social work. She is an example for all of us, because we are also called to follow the same Path. In her words:

This same path of knowledge that I am treading is open to all others who will pay the toll demanded at the gateway—and that toll is willingness to renounce everything for the sake of spiritual truth, and willingness to give all the truth that is won to the service of man, keeping back no shred for self'.¹² ♦

References

1. *The Theosophist*, June 1882.
2. *The Mahatma Letters to A.P. Sinnett*, chronological ed., No. 33.
3. HPB letter to Annie Besant, 15 March 1889.
4. Annie Besant, *An Autobiography*, pp. 442-3.
5. *ibid.*, p. 458.
6. *The Messenger*, March 1915, p. 468.
7. *ibid.*, March 1915, p. 467.
8. H. S. Olcott, *Old Diary Leaves (ODL)*, Fourth Series, p. 192.
9. *ibid.*, p. 184.
10. *ODL*, Fifth Series, pp. 93-94.
11. *ibid.*, p. 95.
12. *Autobiography*, p. 446.

Fables should be taught as fables, myths as myths, and miracles as poetic fancies. To teach superstitions as truths is a most terrible thing. The child mind accepts and believes them, and only through great pain and perhaps tragedy can he be in after-years relieved of them.

Hypatia