

# Annie Besant's Connivance of Christianity and Spirituality

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### Abstract

*Annie Besant was a British socialist, theosophist, women's rights activist, writer, orator, and supporter of both Irish and Indian self-rule. However, Annie's increasingly anti-religious views led to their legal separation in 1873. She then became a prominent speaker for the National Secular Society (NSS), as well as a writer, and a close friend of Charles Bradlaugh. Besant was a prolific writer and a powerful orator.*

**Keywords:** women's rights activist, NSS, anti-religion, political, spiritual, theosophist, socialism

### Introduction

In early days, the society was a gathering of people exploring spiritual, rather than political, alternatives to the capitalist system. Besant began to write for the Fabians. In 1889, she was asked to write a review for the Pall Mall Gazette on *The Secret Doctrine*, a book by H. P. Blavatsky. After reading it, she sought an interview with its author, meeting Blavatsky in Paris. In this way she was converted to Theosophy. Besant's intellectual journey had always involved a spiritual dimension, a quest for transformation of the whole person. As her interest in theosophy deepened, she allowed her membership of the Fabian Society to lapse (1890) and broke her links with the Marxists. In her Autobiography, Besant follows her chapter on "Socialism" with "Through Storm to Peace", the peace of Theosophy.

Blavatsky had stated in 1889 that the main purpose of establishing the society was to prepare humanity for the future reception of a "torch-bearer of Truth", an emissary of a hidden Spiritual Hierarchy that, according to theosophists, guides the evolution of mankind. This was repeated by Besant as early as 1896; Besant came to believe in the imminent appearance of the emissary, who was identified by theosophists as the so-called World Teacher.

In 1916 Besant launched the All India Home Rule League along with Lokmanya Tilak, once again modelling demands for India on Irish nationalist practices. This was the first political party in India to have regime change as its main goal. Unlike the Congress itself, the League worked all year round. It built a structure of local branches, enabling it to mobilise demonstrations, public meetings and agitations.

In June 1917 Besant was arrested and interned at a hill station, where she defiantly flew a red and green flag. The Congress and the Muslim League together threatened to launch protests if she were not set free; Besant's arrest had created a focus for protest.

Besant opined that for centuries the leaders of Christian thought spoke of women as a necessary evil, and that the greatest saints of the Church were those who despised women the most,

Against the teachings of eternal torture, of the vicarious atonement, of the infallibility of the Bible, I leveled all the strength of my brain and tongue, and I exposed the history of the Christian Church with unsparing hand, its persecutions, its religious wars, its cruelties, its oppressions. (Annie Besant, *An Autobiography* Chapter VII).

In the section named "Its Evidences Unreliable" of her work "Christianity", Besant presents the case of why the Gospels are not authentic. Annie Besant, in her *An Autobiography* Chapter XIV opines,

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 (179)

In spite of its controversial background, the Theosophical Society itself has had a considerable influence on the spiritual and intellectual life of many individuals in India, Europe, and the United States. Much of the power of the Irish literary renaissance of William Butler Yeats and AE (George Russell) stems from their association with Theosophy, which also exercised a powerful influence on European occultism.

Perhaps its greatest contribution came during the presidency of Besant, when Theosophy provided the people of India with a feeling of pride in their own cultural and spiritual heritage and participated in the growing wave of nationalism that eventually resulted in the independence of India. Under the auspices of the Theosophical Society, many important Hindu scriptures were translated and published and the library at Adyar contains many rare manuscripts preserved by the society.

The Theosophical Society, with its international headquarters in Adyar, Madras, India, is today a worldwide body perpetuating the basic perspective

and teachings of ancient Gnosticism, as promoted by Blavatsky in the 1880s and 1890s. While the society is a significant body in its own right, its influence has been extended through the hundreds of organizations that have taken the basic theosophical worldview and built variations upon it. Theosophy led directly to the founding of the Liberal Catholic Church, the Anthroposophical Society, the Alice Bailey movement, and the I Am Movement. Almost a hundred different organizations, some of which rival the parent Theosophical Society in size, have emerged from these off-shoots. Less directly attached to Theosophy, but owing much to its initial impulse, is the modern magical revival whose initial major organizational expression was the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, but which has found contemporary expression in the OTO and the popular neo-pagan witchcraft movement. The single most popular expression of Theosophy has been the New Age movement of the 1980s, which brought literally millions of people into esoteric studies.

*My Path to Atheism*, is a book, which was converted from its physical edition to the digital format by a community of volunteers. You may find it for free on the web. Purchase of the Kindle edition includes wireless delivery. *My Path to Atheism* is one of the most well known works of this notable British writer and women's rights activist. In this collection of essays written over a five-year period, Besant traces her path to atheism while simultaneously outlining her theosophist philosophies.

The first essay presented in this collection, *On the Deity of Jesus of Nazareth* was written before Besant had officially parted with the Church of England. It is a signpost marking the author's final split with Christianity, and is an appropriate first essay in this book. The essay relies heavily on the author's knowledge of the stories of The Bible, as she displays what she interprets as weaknesses in the story of Jesus.

Many of the essays in this collection are written in a similar vein to the first. Besant was clearly a scholar of the Bible, and she is thus able to form compelling arguments against many of the stories and theories of Christianity. Later essays see Besant writing persuasively against religious education and blind faith in a set of religious values. On the

Nature and the Existence of God is perhaps the most important essay of the collection, in which the author most clearly outlines her argument for atheism. “We know nothing beyond Nature,” Besant states, “We judge of the future by the present and the past.”(17)

Esoteric Christianity is an ensemble of spiritual currents which regard Christianity as a mystery religion, and profess the existence and possession of certain esoteric doctrines or practices of which the public is unaware but which are understood by a small group of people.

These spiritual currents share some common denominators, such as heterodox or heretical Christian theology; the canonical gospels, various apocalyptic literature, and some New Testament apocrypha as sacred texts and disciplina arcani, a supposed oral tradition from the Twelve Apostles containing esoteric teachings of Jesus the Christ.

My Path to Atheism is an essential work by one of the most noted atheists of the early twentieth century. Those willing to invest time and effort into this collection will undoubtedly be influenced in one direction or another by its arguments. This is a worthwhile read for both believers and atheists alike, and is thus highly recommended.

The path from Christianity to Atheism is a long one, and its first steps are very rough and very painful; the feet tread on the ruins of the broken faith, and the sharp edges cut into the bleeding flesh but further on the path grows smoother, and presently at its side begins to peep forth the humble daisy of hope that heralds the spring tide, and further on the

roadside is fragrant with all the flowers of summer, sweet and brilliant and gorgeous, and in the distance we see the promise of the autumn, the her vest that shall be reaped for the feeding of man.

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